NOTE TO USERS

Travelers in Residence: Women Writing New York at Mid-Century

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation considers the fiction of early and mid-century New York women writers and explores the connection between genre (the satirical novel) and space (New York skyscrapers, apartments, streets, and most particularly, the Manhattan hotel). Arguing that the spatial realities of early 20th century New York inform the topography of novels, I look at how a city filled with hotels and skyscrapers and mapped as a grid might contribute to a different kind of novel than London, a more labyrinthine landscape of low-slung houses, bed-sits and Bloomsbury parks. The project concentrates on the New York hotel, a space of growing popularity, both as residence and as meeting place, for many women moving to the city in the early twentieth-century. I consider the socio-economic significance of this space for women, and I also read it as symbolic of the literary move that New York women writers—in particular, Edith Wharton, Dawn Powell, and Mary McCarthy—were making. Theirs was a move away from sensibility to satire, away from the writing of heroines to the writing of crowds, away from a "private" novel to a more public one. In privileging subsidiary characters over identification with a central hero or heroine and in writing episodic scenes rather than the Woolfian ramble, these writers were turning their backs not just on the traditional heroine-centered plot but

also on the psychological interiority found in the novels of sensibility written by women novelists across the Atlantic. In the case of Edith Wharton, she was turning her back on the "house of fiction" favored by Henry James. Wharton, Powell, and McCarthy aimed instead to write a room of full of acquaintances: a hotel lobby, a swing door leading out unto the street. Included in this dissertation is also an analysis of the decline of hotel life in the early sixties when so many hotels were destroyed to make way for office buildings and apartment projects and when so many women (and men) were leaving the city for the suburbs. I conclude with a discussion of a other writers from the fifties and sixties—Isabel Bolton, Jean Stafford, and Hortense Calisher—to argue that their fiction, more akin to Henry James's or Virginia Woolf's, suggests a move from satire back to sensibility.

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I dedicate this to my father, with the hope that soon he will be traveling again.

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CHAPTER ONE/INTRODUCTION

Hotel Fiction and the Satirical Novel

Part I: A Woman from the Provinces

To trace the origins of this project, I need to go some fifteen years back—long before I even imagined myself an academic—back to the evening I first arrived in New York. I made my way east with a thousand dollars in my pocket, no job or apartment, and a vague notion that everyone should live in New York City for at least a year. Coming as I do from four generations of staunch midwesterners, New York was the New World. Hardly anyone I knew had visited the city, and I knew only one person who had ever lived there—a friend of my mother's, he came in the early eighties and had reportedly died of AIDS. I planned to stay with a stranger, the boyfriend of an acquaintance from school named Ed who lived in Bronxville with his parents, worked on Wall Street and said, over the phone, he'd put me up the first night.

Flying over the city, I could make out the shape of an island, familiar only from a studied subway map. In the airport, I clung to my two suitcases—one packed with a pillow and a blanket. If I'd been in a car, I'd have locked the doors, something my mother always told us to do when entering a big city.

Ed arrived, and off we flew in his car to Bronxville. I remember trees on the side of the highway and darkness. Where were the lights I'd witnessed from above? In a sad little house, his parents bickered all night long, while I sat up in the basement on the sofa-bed—the flag of our alma mater tacked to the paneled wall—and watched Rosemary's Baby until three in the morning. It was a night of terror, inflicted partly by the shouts

from upstairs and partly by finding myself trapped at the Dakota with Rosemary and her baby, Ruth Gordon barring the door.

The next day, I located the ironing board, took the train to Grand Central Station and was interviewed by a little man named Ted who said "keen" and "frank" in a way I'd never heard before. I got the job: as editorial assistant for a publishing company putting out books on balloon animals and the grilling of seafood. A whole $13,000 a year, with an office overlooking Fifth Avenue. My terror evolved into a kind of ecstasy. I walked to a map store on Fifth Avenue and in my taupe interview suit with matching shoes, went to sit in Madison Square Park to plan my first blissful day. From 23rd Street, I walked up to the Metropolitan Museum—since where I come from, the thing to do first in a big city is visit a museum—and then, despite the August heat, went all the way back down again to stare at the boys playing guitar in Washington Square Park.

Two days later I'd found an apartment in Queens. It was on the second floor and below lived the owner, a grizzled and perpetually inebriated Irishman named McShane. He fancied himself a playwright. Every day, when I came home from work, he greeted me at the door. He began to call me Nora—at the time, he was reading Joyce's biography. One night, he showed me his letters from Sean O'Casey, which I took upstairs to read. Their substance: deftly-worded discouragement, unregistered by the recipient. On another night, I awoke to find McShane standing above my bed: He loved me, he desired me, would I go to an AA meeting with him? There was a scene, ending in deftly-worded discouragement. This time it registered. Two days later, I had a new apartment. I also had the O'Casey letters, which I refused to return until I got my deposit back. I have since lost the letters but still hope someday I will find them, stuck inside a book.

I meant to stay in New York only a year; I have stayed fifteen years, and from my present vantage point, I am struck not just by my youthful audacity (I wouldn't have the nerve to do the same thing now), but also by the obvious parallels in my story and an earlier one. Imposed on my New York of the mid-eighties—airplanes and AA, AIDS descending—is a story about New York City at mid-century, one that clearly shaped the experiences (and choices) I'd made those first few days. The story is so familiar it is almost a cliché: the ingénue, having scorned the marriage proposals back home, steps off the train at Grand Central Station. She arrives for an interview at a fashion magazine with matching handbag, vague literary aspirations and below average typing skills. She has a yearning—has had it since a family trip to see the Christmas lights at Rockefeller Center—to live in New York City. After finding herself a studio in Greenwich Village, she takes a taxi to a job interview, clutching her handbag, her eyes fixed on the spire of the Chrysler building and on the people on the street. In the handbag, she carries a smuggled copy of Tropic of Cancer and a newly purchased subway map. In the studio apartment, she listens to jazz and smokes Pall-Malls without smearing her lipstick. In the background, and as necessary to the storyline as the Playtex girdle and the diaphragm in its pink velvet box, is the vision of where she'd come from: the farm, the outer borough, the small town, that god-forsaken place where she got all A's on her book report and just didn't fit in.

This is the story the artist Cindy Sherman relates in her series of film still photographs of the girl coming to the city. Sherman dresses up in the idea: a girl waiting for the bus, a cardboard suitcase at her feet, a country road curving before her; or, a

woman, dressed in her fifties interview suit, cowering beneath skyscrapers.[1] Thrill and Fear. It was this story—along with my pillow and blanket—I carried with me those first few days in New York and one I aimed, when I began this dissertation, to unpack.

My "vague notion" about New York originated, I realize now, from the movies. As a child, I liked to watch films from the thirties and forties. I had watched Irene Dunne set out for the city in Theodora Goes Wild (1939), a film in which a small-town woman (they called her a spinster) descends upon New York, assumes a voluptuous pen name for her off-color novel, and learns about the pleasures of the big city. I had watched through my cinematic Greenwich Village window a parade of suitors—both for the brainy want-to-be journalist and her predictably prettier Broadway-aspiring sister—in My Sister Eileen (1942). I had, with Katherine Hepburn, checked myself into a boarding house in Stage Door (1937) and had followed the department store heroines up Fifth Avenue in You and Me (1938) and The Devil And Miss Jones (1941). Recast in twentieth century American film was the theme Flaubert and Balzac had so frequently treated in their novels of the nineteenth century—the provincial comes to the city and gets lost. It was the woman's turn to get off the train, this time descending not upon Paris, that city Walter Benjamin would call "the capital of the nineteenth century" but upon the capital of the twentieth century instead: New York City.[2]

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[1] See especially Untitled Film Still #21 (1978), Untitled Film Still, #22 (1978), Untitled Film Still, #44 (1979), Untitled film still #48 (1979). From Cindy Sherman's The Complete Untitled Film Stills.

[2] After World War I the cultural supremacy of Paris wanted, and by the mid thirties Europeans had begun calling New York "the one great world city." By 1936 Le Corbusier would name New York a "world capital" without frontiers, and by 1940, playwright Elmer Rice would write that "[I]t's more dynamic here than in Paris" with "more intellectual interest and more creative feeling than in any other city." As Leonard Wallack points out, "the selection of New York as the site for

If the first half of the twentieth century saw a dramatic increase in the women moving to (and working in) the city, the thirties and forties stand as an apex of urban liberation preceding a more restrictive era. Looking back, in The Feminine Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan sees the two previous decades as a contrasting period against which to read and uncover the fifties backlash.[3] In the thirties and forties, women's magazines were giving city girls a glowing review. By the early fifties, however, cultural attitudes toward the female urbanite shifted: if the women's magazines had previously highlighted the efforts of the urban working woman, now they transferred their attention back to the domestic sphere—wife, family, the suburban split level—a move marked, not coincidentally, by the return of the male workforce from overseas and mass migration to the suburbs.[4] This shift made itself into the movies as well: Molly Haskell sees a near

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the World's Fair of 1939-40 and for the headquarters of the United Nations in 1946 merely confirmed what was by then the popular consensus—the city had been transformed" (Wallack 9).

[3] After graduating from Smith, Friedan moved to New York in the early forties, lived in Greenwich Village and wrote for a left-wing labor paper. After her marriage to a young veteran returned from the War, she moved to the suburbs in the early fifties and began writing for the women's magazines. When asked to write a piece on what happened to her graduating class at Smith—it was originally entitled "The Togetherness Woman"—she found herself embarking on what later would be The Feminine Mystique, a tale of women's isolation in the suburbs (Halberstam 598).

[4] On the effect of suburbia on women's life, see Gwendolyn Wright's Building the Dream. The early stirrings of suburbanization in the United States date back to the nineteenth century, when improved methods of public transport first created the possibility of rapid daily travel between urban centers and outlying districts (Jackson 138-156). Suburban relocation was nonetheless almost exclusive, a prerogative for the very well off at the time, and as Margaret Marsh has observed, the critical elements of the ideological impetus for such a move did not coalesce until late in the century, well after the actual technology facilitating it was in place. Only then, it appears, did the notion that it was in the best interests of the family to locate the home outside the city in a "country" environment become sufficiently dominant to initiate a small trend (15-16). Not until the decade following World War I did suburbanization become a "demographic process of magnitude for the first time," (Donaldson 35); however, by 1930, the suburban population of American cities was 45 percent as large as the central-city population (Palen 50). But it was the period after World War II that the movement, curtailed for awhile by the Depression and World War II, accelerated so enormously as, in the words of one historian, to "rip apart and remake the

erasure of the working-woman heroine in the movies coming out by the mid-fifties. Or, if she is there, she loses out: the witty urbanite of the forties films now overshadowed by a more traditional home-and-husband seeking foil. In the forties version of My Sister Eileen, for example, the smart-talking journalist "steals the show as the cerebral one." In the 1955 musical remake, the journalist sister "retains little dignity as the intellectual, but is overshadowed—and shamed—by the popularity of the sister," who gets played—wouldn't you know it—by Janet Leigh (Haskell 158). My favorite fifties reconstruction of the urban story is Gentlemen's Agreement, a film in which the anti-Semitic message gets explored less through the principles of the leading man (Gregory Peck) and more through his choice between the two women vying for his attentions: one a member of the country club (living up in the suburbs) and the other, a left-leaning magazine editor (living up in the penthouse). Country Club Wins.

With all this in mind—my awareness of the historical importance of the period for woman and the supremacy of the urban woman in the movies during the thirties and forties—I came to the dissertation in search of a literary counterpart. Who were the novelists? What were the novels? How had New York City figured in mid-century women's fiction?

There have been a range of women's novels about the city—from the high modernism of Janet Flanner's Cubical City (1926) to the restrained realism of Willa Cather's Song of the Lark (1934). The body of women's New York fiction is extensive. I could aim for the sweeping and restorative account and provide a record of the various approaches to Manhattan. Here's how Tess Slesinger takes on Manhattan in her 1931 The

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texture of social life in America." In the fifties, suburbs grew six times faster than cities; and by the end of the decade, one out of four Americans lived in them (Chafe 117; Diggins 181-83).

Unpossessed; here's how Janet Flanner does it in The Cubical City; here is how Leannne Zugsmith writes New York in her novel All Victories Are Alike (1929). The sweeping and restorative account, however, would have to wait for a like-minded dissertator to come. What interested me the most was a mode of writing the city at mid-century that I have dubbed "hotel fiction," and it includes the fiction of Edith Wharton, Mary McCarthy, Dawn Powell, Anita Loos, and Dorothy Parker. Some might call it satire; others might call it a form of naturalism; others might brand it a "comedy of manners." Or, one might call it fiction of the surface, the background, the fabric of society.

Gertrude Stein once praised Carl Van Vechten's "The Blind Bow Boy" (1923) because "it's all background and the background, as yet American life is the background. Others have tried to make background foreground, but you have made foreground background, and our foreground is our background" (Letters of GS and CVV 86-7).[5] Of an entirely different stylistic ilk than Stein—to the satirical point rather than circling chantlike round and round the surfaces—the writers I consider here were making their background the foreground; they were writing the urban furniture—the surfaces,

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[5] Stein, in her fiction, continually circles around the issue of surfaces in her own sometimes maddeningly opaque way. (Tender Buttons is filled with them). She believed that surface-writing-and-seeing was an important aspect of a writer's response to the things in the world around us, particularly those situated in the present moment. Excessive probings below surfaces tilt the writer's efforts toward the calculated, schematic, consistent explanation and away from the spontaneous immediacy of clarity. (See "What is English Literature.") Claudia Roth Pierpont opens her essay on Dashiell Hammett's mystery novels with a conversation between Stein and Hammett in 1935, in which Stein asks Hammett "why the nineteenth-century men succeeded in writing about so many varieties of men, and women were limited to creating heroines who were merely versions of themselves – she mentioned Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot—yet in the twentieth century this situation was reversed? Nowadays, Stein pointed out, it was the men who portrayed only themselves, and why should this be so?" ("Dashiel Hammett" 66). Roth Pierpont has also written her own essay on Gertrude Stein for The New Yorker collected in Passionate Minds (2003). In this essay, Roth Pierpont's central argument is that Stein is too preoccupied with the surface. The almost maternal depth of affection that is exhibited in her relationships to other writers (mostly men) is missing in her poetry and fiction. There are certainly a host of Stein critics would would entirely disagree with this reading.

costumes, speech, and gossip of the social scene. Rather than depicting deep heroines—a single figure whose development can be followed—these crowded novels often give a plethora of caricatures depicted in a multitude of shifting locales. Instead of the probing of the private mind and the exploration of consciousness, they focus on the way people act and look in public. Dawn Powell explains that she wanted to depict "people accustomed to fronts" —not people as they appear behind closed doors, "not as one knows them in their homes and offices." She wants to write about the "acquaintances we meet in crowds," to show them "in their public exhibition of themselves" and to write "in a particularly New York café way" (Diaries 319).

In her essay on fiction, "The Novel Demeuble," Willa Cather reprimands those writing in the Naturalist tradition for too much saturation of surface; she asks for a pure novel that would throw the "social furniture" out of fiction. Even Balzac, Cather believed, could use a good Spring cleaning. (One pictures a Midwestern hired girl, a rosy-cheeked Swede, sent over to tackle his overflowing closets, throw the social clutter out the window). McCarthy and Powell oppositely threw themselves heartily into the writing of the urban furniture; they wanted to write Balzac's way; they wanted to write what Powell called the "fritter" of New York.

For the most part, these are also novels in which the heroine (or hero) goes missing—or at least that character who, as E.M. Forster would define her, is discernibly "round." The characters in Powell's Manhattan Cycle—the series of satirical novels on New York café society Powell wrote between 1928 and 1963[6]—are novels lacking a

[6] Powell wrote seven novels that critics now refer to as her Manhattan Cycle: Turn, Magic Wheel (1936), The Happy Island (1938), Angels on Toast (1940), A Time to Be Born (1942), The Locusts Have No King (1948), The Wicked Pavilion (1954), The Golden Spur (1962).

psychological space complicated enough to sustain prolonged identification. McCarthy's women and men are often mere artifacts, social types, who get depicted through the elaborate depiction of soup cans and pessaries, furniture and costumes. These were also novels written after 1910—the year Virginia Woolf so dramatically identified, in her 1923 essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" as the moment when "human character changed"—the turning away from traditional heroes and heroines, to be replaced by something else: consciousness. For this reason, novels like Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage (1915-1967), Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway (1925), Elizabeth Bowen's To the North (1932), Djuna Barnes's Nightwood (1936), Jean Rhys's Good Morning, Midnight (1939), or Elizabeth Taylor's At Mrs. Lippincote's (1945) present a different urban experience: the inner meanderings of a walk around the block, a city viewed through the "luminous halo" and "semi-transparent envelope," famously invoked in Woolf's essay on "Modern Fiction." Yet, in the fiction of the mid-century New York satirists, there is rarely a heroine to get behind, nor a deep consciousness to get inside. These were not characters wearing a halo; nor, it seemed, were their authors seeing through one.

My point here is that this move from foreground to background, from writing deep heroines to the mapping of surfaces was itself an urban move; the choice to write sprawling, crowded satires itself a gesture of stepping off the train and into the crowd. The impulse to move out into the public world, away from the intimacies of house or small-town, can be found not just in the actions of the striving characters but in the satirical approach itself—an approach that meant access to many scenes, crowds of people, a public view and a public voice.

I also want to consider the relationship between surfaces and urban circulation, to argue that by writing comic characters, characters written from the outside, lots of characters, the satirists were often wrenching free from the whole issue of identification so as to make the *city* the character. The very qualities that have often led to their critical dismissal—the writing of flat surfaces and privileging of a crowd of subsidiary characters over the deep heroine—aid them both in circulating within an urban environment and in asserting a cosmopolitan point of view. They gain a public stance that is often missing in the novel of sensibility. The heroine is less the point than the places the writer gets to go (and the things she gets to talk about) by following her striver's social climb.

My claim is not that the writing of surfaces invariably engenders an urban map. Geographic or narrative movement is not a defining trait of satirical fiction, although Alvin Kernan does regard satire—both in its traditional form and in the satirical novel—as endowed with particular "circulating" tendencies. (Satire, he argues, depends not on the transformation of character but on illustration instead: "the scenery and the faces may have changed outwardly" but they are really just "the 'same fools' at the end as they were in the beginning" (30). Movement is often found in the author's need to provide "scenery and faces" for illustration.) Satire has also been regarded as a rather expansive form because of its reliance on the episodic rather than the unified plot. Millicent Bell writes that in the effort to write the public scene, to "display society in scene after varied scene," the author of a comedy of manners is left not only with "sprawling inclusiveness" but also a narrative structure defined by the "onward rolling episode" (Edith Wharton 301).

A causal connection between flat surfaces and geographic and narrative expansiveness, however, is not a given. In fact, often with satire, it is not circulation we get but immobility: a lowering of the microscope, an insect impaled and inspected on a pin. The scope does not enlarge; it zeroes in. (I see this kind of narrative stasis in Dorothy Parker's short stories, for example, and in Mary McCarthy's The Group, whose recognition of the problem and her struggle to free herself from it, informs part of my argument in Chapter Five.)

What underlies the relationship between observation and urban circulation in many of the novels I discuss is a "recording" of the movements of upwardly (and at time, downwardly) mobile characters whose aims are of the self-improving and often unattainable kind. One of the startling facts about much of this fiction is that instead of celebrating the city girl, very often these writers were poking fun at her. I had found my woman-in-the-city, yet she was not quite what I'd been expecting. Instead of the girl with all A's on the book report swinging her hat in an effusion of urban delight (or the girl in the Cindy Sherman photograph, hiding under her hat in apprehension) these were remarrying women, gold-diggers, social climbers, money- and status-hungry dames. Their exploration of the city was not founded so much on thrill or fear (the poles around which so much of the feminist discussion of urban fiction revolves);[7] it was founded on greed. These were creatures of capitalism: insatiable, covetous, desperate for the big break. What had, I'll admit, unnerved me in making my entry into this subject—greed flattened—was itself a tool for narrative mobility. Powell might rail against her ever-dissatisfied out-of-towners scrambling up the ladder of success, but in following their

[7] See Elizabeth Wilson's argument about these two poles of critical discussion in The Sphinx in The City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women.

movements, she gets to ride on their backs, look around, travel about, see the world. And unlike the trajectory of The Great Gatsby, a rise resulting in Gatsby face down in a swimming pool (the tragic ending), these fictions of urban desire often refuse to conclude at the bottom or the top: there is often open-endedness, a sense of wanting to keep going, of wanting to escape not just from enclosure but from closure as well.

To consider both my points—the move from private novel to a public one; the reliance on flat surfaces to make maps—I depend partly on the idea of the flaneur, the starting point, it would seem, for most considerations of women's urban fiction. In the strictest, most literal sense, the term refers to an actual figure in nineteenth century fiction: the aimless wanderer, the Baudelairian man-of-the-crowd, the roaming botanizer of the asphalt. Nowadays, literary critics also use the term as a critical metaphor for a whole range of modernist practices: he (or she) is "an icon of the architextual aesthetics of the modern urban novel" and "an increasingly expansive figure who represents a variety of 'wanderings,' in terms of ambulation, nationality, gender, race, class, and sexuality. (Parsons 48). For this reason, the flaneur now gets "used to allude to a whole range of urban social identities from shopping-mall consumer to internet surfer," risking, as Deborah Parsons has pointed out "an overload of significance that results in meaninglessness" (Parsons 78). In adding satirist to that range of social identities, I fear I may be joining the ranks. Yet, as I see it, there is no better figure to articulate the twin strands of my argument: circulation and observation. It is also, of course, the female flaneur—the girl moving to, moving through, and moving out from city to city – who is situated at the center of my argument.

A consideration of the female flaneur is where most feminist critics begin when looking at women's urban fiction. What are the limits of her city? How is her city mapped? How does her streetwalking experience get imagined? Where does she get to go? Often, they look at spaces available to women—the department store, the street, the hotel—and often, drawing on the work of critics like Susan Buck Moers, Judith Walkowitz, and most especially Janet Wolff, they focus on the difficulties of the female wanderer in maintaining an outsider position from which to observe the urban spectacle. In her landmark essay, Wolff argued that urban discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth century gave men monopoly on flanerie and consigned women to the role of objects of a masculine urban gaze: thus, critics of the women's city often begin there—Thrill and Fear; looking and being looked at; wanting to be James Joyce in the city and finding instead that one is Nora desired beneath his gaze.

This project does consider these kinds of problems for women in the city. I look at Mary McCarthy's rendering of her autobiographical heroine as highly visible (constantly watched) in the public spaces of the city or at Dawn Powell's disguising her streetwalking stand-in as Dennis, a male. Yet, I also want to look not just at the representation of the female flaneur in these city novels, but the flanerie—urban circulation and observation—that is found in the writing itself. I want to consider not just the problem of the woman in the crowd but the fact that the satirists were writing crowded novels. I want to look at what satire provided the writer who herself wanted to look and move around. Instead of restricting my attention to the heroine's escape from the confines of the house, then, I look at the way these novelists have left certain *houses of fiction* behind to write transient, public ones, a move that was not only a renouncing of

the precepts of the traditional woman's novel (often shaped through an interconnected triad of psychological, spatial, and structural interiority) but also a renouncing of the narrative landscapes being written by their female counterparts across the ocean: novelists of the city like Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys, Elizabeth Bowen, and Elizabeth Taylor.

In exploring the movements of these urban figurês, I also want to consider the relationship these characters have with particular spaces of the city—skyscrapers, movie theaters, taxi-cabs, studio apartments, uptown and downtown, and most significant, the space that so dominated women's lives in the first half of the twentieth-century: the hotel. What is the relationship between space and genre on the material level? Since my project is not simply a focus on flaneur-as-heroine but more significantly a focus on the flanerie of the satirist herself, I am interested not just in urban circulation and observation as it relates to the representation of woman-in-the-city, but as it relates to the topography of the novel itself. [8] In this sense, I want not only to consider specific New York sites of flanerie (hotels, street, department stores, public squares) within the narrative, but also to consider the effect of particular spaces on the plotting, structure and approach to character: in other words, how does the landscape of the city itself contribute to the landscape of the novels being written by women at the time? How do the spatial realities of early twentieth century New York actually inform the writing? How might New York,

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[8] Sharon Marcus in her study of the French Apartment plot in the nineteenth century novel uses the term "topography" to look at how "narration (and not simply the events narrated) inscribes spatial relations and establishes zones as exterior and interior, mobile and fixed, global and local, publicly open and privately opaque." In considering the nineteenth century novel, she looks in a similar way not only at how the "imbrication of spaces now commonly assumed to be distinct (city and home, public and private)" characterize "the content" of the novel, but how the novel itself blends "public and private in its form" (10).

a city filled with hotels and skyscrapers and mapped as a grid, contribute to a different kind of novel than London, a more labyrinthine landscape of low-slung houses, bedsits and Bloomsbury parks?

The dissertation also relies on spatial metaphor. Both the house and the hotel loom large in my argument. A critic of Eugene Sue, the French novelist, once wrote that a "novel is not a square that one crosses but a place that one inhabits."[9] For feminist critics, this metaphorical elision of houses and novels brings up immediate associations: domestic novels, marriage plots, traditional endings with their reader-I-married-him finales. With its Angels living downstairs and Madwomen above, there is perhaps no spatial metaphor more prevalent in feminist criticism. It has become its own critical cliché, as much of one as the story of the girl from the provinces in her straw hat with her cardboard suitcase. Yet, one might say that it was this house from which my ingénue was running. One might also say that it is this house from which the mid-century satirists were running as well.

Not only were these mid-century novelists resisting the interiority of traditional heroine-centered plots, but they were also writing against other plots of enfolding and enclosing. In regarding the novel as a "house we inhabit," the critic of Eugene Sue was not referring to the woman's novel but the limits of the genre itself: he regarded the novel (as many literary critics in the American fifties did as well) as an enclosed structure: one needn't go outside. A house with walls and windows is how Henry James described the novel. Mary McCarthy was one who longed for doors. McCarthy regarded the novel as a characteristically public form: meant to be full of facts and social types, dates, times, and data. The problem, she believed with the modern novel was that it had slammed shut the

[9] This passage is quoted from Benjamin, Paris, capital du XIXe siecle, 240.

exit; it had lost the "social." However many walks across the public square in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, the novel was still, in her mind, a house cordoned off from the world by translucent curtains—the street seen through "disparate painterly images out of focus" ("Characters in Fiction" 279). Thus, one metaphor to describe what McCarthy is doing is a desire to move from the "house of fiction" to the hotel, with its doors leading out onto the street and its public view. McCarthy does not write specifically about hotels but her fiction, in the metaphorical sense, is all about them.

The space of the New York hotel, then, provides a metaphor for the shift from private to public modes of writing the city, yet I also argue that the hotel is more than just metaphor. Literary scholars, as well as anthropologists, historians, sociologists, have followed the lead of cultural geographers in becoming more closely attuned to the significance of space not simply as "setting"—our old high school definition of space as background—or even simply as textual metaphor, but as an organizing principle that reflects cultural change.[10] Space, I argue, actually shapes fictional choices. In Chapter Two and Chapter Three, I look at how writers's interest in hotel life might have influenced the kinds of novels they were producing. Because the hotel is the central space under discussion here, I also include an analysis, particularly in Chapter Two and Chapter Six, of the socio-cultural importance of this space for women during the first half of the twentieth century.

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[10] For geographers who argue that material space is inseparable from discourses of space, see The Production of Space; Agrest, 213-221, which focuses on how cultural codes produce space and place; Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power," in The Foucault Reader, 253; Roger Friedland and Deirdre Boden in the introduction to NowHere: An Introduction to Space, Time, and Modernity 1-60.

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In her speech to the Annual Writers Congress in 1947, the Australian novelist Christina Stead explains that after moving to New York, she turned away from her more psychological The Man Who Loved Children to write the "many-charactered novel," a mode that looked not just to the cinema and the modern newspaper for inspiration, but to the sprawling nineteenth century novels written by Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy. To make their move out—out of the house and onto the street—the hotel writers included here also look *back*—back to the influence of the Naturalist and nineteenth century urban novels. Dawn Powell's list of influences, recorded in her diary, includes Balzac's Lost Illusions, Dreiser's Sister Carrie, Dickens's Our Mutual Friend.[11] McCarthy preferred Tolstoy to Dostoevsky, writing in a letter to Hannah Arendt that there were two kinds of people, Dostoevsky lovers and Tolstoy lovers and she belonged to the latter. If Virginia Woolf regarded the Dickensian mode of city-writing and character construction as a thing of the past, thumbnail sketches and description of society's fabric to be relinquished for the complications of consciousness, Powell, McCarthy, and Stead waxed nostalgic for Mrs. Micawber and the cafés of Paris. The crowded, social novel was in Stead's words, "the most seductive of forms."

That Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert were influences makes sense: the nineteenth century urban novelists were also skilled readers of surfaces, adept at the sketch, good at the recurrent tic or metaphor, and often as interested in writing the secondary character as the

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[11] Powell's March 29th, 1953 diary entry lists her favorite novels as: Dreiser's Sister Carrie, Sinclair Lewis's Dodsworth, Flaubert's Sentimental Education, Petronious's Satyricon, Eliot's most satirical novel, Daniel Deronda, although only "partly," Gogol's Dead Souls, Balzac's Lost Illusions and Distinguished Provincial, Dickens's Our Mutual Friend and David Copperfield, and lastly, Undset's Jenny, a novel of a single woman who moves to Rome and has a baby on her own.

primary hero.[12] Theirs was also often an omniscient and impersonal third-person mode of narration—a public point of view McCarthy pines for in "Characters in Fiction." "Bring back the author" is how she puts it in one interview; she longs for the "straight shooting" exercised by the "old novelists"; she longs to liberate the omniscient narrator "cramped inside the character like a contortionist in a box" ("Characters in Fiction" 283). The explanation for this looking backward—to the Naturalists and to the sprawling crowded nineteenth century novel—seems simple enough: the writers are Americans, and American writers were unfashionably late to Mrs. Dalloway's dinner party—slow to give up on the hearty realistic fare served up back home. Or there's that other simple and related explanation, one that I would argue underlies much of the criticism of these novels: McCarthy, Powell, and Stead simply weren't *able* to write like James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. They couldn't quite cut it and so resorted to cut-out characters.

But I would make a different claim. In fact, all these writers were quite aware of–and resistant to—what Woolf (and Taylor, Bowen, and Rhys in her wake) were doing. It wasn't that they *couldn't* do it, but that they didn't want to. I would also suggest that they didn't want to, in part, because it was an experiment they viewed as allowing only a partial, restricted, and marginalized perspective on the city. Why get stuck in Virginia Woolf's head when one could be hopping a train to the city? "Those who can live in the

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[12] This practice, as some critics have pointed out comes from a minor non-narrative genre popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Theophrastan character, the thumbnail sketch of a recognized social type, and one that urban novelists of the nineteenth century drew upon extensively. Robert Alter explains that in the nineteenth century realist tradition, "the approximation of what is stereotype serves as a foil of clear decipherability against which are played the more dynamic and elusive major characters, for whom approximation will not do." Alter reads the "comic grotesque figures of Dickens and Smollet, those walking synechdoches, embodiments of a recurrent tic or metaphor," not as "abandonment of verisimilitude but bold stylizations that catch the terrible, absurd simplicity to which some people can reduce their lives" (64).

country or rendez-vous only with themselves do still write novels in which man seeks to placate the ancient enemies," says Christina Stead, but "necessity drives the writer to town and the many-charactered novel is as essential to the metropolis as the many-windowed wall" (196). Yet, one could argue that just as women were beginning to go out—when women were coming to town in increasing numbers, when their access to public spaces and workplace was expanding—writers like Woolf, Rhys, Bowen and Taylor were, in the psychological sense, going further in.[13]

Few women in the nineteenth century had written the urban novel of social types,[14] and it would seem the satirical New York novelists viewed the modernist experiment as an opportunity lost: a going further inward rather than a movement out. For writers who

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[13] This resistance to going inward among these writers of the thirties and forties also relates to the dominance of Freud at the time. As George Haydn in a 1955 American Scholar interview, "What's Wrong With the American Novel" puts it: "I don't see how anyone, any novelist who is concerned with character at any depth or density can ignore the fact of Freud and all the other doctors and disciples and opponents" (Graham 465). It was the era of psychoanalysis, Freudian ideas so pervasive it was hard to be specifically aware of their influence. It seemed that everybody in New York was in psychoanalysis and talking about it. In her autobiography of the era, The Beginning of the Journey, Diana Trilling writes that "Freudian thought excited strong emotions among intellectuals, but not much intellection.... One 'believed' or did not 'believe' in it" (76). Trilling obviously did. In a scathing review of the book in The New Criterion, Hilton Kramer writes that Trilling seemed more interested in her private dramas on the couch than her interactions with the public intellectuals at The Nation. Both she and her husband, Lionel Trilling, held a "blind and irrational faith in the surrender to the psychoanalytic enterprise" (Kramer 6). The writers in the satirical tradition were, on the other hand, often nonbelievers. Mary McCarthy saw Freudianism as an "absurd set of myths." And Powell, after judging a fiction contest, remarked that as a result of the modern-day penchant for analysis, there was a new breed of writers who "write in the first person a lot, and remember sexy moments from their childhood and faraway first lays." They "seem self-absorbed" and "oblivious to the surroundings and people" (Page, Dawn Powell 272).

[14] The closest one might come to a woman's satirical urban novel in the 19th century is the first half of Daniel Deronda, and interestingly, Wharton, Powell, and McCarthy all claimed this was the better part of their favorite Eliot novel. Wharton's response to Eliot is especially enlightening. She agreed with Leslie Stephen who said of Eliot that "it is the constant, though not obtrusive, suggestion of the depths below the surface of trivial life which gives an impressive dignity to work," yet in her opinion Eliot, the "observer of life" is a better "writer than the moralist." The "genial spectator of the human comedy is too often thrust aside by the preacher who feels called upon to draw a somewhat obvious moral from the spectacle which his collaborator would have left to speak for itself" (Wegener 73).

claimed for themselves a kind of clear-sighted authority on the goings-on around them, who preferred the gregarious subject to a solitary one, who resisted the personal to assert a public voice, and who took pleasure in their ability to move from place to place, the modernist experiment meant restriction. To write a city with Woolf in mind meant a walk across the park; to write a city with Balzac in mind meant getting a good seat at a café on the Left Bank. Or, in this case, a good seat at a hotel in Greenwich Village. Instead of an omnibus, they would take a taxi. By writing comic social types rather than deeply realized heroines, by approaching their subject from satirical distance rather than through the subjective scrim of consciousness, by writing plots more akin to Babbitt than Mrs. Dalloway, more Balzac than Elizabeth Bowen, the New York writers were not only consciously resisting the modernist novel of sensibility, but were doing so because, as they saw it, doing so limited the urban frame, silenced the public voice.

If these novels are inspired, on the one hand, by a fictionalized nineteenth century European city, they are also informed and constructed both by the particularity of the American transplant experiences and by the material and spatial realities of a twentieth century New York. As social recorders, ethnographers of the city, Wharton, McCarthy, and Powell's aim was the contemporary—New York Now. As I have suggested, the difference between the British writers of the urban scene and the American writers, was partly shaped by the difference in their landscape. In Apartment Stories, Sharon Marcus considers the difference between London and Paris in the nineteenth century in a similar vein: "Against London, a city that expanded enormously throughout the nineteenth century, but whose landowners and builders concentrated on single-family houses, stands Paris, a city that also increased in population and dimensions, but whose housing stock

consisted mostly of apartment buildings." This difference, as Marcus illustrates, made itself known in the plotting, structure and emphasis of the novels coming out of the two cities.

Similarly New York 1940 and London 1940 offered up different landscapes both for depiction and plotting. Spaces of transience, of course, abound in the novels of sensibility: we step out as flaneur with Peter Walsh in Mrs. Dalloway, watching the "infinite richness of life." In Taylor and Bowen's novels we are forever putting a coin in the gas range in our hotel room, waiting for our teakettle to whistle before heading to Paddington to catch a train. Yet theirs is a city of bedsits, not booming American hotel lobbies. The streets are narrower, the trains made up of small compartments rather than a sea of faces looking up from the public car, their city row upon row of houses. Woolf's London landscape is an inherited one, not as in the case of these writers, the "fresh green breast of the New World" (The Great Gatsby 56). In Woolf, the walk does not broaden the city, but shrinks it to fit within the contours of one woman's day, one woman's ramble around her neighborhood.

Rarely too is there the shadow of the skyscraper; instead there is the shadow of War. Elizabeth Bowen's heroine walks in the rubble of London at the opening of Death of the Heart, and so too does mid-century Britain. The New York writers were writing rubble of a different kind: the Sisyphean rhythms of a city perpetually in the process of building itself up and tearing itself down, a rhythm reflected in their characters' endless ups and downs. War seemed far away. This, in fact, is one of the points of Isabel Bolton's Do I Wake or Sleep: a call to the American writer not just to look inward—one character

spends an afternoon detailing the literary failings of Algonquin-bred writers—but to look past the spires of the World's Fair in Queens to the cities and battlefields of Europe.

If this project has a spatial emphasis, it follows a historical continuum. While I concentrate on mid-century, I don't begin there, but instead, in 1913 with the publication of Edith Wharton's most satirical novel, The Custom of the Country. Although Wharton wrote a range of novels—from the earlier historical fiction to her best-known novel, the heroine-centered House of Mirth (1904)—it was Custom, her most sweeping social history which she considered her masterpiece. I see the novel—a satire of an aspiring Midwesterner thirsty for the urban experience—as initiating the tradition of satirical novels being written some thirty years later.

I look, for example, at the way the writing of Undine Spragg gives Wharton something that her earlier novels of sensibility, like The House of Mirth or The Reef, do not— an opportunity to write multiple locales, a plethora of scenes, cities and urban types. A daughter of old New York, Wharton did not herself move to New York from somewhere else, yet she did write about somebody who did, using the parvenu as a means of constructing for herself a narrative persona skilled at reading publicly and writing a broader, more cosmopolitan map.

By writing The Custom of the Country, Wharton was also attempting an escape from the kind of interiority (both psychological and spatial) that had so long been associated with the woman's novel. Undine leaves behind Apex, Ohio, Wharton leaves behind the small towns and sentimental stories of her nineteenth century female forbearers. She also turns her back on novelistic interiors favored by Henry James. Having already followed his lead in writing The Reef—a novel of four people in a house, a novel characterized by

subtle, almost indiscernible gradations in feeling—she now moves in another direction to exhibit her ability to read the surface: the quick discrimination of the type and the conclusive and funny re-telling of it. The convolutions inherent in reading and writing the twosome, the threesome, and the foursome found in The Reef are here given up for caricatures drawn from the crowd. Having explored the Jamesian house of fiction—in The Reef, it comes in the form of a French Chateau—she now takes on the hotel.

The writers at mid-century would do the same; turning away this time not just from Henry James but from Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, away from the labyrinthine plots of London and Paris to write the ups and downs of New York City.

At the center of my discussion in Chapters Three and Four, are the writers from the thirties and Forties, Dawn Powell and Mary McCarthy. If in the first chapter on Wharton, I focus on one novel, in the second I look at an entire series of novels about Manhattan, Powell's Manhattan Cycle, the majority of which focus on the late thirties and forties, and together tell a story of a city mapped like the café world she favored: public yet intimate. The chapter on Mary McCarthy looks at Pullman-car rendering of surfaces, her strategies for "banishing the heroine," and her ultimate escape from the novel (and New York City) altogether. Included within these chapters are shorter discussions of writers from the previous decade. I look at the twenties, the heyday of the quick-witted woman to consider writers like Dorothy Parker (who was not a novelist) and Anita Loos (whose novels were eventually made into the movies).[15]

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[15] As it would turn out—something I didn't realize as a child—those films I'd been watching on television were not only depicting a New York stage set (Greenwich Village built on a Hollywood backlot) but also, quite possibly, a city built on a writer's nostalgia for her own flapper-era youth. Many of the screenwriters in Hollywood during the thirties and forties were Manhattan transplants, writers who had come to New York in the twenties and then had fled to Hollywood later on. It was time to make money. (Dorothy Parker was one of those New York

In Chapter Five, I look at the fiction of The New Yorker writer Maeve Brennan to consider the effects of the decline of hotel life in the early sixties when so many hotels were destroyed to make way for office buildings and apartment projects and when so many women (and men) were leaving the city for the suburbs. This chapter looks not just at the demise of the hotel but also at other issues affecting urban life at mid-century: the rupture of neighborhoods in the era of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs and the plight of New Yorkers losing their homes to the bulldozer. If in the thirties and forties, New York was made up of strongly defined neighborhoods and streets, with a "thickly textured communal experience that shaped the lives of their inhabitants" (Sharpe 26), by the fifties, we begin to see a waning sense of place, a move away from neighborhood toward what Melvin Webber calls the "[n]onplace urban realm" (Webber 79). Fifties suburbia now looms in the distance and Robert Moses's ruthless red marker slices through the neighborhoods of mid-century New York. Tall buildings, as Jane Jacobs points out, meant less access to street life. The girl-from-the-provinces has been banished to Bronxville, her urban view shrunk to fit within the frame of one of those newly purchased fifties television sets. Or, like Rosemary, she is stuck, not in the Dakota this time, but in a slab of concrete along the East Side highway.

I conclude by briefly discussing several writers from the fifties and sixties, who were writing at a moment when the short story seemed to overshadow the novel as the form most often identified with the New York woman writer. Under the editorial guidance of

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transplants, winning an Oscar for A Star is Born in 1937.) The twenties tone is certainly a defining characteristic of many thirties movies -- especially the screwball comedy – and it is a tone found in the mid-century satirical novels as well. (Philip Rahv, the writer from the Partisan Review, once commented that Mary McCarthy's humor was not satire so much as the wit of a twenties era party girl.) Rahv is only partly right: the humor of McCarthy or Powell, while obviously drawing on the sparkle of the twenties-era, is marked by a gravity born of the Depression and impending War; the Flapper girls grow up.

its fiction editor, Katherine White, The New Yorker began publishing more women's fiction—Hortense Calisher, Jean Stafford, Maeve Brennan, even on occasion Shirley Jackson. I see these writers all drawing from the satirical tradition while at the same time positioning themselves, sometimes antagonistically, against it. There was still New Yorker wit—Katherine White believed the tone of New Yorker fiction should aspire to Jane Austen. Yet, gone—or infrequent—were those expansive renderings of the city scene; in their stead was a more lingering sentence and a more restrained, muted vision of the city. Often it was a terrifying vision and a lonelier one. More fear than thrill: a brooding walk, a woman alone in her apartment. These writers also suggest a return to the mode of sensibility favored by British writers of the city like Virginia Woolf. Hortense Calisher's fiction is, like Edith Wharton's, an attempt to break free from an enclosure, but in her case, she makes her move by modeling her fiction after Henry James.

Because New York and its urban space provide the central organizing strand that runs throughout the dissertation, I organize the chapters along these lines, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes materially. I look at the palace hotel (in Chapter Two), the Greenwich Village café (in Chapter Three), the Pullman car (in Chapter Four), the residential hotel (in Chapter Five), and the skyscraper (in Chapter Six).

Part II: Satire and the Critics

Lining the margins of my fifties edition of George Simmel's "Metropolis and Mental Life," are a string of penciled declarations. At each pivotal moment in Simmel's argument about urban life, some long-gone reader has vehemently voiced his (or her)

agreement. Modern city life, Simmel tells us, leads to a "blasé attitude," ("Too true!" asserts the reader in penciled exclamation); it produces the "intensification of nervous stimulation" heightening the intellectual and objective spirit over the subjective. ("Exactly!" the reader confirms.)

My fifties reader, however, seems most interested in the section of the essay in which Simmel explores what, in literary terms, would be the rendering of character. Simmel maintained that modern urban life both flattens and accentuates personality. Constant contact with strangers has the effect of effacing particularity. In cities, we haven't the time to become acquainted with the subtle differences among our associates; nor can our nerves take the strain of intimacy among so many. What this leads to, however, is greater effort to be heard and seen, which in turn results in an emphasis on an individuality defined by surface differences. The city-dweller, Simmel argues, "must exaggerate (the) personal element in order to remain audible even to himself" (422). While the small town provides opportunities for lengthy and familiar acquaintance, the urban environment, with its repeatedly brief and superficial contacts, creates the need to make a statement about oneself and make it fast; it results in the "the temptation to appear 'to the point,' to appear concentrated and strikingly characteristic" and to adopt "the metropolitan extravagances of mannerism, caprice and preciousness." At this, my reader nearly creases the page in excitement, underscoring in broad overlapping lines and remarking in bold letters: "Just so!"

Underlying Simmel's observations is an unmistakable note of disapproval—cities make for personality, rural life gives one character. The marginal notes make audible the condemnatory tsk tsk. It is like listening to friends who, having left the city for the

country, insist on the superiority of the leisurely at-home, the time-to-get-to-know-you friendship. The comments are quaintly redolent of one's aunt back in Wisconsin who, returned from a New York City spree, is convinced that living in cities converts real people into stage-strutters lacking in proper depth and feeling. The groan is suppressed. At any moment, one expects to hear, "I might want to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

Yet, Simmel's reading of cities (and even the glib marginal reaction) is relevant to my thesis and to the general discussion of many New York women novelists writing between the Wars. The writers in this dissertation—Edith Wharton, Mary McCarthy, and Dawn Powell—were choosing to do just what Simmel would identify with the writing of cities. Implicit in Simmel's argument is that *writing* the urban scene also requires a certain reliance on social typing and on compression of effect. Not only must modern urban dwellers produce a readable and arresting façade, but those telling the public story are similarly beholden to a public easily bored and pressed for time. In order to hold the attention of its blasé readers, the New York magazine writer, for instance, must be good at the pithy, conclusive and dazzling presentation. With a few delineating remarks, the writer of a New York scene transforms mannerism and caprice into a recognizable type. Eccentricity gets pigeonholed, and the probing of the emotional depths gives way to satire, to the representative, the tic, the dandified costume, the defining eccentricity displayed in a public room. If small towns produce deep readings of characters and cities promote the writing of surfaces and social types, then some novels are a sitting room, a village square, the shadows that come of a long and leisurely acquaintance. Others are cities, crowds, a glance across a public room.

By emphasizing "mannerism of caprice and polish" over the gift for going in deep, by taking pleasure in the writing of a crowd rather than the sustained development of a central character, and by inviting their readers to eavesdrop, gossip, to stare at people, the satirical novelists were doing just the thing my aunt from Wisconsin would so deplore. And they were doing just the thing their critics would deplore as well.

The last twenty years has seen a spate of work by literary critics and feminist geographers on women's experience of the urban environment,[16] but surprisingly little work has been done on women's literature of New York City, deemed by many the site of modernism's apogee, the city which Cyril Connelly would christen in 1940 "the supreme metropolis of the moment."[17] As satirists—not modernists—many of the mid-century novelists of New York didn't fit in.

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[16] Women's experience of urban life in modern cities of Europe has received considerable critical attention. Janet Wolff, Susan Buck Moers, and a host of others have written impressive critiques on women's experience of Paris at the turn of the century, remarking either on the absence of the street-rambling female flaneur or on her appearance in the guise of department store browser or prostitute. Literary scholars Susan M. Squier and Rachel Bowlby have examined the role of London in Virginia Woolf's fiction. Christine Sizemore has published a critical work on the female vision of London, from the perspective of five British novelists, and Liz Heron's Streets of Desire explores questions of female flanerie in Dorothy Richardson's fiction. Last year, Katherina von Ankum published a collection of feminist work on the discourse of gender, modernity and the Weimar culture of Berlin, and there have been several recent studies on Lou Andrea-Salome's Vienna.

[17] My aim when I began thinking about this project was not only to unpack an old story, but also to redress a critical gap. If one submits to the argument that modernism was a kind of capital-hopping nomad—moving from Paris at the turn of the century, to London, Dublin, Berlin, and Vienna in the twenties, and arriving like a worn-down immigrant at the portals of New York in the thirties and forties—one might also conclude that feminist scholarship trails not far behind. Yet, it seems we have yet to get off the boat. Feminist geographer Elizabeth Wilson, in her comprehensive study of women and urban life, The Sphinx in the City, focuses largely on European cities—Paris, London, and Berlin—touching down only briefly on the North American continent to take requisite notice of Sister Carrie and the Harlem Renaissance. There is almost no mention of New York at mid-century. When Wilson does shift her gaze to Manhattan, it's neither the New Deal thirties nor the golden forties that catches her eye but the brightly lit, big city of Catherine Texier, Mary Gaitskill, and Tama Janowitz's eighties. In her book Streetwalking the Metropolis, the literary critic Deborah Parsons takes the convergence of city and gender as theoretical starting point for her discussion of the novels of British writers like Dorothy

And if feminist literary critics and geographers have mostly disregarded the female tradition of writing Manhattan in the first half of the twentieth century, so too have the literary historians. When thinking of New York literature between the wars—and almost every anthology or literary history of New York bears this out—most turn to the end of the Harlem Renaissance, to Fitzgerald detailing the high-stepping flappers of West Egg or to the streets of the Lower East Side, to the gritty realism of Mike Gold, to the newspaper reportage of John Dos Passos, to the bridge-crossing City College boys: Norman Podhoretz, Alfred Kazin, and Irving Howe.[18] If women writers are discussed at all, they are generally seen as anomalies. She is the lone woman in the room elbowed on all sides by the tweedy camaraderie of a group of men; she is the exceptional woman included in the critical study. Anzia Yezierska or Ann Petrie may be invited to share the fire escape and the street with their elder brothers; Nella Larsen may be accorded a place uptown in Harlem in the twenties or Tess Slesinger a corner downtown at a meeting of the Communist Party in the thirties; Mary McCarthy may be assigned a desk at the Partisan Review and a role in the New York Intellectual scene of the forties and fifties. Yet nowhere does one get an investigation of these urban novelists and their work in relation to one another.

Richardson, Jean Rhys, Elizabeth Bowen, and Janet Flanner. In A Female Vision of the City, Christine Wick Sizemore does the same with British novels by more contemporary writers like Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, and Iris Murdoch. Yet a similar consideration of women novelists of New York between the wars—during the era of the 1939 World's Fair and the rise of abstract expressionism, an era framed by the vertical thrust of the skyscrapers in the late twenties and the horizontal expansion of Robert Moses's tangled network of freeways in the early fifties, framed by two waves of feminism, goes largely unobserved.

[18] It is also interesting to note that in 1935, Major American Writers, the standard college textbook edited by Howard Mumford Jones, included no women writers at all.

This is partly related to the problem of the writers themselves. It can be off-putting to construct an association, a literary kinship, among writers who would shudder at the female community such a project suggests. If American women writers of New York between the wars shared anything, it was a resistance to comparisons. From the twenties to the sixties, the history of women's urban writing reads as a daisy chain of animosity: Edna Ferber thought herself superior to Fanny Hurst; Dorothy Parker thought Edna Ferber wrote potboilers; neither Mary McCarthy or Dawn Powell thought much of Jean Stafford; Elizabeth Hardwick, although a lifelong friend of McCarthy's, would turn out to be the anonymous parodist of The Group; and there is McCarthy's 1980 interview with Dick Cavett, the one where Mary McCarthy asserts that every word Lillian Hellman wrote "is a lie including 'and' and 'the.' " Writing in the lull between two feminist waves—the "new woman feminism" of the 1890's and the feminism of the sixties and seventies—they disavowed connection to a feminist battle cry, turning their backs on their banner-waving predecessors and feminists to come. Just as it is difficult to read into many of the novels a shared commitment to some kind of female community—The Group, for example, is not about female connections so much as female competition—it is difficult to think of these writers traveling in sisterly packs. Writers like Mary McCarthy or Dawn Powell quite preferred being the lone woman in the room.[19] The nearest one might come to an image of these writers en masse is within the borders of an imaginary New Yorker cartoon, sharply sketched profiles scowling at one another from across a Manhattan hotel dining room while they whisper their observations in tones just audible for a round-the-table laugh.

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[19] As Betty Friedan explains, the few women who made it as writers between the two waves of feminism "sort of made it as exceptions and they didn't identify with other women—at all. For them, it was men, other women, and myself" (67).

Within the borders of that cartoon, however, are just what does link them: the whispering assessment, the critical lift of the eyebrow, the sharp sketch, the observation of social types, the delight in conversation, the urbane point of view and voice, even the hotel dining room itself. Within the borders of that cartoon can also be found the very reasons for their neglect, both by feminist critics and literary historians. Wharton's Custom, Powell's Manhattan Cycle, McCarthy's The Group and The Company She Keeps, have often been judged marginal because their characters are marginally complex: lacking in emotional complexity, lacking an inner life. In his New Yorker review after the publication of The Company She Keeps, Clifton Fadiman would call the heroine Margaret Sargent a character who is "characterless" (Roiphe 130). Until the reissue of three of her novels by Steerforth Press in 1994, those who acknowledged Powell's contribution to American literature did so grudgingly. The novels in the Manhattan Cycle, were funny, but were they important? They were clever, but were they deep?

Of course, women writers were not alone in getting this kind of negative response. Alfred Kazin felt similarly about John O'Hara, who wrote in the "superficial ... fashion of that metropolitan journalism which relies so much upon irony as a rhetorical device that it can finally communicate nothing but its irony" (On Native Grounds 387). Despite O'Hara's "stunning precision in the recording of the national talk and manners," his " 'shrewd eye' and 'sharp ear,' were the very substance of the cynical and elaborately amoral literary personality." O'Hara's was "a genial, boyish, and commonplace mind" that could "easily slip into an acquiescence that was almost indistinguishable from callousness" (On Native Grounds 388).[20] Generally, however female satirists got a worse

[20] It is interesting to note that Kazin partly excuses O'Hara because he sees him as suffering under the negative influence of those cosmopolitan writers, Dorothy Parker in particular.

rap—not seen as "genial" or "commonplace," but downright mean. Wharton, Irving Howe writes, too often "shows her claw inside the glove." According to the Normans—Podhoretz and Mailer—Mary McCarthy was "our leading bitch intellectual" (Mailer 54).

So much writing of the surface dubbed them "woman writer," one way or the other. Either they were behaving like ladies (superficially) or they were doing just what women do best (poking their noses in places where they didn't belong.) The writers themselves saw themselves as Naturalists—a mode typically identified with an urban subject and a mode of surface recording. Most critics at the time didn't see them that way,[21] and other Naturalist writers often didn't welcome them as fellow ethnographers in the field.

In his review of The Custom of the Country, Henry James does recognize that Wharton, in writing the novel, was aiming for a foothold in the Naturalist tradition. And he criticizes her for it. She, like other naturalist writers—what he calls the "slice of life writers"—encumbers the story with "too much saturation of evidence." For James, what saves the stuff of Custom from being "mere filler" is that saturation gets shaped through the "shade of asperity." The Custom of the Country, James writes, is "consistently, almost scientifically satiric, as indeed the satiric light was doubtless the only one in which the elements engaged could at all be focused together" (Bell, Edith Wharton 218). He also divides the "slice of life" and the "shade of asperity" along gender lines: Custom is marked by the "hard intellectual touch in the soft"; the "masculine conclusion tending so to crown the feminine observation" (282). The irony in James's split between shade

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[21] This, however, is beginning to change as the category of naturalism broadens and critics focus more on women describing the surfaces of the urban landscape. Grit no longer has everything to do with naturalism. For an excellent analysis of this, see Fleissner.

and slice, between observation and conclusion, however, is that while he first associates the describing tendency as belonging to the naturalist mode, a form which in the review he identifies largely with male writers, he then turns around and claims it as an essentially feminine characteristic. Women are good at looking around. The wife describes in detail a party of ladies across the room; the husband rustles his paper, wondering why she doesn't mind her own business or at least concentrate on minding his. Mary McCarthy would, like Wharton, find that her knack for saturation and description led critics like Norman Podhoretz and Norman Mailer to identify her as "just another lady furniture describer." For Podhoretz, the "elaborate descriptions of dress, furniture, and food" just go to show that Mary McCarthy is a lady magazine writer like all the rest.

Most obviously, there was the problem of the "shade of asperity," the belief that these women had taken the naturalistic impulse for observation to the critical edge. McCarthy called this observation with a "swerve and swoop," observation "on the bias" (Conversations 45). There was also the problem of too much emphasis on style. The satirist's flair for words, the dazzling descriptions, and the pleasure in what Wharton called the "precise angle" would ensnare these satirists in another critical predicament. Edith Wharton was "reproached," Millicent Bell writes, "for being an accomplished writer; the very elegance of her style was somehow felt to be a limitation" and her critics "would sometimes express the ingrained native distrust of 'cleverness' as somehow undemocratic and something no real man cared for, something respected chiefly by women."[22] Too much sparkle; too much wordplay: the pen runs away with itself. After reading one of Dawn Powell's novels, one reviewer noted that if her "critical eye" had

[22] See Bell's introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton.

momentarily convinced him she was a man, the "turbid gusto" of her prose soon set him straight.

One could also say that simply being identified with New York was a problem—a sign of the vacuous and superficial. A rather telling example of this comes from Nelsen Algren, a writer who identified himself with the "backstreet, backslums" of Chicago and had little affection for New York City. In his book on Chicago, he begins a passage with a description of the city as "a drafty hustler's junction in which to hustle awhile and move on out of the draft." That's why, as he puts it, the "boys and girls grow up and get out. Forever fancying some world-city right out of the books wherein some great common purpose lends meaning to their lives," they

> go to New York and merely grow sharp. Or they go to Hollywood and soften like custard left in the Sunset Boulevard Sun. Or, to Paris, the top of the sky and the end of the world ...and find nothing but American pansies packed three deep at the bars and aging American divorcees in summer furs carting pekes around in baskets ...You can be a typical Parisian, you can be a typical New Yorker if that helps when the cocktail lounges close. But if you can find anything in pants, skirts, or a Truman Capote opera cape passing itself off as a typical Chicagoan, we'll personally pay his fare back to Flair. (47)

If Simmel identified "mannerism of caprice and polish" generally with the modern city, then Algren identifies it more specifically with Manhattan. Go to Manhattan if you want to get sharp. Go too, if you want to be gay. The passage also belies Algren's very point: one doesn't need to move to New York to grow sharp. One can simply stay in Chicago for the he-man version of the satirical thrust: a claw inside a boxing glove.

The critical approach to satire, then, leads to a whole set of sometimes rather tiresome dichotomies: women's gift for going on and on against men's natural aptitude for hitting the nail on the head; men's impartial observation of the city from an omnibus against women's hiss from behind a potted palm at the Waldorf Astoria; botanizing the

asphalt against rearranging the furniture; women polishing their prose to gilded perfection against men hammering democratically away at theirs—even Truman Capote in an opera cape. No wonder literary critics, especially feminist ones, exhibit wariness when approaching the satirical writers of fiction. For the critic, the approach is much like trying to land at LaGuardia on a very foggy night. Not only can the study of satire be a rather deflating critical enterprise—explaining a joke that once told risks no longer being funny—but there is an array of dichotomies to acknowledge and a host of red flags around which one must continuously navigate: the problem of women not being nice about other women; the problem of women attempting to write like men; the problem of women not being good feminists. For feminists, women's satire also often engenders a particularly queasy discomfort: the uneasiness that comes of watching women flattening not just other women, but also, by association, themselves. It is hard, for instance, not to flinch at Dorothy Parker's attacks against her lovelorn heroines or Dawn Powell's jabs against her boozy Manhattanites, knowing as we do Parker's lovelorn biography or Powell's predilection for the bottle. Mary McCarthy once identified satire as related to her own "self-recriminating" tendencies, and Elaine Showalter has described McCarthy's fiction as a "veritable chorus of female self-hatred" (Kiernan 78).

Generally, all of this leads to what I call the "warding off" argument—satire as defense and disavowal and hence, a gesture of ambivalence. Wharton, a recent divorcee, takes out her ambivalence on her ever-divorcing heroine, Undine Spragg. It is striking, though, how rarely this critical approach—satire as disavowal—gets applied to the work of twentieth century male satirists, like, say, Nathanael West. While studies of The Day of the Locust may occasionally slip into biography, they rarely present West crouching in

a corner, wielding his satirical sword to fight off the charge that he is writing to make sure nobody gets him mixed-up with somebody else.[23]

In a recent essay in The Guardian, Margaret Drabble tells of being immediately entranced after reading The Custom of The Country, a novel she regards as "one of the most enjoyable great novels ever written." Yet, she notes the question in the Reading Group Guide at the end of her American Modern Library Classics edition: "Do you think Wharton hates Undine?" It is, as Drabble remarks, "a good question." Yet, it is not the only question and of less interest to her than the "brilliantly perceptive comments on family and marriage, on women's education, on American customs and European customs, and on the influence of American capitalism and commerce upon American culture." It is less interesting to her than the fact that "[w]here Henry James dimly suggests, Wharton analyzes and illustrates." Wharton "knows the world in a way that few novelists do, and it is a privilege to see the world in her company" (36).

"Does Wharton Hate Undine?" is not Drabble's only question; neither is it mine. While the critical problems underlying the satirical approach—especially as they relate to the representation of women—are addressed throughout this work, my focus is less on flaneur and more on the flanerie of the writing. It is a difference that Dawn Powell perfectly articulates in her own response to her critics. In a review of Dawn Powell's 1942 novel, Locusts Have No King, Diana Trilling objected to what she saw as the "discrepancy between the power of mind revealed on every page of the novel and the

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[23] Hortense Calisher makes a similar point in her autobiography Herself: "On the fictional work of Mary McCarthy, it was for years the critical fashion to say that it (she) 'lacked compassion,' a phrase I used to think revealed a lack of knowledge of what satire was—until I caught onto the fact that it was never used on male satirists" (378).

insignificance of the human beings upon whom Powell directs her excellent intelligence" (214). Trilling complained that:

> A shabbier crowd of hangers on and bar flies would be hard to find. Not a single individual among them, either positively or negatively, either by the nature of his ambition or the distance of his fall from glory, suggests any human ideal which justifies a writer bothering with the human race at all. (Page, Dawn Powell 46)

In other words, "I might want to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there." Powell said it better: "Gist of criticism (Diana Trilling, etc.) of my novel is if they had my automobile they wouldn't visit my folks, they'd visit *theirs*." To take the route favored by Diana Trilling etc., Powell explains, would have meant going along with the "ignorant belief in Party Manners for book people." It would mean "writing about 'nice people—people one likes.' " But "Who likes?" Powell wonders. "*I'm* doing the work. I write about people *I* find interesting" and what makes them interesting is that "they are representative" (271). She then proceeds to explain that along with this emphasis on writing representative New York types comes a focus on the city itself. "New York is my subject," she adds. "Never forget geography!" Powell's shift is also mine: a shift away from *who* the heroine to a focus on *where* she gets to go; a shift away from the heroine's "house of fiction" to the author's desire to write the walk across the public square, to stand in a hotel lobby and observe the scene.

CHAPTER TWO

Edith Wharton and the Hotel Novel

Part I: Edith Wharton and the Loud New York Story

In November of 1901, The New York World advertised a new apartment hotel on West 113th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, opposite the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.[24] It was small, with only eight rooms, and it was called The Henry James. When William Dean Howells saw the announcement, he sent a clipping on to James, who responded with a playful comment on the woes of selling books.[25] James wrote that the news of the hotel "at once deeply agitated & wildly uplifted" him such that for an hour he was "consumed with whirling rapture against which [he] almost began to draw cheques" (Letters 65). The hotel might just bring his books before the public. But then again, probably not. No—his books would remain "behind, irremovably behind, the public & fixed there for my lifetime at least & as the public hasn't eyes in the back of its head, & scarcely even in the front, no consequences can ensue" (65). Taking note of the reputed charms of the new apartment hotel—the announcement claims that it "specially appeals to the refined person" —he writes:

> The Henry James, I opine, will be a terrifically "private" hotel, & will languish, like the Lord of Burleigh's wife, under the burden of an honour "unto which it was not born." Refined, liveried, "two toileted," it will have been a short-lived, hectic paradox, & will presently have to close in order to reopen as the Mary

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[24] The apartment building was located at 501 West 113th.

[25] William Dean Howells, on January 19th, 1902, wrote to Thomas Bailey Aldrich that "an apartment house here has been named 'The Henry James.' I cut out the advertisement and sent it to him, and am wondering whether he will abhor or like it" (Howells: SL 4:11). For James's response on January 25th, 1902, see Letters 65-66.

> Johnston or the K.W. Wiggin or the James Allen Lane. Best of all as the Edith Wharton (66). [26]

Writing refined and unread masterpieces, the literary man longs for the big hit at the same time that he derides the culture of publicity that engenders it. Little European hotels give way to big American ones; refined fiction gets overtaken by the "magazine novel." In 1901, James was disappointed by the failure of The Wings of the Dove, which had sold almost nothing and had been received with little critical acclaim. The Atlantic had turned it down for serialization and chosen Mary Johnston's popular romance, To Have and To Hold instead. Kate Douglas Wiggin was the rage, and a year later she would come out with her smash hit Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. James Allen Lane, a Kentucky writer, was writing popular idealized novels of southern gentility,[27] and Edith Wharton had just published The Valley of Decision, a historical novel that quickly earned her more than ten thousand dollars in royalties.[28] At the time he wrote to Howells, James didn't know Wharton and had read only a few stories,[29] but he knew she credited him as a

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[26] Here, James is referring to Tennyson's poem "The Lord of Burleigh." In the poem, a village girl languishes when she learns that her new husband is not, as she had believed, a penniless landscape painter but rather the owner of a great estate. She assumes "all duties of her rank, / But a trouble weighed upon her, / And perplexed her, night and morn, / With the burthen of an honour / Unto which she was not born" (Tennyson 56).

[27] James Allen Lane was the author of Summer in Arcady (1896) and The Choir Invisible (1897).

[28] In 1899, Wharton's novel The Greater Inclination was published and was the most successful Scribner's had published that year. Throughout this period, Wharton earned much more than James for her novels. For example, in 1903, she earned $50,000 in royalties while James earned $10,000. (Bell, Wharton & James, 246).

[29] They had met many years before this, first in 1873 at a dinner party in Paris and two years later in Venice at "The Barbaro" palazzo on the Grand Canal. Neither meeting made an impression on James and he didn't remember them when told later. For Wharton both were memorable experiences. In her autobiography, she writes that she tried to impress him the first time with a pretty dress, the second time with a new hat. "I thought: How can I make myself pretty enough for him to notice me? Well — this time I had a new hat, a beautiful new hat! I was almost sure it was becoming and I felt that if he would only tell me so I might at last pluck up courage to blurt

literary influence. What prompts the ironic re-christening of The Henry James, what makes Edith Wharton "best of all," is not friendship—this would come later—but the possibility of a copycat scribbler supplanting the sage, the American public preferring Wharton, preferring, as it were, the genius dumbed down—Henry James gone public.

By naming his architectural namesake The Edith Wharton, James was identifying Wharton with commercial success and with the appeal of popular fiction. Of the two writers, Wharton was the unmistakable hit. In the years to come, she would churn out four bestsellers and over seventy short stories in literary magazines like Scribner's and in the "slicks"—Ladies Home Journal, Women's Home Companion, Twenties, Saturday Evening Post, McClure's, Redbook, The Delineator, and Pictorial Review. (Wharton, in an apologetic letter to her editor at Scribner's, Charles Burlingame, would refer to her remarkable talent for appearing in a number of magazines simultaneously as her "magazine-ubiquity" (Lewis 81).) Considering her upper class origins (commercial success was not an honor unto which she was born either) and considering the unspoken laws of old New York families that work and writing for money soiled the soul, Wharton was surprisingly attuned to the intricacies of making money—negotiating with editors, handling foreign publishing rights, and fighting for higher pay with the aplomb of a businessman. She would average roughly $50,000 a year from her fiction—far more than James ever made.

James also links Wharton with popular women's fiction. Literary publicity at the end of the nineteenth century was not synonymous with slickness or with sophistication—not urban or urbane—but instead indicated a kind of homely renown: the scribbler ties up her

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out my admiration for 'Daisy Miller' and 'The Portrait of a Lady.' But he noticed neither the hat nor its wearer — and the second of our meetings fell as flat as the first" (A Backward Glance 42).

manuscript with brown paper and string, and in a spidery, feminine hand, addresses the package New York City. At the time of Howells and James's correspondence, commercial success still meant sewing circles and sentiment. It meant big city magazines welcoming manuscripts from tidy drawing rooms and small towns far and wide. It meant the ladies, James Allen Lane aside.

James's yoking of Wharton with the modern hotel (and his housing of himself within a private and refined one) is significant in yet another sense. In The American Scene, the 1904 travel narrative in which he records his impressions of America after a twenty-one year absence, Henry James writes of stepping through the swing doors of the Waldorf-Astoria and finding the "gregarious state" at its most extreme. Disturbed by the provisional character of Americans—their love, born of the new railroads, for transience and speed; their passion for display and the crowded room—he claims that not only is there no home to return to in New York but there is no proper idea of home: no enclosure, no "fortunate nook or casual corner." Instead of rooms, there are thoroughfares. In America, "the synonym for civilization" is not the home but the hotel. "One is verily tempted to ask," he writes, "if the hotel spirit may not just *be* the American spirit most seeking and finding itself" (79).[30]

James delighted in the spatial symbol as a means of demonstrating the literary—the "house of fiction" is one of his best-known architectural allusions—and when he enters

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[30] If the popular axiom amongst Europeans was that "all Americans lived in hotels," James is careful not to align himself with this generalized interpretation of American life, writing that "it is not so much . . . that 'every one' lives at hotels, according to the witless belief of 'Europe,' but that you so quickly seem to measure the very limited extent to which those who people them, the populations they appeal to in general, may be conceived as 'living' out of them" (The American Scene 299). In Norman S. Hayner's 1936 sociological study, Hotel Life, Hayner interviews Europeans who still believe that in America, there are more hotels than houses, and that Americans are more familiar with the hotel lobby than their own kitchens.

the Waldorf, he approaches the space literarily. He plays esteemed man of letters condescending to review a mediocre piece of popular fiction and finds, upon entering the hotel lobby that he has entered "the essence of the loud New York story." Instead of a work of art, he finds a hack job, poorly paced, its tones discordant and "fairly shrieking in one's ears." Missing is the fleshed out, well-rounded character. Europeans, James explains, have been forced to "unlearn their old discrimination in favor of private life" and have been "educated to the truth of the hotel by the fruit-bearing action of the American example" (79).[31] Nevertheless, "there are endless things in Europe . . . behind and beyond the hotel, a multitudinous complicated life," he writes, while in the States, "you see the hotel as itself that life, as constituting for vast numbers of people the richest form of existence" (Ward 299). The life "beyond and behind" refers not simply to old world, old New York notions of culture and privacy but to personal qualities which culture and privacy presumably generate: interior complexity, depth, knowledge of the world. James is struck by the extreme efforts the hotel inhabitants make to be seen, remarked upon, and set apart. Yet, despite their seeming heterogeneity, the people he witnesses parading the corridors of the Waldorf or eating their dinners in the smaller hotels of the South remain flat: they clamor to express idiosyncrasy, and in so doing, strike James as monotonously just more of the same (American Scene 78). They are easy reads. The "air swarms with the characteristic" (78). It is "as if everyone and everything said to you straight: 'Yes, this is how we are; this is what it is to enjoy our advantages; this moreover is all there is of us; we give it all out. Make what you can of it!' "

[31] In London, Paris, and Berlin, one also encounters this spirit of publicity. Yet, as James sees it, the hotel spirit is quintessentially American — a foul disease of brash capitalism, transported across the Atlantic to contaminate the cultures of the old world. The clash between respect for privacy and the hotel spirit appears here as a kind of foreshadowing of the cultural collision of The Big Mac and the croissant, Euro Disney and the Louvre.

While they may be flat, these characters aren't fixed: their plots are founded on the impulse to keep going. Like the hotels or the Pullmans—"rushing hotels" James calls them—the characters of this modern American story are themselves perpetually provisional. They are unresolved, half-made, as "yet but an installment … a specimen of a type in course of serialization—like the hero of a magazine novel, by the highly successful author, the climax of which is still far off" (300). The loud New York story—with its paper doll characters, its slick magazine surfaces, its serialized plots driven not by psychological inquiry but by the question "where to next?"—is no more a story worthy of the literary man than the hotel lobby is a congenial place to spend the afternoon.

Like James, Edith Wharton was keen on the architectural metaphor. In her short story, "The Fullness of Life," she likens the nature of a woman to "a great house full of rooms" (Collected Stories 47).

> [T]here is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing-room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room where the members of the family come and go as they wish; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; in the innermost rooms, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for footsteps that never come (47).

A house with secret rooms is just the kind of spatial reference that many feminist critics, intent on exploring Wharton's spatial iconography, find most compelling. Critics like Judith Fryer, for example, focus on the private, inward-looking Edith, on her interior spaces, her secret gardens, her locked doors, her drawing rooms, and her gift for probing the psychological depths.[32]

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[32] Judith Fryer's seminal work on the architectonics of Wharton's fiction, Felicitious Spaces, looks specifically at the symbol of the house: the drawing rooms cloaked behind heavy drapes,

Yet, I would argue that Wharton's career is a progressive movement *away* from the innermost room, and that this transfer of her attention from depths to surfaces begins with the publication of The Custom of the Country—her chronicle of the turn-of-the-century American hotel world. While Wharton wrote a number of novels about the encounter between New York's established Knickerbocker families and the upstarts in their midst, she takes specific aim at the modern lady of leisure (and at her residence of choice, the grand hotel) in her 1913 novel, The Custom of the Country. My point in this chapter, however, is not simply that Wharton is writing *about* the hotel, which she does constantly and disparagingly, but that she depends upon a particular relation of character, point of view, and plot I call *of* or *from* the New York caravansary—a relation that signaled a departure not only from the narrative interiors favored by her scribbling sisters but also from the "liveried and refined interiors" preferred, in his later years, by Henry James. Written from an urban point of view consistent with the showmanship of the grand hotel and chronicling a plot not unlike those Pullman cars lined end to end and heading nowhere, the novel marks a shift in Wharton's fictional strategies throughout her career—the relinquishing of that holy of holies (the private self) to write crowds; the abandonment of the deep heroine for the "specimen of type"; and the exchange of the hushed interior for the gregarious palace hotel lobby. It was a space which proved not only a fruitful satirical subject but also informed the choices she made about plot and character. At a time when she was putting the Mount behind her to take up a more cosmopolitan, transitory, and urban existence, Wharton would, in the years following the

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the reliance on doors and intimate corridors. Others who have focused on the architectural aspect of Wharton's fiction include Amy Kaplan and Theresa Craig, to name a few.

publication of The Custom of the Country increasingly resist the caging of her talents either within a private house or a private mind.

By the time Custom was published in 1913, James and Wharton had established a friendship and while it continued to be a rather off-balance one—James playing mentor to the less experienced younger woman—Wharton had by this time come into her own, far less in awe of James and far more inclined to do it her own way. On first reading Wharton in 1905, James wrote to a friend that he "wanted to get hold of the little lady and pump the pure essence of [his] wisdom and experience into her." A great admirer of her work, he also held that "if a work of imagination...interests me at all (and very few, alas, do!), I always want to write it over in my own words." Wharton's fiction almost always interested him but almost always induced a desire to re-do it his way. Although he had publicly applauded The Custom of the Country in a Times Literary Supplement Review, privately, he was less enthusiastic. In A Backward Glance, Wharton recalls that for James, the "chief interest of The Custom of the Country and its most original theme, was that of a crude young woman such as Undine Spragg entering, all unprepared and unperceiving, into the mysterious labyrinth of family life in the old French aristocracy" (76). James believed that in the encounter between the traditions of the chateau family and the rootlessness of the American hotel girl, Wharton had "a magnificent subject, which ought to have been (her) main theme." Instead, she had "used it as a mere incident and passed it by" (89).

At first, James's desire for an international theme seems perplexing. Early in their relationship, he had, in effect, parceled off their fictional geographical terrain: I'll take Europe; you take New York. In the 1904 letter in which he expressed his desire to pump

good sense into the little lady, he expressed his desire to see her fiction "tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a backyard in New York." The difference, however, is that Custom, written nine years later, is neither the New York backyard nor the New York drawing room: it is the slick surface of the hotel; it is Pullman cars and transatlantic steamers; it is a heroine and a plot that resist tethering, a universe in which the interactions between old and new do not take. Wharton explains that while she "recognized that the contact between the Undine Spraggs and the French families they marry into was as the French themselves would say, an 'actuality' of immense interest to the novelist of manners" her purpose was of a different order:

> I saw his point, but I argued that in The Custom of the Country I was chronicling the career of a particular young woman, and that to whatever hemispheres her fortunes carried her, my task was to record her ravages and pass on to her next phase. This, however, was no argument to James; he had long since lost interest in the chronicle-novel, and cared only for the elaborate working out on all sides of a central situation, so that he could only answer, by implication—if not openly: "Then, my dear child, you chose the wrong kind of subject" (87).

The "unprepared and unperceiving" modern American is, of course, a popular subject for James, but when this particular specimen of the American girl appears in the late James, either she is a sideline character, a foil against which the heroes or heroines can assert their complexity or she is transformed, given a third dimension through the encounter with an older, more traditional society. Flatness gets dramatized. However unprepared and unperceiving the hotel-dwelling Daisy Miller may have been at the outset, we learn, after her death, that through her encounter with European culture and the influences of the sophisticated Winterbourne, she had learned to see. But Undine Spragg, the heroine of The Custom of the Country, never gets enlightened and doesn't want to. The encounters with the Marvell or DeChelles families don't effect transformation, and

the customs of their countries either slide off Undine's smooth surfaces, or are only superficially absorbed, "shades of conduct, turns of speech, tricks of attitude" to try on like a new dress (314).

Had Wharton chosen the right subject, she would have removed Undine from the hotel and installed her permanently in a French chateau. As Wharton herself points out, in James's later stories and novels, Pullman cars lined end to end and moving with inevitable speed to an unknown destination held no sway: the larger social scene and the proliferation of perspective were given up. Millicent Bell, the James critic who most assiduously contrasted the work of Wharton and James, saw this as their defining difference, what made James great and Wharton trailing behind. "One of Undine Spragg's phases would have been enough for James. He would have extracted the last drop of 'actuality' from it," Bell writes (Wharton & James 279). Wharton, on the other hand, preferred "the constantly changing interest of the rogue-errant's adventures, and a form of continuous chronicle open at either end" (280).

Underlying James's notion of a right kind of story is the command: *Sit Still, Undine.* It is a command that runs throughout the novel. Mrs. Heeny, who provides manicures, massages, and advice to bored New York society ladies, constantly warns Undine to "go steady." Undine, in reckless pursuit of the fancy of the moment, cannot. Neither, in writing Custom, it seems, can Wharton. Unwilling to heed the injunctions of the "great man," as Wharton often called James, Wharton had instead heeded the injunctions of her subject. Undine Spragg had called out, "make of me what you can," and Wharton had done her best, following her phases, recording her ravages. Whatever depths of character might have been revealed—or instilled—as a result of the meeting of Europe and

America, whatever story it might have led to, were relinquished in order to chronicle the career of a hotel-dwelling young woman out and about.

At the heart of Wharton's justification for her hotel heroine and hotel plot lie two suggestions: she told James she was aiming for an almost journalistic mirroring—as if she's not making Undine up; she's recording her. And second, she told him that to give up on Undine would mean to give up on phase upon phase, ravage upon ravage. Her claim that she wants to record Undine locates Wharton within the Naturalist tradition.[33] Relying on the theories of Social Darwinism, on the taxonomy of types, and what Wharton called the "objective faculty," Custom, more than any of Wharton's previous novels, gestures toward what Wharton called "the great experiment." However much she may have admired James the man, he would, in her later life, be supplanted in her literary estimation by Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, two Midwestern journalists who shared her passion for writing crowds and social scenes. By the close of her career, she would be less interested in the inner play of light and shadow and more in the banalities of Babbitt; less in the reverberations of consciousness and more in the reverberations of Sister Carrie's rocking chair, teetering steadily towards the next best thing. Dreiser and Lewis even shared Wharton's passion for writing the American hotel. In Dreiser's fiction, hotels abound—glittering objects of fantasy that seduce, and in many cases, destroy, their

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[33] Wharton's emphasis on recording of character is also discussed in A Backward Glance. She writes that "the situating of my tale," she was "conscious of conducting," but once the preparations are done she "waits breathlessly" for the arrival of her characters, which "are all of a sudden in possession of one." "I am merely a recording instrument and my hand never hesitates because my mind has not to choose, but only to set down what these...people say." For Wharton the scene—the landscape—delimits the kind of people she will write. See A Backward Glance, 198-204.

victims.[34] Sinclair Lewis would write an entire novel about American hotel life in the obscure and rather obsessive Work of Art (1934).[35] It would seem that the European adage—Americans all live in hotels—was perhaps more true of American social realists. It was often the hotel lobby, an ideal space for the observation of social types, in which they imaginatively lived.

Yet, in one sense, Custom is nothing like Sister Carrie, the Naturalist novel that most influenced the writing of Custom and that also chronicles a Midwestern woman's pilgrimage from city to city. There are the differences in class, of course, but also, Sister Carrie is missing the satirical—and funny—voice. In a 1914 essay in The Times Literary Supplement, an appeal for form and selectivity in the novel, James includes a review of Custom in which he claims that Wharton, like other naturalist writers—what he calls the "slice of life writers"—loads the story down with "too much saturation of evidence." For

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[34] In a review of An American Tragedy, H.L. Mencken noted that the economic struggle, in [Dreiser's] eye, has a bizarre symbol: the modern American hotel. "Do you remember Carrie Meeber's first encounter with a hotel beefsteak in Sister Carrie? And Jennie Gerhardt's dumb wonder before the splendors of that hotel in which her mother scrubbed the grand staircase? There are hotels, too, and aplenty, in The Titan and The Genius: toward the end of the latter there is a famous description, pages long, of the lobby of a New York apartment house, by the Waldorf-Astoria out of the Third Avenue car-barn. It was a hotel that lured Jennie (like Carrie before her) to her ruin, and it is a hotel that starts Clyde Griffiths on his swift journey to the chair" (Ward 43).

[35] The one driving ambition of the protagonist, Myron Eagle, is to design and run a hotel as an epic work of art. When in Washington D.C., Myron has no time for the White House or the Capitol because he is too busy taking notes in lobbies; and his European tour is a "passionate pilgrimage" during which he completes two volumes of his "Hotel Project Notes." The novel ends when Myron's son persuades him to turn his attention from hotels to the new "tourist camps" devoted to holidaymakers who had given up on railroad travel and taken to their cars. It ends with those dusty roadside cabins that line Frank Capra's comedy, It Happened One Night. This long rambling, satirical novel suggests that writers and hotel managers are, in their obsession with people seen in public, aiming after the same thing. Throughout Work of Art, Myron is juxtaposed with his brother, Stephen, the writer, both endeavoring to create a work of art that will reflect the vast social realities of America on the move. A few years before his death, Sinclair Lewis admitted to Brendan Gill that if he had his life to do over, he would have preferred running a hotel, an admission that would be echoed by the satirist Nathanael West. While managing New York City's hotel Sutton, he commented to a friend that running a hotel was the ideal job for a writer, for "it put you in contact with so many oddball types."

James, what saves the stuff of Custom from being "mere filler" is that saturation gets shaped through the "shade of asperity." The Custom of the Country, James writes, is "consistently, almost scientifically satiric, as indeed the satiric light was doubtless the only one in which the elements engaged could at all be focused together" (Bell, Wharton & James 218). What elevates Custom above other slice of life novels is the combination of accurate reporting and the ironic rise of the eyebrow; stuff is not just piled on; it's sorted out, categorized, and put away. Details in the novel are found "not in the crude state but in the extract." In describing her career, Wharton once wrote that she saw herself as different from other writers because she attempted "to turn the wooden dolls" of conventional fiction "into struggling, suffering human beings" (Wilson, "Justice" 30). In Custom, she does the reverse—not highlighting her gift for psychological acuity, the ability to go in deep, so much as the ability to read the surface: the quick discrimination of the type and the conclusive and funny-retelling of it. Wharton reverses the dictum of Fiction Writing 101 instructors everywhere (round out) and instead unrelentingly flattens.

The difference in what Wharton is doing here and what Dreiser, Crane or Norris would do in their novels is not that she objectifies her characters and they don't—in fact, Lionel Trilling's accusation against the Naturalists is that they do just that: they turn characters into insects. The difference is that Wharton leaves the reader with no confusion about what to think; there's no pretense of removed impartiality. Conclusions may be latent in Dreiser's depiction of Sister Carrie or Hurstwood, but in the satirical novel, they are up front for all to see. Custom is marked by the "hard intellectual touch in the soft," James writes. Along with observation, there is conclusion. Along with the

litany of recorded details, there is the sharp rendering—a perfect name (Undine Spragg, Indiana Frusk, Elmer Moffatt), or a dazzling send-up.

While this kind of urbanity—or audibility—is missing from Sister Carrie, it is a distinctive characteristic of Wharton's other favorite, Sinclair Lewis. Lewis looked to Wharton as an influence, even dedicating Babbitt to her in 1920.[36] Wharton returned the compliment. Main Street was one of her favorite American novels, "a pioneering work which with a swing of the pen hacked away the sentimental vegetation from the American small town" ("Great American Novel" 153). Yet, although she greatly admired Main Street, she also believed that by the twenties, "as a theme, Main Street—in the literary sense—has now received as much notice as its width and length will carry" (153). Her central complaint in her 1927 essay, "The Great American Novel," was the narrow scope of American fiction. She longed to see the American novelist get out more. "America's sedentary days are long past," she writes. "The whole world has become a vast escalator, and Ford motors and Gillette razors have bound together the uttermost parts of the earth" (156). The American novelist should no longer confine himself to the small town or even to big cities "as viewed from the small-town angle" (156). The "nomadic habits of modern life" had thrown "wide open" to the American novelist an excellent subject. While "the wandering or expatriate American" is not the only "fit theme for fiction," he is "peculiarly typical of modern America—of its intense social acquisitiveness and insatiable appetite for new facts and sights" (157). Why then, Wharton asks, keep American fiction "tethered to the village pump?" Why write Main

[36] Wharton responded to this compliment with glee: "I'm a little dizzy! No one has ever wanted to dedicate a book to me before—and I'm so particularly glad that now it's happened, the suggestion coming from the author of Main Street. Yes—of course!" (Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography 434).

Street when the reality of America has become the hotel? If Dreiser was missing the urbane voice, Lewis, in his best-known novels, Babbitt and Main Street, was missing the train out of town.

This is Wharton's second point in her defense of Custom—the desire to record the nomadic habits of a particular American type—to follow Undine to "whatever hemispheres" her movements take her. In Custom, a contiguous relationship exists between the publicly drawn type and the provisional plot, between the flat character and the plot of desires deferred. While monstrous in her ambitions and lack of emotional depth, Undine is a heroine—if you can call her that—whose on-the-make aspirations generate an on-the-move plot: social mobility leads to geographic mobility. Transcendence (the story of a nice character with whom we can identify; a character who changes and who develops) gives way to transience. Writing the hotel-heroine gives us paper dolls in the form of female picaros. Instead of arrivals, The Custom of the Country presents a series of perpetual deferrals: scenes that suggest arrival (a new husband, a new house) but are soon undermined by Undine setting her sights on "ampler vistas." She is forever longing for "something beyond." Desire leads to fulfillment; fulfillment leads to dissatisfaction; dissatisfaction leads to desire and here we go again. "She had everything she wanted," Undine thinks near the close of the novel, "but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them" (246). Undine's desire to "get in," to arrive at what is fashionable, means that she is forever getting out.

One way to read the emphasis on restlessness and geography in Custom is to see in Undine's mobility a glimpse of Wharton herself. The argument some have made is that if you are in search of Edith, take a good look at Undine's inability to sit still. In his letters,

Henry James describes Wharton much the way Wharton describes her ever-dissatisfied heroine. "Edith sometimes appeared to the view of the harried and aging Henry James," R.W.B. Lewis writes: "like an irresistible force of nature" (350). In a letter to Howard Sturgis, James grumbled that Wharton is caught up in "a nightmare of perpetually renewable choice and decision...her amusement at any cost and in any quantity that suits her she will have, let who will pay" (Letters 189). Alongside this nightmare is an image from Wharton's memoir, A Backward Glance: Wharton behind the wheel of her motor car, a pair of driving goggles in place, a headscarf trailing, and poor Henry James joggling about in the back. Wharton liked to move, and she loved to travel.[37] By 1913, she'd left the Mount and America and the husband behind and was living in Europe permanently, where travel had become as much a passion as the decoration of houses.

My point, however, is not that Wharton redeems Undine in giving her fits of wanderlust similar to her own. Undine's hotel impulses—her indifference to tradition and roots—are too scathingly depicted for redemption, and for a female picaro, she is deficient in roguish charm: she has none of the potential for identification that one might find in Moll Flanders. To call Undine Spragg a representative "New Woman," as some critics have done, seems equally absurd: Undine is not out banging on typewriters or marching for the vote. Instead, she is marrying up.[38] Undine is really a characterological vehicle for Wharton's own "insatiable appetite" for the writing of "new facts and sights." Undine's acquisitive longings mean the writing of urban settings, settings which in turn illustrate not only the gift for seeing and reading and writing urbanely, but also what Van

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[37] For more on Wharton's passion for speed and travel, see Bentley, Wright and Schribner.

[38] For a reading of Undine Spragg as "New Woman," see in particular Martha Patterson's "Incorporating the New Woman in Wharton's The Custom of the Country,"

Wyck Brooks saw as Wharton's "singular gift of the magic carpet." Wharton "had only to think of a scene," Brooks writes, "to whisk one there" (290). By writing a hotel heroine who believes in the "inalienable right to go round," Wharton herself can *write* around. By escaping the demands of the deep heroine, she can focus less on who her heroine is and more on where her heroine takes her.

Part II: The Palace Hotel and the Big-Hatted Lady

At the turn of the twentieth century, the divided dwelling space and large public hotels were fast replacing the private home for the urban middle class.[39] The rise of the railroads, the burgeoning of the tourist industry, and the influx of newly wealthy families migrating to the big city from the south and midwest made apartment and palace hotel living increasingly popular in New York. The apartment hotels, originally an amalgamation of the contemporary apartment building and the tourist hotel—complete with public dining room, maid service, and rented furniture—were going up in record numbers on the Upper West and East Sides. Along with the rise of these apartment hotels came the great palace hotels. The Waldorf-Astoria went up in 1893 on Peacock's alley, the fashionable strip of Fifth Avenue that was the dominion of the department store and grand hotel. The Hotel Astor was built in 1904 and the Plaza in 1906. Unlike anything previously seen in Europe, these hotels descended in design and purpose from the way-station hotels originally built in the vicinity of railroad stations in the smaller cities of America.[40]

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[39] See Cromley, Groth, and Hayner.

[40] In Manhattan, after 1910, many of the new hotels were built near the two new railroad terminals, forming concentrations just to the east and the south of the Times Square area. Although New York already possessed large and splendid hotels catering to the carriage trade, as

Enormous, with over 1,000 rooms, the palace hotels were popular as places to live for longer stretches of time, especially for those newcomers who didn't have roots in the city and found that life in a hotel liberated them from all the responsibilities of keeping house. Self-sufficient—housing haberdasheries and travel agencies, drugstores, florists, valet services, swimming pools, children's playrooms—they were microcosmic cities where one could get away without having to ever leave the hotel at all. In Your United States (1912) Arnold Bennett writes that "it is difficult to imagine any city in the United States minus at least two imposing hotels, with a barber's shop in the basement and a world fair in the hall." Much larger than the European hotel, they provide "a spectacle of humanity such as cannot be seen in Europe."[41]

As a spectacle, it was a distinctly feminine one. Throughout the nineteenth century, the title of "hotel lady" was shorthand for prostitute. It signaled the unseemly, such that middle-class and upper-class hotels built separate ladies lounges so that "respectable" women could be shielded from the potentially licentious influence of the public rooms as well as from the implications that went along with hotel-dwelling.[42] By the turn of the century, however, when middle and upper class women were staying in hotels in record

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well as myriads of boardinghouses and cheap lodging places, these new hotels, born of the railway, offered luxury for less cost and were often geared specifically for business travel and for small family groups visiting the city for a short time. See Harris, Cromley, and Groth.

[41] A recent novel by Steven Millhauser, Martin Dressler (1996) takes the all-encompassing "world fair in the hall" quality of the American hotel as his theme. Insatiably ambitious, Martin Dressler, a risen-from-the-bootstraps entrepreneur, keeps building grander and grander hotels. The skyscraping impulse is let loose, magnified. The ultimate enterprise is the Grand Cosmo, "not a hotel at all" but an experiment in enclosed community, something like a vertical city and something like a global village; a total-living enclave straight out of Walt Disney set in a nineteenth-century city. The notion, common at the turn of the century, that one never had to leave the grand hotel gets exaggerated and post-modernized; the Grand Cosmo, is a complete universe, "a place that rendered the city unnecessary" (269).

[42] See Brucken.

numbers, a new breed of hotel lady was born: one who was not shielded from the central lobby but rather who dominated it. In The Future in America (1906) H.G. Wells describes the grand hotel lobby and notes the number of women commanding the scene. He writes, "in such great hotels as the Waldorf-Astoria one finds the new arrivals, the wives and daughters from the west and south, in new, bright hats, and splendors of costumes, clubbed together, under the discreetest management, for this and that, learning how to spend collectively" (65). Stepping out of a blizzard and through the swing doors of the Waldorf's entrance, Henry James is accosted by "the gregarious state" at its most extreme—a din of conversations held mainly by the "innumerable big-hatted ladies." Critical of the way that women have taken over the leisure spaces of the city and now dominate cultural production and conversation, James observes that upper class women, having exchanged the quiet, intimate interior for the peacock's parade, now find in the "gilded and storied labyrinths" of the grand hotel the very "firesides and pathways of home."

Between 1900 and the mid-thirties, the debate over the larger implications of women living in cities found expression in the cultural tussles over the rented room and the hotel lobby. Feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman hailed the hotel as the harbinger of the feminist utopia to come. "From the most primitive caravansary up to the square miles of floorspace in the Grand hotels," Gilman writes, "the public house has met the needs of social evolution as no private house could have done" (187). She believed that not only would the modern hotel free the urban working women, the typists and clerks, from domestic tasks (instead of slaving away in the kitchen, they could live together in communal sisterhood, sharing the burdens of childcare and cooking), but that it would

also liberate middle and upper class women from another form of demeaning labor: interior decoration. Some critics, though, saw women's life in the public house as the end of harmonious family life. In his 1936 sociological study, Hotel Life, Norman Hayner would claim that the transient existence was a menace to family values, transforming industrious homemakers into blurry-eyed victims of the department stores, releasing throngs of precocious children, little Eloises, into the public dining rooms, and leaving men to fume in the smoking lounge. While Hayner admits that the growing number of the "other sex" in cities and hotel, "may be thought of as an aspect of the general movement among women against slavish drudgery and towards the freedom of self expression," most, he believes, are nothing more than "mental rovers" who "have gained their freedom but lost their direction" (87).

Edna Ferber's short story collection, Roast Beef Medium, published the same year as The Custom of the Country, reflects the differing opinions about hotel living held by writers like Gilman and Hayner. The stories follow the adventures of Emma McChesney, a spunky middle-aged divorcee who sells petticoats on the road and who has, for over twenty years, lived in single occupancy rooms across America. In the stories, Emma's hotel existence and the adventures of a woman working on the road provide the interest, the impetus, the drama: Emma wins an argument with the desk clerk, Emma snubs a suitor in the dining room, Emma steals the account from a competitor. These scenes, however, are immediately followed by disavowal: hotels are no place for a woman. Ferber, like many New York writers, lived in hotels for most of her adult life, and yet she constantly complained about them. She longed to be able to decorate, she once told a niece and yet there was only so much one could do with hotel furniture. Emma, her

heroine, similarly longs for a home of her own. She complains endlessly about the vexations of the hotel: the ugly furniture, the long, lonely Sunday afternoons, the rude desk clerks, the food, roast beef night after night. While some women on the road might fantasize about meeting a handsome stranger, Emma McChesney designs kitchens in her head to pass the time; she has visions of herself elbow deep in flour.

In Roast Beef Medium hotel rooms are familiar, predictable. Each story offers a description of the same room—the straight-backed chair; the iron bedstead; the mirror on which to hang newly washed handkerchiefs; the same food, roast beef, medium; even the same companions who travel Emma's route from Minneapolis to New York. What is exotic, unfamiliar, mysterious, *artistic*, is the fantasy of a home of her own. At first, these stories seem to reverse the girl-leaves-home-to-be-an-artist plot. In the movies coming out of Hollywood in the late twenties and early thirties, the woman dreams of cities and hotels and fast moving trains while dusting the parlor. Cities, hotels, Pullman cars are conflated with artistic aspiration and the longing for adventure. Here, hotel and train life is domesticated, routinized. Homemaking is Emma's unfulfilled art and passion.

The close of the Emma McChesney stories, however, resolves at a halfway point between the "New Woman-goes-to-the-city" plot and the closure-in-enclosure narrative of traditional women's fiction. In the final Emma McChesney story, she has, at last, settled down in one place, but instead of a house or a husband, which she rejects, she moves into a hotel apartment building in Manhattan, with a too-small kitchen and a view of the Hudson River. Along the way, she has also risen in the ranks from traveling saleswoman to the marketing strategist and official secretary of the entire company. (Emma saves the company by introducing bloomers and flannel pajamas to replace the

outmoded petticoat.) In New York, Emma has found permanence at last. She has a home of her own, and is no longer burdened with valise or trunk. But instead of rolling out dough in a spacious country kitchen, she is working in a Manhattan office and living in a bigger, grander residential hotel.

Edith Wharton's response to the grand hotels of New York is similarly ambivalent. The truth is she did not like grand hotels or grasping females any more than Henry James did. She had no need for Gilman's kitchenless utopias. Why should she? She had servants.[43] She didn't reproach women for decorating either; in fact, she wrote a book on how to do it.[44] A champion of the interior, of privacy, and intimate nooks, Wharton designed her own home, The Mount, in Lennox, Massachusetts as an exception to the brazenly open mansions of the new Wall Street plutocracy. In The Decoration of Houses (1897) she, like James, writes zealously of the need to reassert the private realm.[45] Nor

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[43] Wharton, in A Backward Glance, mourns "the extinction of the household arts" and ridicules a liberation of women that would value a university curriculum above what she calls a "curriculum of house-keeping" (830). She does not want women to "despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living" (830).

[44] For a discussion of Wharton's The Decoration of Houses and her interest in interior decoration, see Fryer, Kaplan, and Craig.

[45] "Privacy," she argues, "is one of the first requisites of civilized life"; a room should be a "small world on its own." Instead of the open, passage-like rooms of the previous generation, which allowed for constant surveillance and little privacy, she advocates single utility rooms with many doors. Her greatest quarrel with the American house is that the door—pursued by the previous generation of architects and decorators with "relentless animosity"—has disappeared (49). Doors must be reinstalled, and the first thing the reader is told about the individual components of the house is that "while the main purpose of an entrance door is to admit, its secondary purpose is to exclude" (53). See also Henry James who appraises the modern city and modern American house in The American Scene. He writes: "The universal custom of the house with almost no one of its indoor parts distinguishable from any other...this diffused vagueness of separation between apartments, between hall and room, between one room and another, between the one you are in and the one you are not in, between place of passage and place of privacy, is a provocation to despair which the public institution shares impartially with the luxurious 'home'...thus we have ...every part of every house...visible, visitable, penetrable, not only from every other part, but from as many parts of as many other houses as possible ... thus we see systematized the

did Wharton, for the purposes of inclusion or exclusion, need roundtables in back rooms to host her friends: she could invite her version of the Algonquin's inner circle—"we happy few" is what Morton Fullerton, Henry James, Percy Lubbock and the rest of Wharton's crowd called themselves—over to her house for dinner.

As for the big-hatted lady in the palace hotel, The Custom of the Country openly declares itself. The novel's central character, Undine Spragg, and her circle are the very objects of Wharton's unrelenting (and vituperative) social critique. Reveling in the spectacle of the hotel lobbies of New York and Europe and in her own spectacular figure amidst the hotel crowds, Undine is a "creature of skin-deep reactions," "a sentient throbbing surface" with a "face like a theatre with all the lustres blazing" (37). She seems to possess nothing beyond and behind her glittering surface except an unquenchable desire for social prominence (100). Her "conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity—the band, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses" (129). The central scenes of the novel do not occur in the drawing room but out in public—in the crowded dining room of Paris's Nouveau Luxe, where one finds "an endless perspective of plumed and jeweled heads, of shoulders bare or black-coated, encircling the close-packed tables" (109). Inspiration comes in the shape of hatboxes; interiors are rarely given over to reflection—except within a vanity mirror—but are instead places to try on and discard the newest fashion from Paris, purchases which will be billed to the husband of the moment who must, if he can, find a way to pay. Neither the suicide of her first husband nor the depletion of her second husband's family fortune causes much more than

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indefinite extension of all spaces and the definite merging of all functions; the enlargement of every opening, the exaggeration of every passage, the substitution of gaping arches and far perspectives and resounding voids for enclosing walls, for practicable doors, for controllable windows, for all the rest of the essence of the room-character, that room suggestion that is so indispensable … to occupation and concentration (167).

a momentary flicker of concern: a "trickle of a tear" on thinking of her child; a "vague sense of distress" upon hearing of one husband's suicide (366, 274).

As the "monstrously perfect result" of a system in which men rush off to the office, pat the little ladies on their heads and offer them a fur coat to make up for missing dinner, Undine Spragg follows a code of behavior in which ambition is attained by keeping an eye out for marital opportunities. Able to advance through the exchange of husbands—from Elmer Moffatt to Ralph Marvell to Raymond de Chelles and back to Moffatt again—she is forever on the make, handling marriage and divorce much the way Wharton herself would handle her book sales: with the aplomb of the businessman. A woman who never quite loves 'em but does know how to leave 'em, Undine reads like a kindred relation to the blondes and redheads that populate the novels and films written by Anita Loos some twenty years later. The heroine of the Loos film, The Red Headed Woman could define Undine's life purpose: on the subject of leaving one man for another (and richer) one, the film's heroine explains that she is "upgrading." Even the heroine's character, or lack of one, is described in vertical terms: "the dame is on the level like a flight of stairs."

Coinciding with the boom in hotels was the explosion of divorce in America. Between 1867 and 1929, the divorce rate rose by 2,000 percent, and the divorce capitals of America in North Dakota and Nevada were inundated with thousands of dissatisfied women come to start afresh, spilling in record numbers from westbound trains.[46] Critics of the new hotel culture remarked on the fact that urban hotels, as well as the European watering holes populated by Americans, had become sanctuaries for the woman displaced because she had severed the marital tie. The hotel was a space to regroup, a way station

[46] See Nancy Bentley's Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James and Wharton.

between homes and husbands and a place in which to waste time and money. It was also a space to continue shopping for husbands.

When Raymond de Chelles, Undine's third husband and a member of an old aristocratic French family, discovers that his wife has put a family heirloom up for sale in order to pay for new clothes and jewels, he attacks not just her extravagance, but also her upbringing in the provisional spaces of America:

> You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours, you've forgotten the very house you were born in — if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! .... You come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry. (307)

Undine is likened to a city forever in the process of rebuilding itself, her midwestern hometown, Apex City, suggesting a complete absence of tradition or roots. She could have come from anywhere, from almost any of the boomtowns bursting to life along the railroad lines that crossed the plains. Unlike Wharton's other heroine reared in hotels, Lily Bart of The House of Mirth, who seeks a husband, who longs for a home to call her own, and who is overcome in the final tragic scene by her "homeless, ephemeral" state, Undine is a heroine whose refusal to stay married keeps her perpetually homeless and ephemeral. And Undine likes it that way. Husbands ultimately mean houses, and like houses, rarely can they sustain her interest for long. She delights in moving on—from capital to capital, from husband to husband, from hotel to hotel. Even her name connotes movement, undulation, the waves and troughs of an aspiring, acquisitive force.[47]

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[47] Ralph Marvell believes Undine's name came from the Spraggs's reading of Montaigne's essay "Par divers moyons on arrive a pareille fin," an essay on erratic behavior. "Diverse et ondoyant," was his phrase. In truth, her name was given in honor of the successful hair-waving formula invented by Mr. Spragg, based on "undoolay...the French for crimping." The naming of Undine Spragg is much discussed by critics. Claire Preston opens her essay with an analysis of the name.

Undine is utterly without depth. In fact, so uncomplicated and illustrative are all the characters in the novel that it seems to defy a deep read, and this has irritated critics of the novel since its publication. Irving Howe wrote in 1965 that the novel has "never been properly valued or even widely read" because it "provides no consoling reconciliations" (4). While Wharton's "considerable gifts for caricature...reached their fruition in The Custom of the Country," it is also, for this very reason, a novel "hard to endure" (4). For other critics, the novel has proved particularly troublesome because of its attitude towards women. In her 1986 essay on Wharton for The New York Times Book Review—entitled "The Woman Who Hated Women"—Janet Malcolm, for example, claims that in The Custom of The Country, "Wharton takes her cold dislike of women to a height of venomousness previously unknown in American letters and probably never surpassed."[48]

Faced with this problem of women flattening another woman, some feminist critics have faulted Wharton for her rather extreme efforts at differentiation, reading it as an example of the satirist's defensive pre-emptive strike. A wealthy woman of the upper class, she risked association with the ladies of leisure who spent their mornings abed with lapdogs and bon-bons. As Amy Kaplan has pointed out, by insisting on herself as a professional, one who works, rather than one who merely entertains, Wharton was distinguishing herself from the dilettante, the reigning artist of the old New York society from where she came, as well as from the lady of leisure, the publicity-seeking spectacle

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"The disagreeable ungainliness of the syllable 'Spragg' begins with an assailing consonant cluster, plosively suggesting the enbouchure of spitting or of disdain, and it ends in a rhyme with 'nag,' 'gag,' and 'slag.' But those initial consonants also recall 'sprite,' the famous folkloric bearer of the name 'Undine.' " As "a ruthless, fluctuating self-promoter and self-merchandizer, her name is an exact account of all that she is." See Preston, 185. For more on Undine's name, see McHaney, 180-186.

[48] Malcolm argues that in Custom, Wharton is much more tolerant of Elmer Moffatt's crudeness because she respects the ideals of men far more than women.

invading Wharton's hometown and dominating the department stores and hotels of fin-de-siecle America. Through satire, Wharton defines herself as a professional against the "inertia" which the nouveau-riche ladies new to New York, women like Undine's mother, Mrs. Spragg, "regarded as one of the prerogatives of affluence" (9). As Wharton tells us in her autobiography, she *did* spend her mornings in bed; it was when and where she wrote her novels. But mornings were for work, not for leisure. Undine flips through her copy of Boudoir Chat; Wharton writes.

Yet, fissures are found in the conspicuous absence of them. Anything so tightly sealed seems to demand inquiry, demand a poking either for Edith in disguise (Edith beneath Undine's big hat) or for what has become a more contemporary version of the consoling reconciliation—ambivalence. Wharton scissors out specimens of types, snip, snip, in order to protect herself from the finger pointing her way. Such disavowal leads inevitably to the question, "why so defensive, Edith?" It is difficult not to ask, for example, as the critic Nancy Bentley has done, why a woman would publish a novel so scathing about divorce the same year she was going through one.[49]

Yet, the paradox of Wharton wielding her venomous pen with one hand and stroking her lapdog with the other, or the divorced Wharton in frilly nightgown sharpening her pencil against the frivolity of her ever-divorcing heroine, is less compelling to me than the page that lies before her. What does Undine provide Wharton the writer? Writing flat may be a pre-emptive strike, a gesture of self-protection, a lack of self-awareness, but it is

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[49] Debra Ann MacComb notes that "the divorce industry must have seemed particularly galling to Wharton because [of] its reputation for encouraging 'rotary marriage' along the lines of the period's pervasive 'rotary consumerism.' Nancy Bentley takes this argument further, exploring the gap between this critique of remarriage that underlies the novel and Undine's vitality: in this fissure, she sees Wharton's ambivalence about her own divorce finalized that year with Edward Wharton.

also a decision about craft, about the act of writing itself. Wharton may not have liked the hotel heroine, but she did like the urbane possibilities that came in writing her. She may not have liked hotels, but she seems to delight in the kind of "mental roving" that characterizes them.

Mobility is one obvious consolation in a novel so relentlessly flat. Wharton, the avid lover of houses, may condemn the space of the hotel, but Wharton the gregarious describer of social scenes, the travel lover, with her "incurable passion for the road," (A Backward Glance 31) uses the pullman plot —the plot of mobility—to generate a plethora of scenes, cities, and specimens of type. Undine, happiest "absorbed in the life of the big hotels," is a kind of round-the-world-in-many-pages heroine. The illustration of a heroine as transient as the train that carried her from Apex City to New York means that the episodic proliferation in The Custom of the Country comes in the form of new geographic spaces—scene upon scene, phase upon phase. Undine's hotel aspirations, her provisional desires make maps. Geographic expansion in the novel reads like tracing a red dotted line on a map—from Apex to New York to Paris and back again. As a child, in Apex, Undine forces her ever-compliant parents to take her to a fashionable vacation spot; but it's a disappointment, and the next summer, she drags them to an even more fashionable watering hole. But here too "everything was spoiled by a peep through another door" (34), by the realization that the center of fashion lay elsewhere. Undine's exposure to the summer hotels of the Great Lakes and the East convinces her that she'd been aiming for the wrong thing (and place) all along: "I'll never try anything again until I try New York" (35). The Spraggs rent a house on the Upper West Side, but when Undine learns that "all the fashionable people she knew either boarded or lived in hotels,"

she urges them to move into one of those new structures "moored like a sonorously named fleet of battleships" along the West Side: to the Stentorian or the Parthenon or the Tintern Abbey. Having arrived at the hotel, however, she recognizes that her true object of desire lies on the other end of town. "Fifth Avenue was where she wanted to be" (12).

To get there, however, Undine will travel beyond the limits of the American map and set her sights on other cities. From New York, she will travel to Europe, first to Italy with Ralph Marvell on her honeymoon, where she decides that neither the sleepy towns nor the quiet companionship of her husband are quite the thing. In pursuit of the crowd, she drags Ralph away from his poetry to Monte Carlo and Paris. Later, back in New York, upon finding herself stuck with Ralph in an upper west-side brownstone, she makes a break for it once again. She criss-crosses Europe with the lecherous Peter Van Degan on his yacht; then, hoping he will marry her, she heads to Reno for a divorce. When Van Degan won't have her (it seems she's even too ruthless for him) it's back to Paris, where she lands another husband, this time one with a title. Marriage to Raymond De Chelles, however, is a disappointment. It means being stuck not in a brownstone this time, but in a chateau, aptly named "Le Desert," a place where "the life of the vivid streets faded to a shadow as soon as the black and white horizon" (243). Elmer Moffat is her way out: he buys her a house in Paris and a house on Fifth Avenue. Having finally made it, though, she wants more. Undine, in her bottomless quest for a better position, realizes that a husband with a bottomless pocketbook and a Fifth Avenue address might not be the ultimate achievement after all. There is something better: "the one part she was really made for," to be the wife of an ambassador (335), a part that would, if she could only get it, lead her round the world once again.

Not only is the novel geographically plotted, but it lends itself to a particular kind of narrative mobility by the very nature of its form. In the effort to write the public scene, to "display society in scene after varied scene," the author of a comedy of manners is left not only with "sprawling inclusiveness" but also a narrative structure defined by the "onward rolling episode" (Bell, Wharton & James 301) Satire has also been regarded as a form that relies on the episodic rather than the unified plot because the satirist, in presenting phase upon phase, scene upon scene, is not developing character; she is illustrating. Fairly soon into Custom, it becomes obvious that this is no bildungsroman: the interest isn't in how Undine will change (because she really never does) or what she is hiding (because we always see beyond her) but what she will do next to reinforce what we already know about her. We don't read to witness Undine's transformation: she doesn't change or grow or develop, so much as she acquires, the quest for money and social position forever hurrying her forward. Nor is it "who is Undine?" that draws us forward—we already know that—but instead what new stuff, what new situations, landscapes, backdrops, costumes, will the satirist come up with next.

Alvin Kernan in The Cankered Muse (1954) writes:

> If we take plot to mean, as it ordinarily does, "what happens," or to put it in a more useful way, a series of events which constitute a change, then the most striking quality of satire is the absence of plot. We seem at the conclusion of satire to be always at very nearly the same point where we began. The scenery and the faces may have changed outwardly, but fundamentally, we are looking at the same world, and the same fools, and the same satirist we met at the opening of the work (30).

Our heroine, our satirist, our world, in The Custom of the Country is the same at the end as at the beginning. Each of Undine's marriages, each of her phases is really a heightened example of the one before. At the end of Custom we are back where we started. Undine has married for the fourth time but she is still dissatisfied, still yearning

for yet another vista, still fixated on who might show up at her dinner party. Her fourth husband also happens to have been her first. The novel begins with Elmer Moffatt and ends with him. Yet, on the way, we have traveled to a range of places—met a variety of people, encountered a variety of scenes.

In an essay on the novels of Henry James, Morton Fullerton argues that while James's novels project a round map, "a map of Mercator's projection," novels like The Charterhouse of Parma, Anna Karenina, and The House of Mirth "go on ad infinitum mapping out longitudinally." For Fullerton, these novels may be great, even masterpieces, but they are inferior to those written by James because "there are none but purely artificial reasons why [they] should ever end" (405). Events don't round out or come to narrative completion: they stop. If on the one hand (late Henry James), we have round maps, a central situation and a whorling nuance of character, on the other, we have a flat map unfurling ad infinitum, a map that never arrives at any natural borders but must be artificially scissored so as to fold neatly into the bindings of a novel.

Like Custom, The House of Mirth (1905) is a novel of society: there are scenes upon scenes and a large cast of characters. Yet, the trajectory of Lily Bart's desire spirals downward and inward.[50] The complicated longings of a complicated heroine with her should-she-or-shouldn't-she-marry-him dilemma create a series of increasingly enclosed spaces: we open with Grand Central Station; we end with a tenement bedroom. We begin with a flat heroine and end with a tragic one. The world doesn't expand; it converges.

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[50] "If one chooses to imagine narrative structure of The House of Mirth spatially," writes Robert Alter, "one could say that it has a kind of funnel shape: from one episode to the next, the walls of circumstance of Lily Bart's life become narrower, her social, economic, and romantic possibilities more and more restricted. At the end, she is trapped in her wretched little room in a shabby residential hotel, without resource or human solace, her only way out the overdose of sleeping powders with which she ends her suffering" (48).

Custom gives us a different longitudinal map—one could even say a better map—than The House of Mirth because the object of desire is not marriage, but remarriage. And while the end of The House of Mirth may be "artificial," it is unquestionably an end: Lily dies. But Custom really *is* open-ended. At the close of the novel, Undine is told that she cannot become an ambassador's wife—husbands of divorced ladies don't get to be ambassadors. The novel, however, leaves us with the possibility that Undine will once again figure a way out. Indeed, in the original outline of the story, Wharton planned on Undine leaving Moffatt for the newly made ambassador Jim Driscoll. But then Wharton had to end the novel somewhere, and she ends it just where we began: with Undine scheming to marry up yet again. The climax, says James, of the loud American story is always "far off."

It took nearly ten years for Wharton to complete The Custom of the Country, and some critics have suggested that this is a result of having a no-good muse. What can you do with a shallow heroine? Where can one go? The real problem, perhaps, is the opposite. In Undine's inability to stop, one sees a hint of Wharton's inability to stop writing. How can a writer good at writing social types and public rooms, gifted with "magic carpetry," stop writing a heroine who meets so many people, visits so many places, and is so wickedly available for the sharp, discerning remark? Wharton's impulse to give Undine one more husband (Jim Driscoll) and one more go around the world suggests a reluctance to fold up the map, put away the lapdesk, and go downstairs for dinner.

Part III: Hotel Views and the Satirical Novel

Critics in search of a middle-class urban heroine in the nineteenth and early twentieth century novel share a fondness for the trope of The Woman at the Window. Pining for the street below,

pining to get out and get down, she signals Victorian entrapment on the one hand and the transition to modernity on the other: like the hotel itself—a liminal space between interior and exterior—she is not quite the self-realized urban heroine but almost. In The Custom of the Country. Undine Spragg is found at this post three times. In New York, she draws back the curtains of her hotel sitting room and gazes "eastward down the long brown-stone perspective" to Fifth Avenue because "Fifth Avenue was where she wanted to be!" In Paris—on the brink of ditching Ralph and taking up with Raymond de Chelles—she stands at the window of another hotel sitting room, "flowered, cushioned and lamp-shaded into a delusive semblance of stability," and gazes with delight "at the thronged street" below (161). At the chateau de Saint Desert, De Chelles's ancestral home, she stands at the gallery window, in "exile" from "the joys of Paris," yearning for the distractions of the Boulevard. Each of these window scenes is a transitional moment before another marriage. If Lily Bart is a character who views husbands as potential houses, Undine believes a new husband will furnish her with the city: Ralph will lead her to Fifth Avenue; De Chelles will open the doors of Paris society; Elmer Moffatt will whisk her away from the claustrophobic chateau where "the life of the vivid streets faded to a shadow as soon as the black and white horizon of Saint Desert closed in on her" (211). In each case, we are teased with something akin to a moment of identification. Could it be that city-liberation is at hand? Could it be that our gold digger is on the verge of being transformed into "that girl" swinging her hat as she steps confidently across a city street? Undine, as she stands at her window in Paris, her senses "luxuriating" in all the "material details" of the street below, observes:

> The thronging motors, the brilliant shops, the novelty and daring of the women's dresses, the piled-up colors of the ambulant flower-carts, the appetizing expanse of the fruiterers' windows, even the chromatic effects of the *petit fours* behind

> the plate-glass of the pastry cooks: all the surface sparkle and variety of the inexhaustible streets of Paris (161).

The inventory of the city doesn't stop here: the rush of prose, the litany of street-description continues. Wharton goes on to describe Undine's recent excursions about Paris:

> Everything amused her: the long hours of bargaining and debate with dressmakers and jewelers, the crowded lunches at fashionable restaurants, the perfunctory dash through a picture-show or the lingering visit to the milliner; the afternoon motor-rush to some leafy suburb, where tea and music and sunset were hastily absorbed on a crowded terrace above the Seine; the whirl home through the Bois to dress for dinner at the Nouveau Luxe or the Café de Paris and the little play at the Capucines or the Varietes, followed, because the night was 'too lovely', and it was a shame to waste it, by a breathless flight back to the Bois, with supper in one of its lamp-hung restaurants, or if the weather forbade, a tumultuous progress through the midnight haunts where 'ladies' were not supposed to show themselves, and might consequently taste the thrill of being occasionally taken for their opposites (162).

With its emphasis on mobility and the panoramic sequence of urban sights, the display of goods behind plate glass and the spectacle of the theater and music hall, the passages illustrate Undine's absorption in an urban culture of mass consumption. Cultural critics, drawing on Walter Benjamin's study of the arcades, have engaged in a longstanding debate over the significance of the consuming urban female in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and at first, it seems that scholars in the field of "shopping studies" could go to town analyzing Undine's view from her hotel window. Does Undine's passion for bargaining illustrate female autonomy? Or, is it merely another distraction luring her away from a more authentic experience of the city?[51] Should Undine's longing to "taste the thrill" of being mistaken for a prostitute be read as

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[51] The grossly oversimplified version of the argument posed by feminists like Deirdre Lynch, Elizabeth Wilson, Gillian Swanson, Miriam Hansen and others runs as follows: on the way to the department store, the consuming lady might just get "taken for her opposite," but shopping, at least, will get her out of the house, and in the process may very well provide her with an opportunity for creativity, productivity, authority and a whole lot else besides.

a longing for sexual freedom? Or, is it a textbook example of the fact that "ladies" walking the turn-of-the-century city are *at risk* of being taken for "their opposites?"[52] Some might argue that Undine's passion for the dressmaker and the fashionable restaurant, or Sister Carrie's craving for the department store, could be read as an example of the "tactical negotiation women make with public life through the domain of consumption" (Swanson).

It is a stretch. The scene makes undisguised mockery of Undine's enthusiasm for the city behind plate glass. Undine's perfunctory dashes and hasty absorption, her motor-rush, her whirl, her breathless flight and tumultuous progresses might suggest *that* girl, but the novel makes no bones about what we are supposed to think about Undine's flurry of activity: it is all "surface sparkle" and comes, we discover, at the expense of a sick child and an overworked husband. The examples of dash and tumult are there to mock Undine, and the reader is asked, finally, not to identify with Undine Spragg's passion for Paris, but instead with Paris itself—and with Edith Wharton's passion for depicting it. The flights of prose are what leave the reader breathless, not the heroine's jaunts around the city; it is Wharton, not Undine, who takes off. The hurried rhythm of the sentences, the repetitions and the ironic winks—"the night was 'too lovely'"—and the piling on of details say as much about Wharton's zest for writing this scene and type as it does about the scene and type itself. Equivocation about the urban experience is not found in the complexities of Undine's character, but in the disjunction between the subject (city whirl disparaged) and the jubilant tone and pacing with which it is described. The writing, one could say, "luxuriates" in the very "material details" it mocks.

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[52] This is the argument made by critics like Susan Buck-Moers and others: female flaneurs don't exist because, as objects of the male gaze and at risk of being mistaken for a real streetwalker, they aren't given the necessary invisibility to roam.

In fact, the first satirical swipe in The Custom of the Country, directed against the hotel and the modern penchant for exhibition and for living in surfaces, is itself an exhibition of the writing of surfaces. The opening scene of Custom takes place in the front parlor of The Hotel Stentorian, where Undine and her family reside:

> Mrs. Spragg and her visitor were enthroned in two heavy gilt armchairs in one of the private dining rooms of the Hotel Stentorian. The Spragg rooms were known as one of the Looey suites, and the drawing-room walls, above their wainscoting of highly varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe. In the centre of the florid carpet a gilt table with a top of Mexican onyx sustained a palm in a gilt basket tied with a pink bow. But for this ornament, and a copy of The Hound of the Baskervilles which lay beside it, the room showed no traces of human use, and Mrs. Spragg herself wore as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show window.

The description of the hotel parlor reads as a rebuke against both a room and its inhabitants. The furniture "shows no traces of human use"—all surface, all for show—and has no relation to the people sitting on it except as a further example of their lack of interiority and originality. Wax figures don't live in rooms; they live in show windows. One of Wharton's main criticisms of the interior decoration of the nouveau-riche female is that it is excessively mimetic. And then one of Wharton's main criticisms in Custom is that Undine Spragg, the quintessential hotel dweller, is a creature who learns by copying everybody else: her "pliancy and variety" Ralph Marvell reflects, "were imitative rather than spontaneous" (89).

If the scene mocks wax figures and their imitative tendencies, however, it is also an example of Wharton's own satirical strategy. The characters in Custom are nearly all types and cautionary tales; they are flat surfaces. Undine Spragg, Mrs. Heeny, Elmer Moffatt, Indiana Frusk, Claude Washingham Popple are illustrations, with Thackerayan attitudes, Dickensian names. To create her wax figures, she decorates through copying,

she describes by mimicking. She depends upon both a piling on of details in order to pin down (the measuring of wingspan of Undine the butterfly, the minutiae, detail of dress, manners, furniture and so forth) as well as the sharp rendering of type, the pithy presentation. There is the surfeit of description, and there is the encapsulated sketch. The piling on of stuff doesn't produce the rounded corner but instead the boxed specimen. A paper doll is sketched, but then thickened through an array of costumes and backdrops that are recognizably right, just what such a type would wear, just where such character would be found, just what one might find, say, in the Louey Suites of the Hotel Stentorian—salmon-pink damask, gilt baskets with pink bows, Marie Antoinette on the wall and The Hound of the Baskervilles on the end-table. Material details are also used to display Wharton's gift for the spot-on presentation of type, the pictorial phrase.

A novel that includes both copious description and the succinct one-liner, that is both sketch and unresolved continuity, Custom goes on and on and stops short. (These satirical tendencies are evident in all the writers in this dissertation—from Powell through McCarthy; the pithy meeting the profuse.) To illustrate Moffatt's "garment of vulgarity," Wharton heaps on the details, observing Elmer's "redness, his glossiness, his baldness, and the carefully brushed ring of hair encircling it; the square line of his shoulders, the too careful fit of his clothes, the prominent luster of his scarf-pin, the growth of short black hair on his manicured hands, even the tiny cracks and crow's feet beginning to show, in the hard close surface of his complexion." She is especially good depicting her minor characters, the members of Undine's crowd who are introduced once or twice. They are epigrams written as much for their own sake as for depiction of character. Here, for example, is Mrs. Shallum, one of Undine's hotel-dwelling companions in Paris. Mrs.

Shallum is as "open to inspection as a shop window"; she has "a small wax-featured husband whose ultra-fashionable clothes seemed a tribute to his wife's importance rather than the mark of his personal taste." She is in "command of but a few verbs, all of which, on her lips, became irregular"; her "only idea of intercourse with her kind was to organize it into bands and subject it to frequent displacements; and society smiled at her for these exertions like an infant vigorously rocked."

Wharton's cornering of characters, the delights of the urban view and urbane send-up, are even hinted at in one scene in the novel. Charles Bowen, a friend of Ralph Marvell, observes the bustling crowd from his corner at the Nouveau Luxe restaurant. He longs for his friend, Mrs. Fairford who "would see, from his own precise angle, the fantastic impossibility, the layers on layers of unsubstantialness, on which the seemingly solid scene before him rested." Bowen himself delights in "the special titillation of … putting his hand on human nature's passion for the factitious, its incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation," the "joys of the scene" in which "the type was always the same even when the individual was not." This is what Wharton stylistically conveys: the joys of the "precise angle," "the titillations" of the view of a public room from the satirical balcony. Instead of a private view of a woman's depths, we get a public view, a city perspective.

This quality is one that also separates Wharton from her Naturalist fellows: she does not just describe or conclude; she makes a spectacle of herself; she shows off—a quality, I imagine, which someone like Frank Norris would have found as irritating as a rattling teacup.[53] It was this showing off—the flair for words, the dazzling descriptions and the

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[53] This is a reference to Frank Norris's criticism of realists like William Dean Howells or Henry James—whom he disdained as aesthetes, likening their fiction to the "drama of a broken teacup,

pleasure in the "precise angle"—that would also ensnare Wharton, for many years, in the woman writer trap. Wharton was "reproached," Millicent Bell writes, "for being an accomplished writer; the very elegance of her style was somehow felt to be a limitation" and her critics "would sometimes express the ingrained native distrust of 'cleverness' as somehow undemocratic and something no real man cared for, something respected chiefly by women" (Cambridge Introduction 65). John C. Underwood in a 1914 review of Wharton's work admits that while her prose is marked by "brilliancy," it is a brilliancy "of the superficial, by the superficial, for the superficial. It is intrinsically alien to the genius of the Anglo-Saxon world, in particular to that of its male half" (Bell, Cambridge Introduction 4).

The real problem for the novel's readers, however, has more often been that this fascination with surfaces seems alien to the genius belonging to the woman's half. By focusing too much on facades and not on interiors, Wharton was not doing what women were supposed to be good at—writing characters one can identify with. In this novel, there is alignment with a clever narrator, recognition of one's skill as a reader; inclusion in an urbane community, the pleasure of reading smart prose—yet these are not the consolations Irving Howe was talking about, nor are they the rewards we generally identify with reading women's fiction, especially women's fiction popular around the year 1913. The consolations of identification aren't here—hence, the queasy feeling that underlies the pleasure of reading the novel. Instead of identification with heroine, we get

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the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner." "The world of M. Zola," in contrast, "is a world of big things; the enormous, the formidable, the terrible is what counts; no teacup tragedies here." For Norris, the novel was a "virile" art and "not the affair of women and aesthetes" (Norris 76-78). See also Michael Davitt Bell, who observed that Norris's description of Naturalism sounds "like nothing so much as a prospectus for a body-building course, promising to turn the 98-pound 'literary' weakling into a dynamic 'he-man,' part of 'what counts' in the domain of masculine 'reality.' "

identification with a clever and sometimes dazzling, satirical voice. Nor do we find the expected consolations for writing the novel. Can the pleasures of brilliantly skimming the surface, of "going round" urbanely and of serving up glossy photos as evidence, provide sufficient consolation for *writing* the novel? Doesn't Wharton want to connect to her characters? Doesn't she want a relationship with somebody? Don't people write novels in order to imagine being somebody else?

The rejection of character-identification as the reader's (and writer's) motive in the novel is one way in which Wharton differentiates herself from her regionalist forebears, writers like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. She had little patience for what she called "the tottering stage-fictions of lavender-scented New England." The bulk of feminist criticism on regionalist or sentimental literature focuses on the "bond" or "identification" between narrator and subject and between subject and reader. What makes the regionalist different from other realists is not, as Elaine Sargent Apthorp points out, "on the level of plotting or theme but in her handling of perspectives—the relationship she establishes among author, reader, and character" (43). Much of the critical discussion of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman is that their works create a relationship of community and empathy.[54] Through "interactions with other women, and with their stories, often enfolded as narratives-within-narratives, female protagonists and narrators in regionalist fiction" often "develop further within the context of a particular community of women" and "define identity as collective, connected, and collaborative" (Fetterley and Pryce xvi). Identity is created, Judith Fetterley argues, through the power of "sympathetic imagination" (65).

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[54] See Apthorp and Folsom.

Fetterley also points out that regionalists write as if they were listening in and then directly addressing the reader so as to include her in a private conversation. "Reading" in regionalist fiction, Fetterley writes, "becomes a synonym for listening. The narrator's stance of 'careful listening' fosters an empathic connection between the reader of the work and the lives the work depicts." On the experience of reading regionalist fiction, Marjorie Pryse writes that it is as if women are sitting "together around the home fire on a stormy night," teaching one another and passing down experiences from mother to daughter. And indeed regionalist fiction reads much like an invitation to pull an afghan over one knee and settle in for a long women-with-women chat.

For Wharton, ever resistant to affiliation with her regionalist sisters, sisterly conversation is as confining as an Old New York drawing room. A conversation solely made up of women with women holds no interest. Not only did Wharton prefer her intimate circles made up of men—"we happy few"—but she was also critical of the social and spatial segregation of the sexes so prevalent in modern America. In French Manners, Wharton writes that it is "because American women are each other's only audience and to a great extent each other's only companions, that they seem compared to women who play an intellectual and social part in the lives of men, like children in a baby school" (19). Custom constantly puts down the conversations held by American women, contrasting the skills of the satirical hero (Wharton herself) against the verbal clumsiness exhibited by the female characters. In the novel, there are those women, identified with the grand hotel, who talk and talk but do not say anything, or there are those who relate empathically, who, like writers and readers of the regionalist novel, listen well.

Undine Spragg is a verbal bumbler, whose vocabulary and opinions are all learned through imitation. Her first exposure to the brownstone world of the Marvells, the Fairford dinner party, leaves her confused: "all was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations" and to protect herself, she resorts to uncomfortable silences or to "I don't care if I do's," "I wouldn't wonder's," and "too lovely's." She is "never at a loss for the spoken word" but her terms "seemed like some odd transmission of her preaching grandparent's oratory" (174). She can't write well; her letters home to Ralph from Paris are "brief and colorless" and in them, she repeats the "same bald statements in the same few terms"(174). When Undine moves to France, she learns that "a woman has got to be more than good looking to have a chance to be intimate" with certain members of French society: "she's got to know what's being said about things." Undine goes to a museum once, but then returns to her familiar routine at the hairdressers.[55]

Alongside those hotel ladies who are bad talkers in the novel are those women aligned with old New York, who have been trained at good conversation as an act of listening, figures like Harriet Ray (who the Marvells had hoped Ralph would marry instead of Undine) or Claire Van Degan (the woman Ralph had himself thought he would marry years before). But Harriet, "sealed up tight in the vacuum of inherited opinion"

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[55] The novel makes clear that Undine is not wholly to blame for this deficiency. There is one instance when Undine's behavior is defended and justified. Charles Bowen, a friend of the Fairfords, explains that Undine is the "monstrously perfect result of a system," because she has been excluded not only from the workplace but also from male conversation. "It's normal for a man to work hard for a woman," says Bowen, but "what's abnormal is his not caring to tell her anything about it" (89). For Bowen—and this was true for Wharton, Henry James, H.G. Wells, Paul Bourget and other critics of turn-of-the-century America—the fact that men were withdrawing further into the cubbyholes and corner offices of Wall Street meant the increase of women clubbing together in the public rooms of the city, the hotel lobbies, the fashionable restaurants, the department store.

(50), engages in the kind of talk that "the originals might have exchanged about the same table when New York gentility centered in the Battery and the Bowling Green" (176). Claire Van Degan is infinitely sympathetic and has a "gift of momentary understanding," but her mind is "neither keen nor deep" (183). If Undine is incapable of understanding, of being able to listen, then Claire empathizes well enough but cannot wholly discriminate or conclude. She can only listen. Marvell reflects, "if her answers sometimes missed the mark, it did not matter, because her silences never did" (258).

The only female character in the novel given keen perception and incisive speech is Ralph Marvell's sister, Laura Fairford. Only Mrs. Fairford can read the flat beneath the heaping of details. She is also one of the few characters who can do a send-up. At the dinner party where Undine is introduced to old New York society, Mrs. Fairford comments on the subject of the portrait painter, Claude Washingham Popple. "I've sometimes thought," she muses, "that Mr. Popple must be the only gentleman I know; at least he's the only man who has ever told me he was a gentleman—and Mr. Popple never fails to mention it" (23). Although Undine's "ear was too well attuned to the national note of irony for her not to perceive that her companions were making sport of the painter," she misses the joke. The reader does not. Laura Fairford, however, is a minor character, only appearing once or twice. Also, what makes Laura Fairford a great conversationalist—and different from the "more voluble" ladies of Apex City—is that her conversations, Undine notices, "seemed to be a concert and not a solo" (22). "She kept drawing in the others, giving each a turn, beating time for them with her smile, and somehow harmonizing and linking together what they said." Laura Fairford entertains as regionalist writers tell stories.

But this is not what Wharton does in The Custom of The Country. She's not playing good hostess but society scribe; she's not drawing her guests (her characters) out; she's drawing attention to her verbal acumen by pinning her characters down. The triangle of intimacy—the hostess at a dinner party, the women gathered around the fire—is missing, replaced by the hotel view. Not only is there no one with whom the reader can identify, but whenever the novel invites us to share in Undine's thoughts, the experience does not create identification but disapproval. Endowed with a superior vision, a whispering-in-the-corner advantage, we are similarly not that, similarly not she; similarly discriminating in our ability to recognize and reject particular spaces and selves. As readers, we do not see through Undine's eyes so much as we see through her failings. The reader might have a drawing room hung in Gothic tapestries and a copy of The Hound of the Baskervilles on her end-table, she might shop until she drops, but it does not matter. If satire causes the occasional twinge of self-recognition, it also performs "we" otherness. It's the experience of going to the movies with a friend and seeing her perfectly replicated (and mocked) on the screen, yet when you turn, the friend is oblivious, laughing right along. Or, the experience of leaving the movie and wondering why your friend is giving you that funny look.

By writing a heroine who is no heroine, Wharton gives the satirical voice (the narrator) the central role. The heroine's flatness highlights the narrator's powers of observation and mimicry and draws a line: She is not I; I am not that. And we are not that either. Alvin Kernan claims that the hero of a satire is almost never a character in the novel; rather it is the "voice we 'hear' " which "becomes the satiric 'hero.' " Since "the chief character of satire always lacks so signally the qualities which we associate with

heroism, it will be better to refer to him simply as the 'satirist.'" The writing of this novel does not give us private heroines but a public voice and point of view. The innermost room, the exploration of the deep heroine gives way to the fast glance around a hotel lobby, the imagining of motives rather than depths, a description of a lady's hat and the fastening of her with a fitting name: Indiana Frusk it is.[56]

Part IV: Puffballs and Slicks

One could argue that Wharton does put herself into a character in The Custom of the Country. Identified by many critics of the novel as Wharton's kindred stand-in and most complex character, Ralph Marvell seems to fulfill both the reader's desire for empathic identification and the critics' desire to locate Edith Wharton within the consciousness of one of her characters (he is a writer born of Old New York society). For one thing, Ralph is victim, an ideal locus for identification. About The House of Mirth, Wharton wrote that "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys." To do society right, she needs victims. She needs Lily Bart and she needs Ralph Marvell. Driven to suicide by the monstrous behavior of his wife, Ralph is as good a victim as they come.

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[56] This is the comedic point, I think, of a recent episode of the HBO sitcom, "The Chris Isaacs Show," in which a women's reading group sits down to discuss The Custom of the Country. Whoever wrote the scene understood the compulsion to dramatize and complicate Undine and the humorous difficulty in doing so. One of the show's hosts, Elaine Thorp, finds herself at the edge of the group, puzzled by the excited discussion of Undine as an exemplary model of female liberation. The rest of the group discusses Undine's need to go shopping, to get married, to get out of the house. The group discusses "as if listening in," exploring the intimate relationship of reader, author, character that the heroine-centered novel so often gives. They do just what regionalist writers do best. Elaine sits apart, confused. While the rest of the group chat about how they can and can't "relate" to Undine, Elaine, excluded from the community of women and ashamed of her lack of readerly insight, has only one whispered comment: "Undine, that's a funny name." In a funny way, she is the only one who gets it. Thanks to Jason Tougaw for telling me about this episode.

Yet, while we may sympathize with Ralph, we can never wholly identify with him. Lily Bart's contraries and complications aren't here; Ralph is a caricature flatly drawn, flatly good. He is just another type: the "dabbling dilettante," the well-educated young American man with too little time on his hands and not enough get up and go. (Wharton once called this American the "contemplator-appreciator" type.) As introspection typified, Ralph Marvell is affixed with a name that means poetry, and given fits of romantic reverie that, like Undine's gold-digging or Elmer Moffatt's wheeling and dealing, aren't there to represent change, deepening of character, or development towards further complexity. They are flights of fancy being nailed down.

As a writer, though, Ralph comes close to the critic's search for Edith Wharton. His is the closest we come to a reflecting consciousness: the reader spends more time in his head than anybody else's—and it is through Ralph's perceptions that we collect some of the most vivid details about Undine Spragg. Yet, Ralph's is not a consciousness we inhabit so much as a romantic fog through which we glimpse the satirist's aims; his perceptions are seeped in the sentimentality that the narrative voice shuns—sentimental prose, purple passages that read in stark contrast to the on-the-mark precision of the rest of the novel. On his honeymoon, Ralph scrutinizes Undine's hand—"small and soft, a mere featherweight, a puff-ball of a hand"—and while tracing "the course of the blue veins from the wrist to the rounding of the palm" he reflects that "in the mystic depths whence his passion sprang, earthly dimensions were ignored and the curve of beauty was boundless enough to hold whatever the imagination could pour into it." At this moment, Ralph "had never felt more convinced of his power to write a great poem" and it is Undine's hand "which held the magic wand of expression" (83-84).

Ralph never writes his great poem; he never writes his great book. If "all was blurred and puzzling" to Undine in a world of "half lights, half-tones, eliminations, and abbreviations," then all is blurred and puzzling to Ralph beneath the glare: he misses the truth about Undine until the very end. (At times, it is not always clear whether the send-ups are aimed more at the upgrading woman or at the men who are foolish enough to fall in love with them.) If the experience of reading Undine elicits disapproval, then the experience of reading Ralph elicits impatience—snap out of it. Closeted in his library, surrounded by his books, Ralph cannot read surfaces: they only produce in him the desire to instill depth. We see him on the subway, out of place, puzzling over newspaper headlines, one of which informs him of his own divorce. He is "too little versed in affairs to read between the lines" of people like the Spraggs (149). He wants puffballs to yield poetry, slicks to read like books. It is, for this reason, partly, that he fails as a writer. His inability to finish that novel or write the great poem is not merely a result of having to slave at the office to pay Undine's milliner; it is also a result of having a no-good muse. Early in their relationship, Ralph envisions himself infusing Undine's "virgin innocence," (49) her "freshness, her malleability" with all that is beyond and behind the surface—culture, meaning depth. It's a dream that suggests not only the Pygmalion impulse—man molding woman into an ideal image—but the writing impulse as well.

Ralph's desire to transform Undine's flatness and to invest it with complexity belongs to an American literary tradition: surfaces invite the dreaming up of interiors. The bewildered Winterbourne goes in pursuit of the real Daisy Miller. On hearing Jay Gatsby's stories, Nick Carraway feels he is "skimming hastily through a dozen magazines," yet he spends the novel in pursuit of something that could look like pages

inside a book. Philip Roth's Zuckerman, when faced with Swede Levov, a man who appears to be the "embodiment of nothing" in American Pastoral finds himself "craving depths" and so he makes them up. That's what good narrators—and good writers of fiction—supposedly do. It is the desire to go inside, to draw one close for the long personal history, to wonder what she is thinking about, to look across the room and catch a glimpse of a rich inner life.

Ralph Marvell, however, is not Edith Wharton in disguise, but rather an example of the kind of writer Wharton no longer wanted to be: he is at times a sentimentalist but he is also a writer intent on dramatizing and deepening surfaces. He is more James than Wharton. In the preface to Daisy Miller, Henry James tells of how his heroine came to life. After hearing a story of young American hotel type, a "child of nature and of freedom" who accompanies her mother "from hotel to hotel" and who picks up a handsome young Italian on the way, James immediately thinks: "dramatize dramatize!" "Flatness indeed...was the very sum of her story," acknowledges James, but his "little exhibition" was written to "no degree whatever in critical but quite inordinately and extravagantly in poetical terms." He had taken a type and transformed it into poetry, had done that thing Ralph Marvel wanted to do and that writers love to do: to look across the hotel lobby and dream up interiors. But, in the preface, Henry James also tells of being admonished by a friend for doing this very thing. Standing with James on the steps of a hotel in Venice and watching the "demonstrations" of two young hotel girls, "a couple of attesting Daisy Millers," James's friend, "a gentle lady and an admirable critic," reproaches him for his poeticizing, for his "unprincipled mystification" of this type. The friend says of Daisy Miller that "provoked by a spirit of observation at first no doubt

sufficiently sincere, and with the measured and felt truth fairly twitching your sleeve, you have yielded to your incurable prejudice in favour of grace—to whatever it is in you that makes so inordinately for form and prettiness and pathos; not to say sometimes for misplaced drolling" (47).

James was no satirist—there is the occasional sharp angle, but not the exaggeration of proof. His hotel-dwelling heroines invite the dreaming up of interiors rather than the recording of superficial aims, and while he might begin with a specimen of type, he will not end with one.[57] Like James, Ralph Marvell is prejudiced in favor of grace, form, and prettiness, a writer whose depictions of Undine and her world are missing the satirical edge. By the end of his life, however, Ralph begins to heed truth twitching at his sleeve. Not long before his suicide, he experiences the rekindling of his poetic powers and finds himself writing fast with new excitement. "Two or three subjects had haunted him, pleading for expression, during the first years of his marriage; but these now seemed either too lyrical or too tragic. He no longer saw life on the heroic scale: he wanted to do something in which men should look no bigger than the insects they were. He contrived in the course of time to reduce one of his old subject to this dimension" (241). This time, it is not tragedy or poesy that will be his preferred mode of creation, but satire. Wharton

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[57]Milly Theale, for example, the heroine of The Wings of the Dove is a character whose initial description is as sharply drawn as a New York skyscraper: "It was New York mourning, it was New York hair, it was a New York history ... on a scale and with a sweep that had required the greater stage; it was a New York legend ... and, beyond everything... a set of New York possibilities" (101). But Millie's defining characteristics—her initial readability, her flatness– is not stretched or prolonged through satirical emphasis but altered; the New York skyscraper recedes into the background so that the curves and complications of a Venetian canal might emerge.

would make the same choice—a move away from the tragic depths, the innermost rooms, to the writing of surfaces and types.[58]

Part V: The Chateau

If the feminist critic finds herself reflexively pausing at a scene with a woman at her window, then when faced with a woman miserably stuck in a house, she comes to a halt. What have we here? In Custom, a novel of perpetual movement, there is a point in the narrative when it almost seems as if Undine has been stopped for good: three long chapters near the end of the novel detailing Undine's life with her third husband Raymond de Chelles at his chateau, St. Desert. This time the descriptions are not a torrent of urban dash and tumult, but a litany of despondency. Life at the chateau is "one vast monotonous blur," "benumbing sameness," an "interminable succession of identical days." For the first time, we see Undine inert—"the dullness of her life seemed to have passed into her blood." It is always raining. There are no parties, no crowds, just the ladies of the De Chelles family who bore Undine with their "interminable conversations...carried on to the click of knitting needles and the rise and fall of industrious fingers" (284). Undine's husband is almost never home—he gets to go to Paris—and when he is home, he wants to read. Undine spends "interminable afternoons going round with her mother-in-law" who believes Undine's longings for Paris will soon abate. Although "it was natural that the Americans who had no homes, who were born

[58] This also brings us back to the Undine-as-no-good-muse argument. Some critics have argued that Wharton failed at writing The Custom of the Country because she, like Ralph Marvell, was faced with a bad muse. Yet, as we see here, what cures Ralph Marvell, temporarily, of his writer's block is not the discovery of a subject worthy of psychological inquiry but his decision to move in a more satirical direction. "In the exhilaration" of trying his hand at a less lyrical or tragical mode "gradually a feeling of authority and importance developed in him" (241).

and died in hotels, should have contracted nomadic habits," Undine will soon learn the ways of St. Denis. The ladies of the chateau assume Undine will settle down. But she does not. Instead, she gets a divorce.

As a space of enclosure, of entrapment, the chateau works. The house is damp; the fires aren't lit; the husband is never home—why must Undine always be left behind? The Chateau even comes complete with encircling moat. To escape the tedium, Undine orders dresses from Paris that hang unworn in her closet; she invents ways to annoy her mother-in-law; and she begins "to pore over patent medicine advertisements, to send stamped envelopes to beauty doctors and professors of physical development, and to brood on the advantage of consulting faith healers, mind-readers, and their kindred adepts" (294). Forced to dress in mourning when she wants to go to parties, she is a version of Scarlett O'Hara stuck in a house. One almost wishes Rhett Butler would come along and shock the aristocracy with a waltz in black crinoline around the gallery. And one can almost hear the women's reading group breathing a sigh of relief at a glimpse of an ideal heroine for identification.[59] But our sympathy only goes so far. Undine's experiences at St. Denis—her "interminable days"—illustrate not just her boredom but her lack of interior, as well: she tries to sell the family tapestries to pay off the milliner. The chateau becomes yet another locale, another stage set for showing off the narrator's satirical skills.

What is most interesting about this section of the novel is not so much Undine's experience of the chateau, but our own. The narrative seems as cooped up as the heroine. Undine droops but so does the satirical voice. Dependant on the interminable "interminables," it misses the verve and dash found in the other sections. There is less

[59] Most of the criticism of the novel remarks on this scene as the one place where Undine Spragg seems a redeemable, iconic feminist heroine.

illustration and more explanation. Undine does not have enough to do, but neither does the writer. We are waiting for somebody to arrive—somebody to come and break up the monotony, take us out of the interior, take us back to the city. Elmer Moffat's arrival, then, is as much a relief to the reader as it was to Undine. Without him, the satire is static: the microscope lowers but the map does not unfold.

The chateau chapters also evoke an odd sensation of having been here before. Embedded within Custom is not just a satire of a public heroine—the central focus for most critics—but also a satirical critique of the narrative and spatial interiority practiced in The Reef, the novel Wharton had just written. Published the year before (1912) and written while Wharton was also working on Custom, The Reef takes place mainly within the walls and gardens of Givre. (So central is Givre to the events of the novel that Louis Auchincloss believed The Reef should have been renamed The Chateau.) It is also Wharton's most Jamesian novel, her most discipular work, a novel characterized by psychological, subtle, almost indiscernible gradations in feeling, what E.K. Brown calls "intramental events."

The chapters, then, in which Undine wanders the gallery thinking up ways to irritate her mother-in-law are not inviting us to inhabit the chateau so much as they are asking us to make fun of it. Wharton is not just flattening Undine; she is flattening the complexity of the novel she had just completed, mocking the house which, from within the consciousnesses of Anna and Darrow, she had just spent a year inhabiting, a year writing. Undine's "interminable succession of identical days" could describe the central scenes of The Reef: a walk, a tea, a walk, another tea, a drive, a conversation in the drawing room, a conversation in the upstairs sitting room, another walk. That's what four people in a

house together do. And that is what the Jamesian novel of character is all about—time that seems to almost stand still; a house, which like Simmel's small town "provides opportunities for lengthy and familiar acquaintance," lots of long chats in front of the fire.

One of the central differences in The Reef and Custom is point of view, always an important issue for Wharton. "The two central difficulties of the novel have to do with the choice of the point from which the subject is to be seen, and with the attempt to produce on the reader of the effect of the passage of time" ("Criticism in Fiction" 124). Wharton claims that her preferred strategy for selection and composition is through the point of view of one or two characters who provide "reflecting consciousness." It is best, she says "to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousness persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader *as a whole*" (128). It is this approach that Wharton follows in writing The Reef, a novel in which "there is no strain," E.K. Brown claims, "no harassing process of readjusting one's vision when the reader turns from the consciousness of Anne to go behind the character of Darrow." This is the point of view favored by late James—few characters, few lines of vision.

In Custom, however, Wharton does not follow her own advice. There are multiple consciousnesses, as if, Millicent Bell explains, Wharton is leaning "over the shoulders of major and minor characters, each in turn according to the wanderings of the plot and the shift in focus." Never do we feel that Wharton has entirely handed us over to one or two characters; never do we feel she wants us to forget the intelligence behind her creation.

By abandoning the relationship with heroine in Custom, Wharton is not merely favoring an urbane style—showing off her gift for the "metropolitan extravagance of mannerism, caprice and preciousness"—but she is favoring an urban point of view as well. And, while Wharton may have agreed with James in principle about the use of two or three angles of vision, she also found that in his later work, the narrator was far too removed, that he depended too much on reflecting consciousness to tell his story. W.C. Brownell's famous review of James's novels pleased Wharton, and she wrote to Brownell that she especially agreed with his comment that James is too "busily getting out of the way, visibly withdrawing behind the screen of his story, illustrating his theory by palpably withholding from us the expected, the needful, exposition and explanation." One line from the review that particularly tickled Wharton was Brownell's statement that The Awkward Age struck him as "Lilliput without Gulliver."

There's no missing the Gulliver in The Custom of The Country, for she is everywhere. It's not that Wharton ever directly addresses the reader. (This was a device she relied on earlier in her career but almost not at all in 1913.) She does not write from the first person. She does not peer over the puppet stage and address her audience. Yet, her conclusive selections never let you forget that she is there. Look at me; look at how well I see; look at what I can do. Wharton gets to be the heroine by not writing "as if." By not doing that thing which women are supposed to be so good at (and what great writers of psychological realism are supposed to be good at as well), by not putting herself in somebody else's shoes, Wharton, one could argue, gains the thrill, the audacity that comes in concluding with no room between the lines. By inhabiting a voice (instead of a

character), she can say it straight. The cobwebs that come with an assumed subjectivity give way to brisk, unequivocal assertion.

This briskness is missing in The Reef. We hear it only occasionally, mostly through the consciousness of Darrow, a man identified as much with Paris hotel rooms as houses in the country. When faced with Anna's mother-in-law for the first time, Darrow, for example, records his impressions in the very style Wharton favored in writing The Custom of the Country. He pins down through the piling on of the surface details: "her fair faded tints, her quaint corseting, the passementerie on her tight waisted dress, the velvet bands on her tapering garment, made her resemble a 'carte de visite' photograph of the middle sixties." He imagines her "younger but no less invincibly lady-like leaning on a chair with a fringed back, a curl in her neck, a locket on her tuckered bosom, toward the end of an embossed morocco album beginning with The Beauties of the Second Empire" (245). Yet in The Reef, such a rendering—the encapsulated sketch formed through the litany of details, that fixed but effusive snapshot—is the exception. Darrow is limited by the realities of a house in the country, constrained by the relationship that such intimacy and point of view demand. Anna's mother-in-law invites the epigrammatic glance because she is not an intimate acquaintance but a stranger to him, a rare thing in a novel with so few crowds and almost nobody new to observe and record. Instead, there are parlor whisperings and leisurely lunches over which one struggles to sniff out a secret. Furthermore, while the prose in The Reef is still exquisitely crafted—in certain Jamesian respects, more so—the rifts of urban excitement and surface description that characterize Custom are muffled, hesitant, interrupted by self-questioning and doubt.

In Anna, Edith-the-satirist goes missing altogether. This is surprising, considering that in Anna's character, Wharton came closest to writing her own inner life. "I put most of myself into that opus," Wharton once told a friend. Anna Leath is also a heroine with whom the reader is asked to identify; hers is reflecting consciousness that proves habitable. We learn about her unhappy marriage, her shyness and sensitivity as a young girl; we participate in the subtlety of her thoughts. Her character is not sharply defined but shaded—an "atmosphere," like the chateau itself, "perpetually tremulous with echoes and implications" (205). And she is a woman intent on marrying—not on untying the knot. Yet capable as Anna is of highly nuanced and complicated emotions experienced over the tea table or on a walk in the chateau grounds, Anna is almost too complicated to be interesting. If Anna is an Edith-stand-in—one has to ask: where is the Edith who wrote The Custom of the Country? By putting herself into The Reef—into Anna Leath, into the house—Wharton appears to lose her voice, or at least that one sharp and dazzling quality. We get Wharton as she may have wanted to be or as she believed herself to be or as she was before and after the party. But we don't get Wharton's voice or her eagle-eye survey of a public room. "I was born with critical spectacles on my nose," Wharton once told a friend (Wegener 49). In this novel, she takes them off.

After reading The Reef, Wharton's longtime friend, Ralph Curtis, commented that "never had there been a more boring person as Edith's heroine" (325). Wharton agreed. However much she identified with Anna—or asked the reader to do the same—she was disappointed in the results. She would call The Reef, "a poor, miserable, lifeless lump"; she would deem The Custom of the Country her masterpiece. Henry James, however, liked The Reef; he liked what he called its "Racinian unity." In other words, he liked its

Jamesian unity: four characters, two reflecting consciousnesses, lots of talk, nuance, interiority, and endless dancing around a secret.

To be swayed by Henry James—and to resist him—is almost a rite of passage for the American writer in the early twentieth Century. "James is so catching," complained Mary McCarthy. (Try writing in your own voice, for example, after a few hours rapt or ensnared in the long-winding tentacles of Jamesian nuance: do not, for example, begin a chapter with him, as I have done, if you are at all susceptible to style. You will find yourself struggling to regain the brisk and declarative elements in your own voice. And you may fear you cannot escape: Let Me Out.) For a woman writer in the early twentieth century who wanted to show off a gift for cities rather than selves, surfaces rather than depths, the Jamesian model—the model Wharton followed in writing The Reef—meant restriction. The subtleties of character, the narrow field of vision, the limited number of consciousness, the convolutions inherent in the portrayal of the twosome, the threesome, or the foursome, all lead right back to the place where women writers have so long been located: in somebody else's head and in a house. For Wharton, adept at the comedy of manners and good at the writing of public rooms, such an influence could easily elicit narrative claustrophobia: Can't we meet somebody new? Can't we go somewhere? Edith Wharton does not get out of Anna Leath's head much in The Reef, and Anna Leath does not often get out of the house.

Undine Spragg—a character whose "inmost ideal of domestic intimacy" is to have a husband "in her train, driving about with him to dinners and dances, waiting for him on flower-decked landings, or ushering him through blazing theatre lobbies"—does. And Undine, unlike Anna, is a character with whom we cannot identify. Custom resists the

relationship of identification often associated with the traditional woman's heroine-centered plot. By inhabiting a satirical voice and outsider point of view—rather than the consciousness of her heroine—Wharton is freer to roam narratively, a roaming exaggerated (and urbanized) because her object of critique is so inclined to take off for the big city. She gains what the chateau novel disallows—an urbane voice and the opportunity to write around.

Custom and The Reef are fun-house reflections of one another, each a distorted referencing of the other. At the center of The Reef is the chateau, but on each end are trains, Paris, hotels. At the center of The Reef is Anna—pensive, reflective, complicated, a woman of interiors, a woman in a house—and on either end, hotel ladies. At the opening, we get Sophie Viner in her Parisian hotel room, and at the close, Sophie's sister who lives in a Parisian hotel with a kept man, a pug dog and a box of chocolates. The sister, the novel suggests, is who Sophie will become in just a few years. Complexity is framed by the hotel—a flat, superficial world ripe for censure. The intricacies of what's going on in Anna and Darrow's heads, the elegant and measured descriptions of the house's inhabitants, make up the core of the novel, but the novel ends with a hotel. It ends with intimations of what Wharton is up to next (and what presumably, she was working on at the same time): a brassy dame.

This kind of opposition—between Sophie and Anna, a brassy dame and a deep heroine—also show up much earlier in Wharton's fiction, and does so, interestingly enough, through a choice between a hotel and a chateau. In 1893, just when her marriage with Edward Wharton began to suffer (but had yet to fall completely apart), Wharton published a short story, "Souls Belated." The story opens with Lydia, a divorced woman,

and her lover, Gannett traveling on a train, on their way to a hotel. Lydia, a complicated, reflective woman capable of an almost stomach-tying internal dialogue, cannot decide whether she should or shouldn't marry her lover. A Fifth Avenue escapee, she delights in her newfound freedom, yet upon receiving her divorce papers, recognizes her love both for Gannett and for the respectability that marriage would insure. On the train, she and Gannett debate not only whether they should wed, but also whether they should settle down in a chateau, away from prying eyes, or move into a nearby hotel, one of those watering holes populated by American expatriates (and by divorcees). They choose the hotel and while there, Lydia is confronted by a kind of alter-ego: Mrs. Cope, a divorced woman who is everything Lydia despises—superficial, social-climbing, Undine all over again. Mrs. Cope wants nothing but to receive her divorce papers, the same papers which had caused Lydia intense and painful confusion.

The story divides spatially: one is marriage, solitude, respectability, a chateau. The other is Mrs. Cope, a divorced woman in a hotel. But the house and hotel are not simply dividing marriage from divorce, deep women from shallow ones; they also mark two different novelistic territories. Gannett, Lydia's lover, is a writer, who admits, rather shamedly, that because the hotel was a world brimming with fictional possibilities, filled with inspiring "social types," he prefers the hotel over the chateau as a place to write. This suggests the division Wharton faced in writing her two different novels some fifteen years later. The Reef gives us Lydia in a chateau; Custom gives us Gannett, a writer happiest in recording a Mrs. Copes.

When Gannett first suggests that they move to a quiet villa, Lydia reminds him: "I remember your telling me once that your best work had been done in a crowd—in big

cities. Why," she asks, "should you shut yourself up in a Desert?" One might say the same thing about Wharton herself. What makes the story of the hotel-dweller compelling from a feminist perspective is not that the story liberates Undine from the house, but that it liberates Edith Wharton from having to write it. For this reason, The Loud New York Story is less about a heroine's escape from the confines of marriage or domesticity than about a writer's escape from doing characters who wander the corridors investigating their interiors. To follow James's methods—methods she regarded as "more and more lacking in atmosphere, more and more severed from that thick nourishing human air in which we all live and move"—would have meant leaving one interiority (the domestic novel, the regionalist circle of intimacy, the village and the house) for yet another. It would have meant the substitution of sewing circles and sentimental endings for a circle of inwardly spiraling subjectivity, the exchange of the "the tottering stage-fictions of lavender-scented New England"—Wharton's description of her regionalist forbears—for a house in France. If she will not be tethered to a New York back yard, a village pump or the intimacies of sentimental fiction, she will not be tethered to the desert of the French chateau either. Instead, Wharton writes the hotel lobby.

Part VI: Bestsellers and Brassy Dames

After writing The Corrections in 2002, Jonathan Franzen turned down a spot on Oprah Winfrey and inclusion in her book club. He defended his decision by claiming the need to shun association with a circle of female readership celebrated on Oprah. He wanted to be taken seriously. In an odd way, Wharton's decision to step out of character—and write from the public view—makes sense as an effort to extricate herself from a somewhat different predicament, an effort to distance herself from Sarah Orne

Jewett, on the one hand, and Henry James on the other, from Oprah Winfrey leaning forward to listen in to the living rooms of America and Jonathan Franzen holding forth on NPR, from the woman's "little" novel of character and the man's "big" one. Mary McCarthy, some fifty years after Custom was published, complained that James—and that other writer of sensibility, Virginia Woolf—had left the modern novelist with only two choices: either she will write a sentimentally old-fashioned novel for a mass audience or she will be forced to write the "art novel" for a small handful of readers. It was this tight spot that Wharton, by locating herself between the popular appeal of the bestselling women writers and the refined interiors of the psychological novel, tried to escape.

Yet, in doing this, she managed to appeal to a mass audience. James was right to align her with the New York hotel, with publicity, and with the bestseller list. Wharton's longtime editor at Appleton and Co., Rutger Jewett once remarked that Wharton was "the only author in the magazine field who is writing literature and at the same time being paid the high figure which is usually the reward of tosh" (Lewis 447). By leaving the house behind to write the hotel, Wharton succeeded in writing a hit that wasn't exactly posh, but wasn't exactly tosh either. While she consistently disparaged the consuming and commercial aspirations of the mass public in her fiction, she was also fueled by the desire to appeal to it—"consumed" by the rapture of the sale, inspired by the possibility of drawing the check, and above all else, eager to be read.[60] A glance at the bestseller list

[60] In her biography, Wharton writes of the thrill of having her first book of stories accepted by a publisher. She imagines a friend or a stranger walking into a bookshop and saying, "Please give me Edith Wharton's book." The result would not be the clerk's derision, but a sale. She imagines the customer and how he would "walk home with it and read it and talk of it and pass it on to other people to read." It is this moment, Kaplan claims—the moment of creating "a separate 'personality' in the public eye," the moment of "externalizing one's name on a book that can circulate in the market place" (67)—when Wharton's professional and public identity is born.

of 1913, the year Custom was published, makes it clear what Wharton was up against. The novels on the list written by women include Eleanor H. Porter's Pollyana and Gene Stratton Porter's Laddie, both examples of what one contemporary critic called "molasses fiction" (Bell, Cambridge Intro 56). Hugely popular in the teens and twenties, both Porters were known for their highly sentimental renderings of small-town U.S.A. Pollyana spurred on the creation of "glad clubs" across America, while Gene Stratton Porter, whose works fit squarely within the regionalist tradition, waxes poetic, in her novels, about willow-ware china, shirtwaists, and the trials of a young girl's butterfly chase through the limberlost forests of Indiana. While The Custom of the Country couldn't compete with these novels of glad girls swinging their butterfly nets—and clearly Wharton didn't want it to—the novel was a marked success, both when it was serialized in the magazine and when it was published in book form.[61] It drew not on the public's yearning for back-home simplicity but instead on its desire for sophistication and wit, its desire to read society rather than the small town. Ralph Curtis, a friend of both Wharton's and James's, wrote to Wharton that his mother declared it "the cleverest women's book she had ever read" (Bio 351).

The Reef—a novel of interiors, a novel of few characters and few rooms, a novel liveried and refined—had bombed, selling little more than seven thousand copies; Custom, after generating unprecedented sales for the magazine, would sell nearly 60,000. Once Wharton sent the abstract for Custom to Scribner's, her editors breathed a sigh of relief. Here, at last, was a novel they could serialize in the magazine and feel confident

[61] Wharton saved a clipping of an advertisement of Gene Stratton Porter's Laddie and underlined the admonishing information that Laddie had sold three million copies, being a book "that goes to the heart of a vast reading public because it is true to life, a picture of genuine American people, people who love their homes, who figure neither in newspaper nor divorce court; who are the source of the vitality of the nation" (Lewis, Edith Wharton 328).

would sell. Charles Scribner wrote Wharton that a "story from you with such a presentation of contemporary society and such a girl from the West climbing into it would be sure of its interest and readers. I could not let it go elsewhere—even for the magazine." By leaving the house behind, Edith Wharton had managed to eschew "molasses fiction" and instead write "the cleverest women's book" that Mrs. Curtis had ever read. In doing so, she had also managed to get her name, if not on the signboard of a New York hotel, then at least on the front jacket of a bestselling novel.

In the years following the publication of Custom, Wharton would continue to aim for the bestseller list. After finishing Custom, Wharton told her publisher that her next novel would be written along similar lines—dealing with a group, rather than one central hero and with a series of events, rather than one central situation, a "clear declaration," Millicent Bell believed, "of anti-Jamesian intent." Wharton's next novella, Summer (1917), however, the story of a small-town figure, Charity Royall, who gets pregnant and is forced to marry her foster father, is no hotel novel: there are no crowds, no sparkling wordplay, few types for caricature. Even The Age of Innocence seems to look back to her earlier plotting of a central complicated figure. Of all her late novels, however, Wharton preferred Hudson River Bracketed (1929) and its sequel The Gods Arrive (1932) two long chronicles of the New York literary scene of the twenties, both written quickly and published in serial form. The hero of both novels, Vance Weston, is a product of ambitious midwestern small towns, with names like Euphoria, Hallelujah, Pruneville, and Advance. After he moves east to write, he takes up residence in The Willows, a house built in Hudson River Bracketed Style. There, he falls in love with two women and writes Instead, a short novel enshrining the house and the woman who flourished there in the

later nineteenth century. By the end of the novel, however, Weston has directed his attention away from the woman and the house and transferred it to the social scene of contemporary New York, just as Wharton had done in writing Custom. The sequel, The Gods Arrive, continues Weston's story, following his adventures through Europe, out to Wisconsin, and through the turmoil of a series of extramarital affairs.

Critics found these later works old-fashioned—Wharton had been in Europe too long, they argued, and no longer understood American life; others disliked the later novels for their rambling quality. Wharton's pen had run away with her. [62] But Wharton's response gets echoed in Weston's own antipathy for the modern novel. Like his creator, he rejects the prevailing view that the novel of manners was an outmoded form, arguing instead that "the fishers in the turbid stream-of-consciousness had reduced their fictitious characters to a bundle of loosely tied instincts and habits, borne along blindly on the current of existence" (Hudson River Bracketed 112). Writing to Desmond MacCarthy in 1928, Wharton proposed an article for his magazine, Life and Letters, on "this tiresome stream of consciousness theory, which is deflecting so much real narrative talent out of its proper course." She wanted to call the essay "Deep Sea Soundings" (Wegener 174). Three years later, after reading William Faulkner's Sanctuary, she again expressed interest in contributing something on the post-war experimenters, this time intending to name her critique "Wuthering Depths" (Wegener 174). Finally, in 1934, she published

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[62] Edmund Wilson, reviewing Wharton's 1927 Twilight Sleep, wrote, "We may regret that she should have lived so long abroad that her pictures of life in America have a tendency to seem either shadowy or synthetic" (435). One reviewer, after reading The Children (1928), claimed that "Mrs. Wharton has already told us everything she knows, and now she has got to be judged on her merits. She is becoming an old-fashioned writer, with two plots, and everything handsome about her." V.S. Pritchett argued that Hudson River Bracketed was "only a good old-fashioned novel of huge proportions." And another critic argued that The Gods Arrive was merely an example of the journalistic impulse. See Tuttleton, Lauer and Murray.

her thoughts on the subject in two simply titled essays, "Permanent Values in Fiction" and "The Great American Novel." In both, she makes claims strikingly similar to the one Mary McCarthy would make fifty years later in her two essays on the modern novel, "Fact in Fiction" and "Characters in Fiction." The problem with the moderns, Wharton explains, is that their "characters drift by like figures in a film." They lack the quality Wharton saw as so essential to good character writing: visibility. "When a Babbitt struts the stage, the thin shadows take flight before his sturdy flesh-and-blood, and a deep laugh of appreciation encircles the world." The permanent value of good fiction—which Wharton believed was missing from the works of the members of "the new school of fiction" —was the principal of "creating characters which so possess us with the sense of their reality that we talk of Anna Karenina, Becky Sharp, Pere Goriot, and Tess, as of real people whom we have known and lived with." Characters—unforgettable types one can imagine seeing out in public, rather than being in private—are what good novels are all about.[63] If, at the close of her career, Wharton preferred the hotel writers like Lewis and Dreiser to late James, she also preferred them to the new experimenters in subjectivity—James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf.

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[63] The exception, for Wharton, was always Proust. Strange as it might first seem, Andre Gide played messenger between the writers in the Twenties, with the hope of getting Proust to translate The Custom of the Country into French and of getting Wharton, on her side, to take on The Remembrance of Things Past. It never came to pass, however—Proust never wrote back, and Wharton considered herself too old to take on such a daunting task. Yet, Wharton remained a devoted follower of Proust until her death, even convincing Henry James to read him. What Wharton admired about Proust, however, was not his exercises in internal life, but his characters, his social types. It was not Proust's mind cloaked behind heavy curtains, but Proust moving about in the social circles of Paris she most admired. She saw Proust not as a modern example of the stream of consciousness technique, but a figure of an older literary world: an example of a nineteenth century writer—a Balzac or Flaubert writing the indelible impression, the visible figures, the city scene. She read Proust as social satirist.

For years, Wharton's friends urged her to consider Woolf's genius, yet though she may have been sentient to Woolf's "prodigious gifts," she had little patience for what she regarded as Woolf's self-involvement, her tendency to write private minds rather than the public world of her characters. In Wharton's view, it was not Virginia Woolf who was the genius, but instead, Anita Loos. The woman who best represented the urban woman's story, according to Wharton, was not Mrs. Dalloway on her way to the florist but instead the hotel-hopping, husband-hunting Lorelei Smith. After reading Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Wharton wrote to a friend that here "at last!" was "the great American novel." "I want to know if there are—or will be—others, and if you know the young woman, who must be a genius" (Carey 108). Wharton showed her approval of Loos, fittingly enough, by taking the young woman out for a long lunch at the Paris Ritz.

To have chosen Anita Loos makes sense. Lorelei, the overly rouged gold-digger, is Undine all over again. The novel, too, is written in chronicle form, constructed as a series of episodes (and geographic locales) that made it ideal for film adaptation. The ever-aspiring and divorcing female would be a staple of Loos movie scripts and a staple of the screwball comedy genre. (One might even go so far as to call The Custom of the Country the foremother of the screwball comedy.) Even more significantly, Wharton's hotel novel contains within it nearly all the elements found in the mid-century women's satirical novel. Some of the novelists even acknowledged her influence: Mary McCarthy would call Wharton the only American woman novelist (other than herself) who was a novelist of sense rather than sensibility. Dawn Powell believed critics like Diana Trilling got Wharton all wrong: here was not some moralist clucking beneath her pompadour but a great social realist. It is also with Dawn Powell that I begin, a satirist writing her own

version of the hotel novel—this time not taking on the grand hotels of uptown and Europe, but the literary hotels centered around Washington Square.

CHAPTER THREE

Dawn Powell and the Café Novel

PART I: Skyscraper Views and Apartments Uptown

Between 1925 and 1962, Dawn Powell wrote fifteen novels, over one hundred short stories, six plays, and thousands of letters and journal entries. Yet in the years following her death in 1965, her work languished in the stacks of the out-of-print. Triggered by a 1987 essay by Gore Vidal and, in the nineties, by the research of the journalist Tim Page, Powell's work has since been dusted off and brought into the light of today. The last ten years has seen a posthumous Powell revival. Steerforth Press, which specializes in reissuing the works of forgotten writers, has republished the entire Manhattan Cycle—the eight satirical novels written about the New York Scene between 1936 and 1962[1]—and several of her lesser-known Ohio novels. Page has also, again with Steerforth, published a Powell biography, edited her diary, and put out a collection of her letters. In 2000, The New York Theater Guild put on a two-month festival of plays by and about Powell, and there has even been talk of her making it to the movies. An independent film company in New York has bought the rights to A Time to Be Born (1942), a novel set in 1939 and based on writer and socialite Claire Booth Luce. The actress Anjelica Huston, a fan of both Powell and her period, wrote the script and plans on directing the movie. What makes A Time to Be Born perfect for the movies, according to Huston, is the witty dialogue, the complications of a love triangle, but also the stylish ethos of pre-War New York, the "most beautiful period," Huston claims, "in history."

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[1] The Manhattan Cycle novels include: Turn, Magic Wheel (1936), The Happy Island (1938), Angels on Toast (1940), A Time to Be Born (1942), The Locusts Have No King (1948), The Wicked Pavilion (1954), and The Golden Spur (1962).

The aligning of Powell with a stylish aesthetic was something Steerforth Press understood: the packaging of the Manhattan novels is a case of book marketing genius. The books, bound in muted colors, are beautiful. Together on the shelf, they look like a row of fifties girl's sweater sets hanging in her closet: apple greens, smoky grays and burnished reds in mix-and-match coordination. The jacket covers—photographs of Manhattan in black and white—evoke either a nostalgic glitter or a nostalgic hush. Gleaming chrome, Stork Club elegance, flashing neon, a lone man hunched beneath his raincoat, water towers dusted in snow. The one interior shot—the cover of The Happy Island—depicts a man singing at a piano. The jackets appeal to anyone yearning for a New York of a more Golden Age. For the buyer with a retro-slanted aesthetic—the buyer touched by the nineties obsession for the Eames chair and peg-legged fifties sectional—they invite ownership as well. One imagines a shopper in a Barnes & Noble standing at the New and Noteworthy table—in this case newly noteworthy—and wanting to possess not just one of Powell's Manhattan novels but the complete set.

I caught sight of the set one night at a party held in a duplex apartment on West 9th Street in Greenwich Village. The host, whom I didn't know, was a banker. He had fitted the apartment in minimalist sheen and art deco velvetiness. Like the book-jackets, the apartment was beautiful: the walls painted in the same subtle tones; two Berenice Abbot photographs hung in the bathroom. Upstairs, along all the walls of the balcony was the library, spacious enough to afford the owner room to alphabetize. It was up here in the library, with a view of the party below, where I discovered, displayed in tasteful and chronological coordination, the Dawn Powell collection.

If I had at first imagined that my host was merely bringing his literary tastes in line with his mint-green walls, I was soon set straight. The banker met me on the balcony with a glass of champagne and the information that his passion for Powell had sparked the day he landed the apartment in this co-op building at 35 West 9th Street. He fell in love with the writer—and had begun to read her—after discovering that this was the building in which she had lived from the late thirties to the early fifties. For all he knew, we were now standing in her very apartment.

From my perch on the balcony, looking down below, it struck me that the covers—and the party in which I found them—were wonderfully wrong. However much I liked the jackets—and I should now confess that my sofa is red velvet sectional, circa 1950—the stylish jackets do not accurately represent the reading experience found inside or Powell's romance with Manhattan, a city she called her "one true love." "I am New York—this minute—now," she wrote in her diary. "I know more about it than anyone —not historically but momentarily. I must do a New York Novel to be happy" (285). When away from the city, even a few days, she confessed to disorientation and depression. Woody Allen's joke about preferring car alarms to the racket of rural life was also Powell's: "After those damned birds, there is nothing like a good, yellow-billed New York riveting machine .... Most of my childhood was spent waiting for New York ... even in Paris, I used to sob for the Staten Island Ferry and College Point Brooklyn, a dreary dump" (Huchens 2). Missing from those gleaming photographs is not just the dreary dump but the riveting and sometimes raucous throng. Missing from those covers is the screech of the city. A better reflection of their interiors would be something louder: a brash full-color rendering of a merry-making swarm. (From a marketing standpoint, a

mistake, of course. One thinks of Ernest Hemingway who put off reading The Great Gatsby, supposedly, because of its "garish dust jacket." Embarrassed "by the violence, bad taste and slippery look," he took the book-jacket off to read the book. (Hemingway 174). A brassy image of a billboard along a highway in Long Island may have reflected the world inside, but it did not appeal to a reader hoping—or in Hemingway's case, perhaps fearing—to find genius.)

What also makes the Steerforth covers inharmonious with Powell's themes is The View itself. The photographs gaze at the city from afar. They look *up* at New York—up to the skyscraper peak—and *down* at New York from an elevated position. Even the one interior jacket cover, the posed-looking singer on the cover of The Happy Island, is viewed from balcony height. Written during a time in New York's history when urban development and building construction—at least the vertical thrust—had temporarily subsided, The Manhattan Cycle is similarly horizontal in focus, less interested in the grand, sweeping view and more in people seen up close.

Powell's first novel was written just as the last pre-depression skyscrapers were going up; two of her final novels, The Wicked Pavilion (1954) and The Golden Spur (1962), conclude with scenes of destruction—wrecking cranes smashing into two Greenwich Village landmarks, a Washington Square hotel and Wanamaker's department store, to make way for skyscraper apartment buildings. Located in a historical cavern between tall buildings, Powell's career begins with the great era of the skyscraper and ends in the fifties and sixties with Robert Moses's urban renewal programs when much of lower Manhattan was transformed into a cityscape of uniformly tall blocks of apartments. Powell, like many New York writers in the twenties, hated the Empire State Building.

After it was opened for the public in the thirties, she paid a visit and recorded her impressions in her diary: "A huge tomb in steel and glass," she wrote. "New York … Automobiles, trucks winding in and out, and not a sound. All as silent as a dead city—it looks adagio down there" (32).

If the covers were adagio, so too was the party in which I found them. Parties—crowded rooms, high-pitched laughter, snippets of the overheard conversation—are indeed the stuff of which her fiction was made. All the Manhattan cycle novels include at least one climactic cocktail party scene, which like this one—I was here to celebrate a friend's first book—often herald the success of an aspiring writer, painter or playwright. In Powell's work, however, a party inevitably ends with a scene of raucous disintegration. She could rival even F. Scott Fitzgerald in the way merriment, under the influence of alcohol, will turn to the tragi-comic falling out. If in Fitzgerald, the woman slides under the table, the dog biscuit disintegrates in the bowl and the face gets punched in, Powell's parties give an only slightly less violent verbal smash-up, a more humorous re-ordering of alliances. While the gathering may honor the book deal or big show, her characters are never allowed to *deserve* their success for too long. By the end of the evening, success gets turned on its head. Surfaces are satirically stripped away to reveal the tawdry underside, the ugly and all-too-human meltdown. In The Wicked Pavilion, Jerry Dulaine, a former dress-model, now gold digging party girl, begins by hosting an elegant party but ends the evening at "Monty's on Houston Street, the Grotto down by the bridge, the Sink, the Bowery Lido" and finally a downtown jail. The party ends with Jerry befriending a crowd of fellow inmates, prostitutes named "Babe, Chick, Bonny, Bobby, Flossie, and Sally" (103).

Powell was a tireless socializer. After reading her novels, her diaries, and her letters, one sees mainly the gregarious Dawn. (It is difficult to picture her bent slavishly over her typewriter. Yet, it is something she must have done long and often: between 1928 and 1944, she published one novel almost every two years.) "The party girls" was the name she gave her group of female friends, and although her parties were often barfly affairs, with Dawn holding forth from a rickety stool, she also had a few get-togethers back home at the apartment. Gore Vidal recalled one he attended with Coby Gilburn, a regular bar-wit of Greenwich Village and the man with whom Powell was supposedly romantically involved for twenty-five years. Accessing his separate room through the upstairs entryway, Gilburn even lived for a time in the apartment with Powell and her husband Joe Gousha.

Vidal remembers:

> Summer. Sunday afternoon. Circa 1950. Dawn Powell's duplex living room at 35 East Ninth Street. The hostess presides over an elliptical aquarium filled with gin: a popular drink of the period known as the Martini. In attendance, Coby ... for years her *cavaliere servente* .... The fact that he might be Dawn's lover has never crossed my mind. They are so old. A handsome young poet lies on the floor, literally at the feet of E.E. Cummings and his wife, Marion.... this afternoon, at home, Dawn is demure; thoughtful. "Why," she suddenly asks, eyes on the long body beside the coffee table, "do they never have floors of their own to sleep on?".... In my memory, the poet is forever asleep on the floor while on the balcony high up in the second story of Dawn's living room, a gray blurred figure appears and stares down at us. "Who," I ask, "is that?" Dawn gently, lovingly stirs the Martinis, squints her eyes, says "my husband, I think. It is Joe, isn't it, Coby?" She turns to Coby, who beams and waves at the gray man who withdraws. "Of course it is," says Coby, "Looking very fit." I realize, at last, that this is a *ménage a trois* in Greenwich Village. My martini runs over (25).

From my perch on what was perhaps this same balcony, it occurred to me that the apartment—and the party—had come a long way from that summer Sunday afternoon. I saw below a grand piano, positioned there as if in expectation that at any minute, a

Broadway star would draw the ladies around him for a rollicking sing-a-long. I was fairly certain that this rarely happened, and if it ever did, tonight was not the night. The only sign of festivity came as a distant murmur from the smokers out on the patio. Martinis were not spilling over. This was a social affair of whispers and tinkling glass, freshly cut flowers in bowls that would not topple or be thrown. And it was held in an apartment that signaled everything Powell's life lacked and her novels satirize: social and economic success. A Hollywood star lived just down the hall, the banker told me, as proud, it seemed, of his famous film actor as he was of his posthumously famous writer.

Success, too, was something Powell spent her career pursuing. Burdened by an alcoholic husband and the sole financial supporter of a mentally handicapped son, she labored, with a heroic and sometimes desperate persistence, to make it, aiming again and again for the bestseller list—and always missing. Yet, The Manhattan Cycle exhibits a profound ambivalence about arrival and about the desirability of ever getting stuck for too long at an uptown cocktail party. "One of the central conflicts in her Manhattan novels, as Edmund Wilson pointed out, "is found in the "Greenwich Villager's attitude toward the traditional artist's enemy: 'uptown' " (532). And uptown was just where I was. It had come creeping down past 14th Street to blanket nearly the entire island; it had become Manhattan itself.[2] What drives her plots, what makes her city, is the fleeting quality of uptown, the elusiveness of fame or the fat paycheck, the impossibility of ultimate arrival—be it social, economic, or romantic. Making it on Broadway or onto the

[2] Powell saw downtown New York not only in contrast with uptown but with all of America. In 1933, she returns from a trip to the Midwest and writes: "I am amazed at the change in the Midwest—it is exactly like Hollywood or Forest Hills. The radio, the war, the automobile have leveled off the entire country—the only different place is still New York (and that the bohemia of New York since Park Avenue is so much glorified Westchester which is so much" an enlargement on the small towns of Ohio (Diaries 72).

bestseller list—making it in the "success clique," as she called it—is what her novels parody and what her novels never let anybody completely and finally do. The Manhattan novels depend on characters whose aims will never be quite resolved: painters who got a show but then lose it, writers who smoke at the typewriter all night and then miss their deadline anyway, department store models who aim for the penthouse key and instead find themselves in a shabby Lexington Avenue studio apartment. Dennis Orphen, the novelist character who shows up, Hitchcock-like, in several of her Manhattan novels, said it best: "To sit pretty … to fold hands over stomach with a smug smile" appeals to Dennis, and yet he confesses that to "sit pretty was glandular and not in his makeup, success must be mysterious, evasive, unfaithful, to allure him" (194). Like so many of Powell's transplanted midwesterners, Orphen relates to success with ambivalence; on the one hand, he wants to get the novel published; on the other, he wants to remain on the margins, almost there but not quite.

Depicting the activities of a criss-crossing group of artists and uptowners—rather than the teleology of one character—the Manhattan novels also follow what Franco Moretti called the great theme of nineteenth century urban novels, "the dazzling rapidity of success and ruin" (111). The big break is just around the corner and so too is the dismal flop. These are novels with no central hero or heroine, and so final success (or failure) is never achieved; plots don't ever completely resolve. One character might go up, but invariably, someone else will go down. A New York novel by Powell is not a climb-to-success story but a very bumpy ride. At the beginning of the novel, the failed songwriter, at the end, the talk of the town, but by the next novel, forced to flee, tail between his legs, back to Ohio to live in his parents' garage.

Powell liked writing uptown, but she nearly always fixed her eye on the satirical possibilities that arose when uptown and downtown intermingled—the Midwestern arriviste pandering to or flirting with one who has smugly, if temporarily, made it. This evening wasn't Powellian partly because, as far as I could tell, there was nobody who had crashed. Nobody seemed eager to leave either. Near the end of her life, when she was increasingly forced to socialize in private rooms, Powell complained that she disliked going to friends' apartments because "you have to eat and drink what they have and if the company is dull you are trapped for the evening" (Josephson 23).

She was no happier, it seemed, trapped for the evening in her novels. The point of a private party in her fiction is the satirical send-up but also the sending of her plot somewhere new. A brief stop before moving on to something better and bigger, the apartments in the Manhattan novels are satirical sites where boredom, panic, merriment propel the plot forward. Dominating these city dwellers' lives is what Moretti has called the urban predicament: "the terror of missing something and specifically of missing it because of 'getting there too late' " (112). One might liken reading her novels to the familiar sight of a group standing on a New York sidewalk trying to decide where to go next. First there is impatience, then lag, then acceleration. A taxicab is hailed. In The Locusts Have No King, Frederick Oliver scurries between Dodo and Lyle, Oliver's uptown and downtown lovers, and between a succession of five downtown bars—"rough bar, fancy bar, bars with doormen, bars with sawdust floors" and one uptown party (145). Each location isn't quite right—too many advertising men at the cafés on Rubberleg Square, too many literary snobs at the book signing party uptown. What Powell loved

about New York, she once wrote in a letter to her nephew, was the opportunity for social mobility: one day you can be at a party and ten minutes later downtown at a bar.[3]

Eluding her transplanted midwesterner, however, is not just social arrival—the book deal, the big show—but romantic arrival as well. And, in her first novel, Turn, Magic Wheel, what symbolizes the deferral of romantic arrivals is yet another skyscraper peak. Dennis Orphen meets his lover Corinne for a romantic rendezvous on the observation deck of the Empire State Building. They look down:

> New York twinkled far off into Van Cortlandt Park, spangled skyscrapers piled up softly against the darkness, tinseled parks were neatly boxes and ribboned with gold like Christmas presents waiting to be opened. Sounds of traffic dissolved in the distance, all clangor sifted through space into a whispering silence. (203)

The city seen from up above is not unlike those book-jackets: all spangle and whispering silence, stripping the city of what Dennis—and Dawn—liked best about it: the "screech of the rush hour whistles," "the clamor of the 5 o'clock crowd," the energy of the street below. The scene also reads as a playful gesture of the New York woman writer upsetting the expectations of the reader who may have come looking for romantic fulfillment. In the sentimental urban fairytale at mid-century, what signals the reader-I-married him finale and what leads to the crossing of the threshold with one high-heeled slipper dangling, is not the rose-garden declaration but often the windswept embrace atop the Empire State Building. It is almost a cliché of the mid-century New York sentimental love story, such that the heroines of the Dell paperback urban romances popular in the forties and fifties invariably find themselves reaching for a proposal with a city view: a

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[3] "If it suits you—as it does me—to live in the toughest quarter of downtown, semi-slums, because the houses are old and quaint and have little courts in the back and push-carts and hurdy gurdies go by your window with fruit and vegetables and straw hats and geraniums—well, that doesn't prevent you from being asked to Park Avenue penthouses or any place" (Page, Dawn Powell 100).

penthouse at the top. The End. Think also, for example, of An Affair to Remember, a film belonging to that particular sentimental film category that film critics dubbed the "three handkerchief movie," the weepie, or today, the chick flick. The memorable scene: Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr on the 107th floor of the Empire State Building. (So memorable is it, in fact, that Nora Ephron would make the film—and its vertical iconography—the sustaining metaphor in her 1983 Sleepless in Seattle. In Ephron's version Tom Hanks takes over for Cary Grant; the three handkerchiefs get replaced with a box of Kleenex. Most significantly, Sleepless in Seattle gives the audience what An Affair to Remember withholds: a fully satisfying proposal on the peak.[4]

Yet, in Powell's version of the skyscraper embrace, our Hollywood movie expectation—Cary Grant awaits—is dashed. Dennis and Corinne's lovemaking on the observation deck, their view overlooking the "dissolving" landscape below, appears to provide climactic satisfaction. Yet, the embrace leads not to final union with the beloved but to disentanglement. This scene occurs not at the end of the novel but in the middle. By the next chapter, Dennis is back down on a barstool below, wondering if he might just be in love with Effie after all. "Never let me be party to the fetish of permanency," Dennis pleads (196). The peak, like the apartment, is a temporary space of romantic arrival from which Dennis Orphen makes a hasty escape—a mad scramble back down to the city he loves.

This scene partly illustrates Powell's refusal to give her readers the kind of plots (and characters) expected of a woman writer. Of all her characters, only the street-loving

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[4] This particular story of Manhattan skyscraper romance has, in fact, been told four times in film history. The 1957 An Affair to Remember was itself the director Leo McCarey's remaking of his original movie, Love Affair, made in 1939 with Charles Boyer and Irene Dunne. In 1993, there was Nora Ephron's Sleepless in Seattle, and then in 1998, Love Affair again, this time starring Warren Beatty and Annette Bening.

flaneur and restless writer, Dennis Orphen, comes close to filling the role. Powell even made a joke of it in her diary: "How much sharper and better to have the central figure [Orphen] a man rather than a woman—a man in whom my own prejudices and ideas can easily be placed whereas few women's minds … flit as irresponsibly as that." Orphen, in his "irresponsibility," does not, however, invite heart-fluttering identification or empathy. Neither does Corinne in his arms. Edmund Wilson—in trying to account for Powell's small readership and lack of serious critical attention—once suggested that her problem was that she "does nothing to stimulate feminine daydreams." "The woman reader can find no comfort in identifying herself with Miss Powell's heroines "who engage in love scenes that will neither "rouse [nor] melt you" and whose female characters are often as "sordid as her men" (526). (Powell herself acknowledged in "Secret of my Failure," that the reason she doesn't "sell stories to popular magazines," arose from her inability to write the sentimental romance. The stories in women's magazines "all have subtitles," she notes in her diary. " 'Last time Gary saw Cindy she was a gawky child; now she was a beautiful woman.' I can't help writing "Last time Fatso saw Myrtle she was a desirable woman; now she was an old bag' " (134).

The scene atop the skyscraper also illustrates the plotting device that all her novels depend on: the involution of a traditional courtship plot. They rely on the very thing Gore Vidal believed he had witnessed in Powell's apartment—a love triangle. What drives Dennis back to the street is his chronic inability to choose—a failing shared by nearly all of Powell's characters. While the central characters in Powell's fiction believe in the idea of one true love, they waver indecisively between two—and sometimes more—love objects. If most romantic plots incorporate the "who should I choose?" dilemma, these

can't decide. Just as nobody can ever quite make it once and for all, nobody really ever gets chosen—or rejected—once and for all. Three is a crowd, and Powell likes it that way. In her novel The Bride's House, one character explains that "a woman needed two lovers … one to comfort her for the torment the other caused her" (54). The movement between comfort and torment, between two lovers, forms the underlying structure of all the novels. When he is with "brave and splendid" Effie, the long-suffering ex-wife of a famous writer, Dennis Orphen longs for "sweet, soft, curly, dear little" Corinne. Both are unavailable: Effie is as elusive as the long-dreamed-about novel; Corinne is married. One lives uptown, one downtown.

Locating the objects of desire in different neighborhoods creates a city that splays and triangulates endlessly. Because nobody is ever satisfied, because nobody ever makes it once and for all, because nobody is ever convinced that this really is *the* party or the one true love, the story moves; the city expands. This love-triangle plot also makes a map—a kind of semi-transparent overlay upon which the city can be read. What is quintessentially New York in Powell's novels are those moments when one is moving expectantly towards arrival: rushing through the crowd, traveling between uptown and downtown, waiting at a café to go someplace else. Just as the one-true-love is elusive, so too is the city. The impossibility of finding the one echoes the difficulty of locating the city's center—always up there, over there, anywhere but here.

In The Custom of the Country, Edith Wharton constructs an expanding narrative and multiple scenes through the parodying of a dissatisfied, husband-hunting heroine. Powell plots her crowd of midwestern arrivistes similarly unwilling to stick to one thing. Undine Spragg will not be conclusively married. Dennis Orphen will not conclusively commit.

The city will not be conclusively found. Instead of the indefatigable and uphill pursuit (Undine setting her sights higher and higher), Powell's Manhattan novels make maps through triangular repetitions and through a series of artistic (and socio-economic) troughs and peaks, city mappings that move from Bohemia to uptown gentility and back down again. Instead of a straight vertical line (the skyscraper and the woman intent on scaling it), we have a plot, which, if graphed, forks and splays. By foregoing the conventions of the couple, Powell relinquishes romance for a love affair with a deferred and expansive city.

Driven by these cyclic ups and downs and endless triangles, Powell's episodic mapping of the city, like Wharton's mapping of Undine Spragg's social landscape, never arrives at rounded-off resolution. About Powell's novels, Malcolm Cowley once complained that Powell didn't end her novels properly: "they simply stopped" (Diaries 309). And, in a sense he is right: they often read as a kind of serialized repetition of the story that came before it. After completing one novel, Powell seems to pick up where she left off. Although each focuses on a particular New York milieu—literary coteries in Turn Magic Wheel and The Locusts Have No King, the magazines in A Time to Be Born, the theater world in The Happy Island, traveling salesmen and up-and-coming businessmen in Angels on Toast, the art world in The Wicked Pavilion and The Golden Spur—it relates the same story over and over again: the success clique intersecting with the aspirants downtown, perpetual movement and criss-crossing social worlds. In fact, the novels often bear such a striking resemblance that it is hard to keep them straight, a common complaint, I've noticed, from readers today, and a problem her editors at

Houghton Mifflin clearly recognized during Powell's lifetime: late in her career, they encouraged her to give up on what they called her "Left Bank" themes.

Yet for some, it is the familiarity that appeals. One picks up the next Dawn Powell novel knowing what one is going to get but also knowing that the players have all changed—opening the book is much like entering a familiar public room filled with new faces. In fact, this is how Powell believed her novels should be read. In a letter to her publicist about her novel, The Wicked Pavilion, Powell explained that she wanted the reader to experience the novel "like standing in the café door looking around to see who's here and what's new tonight." She wanted the "book to be presented as if it were a gay place to *go*, not a book to read" (Letters 212).

Standing at the party in Powell's old building, it struck me that the "gay place to go" was just down the street. In order to locate Powell's New York, I needed to make a hasty escape—leave my perch, leave the party and leave those beautiful book jackets with a view. I needed to step around the corner. When I left the party, I turned towards Fifth Avenue where Powell's old haunts, the two Greenwich Village café hotels, The Hotel Lafayette and the Brevoort once stood—The Hotel Brevoort on Fifth Avenue and Eighth Street, and The Lafayette on University and 9th.

Part II: The Café Novel

If grand hotels like the Waldorf Astoria were affixed in the public imagination with the swagger and swish of fin-de-siècle New York, it was the smaller residential hotel that reigned during the twenties and thirties. In the decade after the war, when many

Americans were choosing not just to visit but also to live in Manhattan's rented rooms, the city saw an increase in the construction and popularity of middle class residential hotels. Midsized and midpriced, these hotels were more intimate in feel and, like the church or public square in European cities, often provided a neighborhood with its social center and meeting place. By the twenties, notes I.A. Brock, "Hotel life began to be dispersed. Instead of one New York for everybody there were many New Yorks in which everybody tried to be somebody. Each New York had its own hotel as social center" (12). Several of these hotels became well known as sites where literary and artistic circles formed—hotels like The Algonquin on 44th Street, and The Hotel Brevoort and The Hotel Lafayette near Washington Square.[5]

Stretching as it does from the twenties to the early sixties, Powell's career parallels nearly exactly the era of the small middle class hotel. Edmund Wilson, a devoted friend of Powell's for many years, claimed, in fact, that the entire Manhattan Cycle is one long story of "the days of those small cheap and decent hotels in which thrifty conscientious craftsmen and cultivated ladies of slender means could go on living for years and decades without having their habits disturbed"; ("Greenwich Village in the Fifties" 530) it was a cultural milieu, which by the fifties, was "almost entirely destroyed to make way for huge apartment buildings" and "noisy abysmal bars" (531). In the place of the old Brevoort and Lafayette, there are now enormous apartment blocks, expensive condominiums with skyscraper views. But until they were leveled in the fifties, the Lafayette and the Brevoort figured as small neighborhood centers, locales where middle-class businessmen could mingle with aspiring painters and artists. In the Brevoort, there was a basement café,

[5] Both hotels were built in the nineteenth century. The Hotel Brevoort, one of the oldest in the city at the time Powell lived in New York, was built in 1854. The Hotel Lafayette, on the southeast corner of Ninth Street, was built in 1883.

reminiscent of those in Paris, divided into small rooms with mirrored partitions and marble-topped tables. The Lafayette also had a European style café with marble tables and newspapers on racks. Upstairs were rooms to rent, available either for a temporary stay or for the extended stay.

While Powell socialized at both hotels, the Lafayette was her preferred haunt: she went there every day for nearly twenty years. "I lived so close to the Lafayette," she told Malcolm Cowley, "that I could look down from my apartment building and see my checks bouncing there" (Dawn Powell 179). It was where she gathered material for her New York fiction, listening in on conversations, jotting down notes, trying out her anecdotes on her companions before incorporating them into her work and greeting people from her table "just as if she were the hostess" (Josephson 27). "She improvised her stories, listened to the tales and the gossip of the others, and out of the talk and gossip, the intrigues of her day, the couplings and uncouplings, she shaped her novels" (Josephson 180). Dennis Orphen, the Powell stand-in, remarks that what makes the café an ideal setting is the society it affords: "Considering that this was the very same man who spent each morning staring motionless before a typewriter in his hotel room" Orphen thinks, "it was surprising how swiftly his pen moved over the pages at the café table." What makes the hotel preferable to the apartment for the café habitués is that "here was a place for those whose hearts sank with fear as the door of a charming home (their own or anyone's) closed them in with a known intimate group" (Wicked Pavilion 32).

In the most general sense, the downtown café-hotel embodied many of Powell's central themes—midwesterners in the city, the deferral of arrivals, the ups-and-downs of aspiration. Arriving in New York at the close of World War I, Powell never completely

abandoned the post-war ethos of the transplanted midwesterner artist who comes to the city in search of anonymity and escape from the restrictions of small-town life. What attracted the writer and performer to Manhattan in the Jazz Age, Ann Douglas writes, was "the chance it offered to be *un*cared for, *un*tended,"(27) and in 1920's Manhattan, it seemed that a requirement for being a New York writer (or an expatriated American in Paris) was to have arrived from somewhere else: to be lacking in past, disconnected from family ties, a stranger in the midst. So prized was this badge of orphan and outsider, in fact, that Powell often pokes satirical fun at the New York pretender who assumed a small-town legend when he was really from just up the street. Still, by and large, a majority of writers and artists were from someplace else — new arrivals eager to escape "dullsboro," the name journalist Franklin P. Adams dubbed hometowns everywhere.[6]

Many were midwesterners. Ford Madox Ford remarked that in post-war Paris, all the American writers seemed to be from the Midwest and writing about it. Glenway Wescott, in his novel, Good-bye Wisconsin, made the same observation about the writers moving to New York City: they roamed the world, a "sort of vagrant chosen race like the Jews," until disembarking in Greenwich Village (378). After stepping off their trains at Grand Central or Pennsylvania Station, it was often the hotel where they landed and where they would remain, sometimes for years—Nathanael West at the Hotel Sutton, Willa Cather at

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[6] New York's population doubled between 1910 and 1930; Ann Douglas writes that "among its new inhabitants were Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Elinor Wylie, Hart Crane, Sara Teasdale, Katherine Anne Porter, Thomas Wolfe, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, Louise Bogan, Edmund Wilson, Robert E. Sherwood, Edna Ferber, John Dos Passos, George S. Kaufman, Gilbert Seldes, Van Wyck Brooks, Katherine Cornell, Laurette Taylor, Charles Gilpin, Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Langston Hughes, Nella Larson, Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, Bix Beiderbecke, Cole Porter, Ama Bontemps, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, Daemon Runyan, Gene Fowler, Robert Ripple, Robert Benchley, James Thurber, E.B. White."

the Grosvener on Fifth Avenue, Edna Ferber at the Hotel Majestic on 72nd Street, Dorothy Parker at the Algonquin, Dylan Thomas and Virgil Thompson at the Chelsea, Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz on the penthouse floor of the Shelton,[7] and Dawn Powell, a self-proclaimed "permanent visitor" to New York, playing hostess down at the Lafayette.

Interestingly, too, with the publication of Turn, Magic Wheel in 1936, the first of her Manhattan novels, Powell made her own fictional move from smalltown boarding house to an urban café hotel.[8] Previously, in the Midwest Cycle, the six novels published between 1928 and 1936, she had written solely about small midwestern towns and their eager-to-escape inhabitants. With Turn Magic Wheel, she steps off the train and remains in Manhattan for good. Both cycles, however, really take up the same themes—urban desire deferred. In the Midwest Novels, the train—and the nearby boarding house—figure significantly, while in the Manhattan Cycle, the downtown café hotel is the central locale. Powell, who grew up in Shelby, Ohio, an important transfer point for the New York Central, Baltimore and Ohio, and Pennsylvania railroads, lived for many years in a boarding house across from the railway station. Her small town characters are often described languishing in the station, poring over train schedules or later in bed, they lie awake, listening as trains "whirred through the air, whistles shrieking a red line through the sky behind them" (Dance Night 16). Stuck in the "dreadful cage of

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[7] O'Keeffe preferred the Shelton because of its thirty-four-story views of the sky— "put me in prison and give me a bit of blue sky to paint, and I'd be happy," O'Keeffe once wrote. Never a great admirer of noise and crowds of New York, O'Keeffe would, finally, abandon Manhattan for the solitude and vistas of New Mexico, leaving Steiglitz behind to enjoy the views on the 34th floor (Eisler 49).

[8] Powell began writing plays in the thirties—"Big Night" (1932) and "Jig-saw" (1934)—after which she shifted her attention entirely to Manhattan, except for one look back in the autobiographical 1944 My Home is Far Away.

childhood," Jen, the orphaned waitress in Dance Night, resolves that "there'd be no place where trains went that she wouldn't go, no city too big for her to conquer" (34). The Manhattan Cycle reconstructs this desire for city. If the Midwest novels are filled with young girls swinging their legs from the front porch and listening to the siren song of the train whistle, then in the Manhattan novels, the girl is now a man-about-town swinging his legs from a bar stool in the Brevoort bar and wondering, "where to next?"

Thus, the vision held by Powell's alienated small-towners reveals something of what the city became for their urban counterparts. Or one could look at this in the reverse—and consider her experience of urban life as one imposed retrospectively onto the dream of the city from back home. Powell, who moved from Ohio to New York in 1918, wrote the Ohio cycle while living in New York, looking back on the experience of looking forward. In "What are you doing in my Dreams," an autobiographical sketch written late in her career, Powell examines the experience of going back to the Midwest: she rides the train, and as she moves west, she reminisces about her experience of longing to head east. The thrust of the reminiscences is never located in the nostalgia for home, but in the nostalgia for leaving home. Her urban characters replicate this perpetual farewell. The city is always far-off, a spur to movement towards the city. Just as the boarding house and train station were sites for dreaming the city, so too is the hotel: the "procrastinator's paradise," a "stationary cruise ship," a sort of "union station," where the born café people, "unable to endure a definite place or plan," might "loiter, missing trains and boats as they liked" (Wicked Pavilion 32).

The theme of anti-uptown and anti-success is also linked to the café hotels Powell favored. In Down and In: Life in the Underground, Ronald Sukenick argues that an artist

who realizes she is not being recognized as either a commercial or political success—certainly true of Powell—may manage the failure by rejecting the dominant culture and by finding a space—a bar or café or in this case, hotel—where she can locate herself against the prevailing culture and within a community of outsiders (78). Focusing on the Village scene in the sixties and seventies, Sukenick examines those spaces that replaced the hotels, those "noisy abysmal bars" that Edmund Wilson disparaged, like the San Remo bar and the Cedar Tavern. After visiting New York for the first time in the forties, Simone de Beauvoir makes a similar point about the importance of the café as artist-community. When introduced to the Partisan Review crowd for the first time, she remarks on how frustrated so many of these writers seemed—far more frustrated, she believed, than French writers. Both had similar obstacles: difficulty getting published or finding readers. Rather surprisingly, she blames the American writer's sense of alienation partly on the absence of café life in New York. De Beauvoir repeatedly complains in her travel memoir that there are no real cafés in New York; none of the Washington Square hotels are mentioned, and those she visited seem more like "ladies' tea rooms" than gathering places for intellectuals (43). What De Beauvoir suggests is that a writer's need for affirmation, which ideally would be found in wide readership, can be compensated—if not wholly met—by having a meeting place of like-minded people.[9]

The interesting thing about Powell, however, is that her novels (and the hotels she frequented) were not, in the strictest sense, about an underground counter-culture or about recreating a room full of like-minded artists. While her satire may take an anti-

[9] As it turns out, Powell didn't like Simone de Beauvoir's America Day by Day, a work she considered more remote than Mrs. Trollope's travel observations of the 1830's, a particular favorite of hers. She felt that de Beauvoir was just being snobbish and was not really interested in really trying to understand America (Dawn Powell 254).

uptown slant, her plots are driven by the force of comedic impact between arrived and arriviste. Critical though she may have been of the success cliques, they were the fodder for her fiction. She does not huddle, beret-down, in the corner with her intimates; she asks that outsiders pull up a chair.

This mingling of social worlds, in fact, is what made hotels like the Lafayette and the Brevoort appealing to Powell. In the teens and twenties, when Greenwich Village was cut off from the rest of the city, both hotels were the unrivaled meeting places of high bohemia. With the building of the new subway lines in the twenties, however, came easier access to downtown, such that by the end of the period, tourists and uptowners were increasingly drawn to the attractions of a watered-down Bohemia: they slummed a newly-safe landscape, like tourist buses do now, cruising their way through the neighborhoods of Brooklyn. By the time Powell began frequenting the Lafayette and Brevoort in the thirties, they were no longer the mecca solely of the Bohemian,[10] but catered instead to a social mix, drawing together uptown and downtown worlds, social scenes in which an artist could run into his agent, a midwestern tourist could meet a famous Broadway star. The 1939 WPA Guide highlights both the Brevoort and Lafayette as attractions to the out-of-towner because of this mingling of the "intellectual and cosmopolitan." They were a "meeting place of intellectuals, American and foreigners"

[10] To signal his "solidarity with the intellectual life," Lionel Trilling took an apartment in Greenwich Village in 1929, yet he admits that by that time, the Village was no longer "in its great days—I knew that in the matter of residential preferences I was a mere epigone. So much so, that my apartment was not in a brownstone house or in a more-or-less reconditioned tenement, but in a brand-new, yellow-brick, jerry-built six-story apartment building, exactly like the apartment buildings that were going up all over the Bronx and Brooklyn. Still, the Village was the Village, there seemed no other place in New York where a right-thinking person might live" (Gathering of Fugitives 40).

and clearly—considering the guide's purpose—tourists as well (Federal Writers Project 135 –136).

While Powell wrote about a number of some of the more chic uptown hotels (the Plaza, the Hotel Astor) and the shabbier downtown ones (the Vanderbilt or the Murray Hill), overall her novels are more akin in their social makeup to the Lafayette and the Brevoort: shabbily chic. Writing to Rosalind Wilson, Edmund's daughter and Powell's publicist for many years, Powell explains that The Wicked Pavilion should not be marketed as a Greenwich Village novel: "I dislike any emphasis on a Greenwich Village approach which always conjures up Maxwell Bodenheim" and the alienated artists of the twenties. She preferred the title "Washington Square" because it was more "worldly, intellectual and gayer (Letters 212). Isolated Bohemia was not her subject anymore than the success clique; instead it was collision and collusion and even, in the case of those love triangles, sexual attraction, between these two worlds.

Her hotels, then, like her novels, reflect a pluralistic New York middle class, appealing to writers and artists for their hint of Washington Square glamour and to uptowners and tourists for their hint of Greenwich Village grit. In these hotels one might catch a glimpse of writers (John Dos Passos, Malcolm Cowley, Van Wyck Brooks, Thomas Wolfe, John Cheever, Joseph Mitchell, A.J. Liebling), painters (Niles Spenser, Reginald Marsh), playwrights (Paul Peters, Murdock Pemberton), a director (Ivan von Auw) or a literary agent (Cleon Throckmorton). Right alongside could just as well be found a traveling salesman or a newly married couple. Mary McCarthy pictured her fictional traveling salesman, "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," dining at the

Lafayette. Irwin Shaw pictured his newlywed stepping out of the Brevoort to trail "The Girls in their Summer Dresses" up Fifth Avenue.

The relationship between uptown and downtown also reflects the spot on the Manhattan map where Powell situates herself—on the one hand, at the edge of Washington Square, flanking the old world "village," and on the other, at the very source of Fifth Avenue, with a straight line heading uptown. It is a locale bordering (and inscribed within) the grid, yet at the same time near the secrets, the pockets of a downtown subculture.[11] This combination of grid and pocket drives Powell's plots.

Because it comprised a cohesive yet socially mixed scene—a cross-section of New York society—Powell regarded the café hotel as an ideal space around which to construct a novel. It was a hub "with far-reaching outposts," acting as a "New York center with radiations to [the] city's fringes" (Diaries 291). The people one meets in the hotel café or in the Cedar Tavern determines where one gets to go. Their dramas and ambitions—and their love triangles—lead us out around the city. One sees this most directly in The Wicked Pavilion, one of the last in the Manhattan series, published in 1953. In it, the Café Julien, a barely fictionalized combination of the Lafayette and the Brevoort, figures as the spatial and thematic pivot from which the characters roam the city. Yet, although The Wicked Pavilion is the only novel specifically about the downtown café hotel, all the

[11] Several writers in queer theory have studied this relationship between the map of the city and its connection to the secret, subculture. In "Queer Sites in Modernism," Joseph Boone points to the "actual physical layout" of New York, the "mapping of street patterns within particular sectors, along with their positioning within the interstices of the larger grid" and the effect this has on "protogay and gay lifestyles" in the Village. Because the "tangle of small streets, influenced by the curve of the Hudson, defeats the larger grid pattern" it becomes a kind of "hidden pocket" for subcultures desiring to be outside the grid (254-55). George Chauncey also makes a similar argument in his book-length study, Gay New York.

novels in the Manhattan Cycle share this same hub structure: the fanning out around a cohesive (yet socially mixed) social scene.

Along with this vision of the city on an axis, the Manhattan novels also share a similar sense of a city public-yet-private. Powell's New York, like her downtown hotels, is both a site of expansion and containment. We are invited to step out; at the same time, we are enfolded within an intimate space. What she liked about her hotels was that they were not exactly home but not exactly an entirely unfamiliar, public space of strangers either. In The Wicked Pavilion, the Julien is described as a "temporary home for the homeless to hang their hats," providing a haven for "those who craved privacy in the midst of sociability." On the one hand, there is "heavenly anonymity"; on the other, a chance to unexpectedly run into an old friend or make a new acquaintance. The Café Hotel is the one place to hear "as I live and breathe, just the person I am looking for." Should the friend prove irritating, there were blessed doors from which to escape.

Writing to her editor, Powell explained that with the going of the Washington Square hotels "went an entire way of life," one that she recognized as "almost a necessity" for "writers, artists and people who work alone all day."

> In our work we can't plan a social life too definitely—we never know but what we may get going good just when we're expected at a dinner. We do not know that we'll want to see somebody—anybody, sometimes—after being locked up with ourselves all day but we daren't risk tying ourselves down any more than we have to. So we depend on running into friends by chance when we're through work—stay a little while or for hours as we like—feeling that, in spite of the isolation your work demands of you, you are in touch with the world. I do not think this sort of casual life would appeal to young people looking for sheer fun or gaiety, for the pleasure comes from chance conversations and impromptu meetings with a variety of people, some living such different lives that you've never had a chance to become friends. You enjoy each other all the more for knowing the contact is temporary—like cruise acquaintances (Letters 215).

Made up of "chance conversations and impromptu meetings" and introducing a crowd of characters comprised of regulars (central characters) and a slew of cruise acquaintances (briefly rendered types), Powell's novels are characterized by this same combination of familiarity and anonymity, intimacy and publicity. The drive to get out—to be seen and heard—is counterposed with the desire to "be in," encircled by the intimate coterie. Reading the novels, we are surrounded by a crowd of people who aren't exactly friends, but aren't really strangers either. They are the people, over a stretch of many years, one continuously runs into, but never quite befriends: the familiar face emerging from a crowd of strangers, or emerging from the boozy haze of too many Pernods.

The Manhattan Cycle presents New York with this same sense of "privacy in the midst of sociability." Elizabeth Hardwick once used the term "unprivate private" to describe the spirit of the Manhattan hotel; an "unprivate private" sense of the city is found both in Powell's brand of satire—like the hotel she favored, it is more intimate, more convivial than Edith Wharton's palace hotel survey of the room—and in her mapping of the city. While hers is not the story of enclosed domesticity, it is not an entirely free-floating story of urban street life either. Instead the plots of the Manhattan novels, like the café hotel—a liminal space between street and interior—tug at the boundaries of a private and public city. Her novels are very crowded but also rather snug.

Part III: Intimate Satire

"I want to present my characters in a particularly New York café way," Powell confessed in her diary. "I want to know them in their public exhibition of themselves, not as one knows them in their homes and offices" (Diaries 318). Like Edith Wharton,

Powell gives us urbane surfaces and urban types. Hers are the traveling salesmen with a girl in every port, newspapermen-turned-admen, ingénues with small apartments and big theater ambitions, intellectuals who pay their rent by editing the home improvement section of a glossy magazine, "afternoon ladies" drinking over love affairs in Village bars, academics with hearts set on the bestselling novel. Powell also took as much pleasure in her minor characters (the temporary contact, the cruise acquaintance) as her major ones. In fact, she preferred them (Letters 156). Gifted at the on-the-mark encapsulation, the passing line overheard on the street, and the one-sided phone conversation—always just ajar, it seems, are the wooden doors of the corner telephone box—she writes public chatter (who is getting published where and who is sleeping with whom) and a cacophony of "she's the kind of person who" summations. Ethel Carey, a minor character in A Time to Be Born (1943) "was thirty-two but she looked like a woman of forty so well-preserved she could pass for thirty-two" (A Time To Be Born 11). Eugene Brent, an advertising man whose wife has forced him to participate in her artistic soirees, "was interested in the theater, but this interest took the banal, unprofessional form of discussions of plays and acting, instead of box office or chic little amusing tattle on advance sales, angels, and managerial losses" (The Happy Island 13). A female character in The Locusts Have No King remarks that "Men getting bald is the only thing God ever did for women. It evens things a little" (213). Her companion contributes his own observation, remarking that women "have as much right to use sex to get ahead professionally as men [have] to use their professional success to get ahead sexually" (174).

However gifted at the ruinous mot or neat epithet, Powell tends towards the long descriptive riff. Here's Ebie Vane, an artist in Angels on Toast, a young artist who divides her time between the boys at the Art Students League and her traveling salesman married boyfriend, Jay Oliver.

> The fault was her own for giving up her simple old life as a real artist—(work away at it even if it takes years! That's what she should have done)—and started distorting all the decent things in life with commercial art, married men, Rainbow rooms. Hopping all over the country at a word from the man. Kicking the work over. Kicking over her ideals … Served her right for picking up with a fellow like Jay. Visiting firemen. That's what fellows like Jay and Lou were called. Fellows the old crowd would have laughed at. Fellows you took to Luchow's for dinner, then to Jimmy Kelly's for the midnight floor show and they shouted "Greenwich Village—whoopee!" (50)

Or, in A Time To Be Born, Powell manages to poke fun not just at Vicky Haven, the smalltowner-in-the-city heroine, but also the women's magazines that Vicky, like so many American women, read. Suffering over a broken heart, Vicky realizes that all she could do was to "read the women's magazines and discover how other heroines had solved the problem":

> The favorite solution, according to these experts, was to take your little savings out of the bank, buy a bathing suit, some smart luggage, put on a little lipstick, throw away your ugly glasses and go to Palm Beach or Miami for two weeks. There you lay on the beach doggedly in rain or shine, your glasses hidden in a secret compartment of the hotel cellar, and a not-at-all-dangerous hair tint bringing out the highlights in your new permanent and the smart but inexpensive bathing suit bringing out other highlights in your figure. On the fourteenth day, if not before, a tall bronzed Texas oil man would appear and be bowled over by your unaffected passion for peppermint sticks, unlike the snobbish society women he knew, and if you turned to page 114 you would find yourself, as heroine, bumbling down the church aisles without your glasses led by the Texas oil king and possibly a Seeing Eye Dog. (76)

The difference in Powell's and Wharton's long descriptions, however, is that Powell's prose seems less hampered than Wharton's, who, in taking the comic sprint in The Custom of the Country, is more weighed down by the heavy skirts of nineteenth

century stylistic decorum. Powell's is a more rollicking prose. The riffs, however, can sometimes read as improvisation and sometimes a lack of editorial control. She sometimes takes it too far. Wharton's descriptions spiral toward a crescendo; Powell sometimes prolongs the punch-line past its prime, like a comedian, so seduced by the first laugh, she does not always detect the cue to get off stage.

The central difference, however, in Wharton and Powell's characterizations is satirical positioning. The Custom of the Country leaves the reader feeling exempt, superior, safely on the other side of the room—safely on Wharton's side of the room, or safely up on the balcony watching from an elevated vantage point. By asserting so much satirical distance—down there is the alien tribe—Wharton's character renderings ward off the reader's self-recognition. Powell's humor, on the other hand, often makes us look up from the book with a wince: what three paragraphs might be affixed to *me* should I happen to leave the room? Reading "She was thirty-two but she looked like a woman of forty so well-preserved she could pass for thirty-two" might send one swiftly to the mirror.

Yet, one could also say that the humor also exhibits more conviviality than Wharton's. In Powell's fiction, we are not on the other side of the room—or up on the balcony—but neither is Powell. She often begins her chapters with at-a-distance anthropological reflections on the scene about to unfold—mini-essays reminiscent of Theodore Dreiser. But, The Long View, the city observed from a distant remove, was no more Powell's favored satirical position than it was her brand of city romance. She quickly gets back down again, returns to the thick of it. Generally, too, her satire is a free-for-all, with nearly all her central characters speaking (or thinking) the satirical digs. The

key to great satire, Powell believed, was to "consider yourself not as the observer of the picture but the center of it" and to "take your angle from that" (Page, Dawn Powell 75). The "vitality" of satire is "derived from the completeness of the picture" so that "not one acting part or thought represents the norm," not "the audience, the critic or the author." In this way, "there is … no pointer to the moral" (Page, Dawn Powell 75).

This more democratic satirical positioning also relates to a different relationship between author and subject: Powell believed her satire was less acceptable to American readers (and critics) because she was not pointing out the "oddities of the poor or rich" but the oddities of the American middle class—in other words, the oddities of her own tribe. Not only does this result in a much less removed perspective, but a kind of self-parody as well. By making fun of her own socio-economic circle, she relatedly makes fun of herself.

However much she would be attacked for her ruthless edge, her satire is also relatively benevolent, two-tables-away marksmanship, arrows instead of bullets, not so nice things to say about your friends behind their backs. The artist Loren MacIver described Powell's wit "as mostly honest and goodhearted, even rather kindly. When she had somebody on a pin, you always had the sense that she had him there only to inspect him, to learn something about him—and about herself. You knew she would eventually let him go" (Page, Dawn Powell 262).

Yet, in reading much of the recent criticism on Powell, I am continually struck by the lopsided emphasis on the world-weary social critic over the brisk Middle-Western humorist. In his biography of Powell, for example, Tim Page continually refers to his

subject's pessimism, her tragic vision, her dark humor.[12] (Powell had herself complained about just this kind of response to her work: "The artist who really loves people loves them so well the way they are, he sees no need to disguise their characteristics—he loves them whole, without retouching. Yet the word always used for this unqualifying affection is 'cynicism.' ") In the case of Tim Page, however, the skittishness in acknowledging the twinkle makes sense. As the instigating force behind the Powell resurrection—he nearly single-handedly brought her back to print—Page must have felt the need to combat the very claims that have for so long plagued his subject and led to her disappearance on the shelves: either Powell is "cruel," or, she is having-too-much-fun-making-fun—a satirical lightweight.

What really bothered many of Powell's earlier critics was different from what bothered Wharton's. It was not that she was so distant and superior from her characters but rather that she seemed to like to get too close to people. She wasn't showing how horrible people could be (as Wharton does with Undine); rather, she seemed actually to *like* horrible people. In a similar vein, Powell was not considered hard enough on her characters to be a real satirist and not easy enough on them to be a writer of substance.[13] Not enough distance was applied to her rendering of character and not enough depth. This was Diana Trilling's objection to Powell's 1942 Locusts Have No King, a novel loosely based on the uptown intellectual circles that included the likes of Wolcott Gibbs

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[12] Lauren Weiner reads Page's biography completely differently: in her opinion, Page places uneven emphasis on the good-hearted Powell and does not give enough attention to her darkness and cynicism.

[13] Frederic Morton for example wrote in a review that "what appears to be fundamentally lacking is the sense of outrage which serves as an engine to even the most sophisticated satirist. Miss Powell does not possess the pure indignation that moves Evelyn Waugh to his absurdities and forced Orwell into his haunting contortions. Her verbal equipment is probably unsurpassed among writers of her genre—but she views the antics of humanity with too surgical a calm."

and Dorothy Parker.[14] Trilling objected to what she saw as a "discrepancy between the power of mind revealed on every page of the novel and the insignificance of the human beings upon whom Powell directs her excellent intelligence" (214). Trilling complained that

> A shabbier crowd of hangers on and bar flies would be hard to find. Not a single individual among them, either positively or negatively, either by the nature of his ambition or the distance of his fall from glory, suggests any human ideal which justifies a writer bothering with the human race at all (46).

For Trilling, too, Powell's limitations are born of the "myriad subtle pressures exerted on her to prove her 'womanliness' by disproving her seriousness, to disarm male hostility by asserting a basic frivolity." As Trilling saw it, "no man of Miss Powell's intellectual endowment would fritter away his powers on the small-time creatures to whom Miss Powell devotes herself" (Bio 67).

Powell had little patience for this kind of criticism. "Gist of criticism (Diana Trilling, etc.) of my novel is if they had my automobile they wouldn't visit my folks, they'd visit *theirs*." She explains that to take the route favored by Diana Trilling etc. would have meant going along with the "ignorant belief in Party Manners for book people." It would mean "writing about 'nice people—people one likes.' " But "Who likes?" Powell wonders. "*I'm* doing the work. I write about people *I* find interesting." And what she found interesting, as she explains, were two things: "the representative" and "geography."

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[14] Originally, the novel was to be titled The Destroyers, about "that cruel, unhappy, ever-dissatisfied group who feed on frustrations—Dorothy Parker, Wolcott Gibbs, Arther Kober, etc," a group of people who "[h]ave perverted their rather infantile ambitions into destruction of others' ambitions and happiness. If people are in love, they must mar it with laughter; if people are laughing, they must stop it with 'Your slip is showing.' They are in a permanent prep school where they perpetually haze each other. They destroy their own happiness by being ashamed of whatever brings it; they want to be loved but are unloving; they want to destroy but be themselves saved" (Page, Dawn Powell 87).

In a note about her first novel, Turn, Magic Wheel, Powell explains she hopes to tell a woman's tragedy "viewed through the chinks of a writer's book about her, newspaper clippings, café conversations, restaurant brawls, New York night life" (Diaries 46). In writing the novel, Powell wanted to explore "the front" the woman "keeps up" as a "front peculiar to the New York broken heart."

> "What?" Our friend committed suicide—that's terrible...that's the kind of suit I'm going to get, there in Altman's ... she jumped out of the window? No!— are you getting out here, why don't you get a gold belt..." Publishers and critics ... would say these women, discussing the deaths of their friends must be hard, bitter. The truth is that in New York, a city of perpetual distraction—where superficial sense are perpetually forced to react to superficial impressions—the inner tragedies, no matter how intense, are viewed through the tawdry lace of New York life. (105)

If Trilling saw Powell as frittering away her talents on minor characters, then Powell believed that her subject was the way people and their tragedies get "tangled in the fritter of New York." The real subject of the Manhattan Cycle, is less the characters themselves than the "tawdry lace of New York," the quick ear for a line, the fronts and superficial reactions.

Writing the fritter and fronts also lead ultimately to the real heroine of all her novels: New York City. There is "really one character" in all the novels, Powell explains, "a giant A. who is peeled off like an artichoke into several characters—for each one is but a mood or possibility of the basic one" (Diaries 182). The giant A had, in fact, the contours of the big Apple: "Never forget that New York is the heroine," she reminds herself in the journal (Diaries 217). "Never forget geography." She wanted her novels to be read almost as if they were tourist guidebooks to the city, introducing real places with all the specificity of the city at that moment. This fascination with the specificity of the city is even found in her strategy for rendering character. If Wharton flattens through details

about costumes, furniture, people—Powell does so through geographic saturation; she categorizes by *placing* her characters; identifying them with particular spaces within the landscape of Manhattan.

This eye for representative fritter and this passion for the specificity of the urban landscape was, Powell believed, what distinguished her from other novelists writing at the same time. Most mid-century writers, she believed, were paying far too much attention to themselves and not enough to the world around them. The central virtue of a good writer, she believed, was the inquisitive: "with me the basic urge to write is neither knowledge nor the desire to expound, but pure curiosity." ("I am a born busybody," boasts Dennis Orphen in the opening scene of Turn, Magic Wheel, "Curiosity is my muse.") An inveterate eavesdropper, a shameless listener-in, Powell had no patience for introspective flights of fancy,[15] preferring instead the gossip filtering in around her, the anecdote jotted down from the table just behind. An eye (and ear) for other people was also a quality she believed sorely lacking in her contemporaries. "Most writers today are simply not interested in other people. They do not pay attention to what is happening around them" (Letters 45). They do not look up; they do not look around. She blamed this partly on Freud. After judging a fiction contest, Powell remarked that as a result of the

[15] Even her diaries—that most private of forms—seem more a novelist's notebook than a foray into the personal. Reading them, in fact—especially the second half—is quite instructive for anyone approaching middle-age. The record of the final years in many diaries—or biographies—can often be an overwhelmingly gloomy affair: friends are dying, hospitals a habit, symptoms too strenuously held up for regular inspection. And for many, there is not ascent away from the personal but entropy—a sinking into one's ailments, a hardening of the personality as well as a fading interest in other people. Powell's life was an extremely difficult one—a mentally handicapped son institutionalized, a severely alcoholic husband, constant money worries, the threat of homelessness and her own failing health at the end of her life. Although complaints on these subjects are scattered throughout the diary, they are largely overshadowed in the second half by entries about her plans for the next novel, her observations that morning on the street. One could attribute this simply to ennui—what more can one say?—or to the more inspiring possibility that by the middle of her life, the pleasures of work (and new sights) took precedence—or at least compensated for—the personal worries.

modern-day penchant for analysis, there was a new breed of writers who "write in the first person a lot, and remember sexy moments from their childhood and faraway first lays." They "seem self-absorbed" and "oblivious to the surroundings and people" (Bio 272). Elizabeth Janeway, an "industrious, go-getting little writer":

> Does not intend to enlarge her field by noting people, places or ideas alien to her experience or present knowledge; she does not expect to be interested in anything she is not already interested in. When I hear someone talking about bridge building in Chinotka or politics in St. Thomas, I like to jot down their speech, rhythm and exact beat, as a musician jots down native chords and airs, pure compositional scholarship research. (Letters 56)

Along with this aversion to the interiority of younger American writers was a distaste for the modernists, both in Europe and in America. Women in the sensibility tradition were particularly anathematic. For Powell, there was a "poetic pace" to the paragraphs of Katherine Anne Porter, in whom one hears the "the far off echoes of Katherine Mansfield out of Virginia Woolf," but also a kind of mistiness, a "pallor." By proclaiming herself the "only satirist in New York," she also seems to be exhibiting anxieties about being identified as a woman writer, an anxiety nearly all the writers here share. Mary McCarthy, in her "Characters in Fiction," argues that:

> The fictional experiments of the twentieth century went in two directions: sensibility and sensation: To speak very broadly, the experiments in the recording of sensibility were made in England (Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, Elizabeth Bowen, Forster), and America was the laboratory of sensation (Hemingway and his imitators, Dos Passos, Farrell). (57)

McCarthy believed that only she—and Edith Wharton and Jane Austen before her—deserved the title "novelist of sense." Powell also saw herself as a category unto herself and divides the literary world along gender lines, all the while keeping herself out of it. There were the "he-man writers—Hemingway, Burnett, Cain" whose "words tersely proclaim their masculinity," and there were the women like "Nancy Hale, Louise Bogan,

Kay Boyle" engaged in a kind of verbal flirtation, broadcasting their femininity behind the costume of their disguised heroines. After reading them, Powell records that she was

> impressed with how women now made their art serve their female purpose whereas once it warred with their femininity. Each page is squirming with sensitivity, every line—no matter how well disguised the heroine is—coyly reveals her exquisite taste, her delicate charm, her never-at-a-disadvantage body (which of course she cares nothing about and is always faintly amused at men's frenzies over her perfect legs, breasts, etc.)

In contrast, Powell aspires to a kind of disembodied (or at least desexualized) flanerie, not disguising herself in heroine and largely indifferent to showing off her private life—or, for that matter, her body. (For one thing, she is often dressed up as Dennis, Dawn in disguise.) Never did she want the label "woman writer" to scream (or squirm sensitively) off the page.

If by writing the crowded, geographically explicit city, Powell differentiates herself from the perambulatory interiors of the Bedsit and Bloomsbury writers, she also sets herself apart from a woman writer just up the street and a writer to whom she was often compared—Dorothy Parker. (Powell hated the association—their initials and their wit meant they were continually paired up. Dawn Powell, Diana Trilling once remarked, wrote the lines that Dorothy Parker was famous for.)

Yet Parker does beg the obvious comparison. For those who have never read her but have memorized a few soundbites, she is the personification of the hotel spirit, an icon of flapper-era female urbanity, such that today, tourists make a pilgrimage to 44th Street to sip their overpriced martinis and gaze up at the Hirschfeld rendering of the literary "it" girl surrounded by her roundtable companions. Parker also seems a fitting successor to Edith Wharton. Both used satire to differentiate themselves from other women. Parker, who socialized—and performed—at the roundtable, continually contrasts her own gift for

words against the verbal clumsiness of her characters. As a female public figure constantly quoted, observed, and verbally on stage, Parker recognized that a requirement for being heard was a scarcity of words and control of language. Skillful with the quip and with the carefully placed phrase that would stop a room, she didn't talk a lot (as some imagine); she talked selectively, quietly, the whisper overriding the screech. Her stories however are filled with women exploding, who talk and talk, or who are dead silent.[16]

In her fiction, one sees not just the disparity between the cosmopolitan wit and the domestic woman— the urbane conversationalist holding forth from the roundtable or from the pages of The New Yorker set against the verbally confused hausfrau—but also Parker's narrative voice, spare and in control, distinguished from other kinds of female *public* speech: women speaking to women, or if they are speaking to men, doing it badly. Gregarious ladies are pitted against one another: there is the narrator, urbane and in control against the character, lacking in verbal acumen who explodes (think of Parker's famous monologues, her one-sided phone conversations) or who can't speak at all (the very long pause). In his autobiography, Frank Case, the manager of the Algonquin, would complain about the women he had to deal with every day in his lobby, who "talk and talk and talk," comparing them to Parker and Ferber, whom he regarded as the only women of his acquaintance who used words economically.[17]

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[16] Most read Parker's stories as satire of the domestic sphere and of the domesticated woman. I would also read them as the satire of the *public* woman, who conspicuously consume and conspicuously converse and against whom Parker's fiction asserts a satirical narrator in control of words. I read the monologue and verbal explosion as Parker's expression of stage fright—the dangers of loosing the tongue or forgetting one's lines in the public eye gets projected unto her endlessly talking female characters. See Nina Miller 87.

[17] Case was himself not particularly gifted at verbal economy. The prose of both his published memoirs of the roundtable give the sense of a red-cheeked innkeeper, perpetually bothering his guests at their table.

Yet, although Parker may have shared in Wharton's (and Powell's) public voice, she is missing the public scene, the movement around the city. Focused on women's private obsessions and conversations, enclosed within the frames of the short story and viewed from a superior and often condemning vantage point, Parker's urban tales miss Dawn Powell's narrative movement and café democracy. If Powell writes episodically constructed novels depicting a fluid, public experience of the city, Parker writes short stories that are immobile, cut off. It is a difference that characterizes the hotels they frequented: in the Brevoort and the Lafayette, more intimate public spaces, social classes mingle; in the Algonquin, the roundtable centers around uptown glamorization of the literary life. The mix of social classes found in Powell's downtown haunt and in her New York fiction is missing from Parker's short stories and from her own hotel milieu. Instead, we get narrative claustrophobia. Parker's big blondes remain stuck in their apartments; we are taken on solipsistic waltzes around the room, asked to listen in on one-sided phone conversations, partake of the interior monologue. We don't get much chance to look around the room.

Even Parker's The Ladies of the Corridor, a play written at the end of her life and based on a residential hotel in uptown Manhattan in the sixties, is not an exploration of the public experience of the city; it is a critique of the isolation of women with nothing to do, middle-aged well-to-do widows who in Parker's words, "take excellent care of themselves, and may look forward to twenty good years, which will be spent ... doing what they are doing at present, which is nothing at all" (Meade 347). She does not write

Undine Spragg's voracious movements but the passivity of Undine's bored mother twiddling her thumbs.[18]

Parker, fascinated by fame and continually on stage, also embodies the very qualities of the "success clique" that Powell so delighted in parodying. Along with the new focus on personality in Hollywood in the Twenties came a heightened interest in the lives of New York writers. Round table conversation fed the daily newspaper columns, while the columns, in turn, profiled the group for public consumption. This often resulted in a greater emphasis on the writer than on the writing. One reason Dorothy Parker's work has been overlooked by readers today was that she was so *good* at playing writer. Because she spent more time speaking her lines than writing, the writing itself got downplayed.[19] It may even be an explanation for her scanty output—she never did write that novel she was always talking about.

Separating the audience from the speakers, the public from the private "inner circle," the Algonquin was also a site of exclusion and cosmopolitan snobbery. Here was a private dinner party being held before everyone's very eyes. For this reason, it rubbed many other New York writers the wrong way. Edmund Wilson would complain of how

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[18] Parker returned in 1952 from her unsuccessful stint in Hollywood to set up house, so to speak, in the Volney, a residence hotel on East Seventy-fourth Street where she lived until her death in 1967. There, in collaboration with Arnaud D'Usseau, she wrote The Ladies of the Corridor, a play based on the Volney and its inhabitants. Not only does the play—and Parker's circumstances from which the story is drawn—illustrate a striking departure from her previous public life at the Algonquin, where she was known, celebrated and on stage, but it presents a new story of the hotel-dweller: the shut-in, the shut-away. In her final years, Parker was mostly holed up in her eighth floor room at the Volney, not reading, not writing, and not talking much either. She had few visitors and her friends had mostly dropped from sight. Instead, she had become addicted to the pastime of domestically inclined housewives everywhere: she watched the soaps.

[19] In this sense, Parker's publicity strategies backfired—at least posthumously. Had she made less of a fuss about herself, one wonders if people would have paid more attention to her work and less to her biography. Instead, without ever having to dip into her work, one can catch a few sound bites, and get acquainted with the Dorothy Parker phenomena simply by going to the movies. Here one gets little else but a portrait of a sharp-tongued and deteriorating alcoholic.

persistently the Round Tablers clung together, rarely venturing beyond their own turf. Others spoke of their "aristocracy of intellect," such that years later Parker would apologetically explain: "It was the Twenties and we had to be smartie." Anita Loos would parody the cliquishness of the "resident geniuses" of the Rountable in her Gentlemen Marry Brunettes.[20] After going to the Algonquin, Lorelei makes the following entry in her diary:

> So then they all started to tell about a famous trip they took to Europe. And they had a marvelous time, because everywhere they went, they would sit in the hotel, and play cute games and tell reminiscences about the Algonquin. And I think it is wonderful to have so many internal resources that you never have to bother to go outside yourself to see anything. (89)

This indifference to other people was just what Powell hated in other writers. "I have no equipment for prize-winning—no small talk, no time for idle graciousness and required public show, no clothes either or desire for front," she wrote in her journal. "I realize I have no yen for any experience (even a triumph) that blocks observation, when I am observed instead of the observer. Time is too short to miss so many sights" (Page, Dawn Powell 292).

Yet while Powell's plots are more mobile and expansive than Parker's—far more public in their rendering of the city scenes—they are also much more limited than the plots of another writer to whom she was sometimes compared—John Dos Passos, a

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[20] The twenties and thirties saw a growing cultural fascination with private life as it was lived by public figures. New tabloids like Photoplay provided celebrity advice on beauty and health, as well as tours of celebrities' homes and a steady supply of gossip about their private life. For major Hollywood actors, such a media apparatus meant private life as display: in their personalities, residential palaces and "playgrounds," they provided the "reality" of the personae and consumer utopia projected on-screen. But, as Nina Miller points out, "if idea consumption had its symbolic center in Hollywood, sophistication, the dominant intellectual aesthetic of the twenties, was generated out of New York. There was no New York equivalent to the powerful promotional machine of Hollywood, yet for those gregarious writers who embodied the new sophistication, there was an analogous imperative for "personality" and a blurring of public persona and private life" (Making Love Modern 89).

friend of Powell's and a writer she greatly admired. The Manhattan cycle does not provide the full realistic sweep found in Dos Passos. She does not give us the full throttle effort to get-it-all-down that one finds in Dos Passos's account of the city. Reading him there is always that sense of New York on a windy day: the newspaper headlines speeding and spiraling around us, a city overwhelmed and overwhelming. With Powell, we get Manhattan through an almost Dickensian criss-crossing of coincidence: we run into someone met fifty pages back, surprised to find our downtown acquaintances on an uptown streetcorner. However much the city splays and expands, and however many love triangles are formed out of the couplings and uncouplings of uptown and downtown, there is also a sense of the city drawing us in—a sense of a safer city, a city bounded, even domesticated by a familiar terrain.

If the Manhattan novels seem to push the private experience out onto the street—to limit and demarcate and domesticate the city, they also seem to invite the city in. The Locusts Have No King, A Time to Be Born, Turn, Magic Wheel, The Happy Island are novels of flanerie (urban movement and observation), yet structurally they are not "walking" novels. (Powell, as it turned out, hated to walk.) With no fluid, seamless connections, generally, between her episodic shiftings from scene to scene, they are not written like a free-floating ramble through the city. Instead, we are jolted from place to place. It is that taxi-cab feeling: a late night spent speeding from place to place. "How did I get here?" we wonder. Yet, it is also, paradoxically, a café feeling. A door opens. A story enters. While these abrupt shifts give a sense of city expansion—uptown, downtown, all around—at times, they also read like the city converging. Places are not

just visited, they are overheard. We move out and around. At the same time, the city gets invited inside.

This sense of the city as crowded yet some how manageable (readable) also seems a reflection of her literary influences. If one looks at her list of favorite novels, the modernists are conspicuously missing. Instead, there are the novels of the provincial-to-city plots: Gogol's Dead Souls, Balzac's Lost Illusions and Distinguished Provincial, Flaubert's Sentimental Education, Dickens's Our Mutual Friend and David Copperfield as well as the obvious American examples of midwestern urban desire– Sinclair Lewis's Dodsworth and Dreiser's Sister Carrie (Diaries 78). Glenway Wescott, meeting Powell in the Lafayette, once remarked that she was the only writer doing for New York what Balzac had done for Paris, a comment that Powell felt "illumine[d] [her] whole disorder" (Diaries 285). Powell saw Balzac as one of her greatest influences, which, considering her themes, is not surprising. She once wrote that she wanted to "convey the complete vivid details of New York life and varied characters" with the "complete reality of the eighteenth and nineteenth century letter writers who told all the inside scandals chattily, informatively, real places, real names, etc." She would write a "kind of special woman of the last two decades, as peculiar to this age as certain Balzac types" (Diaries 305)

Her subject, too, is the urban social climber—a figure that also fits within a literary lineage, one born of the nineteenth century. Lionel Trilling, in a three-page section of The Liberal Imagination (1950), invoked a great line of novels running through the nineteenth and twentieth century, the hero of which he dubbed the Young Man from the Provinces. Including in his list Stendhal's The Red and the Black (1837-43), Balzac's Pere Goriot (1835), Dickens's Great Expectations (1861), Flaubert's Sentimental Education (1869),

James's The Princess Casamassima (1886) and Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925), Trilling writes of this type's provincial origins, his fantasies about substitute parents—and his aspiring, social-climbing ways. A.K. Chanda, in his essay on the type, adds Becky Sharp and Sister Carrie to the list. (Carrie's journey from small town to Chicago to New York deposits her at the close of the novel in the Waldorf apartments, looking out the window and reading Pere Goriot.)

Chanda also more closely examines the connection between this type and others to whom he (or she) is so often compared: the self-made man, the parvenu, the hero of the Bildungsroman, and most particularly, the *picaro*. (It was from the *picaro*, Trilling believed, that the Young Man from the Provinces descended.) Chanda explains that in the plotting of both types, there is a rise and a fall, with the *picaro* rising and falling several times—Ullrick Wicks called it the "Sisyphus rhythm"—and the "Young Man" only rising and falling once, in a "trajectory which closely resembles that of the tragic wheel of fortune." If the *picaro* travels slowly and "is likely to have adventures on the road," the Young Man is "swiftly transported by coach or train to his metropolitan destination"—"swift vehicles" which are also "associated symbolically" with the Young Man's "energy and drive, his meteoric rise, and of the distant wealth, power and privilege he aspires to and comes eventually to possess, however fleetingly" (Chanda 326). Both the *picaro* and the Young Man share a desire to get ahead, often through romance with a social superior. Gigolos, in these novels, abound.[21] Powell's fiction fits rather nicely into the category—often a blend of the Young Man and *picaro* types, Midwestern strivers

[21] Often, Chanda explains, the Young Man climbs through a "prostitution of his distinctive aristocratic qualities, his beauty, his elegance, and social poise...gigolos to varying degrees." The two women he includes, Becky Sharp and Carrie also "prostitute their sexual charms whether within or outside marriage. As Guzman de Alfarache, one of the first social climbers in European fiction, discovered, fortune-hunting is the quickest way to win both fortune and rank" (331).

who are ardently (although at the same time ambivalently) ambitious, hungry for Manhattan fame and engaged in a round of ups and downs.

Powell's depictions of the fast paced party life between the wars also seem a kind of imposition of the labyrinthine plots of continental fiction onto the Manhattan grid: the social relationships of uptown and downtown explored through an endless traversing of 14th street, here an unswerving example of the river Seine dividing Left and Right banks. Like Balzac's Paris, too, Powell writes a small-town in the city, where one can keep meeting the same people or their friends. Powell had a lifelong passion for Paris—born, one imagines, partly out of a sense of having missed out on the exodus of the twenties. It also comes from books, from novels about cities that she read and which influenced her perspective on the city. Interestingly, too, the French owners of the Brevoort and Lafayette had designed the hotel dining rooms to have the look and feel of an old Parisian café, with a room for dominoes, the magazine rack, a flavor of Flaubert. Yet when Powell finally visited Paris for several months—a lifelong dream—she was sorely disappointed. France needed a "good shot of rye" or "An American Legion convention, let's say" to make it merrier. She was afraid to drink in the bistros for fear that she might "smile at the busboy or laugh out loud and get arrested" (Page, Dawn Powell 96).

In thinking about Powell in a café in Paris, I nearly automatically think of another café writer across the ocean—Jean Rhys, a writer who calls to mind Parisian café life of the forties. Rhys's café novels are entirely different from Powell's. They seem to be missing a locale and the specificity of Dawn Powell's urban landscape. V.S. Naipaul writing about Rhys argues that "even in her early stories, of Left Bank life in Paris," Rhys "avoided geographical explicitness" and that "the Jean Rhys heroine of the first four

books is a woman of mystery … appearing to come from no society, having roots in no society, having memories only of places, a woman who has 'lost the way to England' and is adrift in the metropolis." Rhys's cities, Colette Lindroth writes, are full of "hazy ambiguity." They are cities "not-quite-there" (89). They are also novels in which "real people" are not quite there either. It is as if we see others through a continual fog: we blink to discover ourselves in a dark and smoky bar on a beautiful afternoon; we peer at people from over a pernod but catch only a hazy outline.

Powell's café stories, drawing as they do on the provincial plots of nineteenth century Paris, enlarge her map of the city, extend it beyond the café view of Jean Rhys. She does not aim for the lost, amorphous wanderings of a woman out-of-place—the slow ramble—but a city that, like Balzac's or Dickens's, expands beyond the private musing. At the same time, by drawing on the nineteenth century café model, her fiction also shrinks the city down to a manageable size. Manhattan's scale gets reduced: urban movement born of coincidences gives a sense of familiarity not found in Dos Passos's efforts to get the full sweep of the city.

In the end, this vision of a city (crowded but also snug) may also explain the popularity of her novels. Reflecting on the destruction of the Brevoort and Lafayette, Powell imagined that the sort of "casual life" of her café experiences—"the pleasure" that "comes from chance conversations and impromptu meetings with a variety of people, some living such different lives that you've never had a chance to become friends" was probably not one that "would appeal to young people." I think that this is just what does appeal to readers of her novels today. One friend of mine, a journalist, confessed that he is attracted to her work not just because of her humorous eye on New York types—many

types that are still easily recognizable in New York today—but because she writes a range and mix of social scenes that he believes no longer do mix. It is not the tastefulness of Powell on the bookshelf or the gleaming city views on her jacket covers, but rather her sense of social space, the breadth of her enclosure that he misses both in the novels he reads and in the neighborhood bars he goes to in Williamsburg. There, he complains, it is all the same. Where in New York today does Bohemia meet the Upper East Side, habitually, daily? It is this nostalgia for place that has even inspired one person—I met him on the recent march during the Republican convention—to name a bar in Powell's honor; he plans to open it next year on the Lower East Side, and he plans to call it "Dawn."

CHAPTER FOUR

Mary McCarthy and the Return of the Author

Part I: Mrs. Brown and Mr. Breen Ride the Train

In 1924, Virginia Woolf read before the Heretics Club of Cambridge, England, a paper which became the essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown."[22] In it, she rejects the novel of representative social types as a thing of the past, an outmoded form. "On or about December, 1910," goes her now-famous declaration, "human character changed" (386). Arnold Bennett had accused the new experimental Georgian novelists—Woolf and her kind—of having lost the art of writing characters who are "real, true, convincing" (387). Woolf, in this essay, responds with a rebuttal complete with its own accusation. The Edwardian novelists—Bennett, H.G. Wells, Galsworthy and their kind—are not writing her version of the real. Focusing too much on social concerns outside the life of the novel and by relying too heavily on elaborate description of the "fabric of society" to tell their tales, they construct characters who are mere illustrations.

To explain her process of creating characters, Woolf tells of meeting an elderly woman (Mrs. Brown) and a crude-looking businessman (Mr. Smith) on a train from Richmond to Waterloo. Mrs. Brown's character comes to Woolf through a process of "steeping" in the "atmospheric" (388). She contrasts this process with Arnold Bennett's. Faced with this same woman, Bennett would, she imagines, be too absorbed in the

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[22] "Character in Fiction" was originally an essay in *The Criterion*, July 1924; which had evolved from the first "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown." A later version of this essay was subsequently printed as "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" as a Hogarth pamphlet and appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* in two installments 23 and 30 August 1925.

details—"the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth; the way in which the cushions bulged between the buttons; how Mrs. Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten at Whitworth's bazaar"—to really relate to her (388). For Woolf, the train compartment is a novel in which Mr. Bennett pays not nearly enough attention to the interior of a woman facing him but rather fills it up with descriptions of housing tracts, timetables, the social realities pasted to the walls or flashing by on the signboards outside the window.

Mary McCarthy's "Characters in Fiction" (1963) reads as a direct, almost point-to-point response to "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," a look-what-you-did accusation slung some thirty years after the fact. Why, McCarthy wonders, in this modern urban age, when there are "more people than ever before," more "mutations in our national botany," are there "no scientists or latter-day Adams to name them?" (274). And why when looking for names for modern social types, are we driven back to the old names: Pecksniff, Mrs. Gamp, Bazarov, Mrs. Pardiggle, Babbitt? Why, when asked by an interviewer to come up with a book that represented the modern American woman, could she think of only one: Madame Bovary?

The fault, according to McCarthy, lay with the "new experimenters," the writers of sensibility who had driven Mrs. Pardiggle from the railway carriage. "Sensibility, like violent action," McCarthy complains, "annihilates the sense of character" (276). McCarthy had little patience for the fine perceptions of Woolf or Henry James. "There are hardly any people in Virginia Woolf," she writes. "The perambulatory sensibility of Mrs. Dalloway, her quivering film of perception, cannot fix for us Mrs. Dalloway as a person; she remains a palpitant organ" (277). Only Mr. Ramsey in To The Lighthouse stands out, a character who "lacks the fine perceptions of others" (277). For Henry James,

she has a similar distaste: "There is all allusion and murmurous indistinct evocation of objects and vistas, in comparison with which Whistler's 'Nocturne' is a sharp-edged photograph" (Ideas and the Novel 9). In her Northcliffe lectures, given at the University of London in the Sixties, she complained that by acting as if facts and gossip were in bad taste, they had "drained the blood out of the novel" (Ideas and the Novel 11).

Mary Ann Caws in "A Single Truth, but Tell it Sharp" finds McCarthy's distaste for Woolf "off-target." "The irony," Caws points out, "is that Woolf's essays have the same sort of punch as McCarthy's best ones, Woolf's eye and tongue the same painfully sharp powers; but McCarthy doesn't deal with the essays" (144). This is true, and McCarthy also doesn't pay attention to the diaries. In that most private of genres, Woolf is her most publicly satirical, casting a flattening glance at nearly every one she meets at a social gathering.[23] The whole point, though, of McCarthy's theory of the "novel of sensibility," is that this punch is just as necessary (and neglected) in the modern novel. Wyndham Lewis, who once wrote a teasing summary of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," described Virginia Woolf the novelist as "a peeping in the half-light." Of Woolf's fictional landscape, he wrote: "Outside it is terribly dangerous . . . but this dangerousness does, after all, make it very thrilling, when peeped-out at from the security of the private mind" (Men Without Art 331). Mary McCarthy agreed. Unafraid of the outside and passionate about the "empiric element in experience," and believing that punch should not be reserved simply for the critical essay or diary, she will not peep, but look straight on.

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[23] For an example of this, one might look at her description of the very same Mr. Bennett, the social realist. She describes dining with him and records their conversation: Over dinner, Bennett says "[s]oon people will say of me, 'He's dead.' " And Woolf "rashly" responds: " 'Of your books?' 'No, of me'—he replied, attaching, I suppose, a longer life than I do to his books." Bennett is a comic character with all the comic flaws: " 'You have all the clothes you want, I suppose' I said. 'And baths—And beds. And a yacht.' 'Oh yes, my clothes couldn't be better cut' " (3: 335).

Interestingly, this stand-off between Woolf's and McCarthy's approach to writing character—sense against sensibility, unswerving inspection against the sidelong peep, comic characters against deep heroines—corresponds to the different metaphorical uses each writer makes of a particular space: a railway car. "McCarthy is good in trains," observes the critic Mary Ann Caws (138), yet for McCarthy, the train interior locale served a very different purpose in her essays and fiction than it did for Woolf in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Woolf's Mrs. Brown faces us in a private train compartment; she is a stranger in whom we are asked to imagine atmospheric depths. McCarthy, on the other hand, turns to the crowded club car to explore how people look and act in public. The train provided McCarthy with a model for exploring the pleasures of the social type, the epigrammatic glance.

The German critic Siegfried Kracauer has argued that hotel lobbies are ideal spaces for detective novels because of the opportunities for quick and superficial read, the gathering of suspects. In his view, the modern day Mrs. Scarlett and Colonel Mustard are not found in the billiard room but on the hotel elevator or behind a newspaper or a fluted column.[24] In Agatha Christie's Murder On the Orient Express, Hercule Poirot, on viewing the odd assortment of social types in the café car, makes a similar pronouncement about the public railway carriage. Poirot enters the café car, and "exclaims in delight" that "here were not only the perfect conditions of a detective story but everything a writer like Balzac would need to write a great social novel" (12). McCarthy was no writer of detective fiction; she confessed, in an interview with

[24] See Kracauer's essay, "Hotel Life" in Mass Ornament. Also see Marc Katz's "The Hotel Kracauer" for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the role of the hotel lobby in modern culture. Douglas Tallack also considers the American detective novel through an analysis of Kracauer's work from the twenties and thirties.

Elisabeth Neibuhr, that the one time she applied herself to the genre, she "couldn't get the murder to take place," for at "the end of the third chapter," she was "still describing the characters and milieu" (7). Yet, she was, in the Balzacian sense, always looking for suspects, always looking for clues.

McCarthy's 1953 essay, "Artists in Uniform," a commentary on American anti-Semitism, opens with a careful verbal sketch of her companions in a club-car. She describes the man facing her, a retired army colonel. She pins him down, guessing rightly that he is an Irish-Catholic suffering a hangover, who "led, he gave us to think, a bachelor's life of abstemious dissipation and well-rounded sensuality" (56). Unsparing, pitiless even, in her rendering of her coach companion, McCarthy introduces the Colonel through a keen eye for the flaws: his face "as white as Roquefort and of a glistening, cheeselike texture," his shock of "tow-colored hair, badly cut and greasy," and his nose pocked with "large grey pores" (55).

This eye for the distinguishing tic—the pock, the ungainly costume, the often unflattering caricature—would not only continually get McCarthy in trouble with the critics, but was the one quality she claimed, perhaps defensively, was necessary to any good portrayal of the comic character.[25] It was what lead some critics to label her a writer without compassion, and what would lead others to consider her a writer firmly in the satirical tradition. Never entirely comfortable being labeled a satirist[26]—she preferred the

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[25] About Tolstoy, McCarthy's favorite novelist, she wrote: "Thanks to a streak of cruelty or sarcastic sharpness in Tolstoy, most of his heroes and heroines are not spared a satirical glance that picks out their weak points: Vronsky's bald spot, Prince Andrei's small white hands, the heavy step of the Princess Marya," and Pierre's "funny-looking green civilian hat at the Battle of Borodino, like a sign of his irreducible innocent stoutness" ("Characters in Fiction" 289).

[26] In midlife, McCarthy was especially anxious about the satirical label. In her application for a Guggenheim to complete the writing of The Groves of Academe, she stated that "my intention is

title "novelist of sense" —McCarthy did, however, acknowledge that satire came almost too naturally. "[S]omething happens in my writing," she confesses. "I don't mean it to—a sort of distortion, a sort of writing on the bias, seeing things with a sort of swerve and swoop" ("Art of Fiction XXVII" 25). She may begin a novel with an inventory of characters or the intention to record them simply and factually, but it always ends differently: "the description takes on a sort of extravagance—I don't know exactly how it happens. I don't mean it to happen" (Conversations 310). "My unblinking eye," McCarthy confessed was really "astigmatic." While she longed to write like Tolstoy, her observations always tended towards the satirical, what she called the "grotesque," a quality she identified with being a metropolitan novelist.

We get another version of a stranger met in a railway carriage in what is perhaps McCarthy's best-known piece of fiction, "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," originally published in The Partisan Review and included as the second chapter of The Company She Keeps. Once again, the focus is not on the atmospheric world of a Mrs. Brown but "all the details, the realistic touches" of an American businessman, Mr. Breen (123). Here too the fabric of society is writ large and small—and at a satirical slant—even down to the color of that Brooks Brothers shirt. (It is green with a monogram that matches a tie.) Margaret, the protagonist, based on McCarthy herself, even imagines that she is writing a novel constructed on the very principles that Woolf disparaged, an unswerving gaze upon outward things. In talking to Mr. Breen, Margaret feels like "a happy burglar twirling the dial of a well-constructed safe, listening for the locks to click and reveal the combination" (90). The focus, however, is not on the inner

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not satirical. In fact, I am trying to curb an overly satirical and self-recriminating tendency in my work" (Gelderman 167). She says the same thing in another application for a Guggenheim to finish The Group: "The book is not meant to be … a satire" (Gelderman 253).

world—"biography will be taken to the door"—but rather on social history. "They might have been collaborators, drawing up the dossier for a new Babbitt, Margaret thinks:

> And she could see the Brussells carpet in the Philadelphia whorehouse, where he had first had a woman, the old Marmon roadster in which he and Eleanor had made love, and the couch in her father's house where the old man had surprised them, and also the squash court at the club, the aquamarine bathtubs in his house, the barbecue pit, the fraternity brothers, the Audubon prints in his study, the vacuum bottle on the night table. This is what I am, he was saying, the wallpaper in the larger guest room is a blue and white colonial design; I go to bed at ten and Leonie sits up and reads; I like kippers for breakfast; we have Hepplewhite chairs in the sitting room; the doctor is worried about my kidneys, and I feel lonely when I first wake up. (122-23)

The difference in these train readings and renderings of character —Woolf's a slow steeping in the atmospheric, McCarthy's a piling on of details and the satirical swerve and swoop; one a face-off with a Mrs. Brown, the other with a Babbitt—is more than metaphorical; it reflects the material differences in the layout and the design of British and American trains. Wolfgang Schivelbusch's The Railway Journey, a study of the effects of the railway on how people came to experience time and space, includes an analysis of the difference between the layouts of English and American trains. Schivelbusch suggests that not only did national character influence the way trains were structured but that train structures also influenced national character. If the European car invited the atmospheric approach to character, the American one invited a more public survey of a larger room. Modeled on the stage-coach, the European train interior was constructed as a row of small enclosed compartments, with passengers facing one another. Because people in the European car were forced to sit facing one another for long stretches, there was little opportunity to travel within the train. It meant being forced into a prolonged intimacy with strangers, such that one had to resort to the furtive glance. It would be rude to look straight on. The American train car however, was a more public

and mobile affair, modeled not on the European stagecoach but on the American steamboat --a spacious, undivided interior with all passengers facing in one direction. The curve of the American track also demanded much longer cross-country trips, which in turn demanded longer, more public cars.

As Schivelbusch explains, the less compartmentalized American railway model also meant a greater "autonomy of movement," both within the car and between cars: a "traveler is free to go and sit down next to whoever he likes, and also to change places again" (101). Because "the seats had not been arranged to face each other" and "because of the possibilities of general communication and mobility in the American car," the "situation of embarrassed sedentary confrontation" found in the British compartment was, for the American traveler, an "unthinkable" condition. "An American," one French journalist wrote, "would not much care for our way of traveling in a fixed seat, in a cramped carriage, under lock and key; he would sense a lack of air, of suffocation" (102). Europeans, on the other hand, who preferred the "intimate, enclosed space" in which "intercommunication does not take place by movement through but past the compartment," were averse to the "American preference for more public and mobile spaces."[27]

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[27] Some English and French innovators approved of the American model: as one English author wrote in the 1860's, with the American model, "there is no danger of robbery, murder, or other outrage, as in the small, locked and inaccessible compartments of European roads." The original European train didn't even have passageways to connect the compartments: one entered each compartment from a side door directly from the railway platform. This invited crime—for there was nowhere to escape. However, as Schivelbusch points out, there did not "seem sufficient reason to abandon the quiet and immobility of the European train compartment." (102). He includes a report to the House of Commons in which its author explains that "the American arrangement" is "opposed to the social habits of the English, and would interfere so much with the privacy and comfort which they now enjoy, that these considerations, apart from others, nearly as important, would forbid its adoption in this country." (102). The only modification made to the original model was the adding, by the end of the 19th century, of a passageway for safety reasons. It should also be noted that in the European car, there were open carriages—the

For Woolf, the coach interior—as space of the character read—is marked by a lengthening of time, the demands of another's presence for an entire journey, a genteel refusal to probe. For McCarthy, the train provides just the opposite; it is the ideal space for the reading of surfaces. One even sees the difference in the uses McCarthy makes of that obligatory item for the modern train traveler: a book. The growing popularity of book buying and reading, Schivelbusch explains, was a direct result of the railway.[28] Because strangers were forced into this state of prolonged intimacy—an uncomfortable one for the British character—they were forced to look away and look down; or they often turned to reading. McCarthy makes an altogether different use of her book-reading train traveler. In "Artists in Uniform" and "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit," the book is not a thing behind which to hide, but a uniform, a badge, a symbol, a clue in the effort to identify and pin down character. It is also an invitation for further communication. In The Company She Keeps, for example, Margaret Sargent is reading a new avant-garde novel. She does not hide behind the book, but uses it to engage the Brooks Brothers man in conversation. The book is yet another surface, a costume signaling to others "Bohemia." Margaret hopes Mr. Beam will catch sight of its cover, be impressed, and ask her what it (and she) is all about. In the opening scene of "Artists in Uniform" McCarthy, fittingly enough, is reading a Dickens novel—a classic 19th century novel of urban classification, filled with just the kind of comic characters McCarthy

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club cars but also the carriages for third class passengers. Schivelbusch explains many middle and upper class passengers would listen almost enviously to the raucous merriment heard from the open third class carriages.

[28] As Schivelbusch explains, "The emergence of the habit of reading" was partly "a result of the situation inside the train compartment." Prior to the railroads, travelers "formed small groups that, for the duration of the journey, were characterized by intensive conversation and interaction: the travel novels of the period testify to this quite eloquently. The travelers in the train compartment did not know what to do with each other, and reading became a surrogate for the communication that no longer took place" (67-68).

prefers. The novel is there to provide data, a signal that clues her carriage companions and her readers in. The Colonel doesn't interpret the signs accurately, however: he imagines, incorrectly, that McCarthy is reading the least urban and urbane of Dickens' novels: A Christmas Carol. His poor observation skills not only contribute to our picture of the Colonel as bad-reader, but they foreshadow the larger misunderstandings ahead: the Colonel misreads McCarthy as a Jew.

Along with the emphasis on surfaces—jacket cover impressions—The Company She Keeps, as a whole, is characterized by the other quality Schivelbusch identified with the American railway car: mobility of scene. Published in 1942, The Company She Keeps is an overlapping tale of uptown divorce settlements and downtown political disputes, bridge games and sexual escapades. Constructed as a series of episodes, many of them published first as short stories in magazines, the novel introduces a slew of urban types, nearly all of them men: the impecunious and swindling art collector, the downtown pseudo-intellectual, the seducing traveling salesman, and the fatherly psychoanalyst. Margaret is also unmistakably a version—or more aptly, a selection—of the author, a fact McCarthy only acknowledged late in her career.[29] Nobody familiar with The Intellectual Memoirs, however, could have missed it.

The Company She Keeps concerns itself both with the way one experiences a public space and the mobility of its passenger. It is organized, structured, like a train: a series of episodes, carefully crafted little urban boxes strung together to make a unified story. Except for the final chapter set in a therapist's office, each is a public space. One scene is set at a downtown literary magazine; one at an art gallery where the heroine works; one at

[29] Years after the novel was published, McCarthy admitted that the novel was autobiographical, reflecting her own life living and working in Manhattan between 1934 and 1938.

an uptown dinner party. The two chapters, "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" and the "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit," take place on trains heading away from the city, and yet these too are really New York stories, concerned with the presentation of an urban self: the sophisticated New Yorker heading to Reno for a divorce in "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" or the Greenwich Village intellectual flirting with a businessman behind her avant-garde novel in "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt." Both are leaving New York only temporarily. The public world, however, is a not an intersecting one. Far less centered in community than Dawn Powell's New York, Margaret's Manhattan is not a hub, but disparate and disconnected worlds; there is no café, no apartment, no geographic center: just a line-up of public spaces.

Not only is the New York in Company mapped as a series of boxes lined end to end, but its heroine also changes New York scenes (and selves) as easily as one might transfer from seat to seat or car to car. As she shifts from minor to major characters, as she changes costume, Margaret Sargent also gets read as a subject for the detailed dossier—flattened through a similar rendering of "realistic touches" and divided into a number of social types. The six Margarets change from scene to scene. The opening chapter, "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment," is written in the third person and introduces Margaret as an uptown type—a frequenter of cocktail parties now headed to Reno for a divorce. It sketches a woman shrewd both in her actions and in her unabashed analysis of them. In the next chapter, "Rogue's Gallery," written this time in the first person, Margaret is a shadowy minor figure who sheds the uptown divorcee uniform to play ingénue at the office. Secretary to Mr. Sheer, an antiques dealer, she records the rogueries of her boss dodging his creditors around midtown Manhattan. In this chapter, she plays

foil—a voice of sincerity contrasted with Sheer's blustery deceptions. In "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit," we get a more rounded Margaret, who analyzes her various roles—at times "sophisticated lady," at times "Bohemian"—with unsparing attention. In the fourth chapter, "The Genial Host," written now in the second person, Margaret is a "you" passing an awkward evening at the home of one of those inveterate New York party givers who specializes in collecting a Manhattan variety around his dinner table. While others stand for "sports" or "motherhood" or "scholarship," Margaret gets to be "literature and the Fourth International." In the fifth chapter, "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man," Margaret is flattened again—the voice of left-wing consciousness presented as contrast to the main subject, the politically irresolute Jim Driscoll. Finally, in "Ghostly Father I Confess" we see Margaret, vulnerable, frightened and "flat on her back in the psychoanalyst's office," dissecting herself (and her therapist, Dr. James) with scrutinizing honesty.

This flattening of self, however, leads to a set of interesting contradictions, which shed light both on the novel and on the problems of a woman in public spaces—not only highlighting the delights (and difficulties) of a woman's urban experience, but also illuminating the division in McCarthy's own experience of herself as an author: she is autobiographer, on the one hand, and critic, on the other. Most significantly, the relationship of Mary to Margaret leads to an interesting paradox: the transformation of a comic character into just what McCarthy tried so hard to resist, the depths of the conventional heroine. For McCarthy, the novel of public selves and public scenes—the Pullman plot—led ultimately to its own kind of interiority: not Virginia Woolf in a train

compartment faced with the atmospheric depths of Mrs. Brown, but Mary McCarthy face to face with herself.

Part II: Cameras and Mountaintops: The Female Flaneur and the Banished Heroine

Only a few years before Company's publication, Christopher Isherwood had written The Last of Mr. Norris (1935) and Goodbye to Berlin (1939), later published together as Berlin Stories in 1963. Structurally, Company is similar to Berlin Stories. Isherwood had originally planned on writing one "huge, tightly constructed melodramatic novel, in the manner of Balzac" but concluded that there was no way to "plausibly contain the mob of characters" he wanted to introduce (v). His experience in Berlin was too enormous; it needed shaping, and so he shaped his urban experience as a sequence of almost discrete episodes: Mr. Norris's apartment, but also public interiors, cabaret scenes, and often train compartments. The Last of Mr. Norris was originally titled Mr. Norris Changes Trains.[30]

What is so markedly different in these two novels, though, is point of view, narrative distance. Isherwood asserts in his preface that now-famous phrase: I am a camera. Although the first-person narrator is present throughout, he is invisible, rarely presenting himself as a recorder, rarely turning the camera back on himself. Like Isherwood, McCarthy, in her original forward, introduces the metaphor of the camera, explaining that "each episode is shot from a different angle, in a different light...the author shifts the point of view, as the photographer moves his camera." Because the episodes are written

[30] Isherwood remembers that when the first section of Berlin Stories was published in England in 1935, it "bore its correct name: Mr. Norris Changes Trains, but the American publisher, William Morrow, found this obscure," so he "changed it to The Last of Mr. Norris, a title which should be followed by a very faint question mark" (Berlin Stories vi).

from different points of view—some in the first person, others in second and third—the subject "appears to change, as the author views her from far or near." In the original forward of her novel, McCarthy asks if "the intimate 'she,' the affectionate, diminutive 'you,' the thin, abstract, autobiographical 'I' " can all "be the same person?" (Hewitt 96).

While Isherwood's narrator remains the perpetual faceless observer, almost every instance of Margaret Sargent's looking out coincides with a self-conscious reflection on how she appears to others. Reading Company is to observe a contortion act on the part of the narrator: she relentlessly scrutinizes others, and at the same time, details her presentation of self and the underlying motives behind her presentation. She plays different selves depending on the company she keeps. Instead of reading the novel as if behind a camera, we read as if it is reflected in a mirror: a woman looks out the train window to observe the landscape passing by, but at the same time, sees reflected in the glass, her own face and behind that, the face of a man watching her. She repositions herself; she looks around her, looks at how she is being looked at, and looks to discern her motives for looking. "It therefore becomes important—for the subject who is interested in his status," Margaret reflects, "to examine the data of his life with the utmost severity and cunning, turning the facts every which way, sidewards, upside down, as one turned those old newspaper puzzles to find the face in the cloud" (274).

"If the reader is looking for a fixed and knowable self," McCarthy explains in her original forward, "she will get nowhere." The search for Margaret "is not conclusive: there is no deciding which of these personalities is the 'real' one; the home address of the self, like that of the soul, is not to be found in the Book" (Hewitt 96). Even the novel's title, derived from a scene between Isabel Archer and Madame Merle in Henry James's

Portrait of a Lady, points to the theme of self-costuming and the homeless self. Madame Merle tells Isabel:

> When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for things! One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive.

To which Isabel retorts: "I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me." (175).

The novel, then, seems to locate Margaret somewhere between Madame Merle's impressions and Isabel Archer's: at times Margaret is all shell, furniture, envelope; at times, as in the closing chapter, she is simply a "homeless self," in which "nothing expresses" her. She just is—a "woman well at ease." The emphasis on the shells, on the one hand, and the "discursive and discontinuous self," on the other, leads John Crowley to view the novel as part realistic novel, part a prefiguring of the post-modern experiment (112). Yet, for Christopher Isherwood, McCarthy's claims for a homeless self seemed less an innovative precursor of discursive and discontinuous things to come but a pretentious assertion of what everybody should know by now—selves come in envelopes. This was his point in his review of the novel. While he liked some aspects of the novel, he was dismissive of "the publisher's somewhat pretentious synopsis"—McCarthy wrote it herself—and "Miss McCarthy's amusing Forward." He faulted both for the emphasis on the multi-faceted self, a claim he regarded as both "misleading and anyhow

superficial." He ridiculed the flap copy's interpretation of the final chapter, "Ghostly Reader I Confess," the scene in which the homeless subjectivity of its heroine seems to come home: a divided self resolved on a therapist's couch. "Here, for the first time, we see the girl plain and whole," reads the jacket copy. "Psychologically she has come to a dead end and can only act and reenact the childhood drama of estrangement that has ... turned her into a human chameleon who can only know herself vicariously, through those whose company she keeps" ("Her Name is Legion" 43).

Isherwood would have none of it: "there is nothing special, or inviting to pity or terror about Margaret's case," wrote Isherwood; "we are all 'human chameleons,' every one of us," and the search for the "ordinary indispensable self" is as "futile as the 'search' for one's own reflections in the mirror" (43). Isherwood's criticism suggests that in making these claims in the prologue, McCarthy makes the young novelist's (and young person's) greatest mistake: she assumes she is special when in fact, she is merely voicing a universal human problem. Any good Buddhist—which in fact Isherwood would become—and in fact, "any relatively intelligent human," should know that no "plain and whole" self ever completely comes home.

Yet, one could also argue that McCarthy is not exploring a universal human condition so much as she is exploring a particular New York condition: the compartmentalization of social worlds and social selves that city living demands and permits. Margaret's role-playing highlights that particular facet of New York life that so often draws people to the city—changing a self simply by changing locales. In fact, if most early readers of Company identify mainly with Margaret's sexual coming of age, I have always found myself identifying more with Margaret's divided city. I like the novel

for the same reason I never have parties. I fear mixing my social worlds and hesitate introducing my Upper East Side lawyer friends to the downtown poets, the elderly secretary to the war resister's league to the Belgian painter, not just because I worry over what they will think of one another but also because I fear the strain of consistent self-presentation that such a mix might demand. The Company She Keeps gets that right—the pleasure of dropping off one self at a cocktail party and picking up another on one's way to the bar downtown; the pleasure of changing seats and changing cars.

On the one hand, then, McCarthy's homeless heroine in her series of public boxes illustrates that urban opportunity for self-transformation and anonymity. Yet she also suggests the difficulties inherent in being a woman—and particularly a woman out and about in the urban scene. Contortional twists in self-presentation are, for example, what John Berger regards as one of the difficulties women have long had to face. "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at."[31] For women on the street or in the public train or the public room, the experience is only exacerbated. Borrowing from the theories of Laura Mulvey, critics like Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock argue that women in the 19th century and even in the early 20th century could not experience city life as flaneur—the free-floating urban observer, the aimless wanderer, the Baudelerian man-of-the-crowd, the roaming botanizer of the asphalt.[32] To be a flaneur, one must be able to

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[31] The passage continues: "A woman must continually watch herself...Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping...One might simplify this by saying men act and women appear" (Berger 78).

[32] Janet Wolff argues for women's lack of freedom to walk and gaze in public spaces, stating that "there is no question of inventing the flaneuse: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century," (32) and Griselda Pollock agrees that "there is no female equivalent of the quintessential masculine figure, the flaneur: there is not and could not be a female flaneuse" in the 19th century (98).

remain invisible, free to observe. Flanerie works by never reminding us of that eye or the writerly I. Because women were forever at risk of being looked at, because the woman on the city street (or the public room or car) is so often under surveillance, she cannot freely survey. She cannot get behind the camera. For many feminist critics of modernism, the 'flaneur' —a term used by literary critics today to refer both to a historical figure and as critical metaphor for a whole range of modernist practice—is another way of saying bird's eye view—scopic authority and detachment.

One way to read the discourse on the female flaneur—the shifts in her self-presentation—is to look at it as a paradigm for McCarthy's urban experience downtown, a paradigm for her relationship to other critics within the Partisan Review crowd. Almost from the beginning, her New York experience was characterized by a very small circle of other writers, mostly men, who read and watched her. (The Intellectual Memoirs also describe a rather incestuous scene: a continual bed-hopping from Philip Rahv, editor of the Partisan Review, to Edmund Wilson, a man she would marry.) All eyes were on her. Frances Kiernan's biography of McCarthy describes an "enfant terrible" among a mostly-male circle, a writer whose beauty seemed to attract nearly everyone who published in the intellectual journals of the day. One friend remembers her as a prima donna of the New York scene—"due homage was paid to her, by the Partisan Review crowd, the Peggy Guggenheim circle, the French surrealist refugees. I can still see her reclining on a chaise longue" (Seeing Mary Plain 216). Reading the biography, one is struck by the number of her male contemporaries who remember McCarthy's book jacket photo for Company—a glamorous shot of a woman who looked like a movie star. Here was titillation: smart *and* beautiful.

If McCarthy was constantly the object of the gaze—all eyes really were on her—she was also under the critical surveillance of this mostly male social circle, and this too is replicated in The Company She Keeps. Margaret is an assiduous critic, a brilliant social analyst, a keen observer of social inventory who moves from scene to scene throughout the city. Yet, her experience of the city demands a certain flexibility of perspective—shifts in self-presentation born of the problem of having to both observe and be observed. In Margaret—and in fact in many of McCarthy's heroines—there is always the internalized critic: the boy across the room seems to be perpetually in the woman's head. In The Lost Week, an early unpublished novella, Mary McCarthy describes her novelist heroine, Frani Farrar, as one who "practiced self-criticism with such openness and assiduity that she had a monopoly in the field and left no avenue open for the assault of her competitors" (Kiernan 131). This passage reflects, in a way, McCarthy's satirical position: she leaves no avenue open for the assault of the Normans—Podhoretz or Mailer. The Company She Keeps—like much of her autobiographical work—reads like a preemptive strike. I see you, I see myself; thus you can't get me.

Christopher Isherwood's criticism of McCarthy and his claims for his own behind-the-camera objectivity seem to rather neatly fit the binary of male flanerie vs. female flanerie—men watching others; women watching others and themselves. Preferring the camera without the dimming of the scene that comes when a hand or shadow get in the way, Isherwood claims for himself the privileged position of objective observer, the outsider, the man on the omnibus watching the goings-on below; he assesses and observes with no self-conscious interruptions. Margaret, however, hindered by her own

awareness of being looked at, cannot get behind that camera, cannot freely describe what she sees because she is so busy wondering how she is being perceived by others.

Yet Isherwood's claim for invisibility (and objectivity) is partly belied by his dependence on first person narration. Instead of placing himself in the background, the combination of declared invisibility and the assertion of "I" often situates him in the foreground instead. Reading Berlin Stories, one always has, I believe, a sensation of a shadow just at the edge of the camera frame, self-revelation caught in the smudge of a finger nearly but never revealing itself. We read the city and are drawn forward partly out of a desire to see Christopher step forward; we want him to come out of hiding. In fact, for some critics, the proclamation of objectivity seems suspicious; it suggests not so much the freedom of male flanerie, but Isherwood's quandary over revealing himself as a homosexual. He hides and at the same time angles to be seen. He hides and at the same time wants to come out.

Isherwood's behind-the-camera assertions also reek of high-modernist bravado—ethnographic observation at its most old-fashioned. If Isherwood faults McCarthy for her naïve response to the problems of subjectivity, one could just as easily fault Isherwood for his naïve claims for an objective outsider position. One might argue, for example, that Buck-Moers and Wolff's argument—the female flaneuse is unable to position herself behind the camera—is ultimately beside the point. Who wants scopic authority or bird's-eye views or behind-the-camera objectivity anyway? Who wants—or believes in—this kind of positioning anymore? In her costuming of selves and in her contortional revelations, was McCarthy naïve or was she somehow ahead of her time: the critic who recognizes, as so many cultural anthropologists and literary critics do so

readily today, that one cannot start describing and cataloguing others without acknowledgement of one's own position within the frame?

McCarthy makes this point herself quite directly both in "Artists In Uniform" and in her essay "Settling the Colonel's Hash." The central idea in "Artists in Uniform" is that in believing that one can observe and flatten others, one must be prepared to be observed and flattened oneself. As McCarthy sits before the Colonel, cataloguing and pinning him down as blusterer and a bigot, she suddenly realizes that the Colonel is also typing and labeling her: she is a Bohemian and thus, the Colonel concludes, she is a Jew. McCarthy realizes that everyone is wearing a costume that signals clues to identity—including herself. She remembers:

> I was wearing a bright apple-green raw silk blouse and a dark-green rather full raw silk skirt, plus a pair of pink glass earrings; my hair was done up in a bun. It came to me, for the first time, with a sort of dawning horror, that I had begun, in the course of years without ever guessing it, to look irrevocably Bohemian. Refracted from the three men's eyes was a strange vision of myself as an artist, through and through, strained with my occupation like a dyer's hand . . . . My costume, it seemed, carefully assembled as it had been at an expensive shop, was to these observers simply a uniform that blazoned a caste and allegiance just as plainly as the colonel's khaki and eagles (57).

In this passage, McCarthy makes clear that she cannot escape from the survey of surfaces anymore than her coach companions. Once again, too, McCarthy contorts: she watches others and "refracted through men's eyes," watches others watching her. This passage also illustrates what Elizabeth Hardwick called McCarthy's greatest gift—her "scrupulosity." There is always that unflinching gaze back upon herself, the refusal to look away.

Concerned that readers of "Artists in Uniform" didn't properly understand her underlying message, McCarthy wrote "Settling the Colonel's Hash" to set them straight. In this essay, she explains that the experience with the Colonel in the club car had taught

her an important lesson: the impossibility of staying out of the picture. She admits that when facing the Colonel she wanted to "be regarded as ordinary or rather as universal, to be anybody and therefore everybody… to be the voice of pure reason." Yet, "pride went before a fall." Somehow she and the colonel found themselves "on the same plane—facing each other, like mutually repellent twins." From this, she concludes:

> [I]t is dangerous to be drawn into discussions of the Jews with anti-semites; you delude yourself that you are spreading light but you are really sinking into the muck; if you endeavor to be dispassionate, you are really claiming for yourself a privileged position, a little mountain top, from which you look down, impartially, on both the Jews and the colonel. (239)

This acknowledgement of the problem of a mountaintop view—and the impossibility of ever being "the voice of pure reason"—suggests an enlightened view of the critical position. It also reflects McCarthy's central autobiographical philosophy. By writing "Artists in Uniform," McCarthy explains, "I wanted to embarrass myself and perhaps the reader too" (239). She fixed her eye as sharply on her own behavior as on the behavior of her friends and enemies. To read Margaret's cunning contortions in self-presentation is to read McCarthy-on-McCarthy in nearly all the autobiographies. Invariably, too, it was her scrupulous observation of self that softened her harshest critics. However disapproving her detractors—McCarthy's sharp edges unnerved nearly every critic who wrote about her—most were forced to admit that McCarthy was as hard on herself as she was on everybody else.

Yet, the refusal to get up on that mountaintop or get behind the camera is strangely paradoxical. She may have acknowledged the problem of the mountaintop view, yet it is towards its summit—that critical and satirical vantage point—her fiction increasingly heads. She actually wanted to be the Balzacian flaneur; she wanted to be Isherwood behind the camera; she wanted good old-fashioned objectivity. Her essays and later

interviews all proclaim a desire to arrive at a place where she is no longer troubled by the need to acknowledge her own position within the frame. Those qualities essential to a novel of sense—just the facts, the vantage point from outside, a free-floating objectivity, the sharp edges of reality—were curtailed by the problem of Mary-as-flaneur, Mary-as-heroine.

Isherwood's complaints about the novel, in fact, actually correspond with McCarthy's own attitudes about the novel later in life. The Forward and jacket copy, Isherwood protested, place too much emphasis on Margaret. From reading both, one comes away convinced that she is the novel's primary focus. Yet, as he sees it, Margaret is far less interesting than all the other characters; she is but "a stooge for feats of really dazzling social analysis or as second fiddle" to the other characters; she "does not appear as a series of striking contrasts and apparent contradictions," but comes off instead as "a colorless …minor figure." What "is best about the novel" are "those characters: Mr. Sheer and Mr. Breen and Pfaumen and Jim Barnett and Dr. James" ("Her Name is Legion" 43).

The Forward's emphasis on Margaret over the other characters also replicates generally the critical reception of the novel (Isherwood excepting), most of whom pay scant attention to Sheer and Breen and Barnett—or McCarthy's gift for rendering them—and instead concern themselves mainly with the two chapters in which Margaret is a more highly developed character—either "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit" (Margaret aware of her self-fashioning), or "Ghostly Father I Confess," (Margaret "flat on her back in the psychoanalyst's office" in search of the self "plain and whole"). Their focus is identification, either with Margaret's sexual awakening (the one-night-stand; the

walk of shame down the train corridor afterwards; the revelation of the embarrassing secrets)[33] or with Margaret-as-Mary.

McCarthy, later in life, seemed embarrassed by the self-as-heroine. However much she continued to be interested in the problems of autobiography—she was perpetually working things out in the confessional—she also seemed to regard the autobiographical impulse as a hindrance. Not only did she resent the uneven critical emphasis—more interest in identifying Mary-behind-Margaret than in the skill at facts, surfaces, and New York types—but she also finally agreed with Isherwood that in Company, Margaret gets in the way. (She would excise both the Forward and the jacket copy in later editions.) If Margaret's contortions hindered Isherwood's pleasure in the secondary characters, they also hindered McCarthy's uninhibited writing of them.

Ultimately, McCarthy also regarded Company as too much a novel of sensibility—she called it her one effort at doing Henry James—and Margaret too much the traditional heroine. In a Partisan Review interview with Elisabeth Neibuhr, she complains that in The Company She Keeps:

> there's always that heroine. I know. I would dearly love to get rid of her, to scrap her. She's always thinking about herself, and doubting herself, she's partly observing and partly doubting herself and this is rather the conventional heroine of the woman novelist. Women novelists incarnate the principle of doubt in this

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[33] The most common reaction from women readers to The Company She Keeps has been identification with the notorious seduction scene in Mr. Breen's compartment. Nancy K. Miller notes the reader-response to "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt" and includes an array of contemporary responses. Kate Millett remembers that "there's a passage in Mary McCarthy where the heroine so-called does the sublimely stupid thing of getting drunk on a train and spends the night in a berth fucking some character she's picked up. It's the sort of harebrained thing we've all done and hated ourselves for afterwards. But she had the guts to admit it." Elizabeth Hardwick opens an essay on the story with a quotation from a reader: "Mary McCarthy! 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt!' That's my Bible! I once heard a young woman exclaim." And from Vivian Gornick who recalls "Oh God! We moaned over 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,' that is just the way it is." See Miller's "Women's Secrets and the Novel: Remembering Mary McCarthy's The Group" (175).

> kind of heroine, and I'm sick of her. She doesn't exist in the book I'm working on now (The Group) .... I've banished her. (67)

Out of her urban predicament—a continual shifting between self analysis and analysis of others, a woman "partly observing and partly doubting herself"—McCarthy finds herself back in the place she had so long tried to escape: the depths of a traditional heroine. Instead of the reflecting woman alone in her railway carriage, then, we get the conventional heroine in the guise of a female flaneur, seated in a public compartment face to face with herself or faced with a sea of male eyes watching as she walks down the aisle. Margaret's costuming, her perpetual reconstruction of urban selves, her hyper-vigilance about how she is being watched and regarded also leads paradoxically to the conversion of a comic character (a flattened self) into just what McCarthy in her essays disavows: the doubting heroine.

The shifts between social analysis and self-questioning seem to be a flattening of character, but actually round her out. Margaret is much like a patient too quick for her therapist, and in this, she exposes her vulnerability. So much self-protection and self-exposure don't distance the readers, but suggest depths hidden away. The reader, like the therapist, often finds the predilection for unflagging self-analysis less a sign of control than a symptom worthy of sympathy. Identification occurs less with Margaret (or Mary) in her Bohemian costume reflected in the glass; identification takes place more in the act of contortion. We find ourselves relating to the twist of the neck.

Margaret's vulnerability—born of McCarthy's autobiographical honesty—is a quality the critic Morris Dickstein notes about the novel as well. As he sees it, her autobiographies and her most autobiographical novel, The Company She Keeps, are better than The Group or The Groves of Academe because in Company, McCarthy is an

"unformed character in search of a self, wrestling with the knaves and naifs who are not really her equal. Yet she is also troubled, put upon, ambivalent" ("A Glint of Malice" 22). The "protagonist's sense of vulnerability—the woman with her guard down"—he argues is what is missing from what her more satirical writing, "where a more self-assured, more destructive, though also more witty side of her personality comes into play" ("Mary McCarthy at 90" 36). Furthermore, he argues, in order to create a rounded heroine, McCarthy "needs the autobiographical protagonist"; she "needed her personal history to furnish her with a character she would never fully understand, and with a ready-made story that would intrigue and challenge her" ("A Glint of Malice" 22). It seems McCarthy suffered that other fault common to young novelists (and one, he suggests, she never got rid of): she couldn't empathize with anyone but herself. To write a heroine, McCarthy needs a "character to whom she cannot feel superior, someone who can sustain not only her wit and cleverness but her weakness and sense of vulnerability, her second thoughts, her misgivings, mistakes. And she herself was the only candidate" ("A Glint of Malice" 20). In the novel itself, there is some acknowledgement of this failing. Margaret confesses that she "doubted whether she could have ever become an actress, acknowledging that she found it more amusing and more gratifying to play herself than to interpret any character conceived by a dramatist .... It was her own many-faceted nature that she put on exhibit" ("A Glint of Malice" 6).

Dickstein also argues that Company is the only McCarthy novel in which there is real movement, real narrative development. Again, McCarthy seemed to agree: in writing the progress of the homeless heroine, she felt she had ended up with a traditional model of interior development.

On first read, however, Company seems to give us another model of flatness leading to movement. McCarthy's city desire plot, however, is not the setting up of episodes through the desire for a new husband (as in Wharton) or an irresolvable love triangle (as in Powell) but through the impossible effort to find a fixed self. Yet, the movement of this novel is nothing like either the plots of The Manhattan Cycle or the plot of The Custom of the Country; in Company we begin with a series of episodic public scenes but then find ourselves circling towards a conclusive center. The narrative's episodes line up and then curl inward, like the unpeeling of an onion—Isherwood's metaphor for the problem of locating a fixed self. We circumvent a core, but move towards resolution. If Berlin Stories asks us to read for the self to come out behind the camera, with McCarthy, we read to see the observer and observed selves conjoin. We read to glimpse our public heroine in private—not simply alone in a room, but alone in herself: Margaret "plain and whole." However much McCarthy, in the forward, protests that no such self can be found, the novel moves towards this kind of resolution. It ends on the therapist's couch; it ends with Freud, the modern-day founding father of the inward search.

McCarthy was no admirer of Freud; in fact, she seemed to blame him, as much as his literary devotees to subjectivity, for the demise of the novel.[34] The therapeutic session at

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[34] Freudianism McCarthy dismissed as "an absurd set of myths" (Gelderman 80). In a 1979 interview with her brother Kevin who asks if she felt that she had been "compensating" for early childhood wounds in becoming a writer, she replied that "that sort of psychiatric stuff doesn't compel my belief. Its tendency is take any mystery out of our experience, and to imply one has a kind of knowledge one doesn't have."(Kiernan 43). Nevertheless, McCarthy could not escape from the influence of Freud and was often identified with the pyschiatrist's couch. In an interview, Edwin Newman says to McCarthy that "people have often spoken of your having left the confessional booth for the psychiatrist's couch." McCarthy responds that she doesn't think the remark has "any bearing at all. It figures in one short story at a point when I was going to a psychoanalyst but I don't believe in psychoanalysis. In fact, I regard it as a fraud, especially as practiced." Nevertheless, she admits, "I do have some confessional impulse, and a lot of my work does come out of this confessional impulse, and it may have to do with my Catholic training" (80).

the close of the novel, as Katie Roiphe points out, is less a "baring of subconscious feelings" as it is "witty sparring" with Dr. James (131), and an opportunity for Margaret/Mary to satirize both the psychoanalytic process and the doctor facing her.[35] We get another Pullman car rendering of flat surfaces. Nevertheless, as Roiphe points out, McCarthy does not "choose, as she could have, to strip her text of Freudian underpinnings and flashes of childhood memories" (130-131). We end by going in.

At the end of her career, McCarthy herself regarded the novel as too much about the Freudian problem, too much about the "fragmented unplaceability of the human personality," claiming that she was no longer "interested in the quest for a self."

> I was very young then. Oh, I suppose everyone continues to be interested in the quest for the self, but what you feel when you're older is that you really must make the self. It's absolutely useless to look for it, you won't find it, but it's possible in some sense to make it. (Conversations 24)

Yet, she was not interested in writing this novel of self-making either:

> I've never thought of writing a developmental novel in which a self of some kind is discovered or is made, is forged, as they say. No. I suppose in a sense I don't know any more today than I did in 1941 about what my identity is. But I've stopped looking for it. I must say, I believe much more in truth now than I did. I do believe in the solidity of truth much more. Yes, I believe there is a truth, and that it's knowable. (Conversations 28-29)

It is towards the solidity of truth (and the dispassionate mountaintop view) that McCarthy sets her aim in writing her other New York novel, The Group.

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[35] Margaret "would spend half a session trying to show him, say, that a man they both knew was a ridiculous character, that a movie they had both seen was cheap. And it would be hopeless, absolutely hopeless, for he *was* that man, he *was* that movie, he was the outing cabin, the Popular Front, the League of American Writers, The Nation, The Liberal, The New Republic ... Colonial wallpaper, money in the bank and two cocktails (or was it one?) before dinner" (The Company She Keeps 250-251).

Part III: From Courtyard to Venetian Canal

Mary McCarthy, like Dawn Powell, was a Midwestern orphan who made a home for herself in Greenwich Village in the thirties, arriving in New York in 1933, not as the young single woman in search of a typist's desk but a married woman in search of a decent-sized apartment on the Upper East Side. Her route was not a direct one either: she came via Vassar, arriving at Grand Central Station assured of a welcome from familiar school friends—Elizabeth Bishop was one of them—and with the knowledge that others, like Edna St.Vincent Millay, a graduate of the class of 1917, had made the Vassar-to-Village journey before her. (Millay had the distinction of preceding McCarthy in other ways: she was Edmund Wilson's lover long before McCarthy would be his wife.) McCarthy's years in 1930's New York were divided, really, between these two worlds: Greenwich Village bohemia and the uptown world of Vassar-educated newly-marrieds. Her account of the period—written in Intellectual Memoirs: 1936-1938—tells the combined story of Upper East Side apartments, decorated and described by her in meticulous detail, and the political and sexual adventures with the Partisan Review crowd downtown.

The Group, published in 1963, nearly twenty years after Company, takes place in 1930's New York City, but focuses mainly on the Vassar world. In this novel, there is also an episodic structure and a foray into autobiography. This time, however, McCarthy does not plunder her personal history but rather the exploits of her old college classmates at Vassar. The concern of the novel is not how women and men relate in the public spaces of the cities but how women relate to one another, mainly in the private spaces of their apartments.

In The Group, McCarthy follows the strictures she laid out in her best-known essay, "Fact in Fiction" and its companion piece "Characters in Fiction," asking us to remember that good novels from Balzac through Tolstoy are filled with the "fetishism of fact," ("Fact in Fiction" 67), and that a good realistic novel often privileges the minor comic characters over the major ones. "Contrary to accepted belief," McCarthy claims, a comic character "is likely to be more complicated and enigmatic than a hero or a heroine, fuller of surprises and turnabouts; Mr. Micawber, for instance can find the most unexpected ways of being himself" ("Characters" 56). The Group mainly upholds the aims set out in the essays, highlighting the social surfaces of the minor characters, privileging the mapping of the public scene over the depths of the heroine's consciousness, and relinquishing the misty terrain of sensibility, the "quivering film of perception" for the "reassurance," the "guarantee of credibility," found in "fact in fiction, dates, and times and distances" ("Fact in Fiction" 123).

In this novel, too, McCarthy succeeds in eliminating all traces of a traditional heroine—the eight women who comprise the group come closer to comic types than developed characters. McCarthy's move—away from heroine (Company) to the stuff and slang of eight minor characters (The Group)—seems to replicate the move Edith Wharton had made many years before. Inhibited by the demands of writing herself-as-character in The Reef, Wharton found herself liberated by the opportunities found in satirizing the stuff and slang of the urban scene. By relinquishing the autobiographical heroine distracting her (and the reader) from the pleasures of writing Mr. Breen, McCarthy, it seems, struggles to do the same. This time, there will just be Polly and Helen, Libby and Priss, the birth control clinics and pessaries, the conversations overheard.

Yet, paradoxically, in escaping from the writing of self, McCarthy finds herself at a new impasse, backed into yet another corner. (She was, she once admitted, "always painting herself into one.") With the eradication of heroine came another kind of constriction. McCarthy acknowledged that she could never get the women in The Group to *do anything*, to leave the enclosures of their apartments uptown and move around town. In depicting Kay, Pokey, Helena, Dottie, Lakie, Polly, Libbie, and Priss, McCarthy does not write an Undine Spragg who moves us forward, but rather static figures, Vassar-educated versions of Dorothy Parker's big blondes who remain stationary beneath the lowered microscope. If Company was too much psychological inside, The Group was too much a portrayal of women stuck inside.

The novel opens with description of urban delights and of the women out and about, moving around New York:

> They were in the throes of discovering New York, imagine it, when some of them had actually lived here all their lives, in tiresome Georgian houses full of waste space in the Eighties or Park Avenue apartment buildings, and they delighted in such out-of-the-way corners as this, with its greenery and Quaker meeting-house in red brick, polished brass, and white trim next to the wine-purple Episcopal church—on Sundays, they walked with their beaux across Brooklyn Bridge and poked into the sleepy Heights section of Brooklyn; they explored residential Murray Hill and quaint MacDougal Alley and Patchin place and Washington Mews with all the artists' studios; they loved the Plaza Hotel and the fountain there and the green mansarding of the Savoy Plaza and the row of horse-drawn hacks and elderly coachmen, waiting, as in a French place, to tempt them to a twilight ride through Central Park. (8)

The description, however, does not celebrate the city so much as it mocks the predictability of the middle class college girls' first-year-in-the-city route—quaint MacDougal Alley and carriage rides through Central Park. Furthermore, although constructed as a highly episodic parade of shifting scenes—now in Polly's apartment, now at the gynecologist's office, now at a cocktail party at Kitty's—the novel provides

very little feeling of urban movement. The initial foray around the city goes nowhere. We are not on a walk, not in a taxi-cab, not even moving between compartments of a train. Rather, the impression is of voyeuristic standstill: we watch as the inhabitants of an apartment (or office) draw open the curtains, switch on the lamp to reveal a room in perfect detail. Instead of traffic out across the city, walls fall away to expose their private interiors. It is the effect of a dollhouse creaking open at the center to reveal all the rooms—over there Polly washes her nylons, over there, Kitty reclines on the gynecologist's couch. The walls come down, and so too do the closet doors, the kitchen cabinet. We are invited to forage the secret contents of the medicine cabinet. Surfaces are stripped bare to reveal more and more surface clues.

As an image, the cross-section New York building appeals to me. It is why I like "Rear Window" and Romare Bearden's painting, "The Block," and why I love Georges Perec's Life: A User's Manual, a novel whose scheme is based on a walls-off-their-hinges scrutiny of a typical Parisian apartment house. (The entire action takes place, one chapter to a room, and in each room, all the furnishings, all the fittings are described in scrupulous detail. Systematic and at the same time whimsical, the novel contains 99 chapters, 100 rooms.)

To compare Perec's Life, an inventive, postmodern encyclopedia of Parisian life, with The Group is something of a stretch. (The association would probably have offended both writers.) Yet, the two novelists do share a compulsion for the catalogue, for the ordering of things, and for the surfaces of daily life. The Group topples in soup cans, thirties verisimilitude, just the chair, just the hat, just the thing. One character lives in an apartment where "every item seemed to be saying something, asserting something,

pontificating … down to the last can of evaporated milk and the single, monastic pillow on the double bed" (167). This is true of the novel as a whole: things assert themselves. In this sense, though providing little in the way of traffic or street, the novel does exhibit great observational range. It vaguely reminds me of some of the apartment house sections in William Dean Howells's 19th century New York novel, A Hazard of New Fortune. There is a scene in which the protagonist, Mr. March, describes the "gimcrackery" (the Victorian fans, the Persian rugs, the little China dogs) shoved into one woman's New York apartment. The urban and domestic gimcrackery of New York at mid-century is what The Group is all about, a record, as Hortense Calisher once put it, of an "age disinterred in its artifacts of advert living and advert meditation—by a memory as careful with that dust as an archeologist" (Herself 379).

Unlike A Hazard of New Fortunes—which sweeps the city from top to bottom, from El train to the fire escapes of the Lower East Side—The Group provides almost no real city mix. We get clutter—and a devastating critique of commercialism of America—but we don't get crowd. The beauty, too, of both Perec's Life and Bearden's "The Block" is the permeability of apartment and street: interiors are forever spilling out, streets beckoning. Not only is there no street, but all the rooms, scenes, characters begin to look the same.

The view offered up in The Group reminds me not of an apartment complex seen from the street, but of rather one of those interior pre-war buildings constructed around a courtyard. I spent a recent evening with a friend who lived in one of these courtyard apartment buildings in Manhattan—Chelsea Gardens on 23rd Street. We sat on the fire-escape, looking across the garden at rows of lit-up apartments, each one inhabited, it

appeared to me, by a single man or a gay couple preparing their dinners at the kitchen window. From my friend's window (we ordered in), there was nowhere else to look, nothing but flowers in the courtyard and the rows of windows on all sides. My friend knew intimate details of nearly every window, every inhabitant. Yet, it was a voyeuristic experience on 23rd Street quite different from say James Schuyler's view thirty years before. From his window down at the Chelsea Hotel, Schuyler loved to watch the street and across it, watch the boys at the YMCA. His view gave up a multitude of scenes; it opened up. Here there was no street: just a wall of windows, As far as I could tell, the window views were nearly all replicas: slight variations in the arrangement of furniture or the shade of paint. The Group offers up a similarly enclosed (and homogenous) urban view; this time, though, the apartment dwellers aren't gay Chelsea professionals but mid-century housewives living on the Upper East Side.

McCarthy's containment of her female characters within this rather claustrophobic interior—courtyards, rooms crammed with the social gimcrackery—seems on one level, a an extension of Morris Dickstein's earlier point. If as Dickstein posits, McCarthy is the only one who ever gets to be heroine, one could also say that she is the only woman who seems to get to move around the city. In Company, Margaret rides the train, travels between compartments; in The Group, women live tucked away. McCarthy writes herself out in the public world, but seems unable (or unwilling) to write other women doing the same. Yet, more obviously, The Group with its simultaneously exposed and claustrophobic feel—walls fall away; walls on all sides come closing in—as a response to the realities of many women's post-war New York. Although the novel opens in the thirties, it follows the group through to the sixties. Its aim seems very much the

exploration of a fifties sensibility: commerce, domesticity, suburbia. In its structure (as well as its themes), we get the story of women closed in, cocktail parties with a courtyard view: suburbia on the Upper East Side.

Along with this sense of containment and stasis, the novel is also marked by an almost deafening clamor of voices. We are stuck inside the apartments but also inside the gabble of the characters inhabiting them. If the novel begins with carriage rides through the Park and Brooklyn hillsides, soon the city is drowned out by talk and remains drowned out for the rest of the novel.

This noisy quality relates, I think, to McCarthy's efforts to eradicate heroine—to write a satire in which the presence of satirical narrator is obliterated. In a letter to the Danish translator of The Group, McCarthy explains that the novel, "unlike my other books, has no heroine and no one to act as the author's stand-in"; there is no one "telling the reader what to think and feel." The narrator, "as directing intelligence, is supposed to be soundless, like the conductor in the pit." She continues, in almost painstaking detail, to disabuse the translator of any misconception that a particular pronouncement originates from the narrator herself. The narrator's "voice (mine) is heard in the first sentences," but is ultimately "drowned out by the Group." And while "the author is again audible from time to time, introducing the characters (Dottie's cough, 'like a perpetual scruple,' or 'Elinor was always convinced of other people's hypocrisy since she could not believe that they noticed less than she did')," even here "there is an element of mimicry." After the first chapter, "the narrator as commentator is not meant to be heard again until the final sentence." Everything in between is either spoken out loud or is "in invisible quotation marks" ("Letter to a Translator" 74).

McCarthy is careful to point out that all the satirical observations in the novel harmonize with the personalities of each character. In its inflection, "[t]he sentence about hypocrisy," for example, McCarthy explains, is a take-off of Lakey, who has a way of spitting out her thoughts, one by one, distastefully, like fruit pips." If some readers assume Polly is the author's mouthpiece, they get it wrong: "When Polly thinks 'Libby's red open mouth, continually gabbling, was like a running wound in the middle of her empty face,' that is Polly—not the author butting in" (70). "True," she admits, "it sounds sharper than Polly, and Polly would never say it out loud, but the sharpness is meant to show how exasperated, how 'unlike herself,' she has been made by Libby" (70).

The letter is marked by a rather anxious, even defensive tone, a she-doth-protest-too-much vehemence. Do not be mistaken, she seems to say: this time, the self really cannot be found; this time, the author really has managed to stay behind the camera; this time, she will write a satire in which the satirist is nothing more than a recording device, a microphone listening in. (Or in other words: it wasn't me, I swear.) One hears an echo of Edith Wharton who defended The Custom of the Country with a claim for the author's disengagement. Wharton was merely recording Undine Spragg, nothing more. Yet, just as one can hear Edith Wharton in the selection, the angle, one hears McCarthy between those invisible quotation marks and through her satirical slant and selection. However much she professes otherwise, McCarthy does very obviously butt in. While she seems vehement (and meticulous) about adhering to her ventriloquist point of view in The Group, she was also increasingly frustrated by its central demand—the "banishment of the author" (Conversations 6). She complained, after finishing The Group, that the novel

depended *too much* on ventriloquism, a mode of narration that meant feeding the author's voice and observations through a muffle of her comic characters.

McCarthy makes it clear, however, that the expulsion of the satirist in this novel came not from her own predilections but from her adherence to the demands of the modern novel, demands which she found both "tortuous" and unavoidable. She blames Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Henry James. Writing in their wake, the modern novelist, McCarthy believed, can no longer "go straight." Instead, "stuck in the phylogenesis of the novel," she is forced to write through "a curious back door" ("Characters in Fiction" 280). Either a "character is shown, as it were, inside out, from behind the screen of consciousness," or he is shown "through ventriloquism, a mode in which the author is "cramped inside the character like a contortionist in a box" (282). As she saw it, neither approach was natural or comfortable. All "fictions are, of course, impersonations," yet "it was somehow less dubious to impersonate the outside of a person, say Mrs. Micawber with her mysterious 'I will never leave Mr. Micawber,' than to claim to know what it feels like to be Mrs. Micawber" (283). To "come at a character circuitously, by a tour de force, means spending great and sometimes disproportionate pains on the method of entry" (283). Instead of the objectivity—the "straight shooting" exercised by the "old novelists"—the modern novelist must "twist" and "squirm"(282).

What had happened, she wonders, to the old novel in which an author can simply speak outright, the novel in which the author's voice is as much a character as those described? In championing the return of the author, however, she does not mean author-as-heroine. She does not want, as she explains, voice *through* heroine—which exacted, at least for McCarthy, yet another kind of contortion. (She had already tried this with

Company.) She longs for voice *as* heroine; she longs for Stendhal, for Tolstoy. Even Edith Wharton could descend and insert. Where was the novel in which the author's voice is heard loud and clear? At the time, there was only one contemporary writer she could think of—Pasternak in Dr. Zhivago—who was speaking in his own voice, "a beautiful tenor voice" (Conversations 26). Pasternak, however, could get away with authorial assertions because he was Russian and thus not forced to adhere to the standards of the experiments of modern day. For "us, there [is] no turning back to the objectivity of Tolstoy" and no way to wholly "shoot" Mrs. Micawber "straight": there is always, again, the reflection in the glass, the twist of the neck.

Yet, however much she viewed these experiments in point of view as underhanded tricks, acts of deviousness against which her adherence to the facts and surfaces of reality revolted, McCarthy also felt beholden to them. Her readers (or perhaps, more accurately, her critics) expected Joyce; they expected Freud; deft slips of the hand, acrobatics—rather than a direct line of observation. For "the writer today it has become almost obligatory ... to invade the privacy of a soul so foreign or so fetal as to seem beyond grasp" ("Characters in Fiction" 284) For this reason, John Updike's Poorhouse Fair, suffered "from the point-of-view problem, the whole virtuosity of doing it through the eyes of this old man sitting on the veranda of the poorhouse, through his eyes with their refraction..." (Conversations 19). This obligation, this exercise in virtuosity, McCarthy believed, prevented Updike from "saying a good deal in the book" (19). After completing The Group, McCarthy suggests that the obligation prohibited her from saying a great deal as well. However much she wanted to say it straight, she would forego her

own tendencies—the pleasure in the author's voice, this pleasure in herself as critic—for to give in to them wholly would render her old-fashioned, out-of-step.

The closest she came to the kind of objective urban flanerie she desired was not in the novel but in her nonfiction. In an interview, McCarthy remarks that it was after writing her travel books on Italy—The Stones of Florence (1959) and Venice Observed (1961)—that she realized she missed the Author's Voice in the novel:

> The reason that I enjoyed doing those books on Italy, the Venice and Florence books, was that I was writing in my own voice. One book was in the first person, and one was completely objective, but it doesn't really make any difference. I felt, you know, now I can talk freely! The books were written very fast, the Venice one faster. Even the Florence book, with masses of research in it, was written very fast, with a great deal of energy, with a kind of liberated energy. And without the peculiar kind of painstakingness that's involved in the dramatization that one does in a novel, that is when nothing can come in that hasn't been perceived through a character. The technical difficulties are so great, in projecting yourself, in feigning an alien consciousness, that too much energy gets lost, I think, in the masquerade. (Conversations 26)

Writing the travel essay, then, is to be saved from Henry James's injunction—dramatize, dramatize—and from the twists of an alien consciousness. Freed from the impediment that are those characters—other people—she can now write fast, with "liberated energy." She escapes, really, the problems of fiction, the act of imagining through another. Rather than having to worry what Polly would actually think or say, she can observe the city gliding by from her post on a gondola; she can turn to the facts, the stack of books on one side of her typewriter. What for many is impediment—the demands of a painstaking footnote—is for McCarthy speed. And, if some, when faced with the obstructions of secondary material, find it difficult to gain a voice, Mary gets hers back. All the details free her up.

The return of the Author—the move from train and courtyard to gondola—also seems a way of overcoming her tendency toward belittlement. About The Group, she

complains about having to speak "through all these lesser intelligences." It's a rather telling statement, suggesting not only that she must perpetually work out whether Polly would have the sharpness to say what McCarthy might say outright, but also that to write the novel, McCarthy must pretend to be stupider than she really was. In Venice Observed, McCarthy comments that

> [s]ophistication, that modern kind of sophistication that begs to differ, to be paradoxical, to invert, is not a possible attitude in Venice. In time, this becomes the beauty of the place. One gives up the struggle and submits to a classic experience. One accepts the fact that what one is about to feel or say has not only been said before by Goethe or Musset but is on the tip of the tongue of the tourist from Iowa who is alighting in the Piazzetta with his wife in her furpiece and jeweled pin. (12-13)

But of course, as the passage makes clear, the penchant for belittlement doesn't entirely disappear in the travel books. Filled as they are with facts and historical data, even here McCarthy cannot resist the need to flatten a minor character: the reader, the average American tourist. Take for example McCarthy's description of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, a church for which I happen to have a rather intense personal feeling. On my first trip, I remember rounding a corner, all alone except for the cats, with no one to interfere with my delight or my sense of personal discovery. I almost believed, for an instant, that the church was mine. Yet, in one swift paragraph, McCarthy puts down a church and her reader:

> After a time in Venice, one comes to look with pity on the efforts of the newcomer to disassociate himself from the crowd. He has found a "little church"—has he?—quite off the beaten track, a real gem, with inlaid coloured marbles on a soft dove grey, like a jewel box. He means Santa Maria dei Miracoli. As you name it his face falls. It is so well known then? (13)

The church gets diminished in our eyes, and so too do our feelings about it. The reader has become yet another category—tourist—summarily filed away.[36]

Though McCarthy may not be able to entirely forego her character-flattening tendencies in the Venice and Florence books, she does illustrate a move that had, over the years, characterized her career: satire evolving into "pure" criticism.

The satirical novel, of course, is already a wedding of the critical and fictional impulses; The Custom of the Country was, as Henry James pointed out, both record and conclusion. Furthermore, many of the women satirists in the early twentieth century were, as I've argued, struggling to work out the demands of character identification so as to gain a public voice. They wanted to be ethnographers, social critics. They wanted the freedom to observe and at the same time to pass judgment. They wanted to get out. In the case of McCarthy, however, it seems that the sly insertion of critical commentary through character was not enough. There was a desire to take satire further, to escape not just a fictional enclosure (the novel of sensibility, the traditional romantic novel) but the very enclosure that is fiction. Wharton exerts independence from the confines of the Jamesian house of fiction; Powell puts us into a taxi-cab, whisking us away from the solipsism of the uptown apartment, from the too intimate Bloomsbury ramble, and from the closure (and implicit enclosure) of the traditional romantic ending; Stead turns her back on the more psychological, Woolf-influenced The Man Who Loved Children to write her

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[36] The Italy books don't entirely liberate McCarthy from the problem of self-consciousness either. In this passage, for example we see McCarthy's need to be one step ahead of her critics, the writer making it plain that her observations are nothing new. Throughout the travel books, McCarthy is clearly aware of what the critics might (and did) say about her—in short, how dare this upstart American, a veritable newcomer to Italian history, try her hand at a book about it. McCarthy knew that would be a problem; and she defends herself at every turn. It was not just the reader (the tourist), who is the "newcomer" attempting to "disassociate" herself from the crowd, but McCarthy as well. She disassociates by constantly acknowledging her newcomer status.

sprawling novels of New York society. Mary McCarthy's effort at writing Venice, however, lead to something more extreme—the desire to escape from the novel and the desire to escape from New York City as well.

Part IV: Urban Flight

The flight from the novel towards journalism is the subject of the final pages of McCarthy's "Fact in Fiction." Yet, the passage begins with what appears to be a digression on the affliction of a being a writer in today's society. The modern writer has lost access to the range of experiences available to the nineteenth century novelist. Dickens and Flaubert's cities were smaller and as such encompassed a greater variety of people. In their profession, and in their urban locales, they could meet all sorts. The modern writer, even if living in a city, will find himself living a provincial life. He lives in hunched-over-the-desk isolation, an isolation that McCarthy blames partly on the new "standardization" of the writer's career in America. Because of the postwar trend of fiction writers supporting themselves in university jobs, the writer often sees only other writers and is removed from experiences and people outside her profession: "The writer today who has a painter for a friend is regarded as a broad-ranging adventurer." This accounts for the one-novel writer, she believes, and for this reason, the "worst thing that can happen to a writer is to become a writer" (269).

From here, McCarthy imagines an escape: the "recurrent dream of the modern novelist, after the age, say, of thirty or thirty-five" is to "throw off this straight jacket" of urban isolation and specialization (269). Before, his "dream was the opposite, to come to New York (or Paris or London) to meet other writers." Now, he feels compelled to leave the city (and the novel) for wider environs:

> Various ways out are tried: moving to the country, travel, "action" (some form of politics), the resolute cultivation of side-interests—music, art, sport, gardening; sport is very popular with American men novelists, who hold on to an interest in baseball or a tennis racket or a fishing rod as relic of the "complete man" or complete boy they once were. But if these steps are sufficiently radical, their effect may be the reverse of what was intended. This is what seems to have happened to Gide, D.H. Lawrence, Malraux, Camus, George Orwell. Starting as novelists, they fled, as it were, in all directions from the tyranny of the novelist's specialization: into politics, diary-keeping, travel and travel-writing, war, art history, journalism, "engagement." (269)

Unable to "settle down to a single form or mode," these vagrants from fiction exhibit a "perpetual restlessness" which seems a "sign for an unrequited, unconsummated love for the novel, as though in the middle of their oeuvre there was a void, a blank space reserved for the novel they failed to be able to write" (270). McCarthy acknowledges that she too shares this restlessness and this unrequited love:

> We are all in flight from the novel and yet drawn back to it, as to some unfinished and problematic relationship. The novel seems to be dissolving into its component parts: the essay, the travel book, reporting, on the one hand, and the "pure" fiction of the tale, on the other. The center will not hold. (270)

This is a rather puzzling (and delightful) passage. It is full of detours and surprises. It reads fast. It is also a little untidy. It depends on a not wholly supported extended metaphor: writers who abandon fiction are like writers who abandon cities. Suddenly, in the midst of an essay on the importance of facts in fiction, we are 35 and living in New York; we are yearning for a hobby; Malraux and George Orwell are seen taking up sports. Novels dissolve. The center cannot hold.

The rambling style, too, perfectly illustrates just the kind of liberation of the pen McCarthy identified with essay writing. Next to the essays, the prose of the fiction, can sound a little stiff, fussy, overly controlled. (There's also something in her essay style that has the earmarks of typewriter composition, a flair missing from most essays written today. Because ideas cannot be cut or pasted, one must, with easy grace, round up

digressions. It is like making a garment with chalk marks showing, stitches half-finished; one is compelled to work them into the overall design. This McCarthy does well.)

Beyond its style, however, the essay also illuminates several themes that were worrying many mid-century American writers: the introduction of new narrative forms blending fact and fiction (Truman Capote's In Cold Blood had only recently caused a stir); the ever-potential demise of the novel (post-modernism is yet to come); and the growing belief that the city was no longer the space around which the modern writer's world revolved. It's a quiver of anxiety of its moment but also an anxiety that I think relates specifically to the role Mary McCarthy played as New York intellectual.

The flight from the novel is the persistent theme throughout McCarthy's career. She was always a divided writer—part critic, part novelist. She wrote book and theater reviews for the Partisan Review, The New Yorker, The Nation and in her later years would turn increasingly to the political essay, the most famous of which is the New Yorker article she wrote in the sixties after visiting Vietnam. As critic, too, McCarthy was often more readily forgiven her satirical tendencies. Hortense Calisher, in the seventies, wrote that:

> On the fictional work of Mary McCarthy, it was for years the critical fashion to say that it (she) "lacked compassion," a phrase I used to think revealed a lack of knowledge of what satire was—until I caught onto the fact that it was never used on male satirists . . . . Later, her novels would be given the attention they deserved as satire, but very much because she had won her spurs as critic and journalist. (378)

In truth, I don't believe this quite happened. McCarthy's lack of compassion continued to be a central focus for years to come. (A collection of essays, most of which were published after Calisher's observation, seem unanimously engrossed in the compassion problem. Even those aiming to veer away from the she-can-be-nasty

emphasis spend so much time acknowledging it that the reader is ultimately left with little else, a problem with which I am wholly sympathetic, a problem anyone writing about McCarthy's fiction inevitably must face.)

In one sense, Calisher has, over time, proved to be right. McCarthy's position as critic may not have lent more forgiveness, but she has won her spurs. Nowadays, the critical fashion is to concentrate more on McCarthy's essays and non-fiction political writing. The recent publication (and popularity) of a collection of her political essays suggests this. Another explanation for the popularity of the essays is that the mid-century essay seems to be back in fashion. A journalist friend of mine has begun reading her to see how it's done. Those who do continue to examine the novels seem to read them more as archeological sites, opportunities to examine the significance of say the Margaret Sanger clinic or the studio apartment, all the gimcrackery of mid-century America. She dusts off her artifacts and we, like visitors to a museum, study them behind glass.[37]

Although McCarthy may now be more revered as critic, she always considered herself first and foremost a novelist. This she makes clear in the final passage of "Fact in

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[37] This interest in McCarthy as cultural anthropologist also sheds light on an issue often discussed when considering satire and social criticism: its durability. During her career, many of McCarthy's detractors felt that she was too contemporary, too of the moment, too much of a journalist, and for this reason, would not be found on the shelves in years to come. Irving Howe: "I don't think most of her stuff will last. She wasn't a natural fiction writer. She was a satirist essentially, and satire, unless it's very remarkable, is always of the moment" (Kiernan 34). Jason Epstein would do him one better: "Her stuff was interesting—it was really first-rate—but she was very much of the moment and very much a personality and I don't think anything is going to last. But that doesn't matter because most of what was written by her contemporaries isn't going to last. A lot of it was journalism – or journalism disguised as fiction" (Kiernan 340). There is certainly something to this opinion: try teaching Sinclair Lewis's Main Street to a class of undergraduates—as I have done—and you might concur. Wildly popular when published, it is a novel wholly of its moment and often inaccessible to readers today. Although it is too early to tell—fashion is fleeting, and we aren't reading McCarthy at a great distance, only fifty years—she does seem to have survived because of what she had to say about the moment more than anything else.

Fiction." She recognizes in Malraux and D.H. Lawrence's restlessness her own dissatisfaction with the novel. (They will foot it to the country with a set of golf clubs or go off to war; she will sink into the cushions of a gondola, take a plane to Vietnam.) Yet, she also makes it clear that one must not stay away too long: one flees to the travel essay, to politics, to "engagement," but is drawn back to the ideal, purest of forms "as to some unfinished and problematic relationship" (270).

One way to read this is as an anxiety about reputation. To leave the novel altogether is to risk being labeled just the sort she so ably mocks in her Italian travel books: a wandering, restless middle-class tourist. Within the literary community at mid-century, there was an implicit class-structure. Novels are high; journalism is low. Tom Wolfe, in his 1973 anthology of New Journalism, described his life as a newspaper feature writer in the sixties:

> What [feature writers] had in common was that they all regarded the newspaper as a motel you checked into overnight on the road to the final triumph. The idea was to get a job on a newspaper, keep body and soul together, pay the rent, get to know "the world," accumulate "experience," perhaps work some of the fat off your style – then, at some point, quit cold, say goodbye to journalism, move into a shack somewhere, work night and day for six months, and light up the sky with the final triumph. The final triumph was known as The Novel. (5)

As Wolfe makes clear, for the serious writer, the whole point is to move away from journalism towards the novel, to check *out* of the motel, not the other way around. He goes on to explain that the outcry against the new, personal journalism that writers like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer introduced in the sixties was born of a certain hierarchy, one that privileged novelists (and a few playwrights and poets) as "the only literary artists [who] had exclusive entry into the soul of man" (25). The middle-class were the best essayists, critics, biographers; the lower class consisted of journalists, even lower were the freelance writers.

In McCarthy's attachment to the novel, then, one might read a fear this time not of being old-fashioned or out of step, but middlebrow. It is an anxiety that explains certain inconsistencies—why she always privileged the novel (despite the freedoms she found in non-fiction) and why, despite her own intertwining impulses (fact in fiction), she joined in the outcry against the "publicity gimmick" of Capote's In Cold Blood.

Yet, even here there is a divide. Not to write novels might label her middlebrow but writing only novels might have the same effect. (Even worse, it might label her just what people like Norman Mailer accused her of being—"another lady novelist of the garden variety.") McCarthy's articles on Stalin and Vietnam, her essays on Florence and Venice, even her letters to her friend, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, announce the presence of a politically involved, smart-like-the-boys and smart-like-the-Europeans intellectual. A book like The Stones of Florence—note the allusion to Ruskin—seems not just a fleeing from the novel but also a fleeing towards an old-fashioned ideal: the display of a wide knowledge of the old-world variety. She knows painting, she knows architecture, she knows history. She will not be just the New York intellectual; she will be a European one.[38] The books on Venice and Florence are also the writing of a city that is not New York—a departure that, I think, is significant.[39]

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[38] This desire to be a European intellectual—and the efforts to write a travel book on two European cities is interesting in light of Simone de Beauvoir's comments about McCarthy after meeting her. In a letter to Sartre, de Beauvoir writes: "She's very beautiful and seems intelligent, but without the least charm or interest other than documentary (and as such she fascinated me), being so typically the American intellectual woman" (Seeing Mary Plain 267). In her travel book about America, America Day by Day, de Beauvoir describes McCarthy as a "cold and beautiful novelist who devoured three husbands and a crowd of lovers in the course of a neatly-managed career." McCarthy retaliated, writing a scathing review of America Day by Day in which she claims that de Beauvoir's reading of America is glib and misinformed. One way to read the books on Europe, then, is an effort on McCarthy's part to take on Europe and escape the "typical American intellectual" label. Yet, in the end, she didn't quite succeed. The central criticism cast against her, mainly by Italians, was that the books were too much documentary, not enough depth, too glib, misinformed.

Not only does the passage at the end of "Fact and Fiction" reveal something about McCarthy's place in American letters, but it also reveals something about the place of New York in her life. Her metaphor: before the age of thirty or thirty-five, the writer's dream was "to come to New York (or Paris or London) to meet other writers." After that, she will head for the country and travel out of town. As it would turn out, this is just what McCarthy did.

Many writers in post-war America shared both the grievance over the specialization of the writing profession and the belief that novels were increasingly losing the urban sweep. Hortense Calisher would complain in the sixties of writers fleeing the city for academia: "The university," has "willy nilly become the new café" (American Short Story 34). Ralph Ellison also bemoaned the new penchant for "writers writing too much writing and about writers," a result of the growing popularity of Writing Programs and University jobs. "If you aren't careful, you'll limit yourself only to people who live pretty much like you. And you are apt to limit your range of reference, the richness of your symbolism, your eloquence to that group whose experience most closely matches the curve of your narrative" (51). Italo Calvino believed that the American novelist had changed after World War II: now, he is "someone who works in a university, who writes novels about campus life, about the gossip surrounding the adulterous affairs between

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[39] Venice was not only a departure for McCarthy but also for The New Yorker. The book was originally excerpted in The New Yorker as "The Revel of the Earth" in 1956, and for The New Yorker "it was a first" (Kiernan 409). Brendan Gill remembers that: "we had never had anything like Venice Observed. Now it would be commonplace ... More and more the magazine was becoming something other than what Ross had intended it to be—Ross trying desperately to keep everything in New York, reluctantly admitting Washington. We'd had Paris from the beginning because of Jane Grant, who was a friend of Janet Flanner. He couldn't do anything about that. Shawn was the person who felt that a wonderful piece of writing existed in The New Yorker because it was the kind of place that should have a wonderful piece of writing" (Kiernan 409).

lecturers, which is not the big wide world, not something genuinely exciting" (Hermit in Paris 151).

As it happened, McCarthy wrote three urban flight novels after The Company She Keeps: the first, The Oasis (1948) is a satire of a crowd of intellectuals removed to a utopian community on a mountain in New England; the second, The Groves of Academe (1951) is the story of a university scandal; and the third, A Charmed Life (1955) tells of failed writers and critics living in an artist community on Cape Cod. Each is based on personal experience; The Groves of Academe fictionalizes McCarthy's experiences while teaching for a year at Bard in upstate New York.[40] A Charmed Life is based on her summers living in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, with Edmund Wilson and other New York friends. Characters in The Oasis so closely resembled members of the Partisan Review crowd that Philip Rahv considered suing for libel. Concentrating on the gossip and intrigues of a small, enclosed intellectual circle, these novels illustrate Calvino and Ellison's criticism. Or, more aptly, as satires of these insular environments, they concur with it.[41]

Again, McCarthy's role as New York Intellectual is significant, and again, it sets up a paradox. On the one hand, the role asserts a position outside the academy. In his book The Last Intellectuals, Russell Jacoby uses McCarthy as his prime example of the kind of intellectual who did not depend on the university to make a living, and the kind of writer

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[40] The Groves of Academe is a novel about a Joyce scholar who when he receives notice that his one-year teaching contract will not be renewed immediately lets it be known that his wife is desperately ill, that he has been hired with the promise of tenure, and the school's president has fired him solely because he is a member of the Communist party.

[41] But then, aren't most University novels satirical? I think of Don DeLillo or Kingsley Amis's treatment of the subject. If as Calisher suggests, the university is the new café, then one could just as easily call the university the satirical subject that had replaced city.

capable of exploring a range of subjects. She had that one job at Bard, another at Sarah Lawrence, but she always made more money publishing stories, novels, and critical essays. This same role, however, cast her within an everybody-knows-everybody scene. She may not have been a workshop writer, but she was a writer's writer. The claims at the end of "Fact in Fiction" are that the modern writer, consumed by the writing profession, ends up writing only about one prospect and loses access to the variety of urban experience. This perfectly describes McCarthy's New York life and the subject of most of her novels: she satirizes insular worlds—the intellectual scene (treated in The Oasis, The Groves of Academe, and A Charmed Life) and the Vassar scene (treated in The Group). Like most novelists, she draws upon her own experiences, and her own experiences are writers, critics, intellectuals.

In fact, her complaint about the insularity of the literary world is more applicable to her own literary life than most people's. One cannot imagine, for instance, Dawn Powell, the quintessential New York café writer, leaving the city as subject or containing herself within one intellectual scene for long. If as McCarthy points out, "[t]he writer today who has a painter for a friend is regarded as a broad-ranging adventurer," then Powell was such an adventurer. After the hotels closed down, she took her observant eye elsewhere: she began drinking at the Cedar Tavern where she could observe Jackson Pollock and the bar regulars duking it out in the back room. (This is also what her final novel, The Golden Spur, is all about.) Even McCarthy's claim that before the age of thirty, the writer dreams of coming "to New York (or Paris or London) to meet other writers" is only partly true of Powell: she met and wrote about all sorts. Powell's experience of New

York (her love of New York) was not founded on meeting and knowing or networking.[42] McCarthy's New York experience, however, seems to have been just that.

In one sense, The Oasis and A Charmed Life are both New York novels in that they detail a group of New York writers, most of whom were based on McCarthy's inner circle of acquaintances. But the novels are not set in New York, and they have essentially turned to the satirizing of friends—not urban strangers—a tendency that would get her in trouble not just with Philip Rahv but with nearly everyone. As I have already discussed, even The Group, although set in the city, depicts a city-absent, a claustrophobic world again based on people McCarthy knew rather intimately. The scope gets increasingly narrower. Her claim that the writer today risks only producing one novel because after the first, the life is taken over by the profession—publicity, sales, making it in the literary trade—seems strangely applicable to her own experience. While prolific, she had just written really one New York novel with a range that extends slightly beyond the insularity of writers-with-writers. Not yet famous and not yet wholly taken up with the writer's profession when she wrote The Company She Keeps, McCarthy was able to examine an urban environment beyond the inner circle: the novel has a sense of youthful curiosity; the urban view has not yet become entirely fixed within one world. It is a train novel (city explored) not a university novel or a utopia novel. There is still a sense of writing somebody new.

At the same time, even Company is somehow limited—rather slight, just a handful of types—and as I have pointed out, it sets up the very problem of a woman being constantly scrutinized by others: the problems of female flanerie. Even the book jacket

[42] In fact, Powell was, as many of her friends noted, shy of too much attention. Edmund Wilson believed that Powell did not sell well not just because of her "sordid" depictions of women and refusal to give women readers a romantic fantasy, but also because she had no gift for publicity.

calls out for public attention, just the kind of attention McCarthy claims will get in the way of scope, engagement, discovery of people outside. Again, one sees the difference in Powell and McCarthy's approach. Powell admitted that she had "no equipment for prize-winning—no small talk, no time for idle graciousness and required public show, no clothes either or desire for front . . . . no yen for any experience (even a triumph) that blocks observation, when I am observed instead of the observer. Time is too short to miss so many sights" (Page, Dawn Powell 292). Always critical of McCarthy for what she called her "social-climbing ways," Powell believed that The New York Intellectual role got in the way. McCarthy's public persona did as well. Powell takes note in her review of The Oasis that it comes complete with a picture of the "pretty author evidently reclining on the other end of Truman Capote's couch" (Kiernan, Seeing Mary Plain 253).[43]

Just as McCarthy had painted herself into a corner in her fiction, she had painted herself into a corner in New York: it had become more a small-town of old acquaintances, a city that no longer opened up, its own inhibiting enclosure, a narrow field of too many people whose feelings would (and did) get hurt. Ultimately, too, she would leave New York as locale. She lived in Manhattan on and off, but by the late fifties, she like Edith Wharton, had moved to Paris, where she finished The Group—New York apartments described from an elegant Parisian one—and wrote her final novel,

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[43] In the same review, Powell notes that McCarthy's is a "dry, juiceless gift, intense over trivia." Yet, elsewhere she grudgingly approves of one side of McCarthy. In her diary, she observes, in typical Powell fashion, that McCarthy has "two manners—her lace-curtain Irish, almost unbelievably genteel lady scholar torn between her desire to be Blue Stocking without losing her Ladyship; and then her shanty Irish where she relaxes, whamming away at her characters like a Queen of the Roller Derby, groin-kicking, shin-knifing, belly-butting, flailing away with skates all arms at her characters and jumping on them with a hoarse whoop of glee when they are felled." If she had a choice, Powell would take Mary flailing with all arms. Again, in her diary, she later writes that "one reason I dislike the studied academosis of people like Mary McCarthy—people who have shown they have good punch—is the rareness of good punchers nowadays, and the hordes of academic nose-pickers" (Diaries 354).

Birds of America, about a young man living in Europe. Perhaps, there seemed little left to say about New York. In the case of Powell, there was always more to say—a difference that is illustrated in the trajectory of their work: Powell's plots push us out and around the city, McCarthy's push us, finally, out of the city altogether.

CHAPTER FIVE

Maeve Brennan and the Last Days of the Hotel

In 1965, Tom Wolfe published an article in The New York Herald Tribune as the first installment of a two-part attack on The New Yorker magazine. In it, he dubs the magazine the "laughingstock of the literary community," lampoons its editor, William Shawn, and mocks the "whichy thickets" of its prose. He also accuses The New Yorker of having packed up and moved to the suburbs. Catering to "educated women with large homes and solid hubbies" and a fondness for "expensive things," the magazine had become just another example of the "sentimental bourgeois," a "totem" of good breeding in the "good green world of Larchmont, Dedham, Grosse Point, Bryn Mawr, Chevy Chase" (Yagoda 339). Wolfe also notes the abundance of stories by women in the magazine, stories in which lady writers reminisce about growing up in "curious rural bourgeois settings" or describe "domestic animals they have owned" (Yagoda 336).[44]

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[44] Wolfe admitted to wanting to have "a little fun" with the magazine by writing what he called an "anti-parody." Lurid and littered with exclamation points, the two pieces published in The New York Herald Tribune in April of 1965 were entitled "Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of the Walking Dead" and "Lost in the Whichy Thicket: The New Yorker –II." As expected, the articles horrified the New Yorker staff. One of the complaints was that Wolfe had neglected to fulfill one of the basic tenets of good journalism: he got his facts wrong. But one fact he did get right. In the late fifties, there were more women living in the suburbs and more women reading the magazine than ever before. By 1954, they made up 55 % percent of the readers and would continue to outnumber men for the next ten years (Yagoda 311). There were also more women writing for the magazine. A 1958 survey of the contents of the magazine records that over half the stories and short essays were by women (Yagoda 282). That women writing for women should connote a slippage in quality, however, is not a matter of fact, but of taste. Alice Munro considers the fiction published in the magazine at mid-century, next to Chekhov, as the most significant influence on the development of her short story style. The writer she recalls by name is Maeve Brennan. Brennan's short story, "The Springs of Affection," published in The New Yorker in 1972 was an "all-time favorite of Munro's." What Munro liked about Brennan was that she "wrote about the same things—about emotions and places" (2). In her 1988 essay on her own years working at The New Yorker in the sixties, Frances Kiernan

Ben Yagoda, in his comprehensive study of the magazine, makes a similar observation—and in similarly disparaging terms. He remarks that the "fiction that predominated from 1952 to 1962 was reminiscence, the locale Irish (followed by English, and then American southern), the authorial gender female." Women-writing-for-women may have led to an increase in sales,[45] but, in Yagoda's opinion, it had also resulted in "gentility bordering on blandness." Gone were the "vigorous" short stories and "tight objective sketches" that characterized the magazine under Harold Ross. In their stead was prose weighed down by a "deliberate long-windedness" and not "infrequent excursions into the out-and-out dull" (282).[46]

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remembers defending the magazine against similar attacks, often by people who had not read the magazine in years. She writes: "If you believe that fiction at its best can enrich or even change our lives, mustn't you constantly bear in mind that women have lives too?" (90).

The rise in the short story as an increasingly more popular form for women was also true. In the years following the war, the short story was becoming increasingly more popular for women writers. Why they were turning to the form at mid-century has been the subject of some debate. Some feminist critics have considered it another example of an "anxiety of authorship," a fear of facing the demands of the novel. Others have read the popularity of the short story in the fifties in more practical terms: a short story can be written between baby-feedings. Grace Paley has made this argument, and so too has Alice Munro. Another explanation for the growing popularity of the short story was a growing market for the short story in the forties and fifties. Gerald Clarke describes the forties and fifties as "a remarkable, but little remembered, moment in American literary history when fine fiction found a nest in a forest of lingerie ads" (81).[44] Not only had the high fashion magazines at mid-century become far more willing to publish literary fiction, but The New Yorker had become an increasingly popular venue for women writers. Writers like Jean Stafford, Shirley Jackson, Hortense Calisher, Sally Benson, and Maeve Brennan all published in the magazine in the post-war era, many of them under the guidance of Katherine Angell White.

[45] Yagoda notes that in the fifties and early sixties the circulation of The New Yorker grew 40 percent and that its advertising pages increased by more than 70 percent. He explains the success partly as a result of the increase of woman readers living in the suburbs who were "flocking to The New Yorker" as "one of the few ways they could exercise—and in some cases advertise—their learning and culture" (Yagoda 311).

[46] It should be noted that the rise in the number of women readers and writers was not the only explanation Yagoda gives for the decline in the quality of the writing. In the case of non-fiction stories, he blames the "whichy sentence" on the magazine's "labyrinthine editorial procedure" and its "scrupulousness in matters of fact, grammar, and style" which had become "fetishized under Shawn" (327). In the case of fiction, he points to the decline in the popularity of the short-

On first glance, Maeve Brennan, a short-story writer and "Talk of the Town" contributor at The New Yorker from 1949 through the early seventies, seems the very epitome of the ethos that Wolfe and Yagoda deride. The bulk of her New Yorker stories take place in the dark parlors and damp bed-sits of her native Ireland: Dublin, Wexford, and Coolnaby. She also wrote a number of stories about American suburban life, most based on her experiences living in Sneden's Landing, a town along the Hudson in upstate New York.[47] There are even several stories about domestic animals—a few about Bluebell, her dog, and one story, "I See You Bianca," (1966) from the point of view of a cat. It was under the byline of "The Long-Winded Lady" that Brennan wrote her "Talk of the Town" pieces from 1953 through the late sixties. In many of these, especially the early ones, she pretends to be a suburbanite, just down in the city for a lunch. "The Long-Winded Lady," Angela Bourke explains, was intended to be a "two-dimensional" figure," a woman seemingly "supported by a private income, and venturing forth only to shop" (191). Brennan's daily excursions around New York often record a bounded and familiar terrain, a landscape in which any woman in town from Dedham or Larchmont might feel

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story form and the fact that many writers had abandoned The New Yorker for Hollywood (283). The suggestion, although never stated, is that the only fiction writers available and willing were the women.

[47] Brennan's stories can be divided geographically: Sneden's Landing, Long Island, Ireland, and Manhattan. The suburban stories, otherwise known as the Herbert's Retreat Stories, are mainly collected in The Rose Garden (2000) and were originally published in The New Yorker in the early and mid-fifties. There are also a number of stories set in the Hamptons, where Brennan sometimes lived in the winters, borrowing summer houses from friends like Sara and Gerald Murphy. The stories of Ireland were published throughout her career, although most reviewers consider her final stories, published in the late sixties and early seventies, to be her best. Most of these were republished in The Springs of Affection: Stories of Dublin in 1997. Of the Manhattan stories, there are two kinds. The early ones, which seem very much in the tradition of Dorothy Parker, are a little brittle, quaintly urbane: a couple buys a tie, a man is given a hot water bottle for a gift. And then there are the later New York stories which I discuss here, most of which are about a solitary life in the city and the transformation of the urban landscape.

right at home: a lunch at Longchamps, a view of a raucous party of sightseers in the Waldorf lobby, an afternoon Martini at Le Steak de Paris.

Brennan also seems an ideal figure to appeal to a suburban woman hoping to catch a glimpse of mid-century urban glamour. "[T]o be around her was to see style being invented," recalls her friend and editor, William Maxwell. She painted the ceiling of her office at The New Yorker a Wedgwood blue, knew the difference between the colors "bone" and "taupe," and early in her career had worked as a fashion copyeditor at Harper's Bazaar. The photographs of Brennan that appear most regularly on book jackets or magazines support this image. They appear from one sitting taken the year before she began working at The New Yorker. Brennan sits or stands, a sleek Holly Golightly look-a-like, in a room filled with "expensive things." She is dressed all in black, the ash of a cigarette dangerously long, her hair pulled back. A fire is in the fireplace, roses in a vase; there are stacks of books, a smoky mirror, a cut glass ashtray to catch the ash.

This past year, Angela Bourke published the first biography of Brennan. Before it came out I had a publicity copy sent over, and when I opened the package I found that not only was this photograph on the cover but that the publicity inserts had been sprayed with a heavy dose of what was supposedly Brennan's favorite perfume: Russian Leather. Even here was an appeal to some kind of nostalgia for mid-century glamour. I left the book on my desk, next to my ashtray, and for days a combination of perfume and cigarettes lingered, invoking recollections of a great aunt, who while the tenant of a much shabbier apartment in Milwaukee, bore a permanent scent of what seemed to me, as a child, big-city sophistication. Like those ladies in Larchmont, my aunt was also the kind of woman whose subscription to The New Yorker never ran out.

Yet all these images—the genteel Irish lady, the fashionable magazine writer, the lady-who-lunches—are not the whole story. For one thing, the jacket photograph on the Brennan biography is all smoke and mirrors; it was taken in the borrowed apartment of a wealthy friend, the Irish-American theater critic Quinn Curtiss: Brennan did not own expensive things and rarely had a long-term address. She often lived in short-lease apartments—usually with no kitchen and usually with a stray cat. More regularly, Brennan lived in hotels. After a brief hiatus in Sneden's Landing in upstate New York—coinciding with an equally brief marriage to the New Yorker writer, St. Clair McKelway, in the mid-fifties—she lived at the Hotel Earle, the Royalton, the Iroquois, the Prince Edward, the Algonquin, the Westbury, the Lombardy, the Holley Hotel on Washington Square. Gardner Botsford remembers that when Brennan moved, she could, "like the Big Blonde in the Dorothy Parker story," "transport her entire household, all her possessions and her cats—in a taxi…" (220).

By the early sixties, Brennan seemed to drop the suburban persona altogether, to reveal herself as a "traveler in residence," a flaneur of daily life in mid-century New York, who had, in the words of John Updike, "brought New York back to The New Yorker" (Bourke 249). Brennan also began to seem less interested in shopping sprees than in a city under siege. Her story, "I See You Bianca," is not really about a "domestic pet"; it is about an apartment, a floor-through on West Fourth and 12th Street about to be torn down (Rose Garden 250). In "The Last Days of New York" (1953), one of her "Talk of the Town" pieces, Brennan describes a view from the window of her hotel room on Washington Square: down below is a "narrow gap" in place of the Holley Hotel, the residential hotel she'd inhabited years before. Beneath her window, "brand-new, drearily

uniform apartments" take up one corner of the north side of the square, and beneath her feet, the floor of her hotel room is "already shivering under the wrecker's boots" (87).

The New York depicted in Brennan's essays from the fifties and sixties is a "capsized" one, its inhabitants clinging "to the island that is their life's predicament" (Long Winded Lady 1). In many of the essays, however, the shipwrecked appear merely as ambience, backdrop to what is most important: the island itself, the restaurants, bookstores, department stores she and her readers frequent, even if only in their imagination, and the threat that at any moment they may vanish. Read together, her New Yorker pieces take the reader on an extended walking tour with Brennan as umbrella-toting guide, a tour that is not intended for the sightseer, but for those who know the city only too well, the purpose not discovery, but elucidation: the casting of fresh, attentive eyes on the everyday. See your walls, lest they someday be forgotten. One essay relates the rescue of a two-hundred-year-old wooden farmhouse from imminent destruction and its removal from York Avenue to Charles Street downtown in the Village. Others written in the fifties and sixties wax nostalgic about what has already been destroyed—Wanamakers, Stern Bros. Department Store, Schraffts restaurants.[48] Another mourns the Eighth Street bookstores that have moved or closed because of the high rents imposed in

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[48] In December, 1954, Wanamakers, occupying the entire block bounded by Broadway, Fourth Avenue, Ninth and Tenth streets, closed in order to concentrate on its suburban operations. Writing in the The New York Times, journalist Meyer Berger wrote that New Yorkers "had come to love the place, its soft-spoken salespeople, its suave—but not too suave—floor walkers, its mellow indoor bells, the concerts in the great Wanamakers Auditorium, the air of quiet gentility that always lay, sort of reverent and hushed, over its well-stocked counters." In 1956, a plan was announced to tear down the store—one of the greatest achievements of cast-iron architecture in New York—and replace it with two nineteen-story apartment buildings. On July 14, 1956, shortly after demolition had begun on the store, a fire broke out in the building, one of the worst in New York's history, burning out of control for nearly 24 hours. Much of the building's cast-iron façade remained intact; still "there were no second thoughts about the building's future, however, and the building was demolished" (Stern, New York 1960 22-4).

the sixties. Of all the spaces in the city, though, the one that holds the most significance and the one she regrets most consistently is the space connecting all the others—the New York hotel.

Brennan's rendering of the hotel world of New York is quite different from Dawn Powell's. Were I to choose a photograph for the cover of her biography, it would not be Holly Golightly poised in front of the home fire, but a photograph from the late forties, a study by Berenice Abbot of a solitary, pensive-looking man staring out the large French windows of The Lafayette Hotel dining room. Set in the space Brennan liked best, a public room where she could observe strangers up close, the photograph is also similar in tone. It evokes Manhattan on a gray Sunday afternoon: beautiful but a little sad. It is characterized by an Edward Hopper-like estrangement: a woman alone in her hotel room, alone in her booth at Schraffts, observing the city she loves being torn down around her.

Berenice Abbot's study of the Lafayette interior is entirely different from the painting of the same room on the original cover of Powell's The Wicked Pavilion. Painted by Reginald Marsh, a friend of Powell's and another frequent customer at the Lafayette, the jacket cover portrays brightly dressed people crowded around the café table. A rage of color, it is utterly unlike Berenice Abbot's and utterly unlike the misty urban landscapes found on the contemporary Steerforth jackets of Powell's novels. Powell writes the crowd; Brennan writes hotels that have been emptied out. Her hotels, if not destroyed, have been eclipsed, as an architectural space, as a cultural idea, by the slabs of office buildings and apartment complexes erected all around.

One might argue that in pining for Wanamakers, Brennan was writing just the kind of middle-class reminiscence that Wolfe and Yagoda deride, or even that in detailing the

ravages of urban development, she was providing her readers—the women of Larchmont and Dedham—confirmation of what they perhaps already believed: the city had gone to seed. Yet, if Brennan's essays and stories provided confirmation of why women might want to leave the city, they also remind her readers of why in the past, they might have wanted to stay. Hers is a story of a woman traveling through the city, often preferring to eat alone in restaurants and live in hotels. Her work also reflects a tradition at mid-century of women fighting to save the city. It was often middle-class women, in the years following the destruction of Penn Station, who would be some of the most vocal opponents of the policies of Robert Moses: armed with baby carriages, the women of the Upper West Side march to save the playgrounds of Central Park, for instance, or join together, under the leadership of urban activist Jane Jacobs, to oppose Moses's plans to build a highway through the West Village.

Brennan's essays, criticized as demure and two-dimensional, were in fact addressing some of the most significant issues affecting urban life at mid-century: the rupture of neighborhoods in the era of Moses and Jacobs, the plight of New Yorkers losing their homes to the bulldozer, and the demise of the residential hotel. Brennan's work addresses the significance of the hotel for women in the first half of the twentieth century—census reports from 1920 show that for the first time in American history women made up almost half of its long-term inhabitants, a trend that continued into the thirties—and points to the destruction of hotels as one more example of the cultural shift at mid-century towards the reinstallation of women within the home. Her work also foretells, however unwittingly, the homeless crisis that would devastate the city in decades to come. Amidst the rubble of the fifties and sixties lay not just the remains of the middle

and upper class hotels—the Astor, the Brevoort, the Lafayette, the Savoy, the Murray Hill, the Hotel Imperial and so many others—but boarding houses, cubicle hotels, and single room occupancy hotels (SRO's) as well.[49] The destruction of so many hotels in the sixties—as well as the conversion of many residential hotels into tourist accommodations or co-ops in the seventies—would be one of the core factors contributing to the homeless crisis that would devastate so many lives in the decades to come.

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In his book about the forces of New York real estate, urban historian Max Page argues that the central dynamic of urban development in New York City is the relentless cycle of what-goes-up-must-come-down. "It will be a great place," O. Henry wrote of Manhattan, "once they finish it." Any street corner on any day in New York drives this fact home. Take this one: the corner of 34th and Fifth. As I write this, I am in the library

[49] The Hotel Astor, a landmark hotel since its completion in 1909, was demolished in 1966. In its place was built One Astor Plaza, or the W.T. Grant Building, a large office building. One Astor Plaza marked the "dramatic acceleration in the shift from Times Square's principal role as a nighttime world of entertainment to its hitherto secondary daytime role as an office district" (New York 1960 443). In recent years, Times Square has swung back again as a center of entertainment, this time as center for Walt Disney. The space that was once the Hotel Astor is now the headquarters for MTV. The year Brennan published "The Last Days of New York," demolition began on the Brevoort, off Washington Square. It had closed down in 1949, but its famous dining room and sidewalk café remained open until 1953, until it was demolished, along with the Lafayette, to make way for a gigantic fourteen-story apartment house of 301 units, and a restaurant "whose promise to recapture the culinary glory and atmosphere of the old hotel's dining room and café were not fulfilled" (New York 1960 223). Along with these, many other hotels were being destroyed in the fifties and sixties, including some of the grand hotels, like the Hotel Astor and the Savoy. The Manhattan Hotel on Forty-second Street at Madison Avenue was torn down in 1961, replaced by a forty-one-story office building. The Dauphin, on the west side of Broadway between Sixty-sixth and Sixty-seventh streets, went down in 1961. For more on the many upscale hotels that disappeared, see New York 1960 1104.

of a university building, which was once a department store, seated on the spot—I like to think—where once stood a display rack of ladies' hats.[50]

Although change and the endless tearing down of the familiar are permanent qualities of Manhattan, the fifties and sixties were a particularly traumatic moment in the city's history. In the years following World War II, New York saw the burgeoning of the service industry and a dramatic escalation of office construction.[51] "The Great Manhattan Boom" was what Time magazine called the commercial building fever of the 1950s: "Manhattan, written off long ago by city planners as a dying city because of its jammed-in skyscrapers and canyonlike streets, has defied and amazed critics with a phenomenal postwar building boom" (Wallack 89). All across the city new homes were being built—large-scale, high-density low and middle-income housing projects—while others were crumbling, cleared away to make way not only for the new public housing complexes and office buildings, but for expressways and civic centers. The building of the new Cross Bronx Expressway had cut a wide and devastating swathe through the East Tremont neighborhood in the Bronx; down came the tenements of Hell's Kitchen to make way for the Coliseum on 59th Street, for Lincoln Center, for Fordham's midtown campus; whole neighborhoods were razed under the National Housing Acts Title I

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[50] The B. Altman Department Store, originally opened in 1906, was closed down in 1989. In August of 1999, the Graduate School of the City University of New York moved in, another example of a trend in the last twenty years of converting large department stores. See Collins B1.

[51] New York Times, March 29, 1954; New York Times, March 21 (1956); New York Times, January 19, 1954.

provisions for slum clearance, providing new homes for some but forcing many, mostly minorities, to seek affordable housing elsewhere.[52]

In the "Last Days of New York," Brennan writes of watching a demolition from her office on the twentieth floor of a midtown building—presumably The New Yorker offices on 43rd Street. "In the afternoon, when I went to lunch, I found a whole block of Sixth Avenue gone" (218). She experiences the bewilderment common to anyone who has lived, even if only for a short time, in New York City: the missing of the taken for granted, the loss of what you never knew you had. "It is very disconcerting to have a gap suddenly appear in a spot where you can't remember ever having seen a wall" (218).

Later, in her hotel room, Brennan looks down from her window in her Greenwich Village hotel on Washington Square. She describes the square lovingly, the ice cream cart with its striped umbrella, a solitary woman feeding pigeons, the flight of the birds through the trees. And then, briefly, she alludes to talk of Robert Moses's plan to build an expressway: "I heard lately—it is only a rumor, I suppose—that there is talk of cutting an underpass through Washington Square. I suppose that means that part of the square anyway, will be dug up. It will hardly look the same after that."

As she sits in her hotel room and plays with a pack of cards, Brennan looks around and notes the brightly painted walls. She thinks, "they should be even brighter, with more blue in them, so that they'd really assert themselves" (17). Perhaps then, she muses, when the hotel is torn down, "as it is bound to do," the tenants of the new apartment buildings across the street will remark on its color: "I can't afford to start wondering every time I

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[52] Instead of eradicating slums, the Title I policies ultimately created new ones. Because those evicted under the policy—largely Black, Hispanic, and poor—were not given adequate provisions for relocation, many ended up crowding into other neighborhoods, thereby creating new slums. See Caro 777-8 and 966-79.

have the place painted if the walls will speak up after the room has been laid open." In a city fast becoming gaps where once there were walls—a city where homes were being forfeited and forgotten by everyone but their former inhabitants—Brennan asks her readers to follow her example: build houses of cards that will last, "paint their walls in noisy colors to astonish the tenants of high buildings all around" (56).[53]

Eight floors above the park – with even taller buildings looming above—Brennan also stands between street and skyscraper, and as such, between the two antagonistic forces of urban development at mid-century. Morris L. Ernst, the famous lawyer and supporter of the preservationist cause in New York, based his campaign on the notion that "[p]eople cannot take root when they live more than six or eight stories off the ground," a position which according to New York historian Robert Stern would "run as a continuous thread through virtually all discussions of housing and urban redevelopment in the city as a whole" (New York 1960 222). The fight to save the Village was very much a fight to save the street, a fight that at the time revolved around two pivotal figures

[53] This image of the building stripped of its exterior, the walls painted in bright colors is found in other depictions of New York at mid-century. In Jane Bowles's Two Serious Ladies, there is a long passage that describes the same image to nightmarish effect. On a visit to the city, Miss Goering sees from her kitchen a building about to be destroyed and replaced by an apartment building. One wall "had already been torn down. The rooms were still partially furnished and rain splattered the wallpaper. The wallpaper was flowered and already covered with dark spots, which were growing larger." In typical Bowles fashion, horror is magnified through the dryly observant manner in which it is told. At the same time, we are invited to laugh. When Mrs. Copperfield hears the story, she responds: "How amusing, or perhaps it was depressing." Miss Goering then tells of seeing a man come into the room who "walking deliberately over to the bed, took up a coverlet which he folded under his arm" and then "walked around the room aimlessly for a bit" before standing at the edge and "looking down into the yard with his arms akimbo. I could see him more clearly now, and I could easily tell that he was an artist. As he stood there, I was increasingly filled with horror, very much as though I were watching a scene in a nightmare." Mrs. Copperfield asks "Did the man jump?' No, replies Mrs. Goering: the man "just remained there for quite a while looking down" with an "expression of pleasant curiosity on his face" (17). In a sense, this is what Brennan does throughout: horror is magnified through the understated manner in which she tells of the city's destruction: "I suppose that means that part of the square anyway, will be dug up. It will hardly look the same after that."

in the history of Manhattan's urban planning: Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs. Marshall Berman would see them as representing the two poles of modernity: Moses, the Faustian lover of progress; Jacobs, the believer in the integrity of street life and neighborhood.

As New York City Parks Commissioner and as chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority and the New York State Power Authority, Robert Moses had long been hailed as New York's urban savior—the man responsible for the planning of two Worlds Fairs and for the building of innumerable parks, beaches, bridges, expressways, stadia and tunnels. In his capacity as chairman of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, he was also the man behind the Title I policies which cast roughly 500,000 New Yorkers from their homes. And as chairman, he was the man behind the proposed flattening of huge sections of the southeast Village so as to make way for a new residential high-rise enclave called Washington Square South, a plan which included the call for a new roadway cutting through Washington Square. By the time of Maeve Brennan's piece in The New Yorker, some of the city's inhabitants were beginning to alter their opinion of Moses, viewing him less as urban messiah—blueprints raised heavenward, Moses commands: "here we shall build"—and more as bully of the bulldozer. Writing of the annihilation of his Bronx neighborhood, a vibrant community torn apart by the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway, Marshall Berman would liken Moses to the figure of Moloch in Allen Ginsberg's poem Howl: "Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs" (310).

If in Berman's eyes, Robert Moses seemed to represent one principle of modernism—progress at all costs—then Jane Jacobs in her classic The Death and Life of

Great American Cities offered a "source of life and energy and affirmation that was just as modern as the expressway world, but radically opposed to the forms and motions of that world" (316). Moses believed highways and cars could rescue city-dwellers from the dirt, noise, and crowded conditions of the street; Jacobs believed highways and cars were destroying the diverse vibrant neighborhood. Moses revered the philosophy behind Le Corbusier's Radiant City; Jacobs longed to overthrow the "holistic urbanism" that had dominated city planning since the publication of Le Corbusier's Urbanisme in 1929. Moses saw no value in old buildings; Jacobs, who fought for landmark preservation, believed older buildings were as important to the vitality of neighborhood as new ones. Moses wanted to build the Lower Manhattan Expressway through the West Village; Jacobs led the campaign to stop it.

Jacob's argument in The Death and Life of Great American Cities is that most urban planners who had grown up with the Le Corbusier model were, in fact, anti-urban. They wanted to build slum suburbs in the sky, towers that bred crime and isolated people from the street life below. Jacobs wanted a return to the diversity and vibrancy of neighborhood, what she called "the ballet of the city sidewalk" (50). To illustrate her point, she traces a day in her life on Hudson Street, and does so, as Marshall Berman explains, with a "deceptive modesty." She is "just talking about her everyday life" and in prose "that often sounds plain, almost artless." She observes the children leaving for school, mothers making their way to the corner grocery store, old women on their stoops, shopkeepers sweeping the sidewalk, secretaries on their way to work, the myriad sights and views of one street on one particular day.

Brennan's stories about New York are characterized by a similarly "deceptive modesty" and a similar detailing of daily life. She describes a drugstore on Tenth and Sixth, a crowd gathered outside the Criterion Theatre on Times Square, two lovers walking down Sullivan Street, trucks backed up on 48th Street, a couple having lunch at the University Restaurant on 8th Street, a tourist riding a bus up 5th Avenue, people looking out of the window of the Village Smoke Shop. She has a reporter's eye for details of the street, and at times her prose meanders, following the contours of a city stroll. Often, her descriptions also have a kind of writing-exercise quality about them: describe a dress from top to bottom; describe a woman from hat to shoes. (In an interview with Time in 1974, she explains that "if you are writing about people in the street, you have to describe their clothes, all of them. Clothes tell a lot.") She does the same with public spaces: describe a walk from start to finish; describe a street from end to end. Her renderings of the city are marked by a fixation with the specificity of the landscape—the corners and landmarks of the city—as if she is safe in the assumption that her reader knows the city well.

Yet as someone who was perpetually "scurrying out of buildings before the wreckers," Brennan also writes on a darker note. Her matter-of-fact observations of street life often give way to elegy. In her story, "I See you Bianca," the owner of an apartment on 4th Avenue lives in a "neighborhood with too many buildings half up and half down, and too many temporary sidewalks, and too many doomed houses with big X's on their windows" (Rose Garden 250). Nicholas, the owner, builds bookshelves and cabinets and fixes the furnace, hoping to create a "permanent refuge" he knows is bound to fail: "his

house is to be torn down." Looking out his window, he observes what Jacobs called the "ballet of the city sidewalk" down below:

> They stand outside their apartment houses on summer nights and during summer holidays. They stand around in groups or they sit together on the front steps of their buildings, taking the air and looking around at the street. Sometimes they carry a chair out, so that an old person can have a little outing. They lean out of their windows, with their elbows on the sills, and look into the faces of their neighbors at their windows on the other side of the street, all of them escaping from the rooms where they live in and that they are glad to have but not be closed up in. It should not be a problem to have shelter without being shut away (256).

The desire for "shelter without being shut away" illustrates the underlying anxiety found in so many of Brennan's essays and stories. It is a double anxiety: on the one hand, the fear of being forced out of her home, a plight shared by thousands of New Yorkers at the time, and, on the other, the fear of being forced into one, the threat of being shut away, distanced from the activities of the street, sealed up in one of those brand-new beehive cement blocks high above—or obliged to leave the city for good. The desire for "shelter without being shut away" speaks to Jacob's conviction that the rise of the large-scale apartment buildings—suburban slums in the sky—was destroying the "ballet of the street." It also nearly perfectly describes one of the reasons why so many women in the first half of the twentieth century chose to live in hotels.

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Of the many popular themes found in essays and stories about New York City, two perhaps carry the most resonance: that of the jubilant newcomer, gazing like Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway on the "fresh green breast of the new world" (182) and that of the long-time resident, stirring her walking companions (or her readers) with a poignant account of what was here before. Essays like "The Last Days of New York" belong to a tradition,

the best of which is probably The American Scene (1907), the travel journal in which Henry James observes his native city after a twenty-one-year absence. James also sees gaps where once there were walls. He too finds New York diminished, and at the same time, new and enlarged. What figured in his youth as the biggest is now, in 1904, overshadowed by the even bigger: Trinity Church has been "cruelly overtopped," squeezed between those "triumphant payers of dividends," the tall buildings. Genteel Fifth Avenue has become a dress parade of ornate mansions; his boyhood home on Washington Square, has disappeared. The American Scene reads something like a child's nightmare: he wakes to find that the vista has been transformed into a vacant lot, the banister along which he slid stripped of its polish.[54]

This nostalgia and Rip-Van-Winkle disorientation characterizes Brennan's essays as well.[55] Yet there are interesting differences: most significantly, James depends upon the space Brennan loved best to describe the ills of New York. For James, the two images

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[54] James's nightmare was not just about the transformation of the landscape. The tall buildings may have been an affront to his memory of his boyhood home, but he was equally troubled by the changes in the city's demographic that occurred while he was away. On a visit to Ellis Island, James observes the throngs of Italian and Jewish immigrants, and is left with a sense of having "seen a ghost in his supposedly safe old house." A walk through the Lower East Side elicits an eruption of class prejudice: the immigrants on the fire escapes are described as "human squirrels and monkeys," clinging to the cages of "some great zoological garden." There is no escape uptown either. Here, James is accosted by the ill manners of the parvenus. Brennan's pen leads us like the tourist guide with her umbrella, while James wields his pen much the way a man caught in a crowd of unruly children might swing his walking stick: with a wave, he longs for them to disappear. A grown man has suddenly woken to a child's nightmare and finds wild elephants stomping in the nursery, dirty boots tracking mud on the carpet, strangers in possession of the house. Fifty years later—when Brennan was writing her New York nostalgia trip—immigrants were once again pouring into the city, this time Puerto Ricans and Blacks rather than the Irish, Jews, and Italians of James's day, while the white middle class—a class comprising the offspring of James's "aliens" of 1904—were flocking to the suburbs. Brennan, however, makes little comment about the change in the urban population.

[55]It is worth noting, too, that at the same time that Brennan was writing many of the nostalgic essays about New York, she was writing stories of women returning to their childhood homes in Ireland, where she finds the landscape (and people) of her youth unsettlingly altered. See especially her novella, The Visitor, written in the forties and posthumously published in 2000.

marking the end of a way of life—the end of tradition, solidity, sanctity of home and hearth—were the spires of Trinity Church, overshadowed by looming new buildings, and the modern hotel. For Maeve Brennan, what marks the end of her way of life—and the loss of her home—is not the rise of the hotel, but rather its annihilation. James, "the visionary tourist," mourned the "extinction of Trinity"; Brennan, the "traveler in residence," mourned the "execution of the Hotel Astor" (Long-Winded Lady 67). In one essay, she describes what was once the grand entrance of a turn-of-the-century hotel, now a darkly lit lobby, a third of its original size with an old orange leatherette sofa and a badly working elevator.

One of the faults of the hotel, according to James, was that it had led to a new culture of the "gregarious lady." Women now found in the interiors of the grand hotel the very "firesides and pathways of home." Yet this transformation of public space into private space is what many women liked about hotel-living. In a "Snowy Night on 43rd Street," Brennan describes a street where she lived—a back street in a neighborhood bordering Times Square. (Brennan called it "The Latin Quarter," but it is commonly known as Hell's Kitchen.) Simply a description of her street and of an evening alone observing the regulars at a small restaurant, the Café Etoile, the story ends with Brennan alone in the hush of her hotel room down the street. The story illustrates one of the benefits of hotel living: the ease with which one can move between private and public space. Hotel life fulfills both the need for a room of one's own and the need to socialize down below—in the lobbies, cafes, restaurants, and bars. James may have criticized women for turning the public space of the Grand Hotel lobby into the "firesides of pathways of home," but

Brennan calls the "small, inexpensive restaurants" the "home fires" of true New Yorkers (The Long-Winded Lady 2).

Brennan was not alone in preferring hotel life to a permanent apartment or house. In an article, "I Like a Hotel" published in The Sunday Worker in 1939, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a Wobbly activist in the thirties, writes of seeing "lots of old ladies in hotels. People pity them. It's quite unnecessary. They enjoy it immensely. It's a sort of 'sit-down strike!' "

> When a committee puts me up at a hotel, I don't say "Bourgeois," scornfully. Not me! I luxuriate, because it doesn't happen often. I think 'Well, this is a sample of the future, what every woman ought to have, a room to herself and release from domestic tasks.' (Baxendall 245)

For some women, hotel living was a sit-down strike; for others, it meant greater access to street life; and for others, it provided safety, respectability. In the nineteenth century, hotels were disreputable—no nice girl would be seen in one. In the twentieth century, the residential hotel often signaled respectability, a safe haven. Downtown artists could find cheap (and decent) lodgings at the Vanderbilt or the Murray Hill; single working women, widows (and divorcees) found refuge in the apartment hotels in the West Side and Upper East Side. There were also the women's residences, which catered solely to women, and, like the doorman building today, provided parents the reassurance—probably never *wholly* justified—that their daughter was out of harm's way.[56] Often, too, they were the only affordable housing for single woman. Rosalind

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[56] There were also a number of men's hotels designed on the club model in the twenties, but most of these failed because, as Robert Stern points out, they were considered "faintly Victorian." Women's hotels fared much better, a more sophisticated version of the old fashioned boarding house: a step forward, not a step backwards. Nearly all were built in the late twenties. Along with the Barbizon there was the women's club residence at 18 Gramercy Park South, built in 1927, the Allerton on 57th Street built the same year, and The American Women's Association Building at 353 West Fifty-seventh Street, built in 1929. Containing 1,257 bedrooms and a 1200 seat theater,

Rosenberg points out that "[a]side from these residences, living on your own in New York was impossible to afford" in the late twenties and early thirties "because even women who were college graduates were limited to low paying jobs" (Byron Al).[57]

If the hotel itself provided a sense of safety, the network of Manhattan hotels also gave women a city bounded by a safe and familiar landscape. Maeve Brennan's hotels, for example, signify a social network, a connect-the-dot red line that maps a delimited city that is bounded by the hotel world of three neighborhoods. She writes the backstreet hotel world of "The Latin Quarter"; she writes the hotels and inexpensive restaurants of Greenwich Village, often tracing the same route from Hotel Earle to University Restaurant; and she writes the upscale Midtown hotels. She wonders whether she should go along to the Algonquin, "which is so small and familiar, or to walk a little farther, and

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as well as a cafeteria, lounge, indoor swimming pool, and bowling alleys, the AWA building was the largest, and "aimed to duplicate the success of the Barbizon with a lower class market." (New York 1930 195) There are few residential hotels left—The Gramercy Park residence is still in existence. So too is the Webster Hotel on 34th Street, founded in 1923 by a Macy's executive for the department store employees. While no longer associated with Macy's, the residence continues to offer the same services to single, working women: full maid service, breakfast and dinner, a patio deck, and "the beau parlor," a room to entertain male visitors. The Webster still aims to be affordable: a room costs $213 a week. Men may visit until midnight.

[57] For the upper class girls, fresh out of Vassar or Smith, there was also the more luxurious, clubhouse hotel. The most famous of these, the Barbizon on Lexington and East Sixty-third Street, offered a dormitory feel—Vassar extended—and breathtaking views on an eighteenth-floor roof deck with lounges, a restaurant, and a solarium (New York 1930 191). If in the early days the clubhouse hotels seemed to represent the chic, modern city girl—albeit a privileged one—by the fifties they came to symbolize something antiquated and repressive. And dull. The heroine of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, for example, wins a magazine scholarship and is put up at the "Amazon." Modeled on Plath's own memories of living at the Barbizon, The Bell Jar tells a story of suffocation and of "girls at posh secretarial schools like Kay Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class... and were waiting to get married to some career man or other" (4). The experience nearly pushes the heroine off the roofdeck's edge. Dan Wakefield, in his memoir of New York in the fifties, describes his courtship of a girl at the Menemsha Bar in the Allerton House, noting condescendingly, that it is "a residential hotel where girls just off the train to New York could stay and be protected while they learned how to fend off the evils of the big city," a place that he, as a recently arrived Greenwich Villager, deemed both "suburban" and "bourgeois" (212).

east, to the Biltmore, which is so large and familiar" (8). Her New York is narrow one: she "has never felt the urge that drives people to investigate the city from top to bottom. Large areas of city living are a blank" (6).

Dawn Powell also delimits a woman's urban map by recording the movement from hotel to hotel. In her case, the map records a journey of urban exploration and sexual freedom. In Angels on Toast, the heroine Ebie Vane takes a nostalgic tour of Greenwich Village; she starts at the Vanderbilt, "where you could lunch with one man and see over the balcony rail the man you were going to dine with that night." She moves on to the Murray Hill Hotel, where she remembers "in the dining room, publishers, agents, traveling salesmen" and "a pleasantly out-of-town flavor to it that made you able to guess the type of man he was if he suggested this restaurant" (145). She ends up visiting her mother—a "New Woman" of an earlier era—in one of the older hotels, who, along with the other "old birds," finds the hotel bar a space where she can be out in the world without having to leave the front exit.

The hotel was also an important space for writers. Dawn Powell was not alone in finding it an ideal space for mixing work and social life. Other artists felt the same, although for some it was less the possibility for social contact than the freedom to focus on their work. Georgia O'Keeffe preferred the Shelton Hotel to an apartment because the hotel, with its maid service and public dining room, left her unhampered. Dorothy Parker lived at the Algonquin because "among institutional furnishings she felt free and organized" (Meade 123). Even Dawn Powell ended up appreciating not just the social life afforded by the café, but the pleasures of living upstairs. After being kicked out of her apartment on 9th Street, she moved with her husband to the Madison Square Hotel at

Madison and Twenty-sixth Street (now demolished)—which though "in the suburbs" above 14th Street was "a good place to live" because it was a "restful and practical way to live and enormously economical" (Letters 261).

Because the hotel was central to many women's experience of New York in the first half of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that women (and women writers) were often the most outspoken in recording and regretting its destruction. (Women were also, as Robert Caro points out, some of the most outspoken and earliest critics of Robert Moses and his development plans. The thirties novelist Fanny Hurst, one of Moses's most vocal foes, was involved in the first fight to save the playgrounds of Central Park.)[58] Ruth Wittenberg, a longtime Village activist, widely credited with being the most important force behind the successful effort to grant the Village landmark status in the fifties, recalls that there were "two spots in the Village that everybody in our crowd knew, the Brevoort and the Lafayette, which were the centers of political and writing activities." The destruction of these hotels "really changed the Village. The physical

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[58] Moses plan to build a parking lot for the Tavern-on-the-Green in 1956 in place of a playground in Central Park was one of the first of his actions that would incite a city-wide uproar, and the fight to save the park was instigated by a number of Upper West Side mothers as well as by a number of well-known residents living on 67th Street, including those who lived in the "literarily oriented residence hotel, the Hotel des Artistes" across the street. Living at the hotel at the time was Howard Chandler Christie, the artist, and Mae Murray, the "Merry Widow" who "had once been Hollywood's most glamorous star." She lived in an "attic formerly a chambermaid's room" at the top of the hotel. On the same street, also lived the now elderly Fanny Hurst. As Robert Caro explains, the fight to save the park was successful partly because it had harnessed the support of so many well-known artists and writers and show-business people living in the neighborhood. Fanny Hurst wrote the original petition against the parking lot. She would become as identified with the fight to save the park as the mothers with their baby carriages lined up at the edge of the construction site. Moses, when speaking to reporters, even refers to her: "Oh who are these critics anyway?" he demanded. "Troublemakers. A small, noisy minority. You have Mr. Issacs and the Citizens Union and these childless women howling about their non-existent children. Take a woman like Fannie Hurst. Where are all her children? I've never heard of her having any children." This attack would lead the Post to respond with its own comment: "It had not previously occurred to most Americans that they had to give birth before disputing Robert Moses." See Caro 985, 1001.

aspects of it have a real effect on the population. People weren't isolated in apartment houses where they didn't know what was going on next door. They collected in small cafés" (442-443).

The same year Brennan published "The Last Days of New York," Eudora Welty wrote a short skit entitled "Bye Bye Brevoort," to be produced as part of an Off-Broadway Production in 1956.[59] In the skit, three "old relics" (Millicent Fortescue, Violet Whichaway, Agatha Chrome) throw a tea party in their room upstairs at the Brevoort, not yet reached by the wreckers dismantling the building. Fitted with hearing aids, they remain unaware that the building is being torn down around them. Portraits are falling; tea tables shaking, and still the women continue to think it merely "modern times!" "The noise is frightful," says Fortesque: "The vehicles! I can't think why they don't make vehicles go around the island!"—a fitting complaint, considering that Robert Moses couldn't think why the city didn't make the vehicles go across it. The skit ends with the wreckers carrying the shrieking ladies, still in their rocking chairs, out unto the street. The closing scene of Dawn Powell's The Wicked Pavilion, written the year before "The Last Days of New York" and "Bye Bye Brevoort," tells a similar story. After a farewell banquet in the Café Julien dining room, made up of "real estate men commemorating their grief in selling the Julien to a mysterious concern rumored to be about to change it into apartments," the wreckers arrive. Two of the hotel café regulars stand in the street and watch the Julien come crashing down, gouging another gap in the familiar landscape and casting its regular patrons, writers, painters, and hangers on permanently back onto

[59] "Bye Bye Brevoort" was one of the skits in "The Littlest Revue" which opened at the Phoenix Theatre in New York City on May 22, 1956. The play was not published at the time—although in 1980, Palaemon Press put out a limited number for the subscribers of the New Stage Theater in Jackson, Mississippi.

the street. The description of the gutted-out interior echoes Brennan: "it was disconcerting to look through the paneless café windows straight into the open garden," the canopy "a tumbled pile of rags," "the letters 'Café Julien' almost indiscernible under rubble," and the laurel vines "a great heap of gleaming green leaves" still "breathing and quivering with life" (178).

For Powell, the destruction of these hotels marks the end of a social world, the end of her subject: café society in Greenwich Village. Yet, compared to Brennan's observations on the city, the wrecking ball scenes in the final chapters of both The Wicked Pavilion and The Golden Spur are marked by a more bemused, shoulder-shrugging acceptance—as if Powell had all along expected it. As if she even understood it. That the hotel—in Henry James's view, the very symbol of the American city's passion for impermanence, the home of the "provisional spirit"—should in the end be the victim of this same spirit is an irony that Powell could not have helped but recognize. One might even say that the transformation of a thriving hotel into rubble is partly what her novels are all about. The Sisyphean rhythms of her striving characters—their greed, their inability to commit—parallel the endless building up and tearing down of the city in which they live, a what-goes-up-must-come down state of affairs.

Yet, the final scene of The Wicked Pavilion also records the effect of the wrecking ball on the people who reside upstairs. Along with the artists and writers watching the Julien come down there is also a "rouged and dyed old lady elaborately dressed in the fashion of World War One," dabbing at her "mascaraed eyes with a lacy handkerchief" (320). She has come not only to watch what had been her home for over thirty years transformed into rubble, but to guard the welfare of her birds; they had made a nest

outside her upstairs window, right above the café. One of the workmen in the demolition team makes his own observation: these women, the "old birds," were being sighted, looking lost and confused, everywhere around the Village. One could see a whole "nest of them" feeding the pigeons in Washington Square Park.

In eulogizing the New York hotel, writers like Brennan and Powell record not only the end of a period of voluntary homelessness for women in the city, but also the beginning of a period of enforced homelessness for thousands of New Yorkers. The dramatic depletion in the number of residential hotels, SRO buildings, and rooming houses in the sixties and seventies would ultimately be a root cause of the homeless crisis of the eighties. Since the turn of the century, residential hotels had been one of the main housing options for poor single adults and childless couples. In the fifties, when New York began to adopt its policy of "deinstitutionalization," the YMCAs and SROS and cubicle hotels had also been a resource for discharged patients of state psychiatric hospitals. Yet by the seventies, more and more homeless people were on the street, and the principal cause of this was that the affordable residential hotel was becoming obsolete.

One of the problems was that residential hotel life depended on old constructions. After 1930, almost no new residential hotels were built, partly because the "sheer primacy and publicly secured profits of suburban single-family houses overshadowed most notions of investing in downtown apartments or residential hotels" (Groth 9). The single-room housing stock also became increasingly regulated; in 1955 changes in housing codes barred the conversion or construction of new for-profit single-room

housing.[60] In the sixties, many older residential hotels were being destroyed to make way for office buildings, and by the seventies, those that were left were swiftly being converted into higher-cost housing, especially in areas that were gentrifying like the Upper West Side.[61] Between 1972 and 1982, 100,000 SRO units disappeared.[62] The only option, then, for many of the poor was the street or the shelter.

Brennan's phrase, "It should not be a problem to have shelter without being shut away," seems eerily prescient of what would happen to so many New Yorkers in the seventies and eighties. It was also eerily prescient of what would happen to her. By the late seventies she began experiencing psychotic episodes. Gardner Botsford recalls that she began to obsessively listen to Billie Holliday records, and once, she called him from Yaddo, the writers' colony, convinced that the people there were engaged in a plot to harm her. At one point, she was found sleeping in the ladies room at The New Yorker. She was institutionalized for a period, then released. For a time, she seemed to be taking her medications, but when she went off them, she stopped speaking to her friends at The New Yorker. She disappeared, until in the early eighties she was sighted by one of her

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[60] See O'Flaherty 175-6.

[61] In the seventies, with New York City teetering on bankruptcy, the city did a number of things to try to attract and hold the middle class. One of these incentives was the real estate abatement program (J51), which provided real estate tax abatements for ten or fifteen years on the conversion of older buildings into residential use—the conversion of rental units into co-ops. While this had benefits—a rise in home ownership in the inner city—it also meant that many single room occupancy hotels on the Upper West Side, mid Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn were converted. See O'Flaherty, 57-59 and 48-51. Also see Hoch 239-240.

[62] In his study of Single Room Occupancy hotels, Anthony Blackburn records that the number of single-room units fell from about 129,000 in 1960 to 25,000 in 1978. By the late seventies, the erosion of hotel life was especially dramatic. A 1979 study of "lower-priced hotels," including SRO's as well as other facilities like the YMCA, shows that the number of residents in these kinds of lodging places had fallen from 35,000 to 23,000, from 1975 to 1979, a dramatic decline in only four years. See Blackburn 1-8.

colleagues at the magazine near Rockefeller Center among a group of homeless people, feeding the pigeons, just like one of the ladies she had described from her window in "The Last Days of New York," and like one of those "old birds" Powell describes adrift in Washington Square. Although no one knew for sure, it was thought that the "traveler in residence" may have been homeless. A receptionist at The New Yorker noticed a bag lady in the waiting room one afternoon but had no idea who the woman was, and only later realized that the woman was once a glamorous staff writer for the magazine. Brennan briefly returned to Dublin to live with relatives, but then with no warning called a taxi and moved into a hotel. She did the same in Chicago, after a brief period living with her brother. Every once in a while, there would still arrive at The New Yorker a "Talk of the Town" piece, with no one sure where it had been written or where she was. Maeve Brennan died in a nursing home in 1993, with no recollection that she had either lived in New York or written for The New Yorker.

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Another women writer at mid-century who also depicted a ravaged urban landscape—and did so partly out of her own psychological trauma—was Shirley Jackson. If Maeve Brennan, in eulogizing hotel life, was reminding women of why they might have wanted to live in New York, Jackson, while more gothic than genteel in her fictional approach, seems to more aptly fit the model of the writer attempting to appeal to a suburban reader who might be looking for confirmation that the city was no longer an amenable place for women to live. Of all the post-war New Yorker women writers, Jackson was also by far the most popular with a wide American audience. She wrote prolifically—five novels, two of which were turned into movies, and nearly sixty stories,

some published in "high" middlebrow magazines like The New Yorker, others in magazines like Good Housekeeping and McCalls. Her most popular collection of short stories—and the one most revered by the critics—was her first collection The Lottery or, The Adventures of James Harris published in 1949. The New York Times Book Review included the anthology on its list of the "Best Fiction of 1949." It was written at the same time John Cheever was publishing stories in The New Yorker about an uninhabitable Manhattan[63] and at a time when, as Betty Friedan would argue, women's magazines seemed to no longer want to serve up stories of urban delight and autonomy. Many of Jackson's stories in the anthology are urban tales of cities decaying and women disempowered: they struggle to cross a busy street, smoke endless cigarettes in their studio apartments, and fear that any moment the buildings will fall in around them.

One of her stories, "Pillar of Salt," for example, is really a story of agoraphobia. It opens with the classic urban fairy-tale: the woman on a train headed to the city. Margaret, the central character, however, is not a young girl but a married woman, traveling with her husband from their New Hampshire town for "two unbelievable weeks" in New York City. Margaret exults. She has left the children behind, packed the suitcases with pretty summer dresses, and she cannot get a tune out of her mind.

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[63] Cheever's stories of New York, most of which were originally published in The New Yorker, are mainly included in the collection The Enormous Radio and Other Stories, which came out in 1953, four years after Jackson's collection. In these stories, people want out, and eventually, Cheever would take them out, turning his focus in years to come to the region for which he is best known, suburbia. But then, while Cheever preferred the suburbs, he was just as hard on them. The same could be said of Jackson. She could never live in New York, but she was also critical of small-town life. What is "The Lottery" except a tale of small-town cruelty? Her own life in the country doesn't seem to have been much of a picnic either. (According to her biographers, not only was she the main breadwinner—the stories paid the bills—but she did all the housework in their eighteen-room house, brought up four children mainly on her own, and did all the driving. Hyman would never learn. Often abusive and rarely helping with domestic chores, Hyman was, according to the biographers, more hindrance than help.

> It came from the days when she was fifteen or sixteen, and had never seen New York except in the movies, when the city was made up, to her, of penthouses filled with Noel Coward people; when the height and speed and luxury and gaiety that made up a city like New York were confused inextricably with the dullness of being fifteen, and beauty unreachable and far in the movies.

To her husband, she confesses: "I just love trains." The opening lulls the reader into expectations that will be completely overturned, for like most of Jackson's stories about New York, the urban fantasy goes flat; the Hollywood expectations come up against the reality of a city described in bleak decay. The first few days in Manhattan are picture-perfect—sightseeing excursions, breakfast at an automat, a visit to the Empire State Building. From here, things begin their slow disintegration. Margaret begins noticing things, little things—the taxi door held on with a piece of string, the layer of dust on the furniture in the New York apartment. She and her husband go to a party—not held in a Noel Coward penthouse—but in a walk-up with "narrow and dark stairs," on a dangerous street where, as one guest informs her "somebody is always getting killed." From here, things only get worse: Margaret notices "buses cracking open in unimportant seams, the leather seats broken and stained" and buildings whose "corners … seemed to be crumbling away into fine dust that drifted downward" (243). By the end of the story, Margaret stands frozen at a street-corner, transformed into a "pillar of salt," petrified by the rush of traffic and the onslaught of people. She looks across the street and sees buildings that seem to be literally falling down on her: the "sills dissolving" (249). While living in New York, Jackson began to believe that tall buildings were at any moment about to fall. So extreme was her agoraphobia, that in the late forties, she finally left New York for Bennington Vermont with her husband, the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman.

If one central image in Jackson's urban fiction is a landscape dissolving, another is the vision of the single middle-aged woman estranged and alone in her studio

apartment. Maeve Brennan writes of the pleasures of solitary walks around the city, the daily life of the city street. Jackson writes the dreariness of a day cleaning up the kitchenette and a map of Greenwich Village or midtown that is less about the comfort of a familiar landscape as it is a nightmarish tracing of the same worn path.[64] The New York stories often depict urban dwellers obsessed with order. In "Pillar of Salt," the word "arrangement" comes up again and again—the arrangement of the buildings she sees from her window, the arrangement of her clothes, her suitcase, her thoughts. Jackson's characters are forever smoothing their daybeds, making pots of coffee. They are obsessed with the ordering of their dishes, the contents of their bureau drawers. But it is not just the characters who are domestic arrangers, laying out their dishes and following the routine, but Jackson as well. She spends seemingly inordinate time on all the details of a dress or of a piece of furniture and does so in a very orderly way, the prose a matter-of-

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[64] While Jackson's stories are nightmarish tales of lost identity and urban loneliness, they are also sharp and satirical. In one sense, they are written more within the tradition of Powell or McCarthy than Brennan's fiction. Most often, Jackson satirizes the dreams that brought women to the city in the first place. She pokes fun at girlish New York fantasies, just as she had in her own way poked fun at Margaret's fifteen-year-old song on the train. "The Villager," for example, tells of a Miss Clarence, a woman who at twenty-three came to New York to be a dancer because:

> everyone who wanted to study dancing or sculpture or book-binding had come to Greenwich Village in those days usually with allowances from their families to live on and plans to work in Macy's or in a bookshop until they had enough money to pursue their art. Miss Clarence, fortunate in having taken a course in shorthand and typing, had gone to work as a stenographer in a coal and coke concern. Now, after twelve years, she was a private secretary in the same concern, and was making enough money to live in a good Village apartment by the park and buy herself smart clothes. (49)

Miss Clarence who has given up art for smart clothes carries around with her "a copy of The Charterhouse of Parma, which she had read enthusiastically up to page fifty and only carried now for effect."

fact recording: "David put his bag down on the table and put the butter away in the refrigerator and the rolls in the breadbox. He folded the empty bag and put it in a drawer in the kitchenette. Then he hung his coat in the hall closet." ("Like Mother Used to Make" 45). Jackson uses the mundane, however, to horrific effect: "[W]here magical realists often begin with an absurd premise and develop it realistically," writes Darryl Hattenhauer, "Jackson often begins with what seems to be mundane—and unravels it" (3) Suddenly the neatly laid table is in disarray and taken over by a complete stranger. Jackson's ordering of the city is less about measuring and marking a route as the reigning in of an overwhelming sense of panic. Middle-aged, lonely, longing for husbands, Jackson's heroines are afraid to go outside. Instead of sitting in cafés to pass the time, they organize their kitchenettes.

CHAPTER SIX:

Sense and Sensibility in the Fiction of Three New York Writers

In 1946, Scribner's published a short novel—barely 120 pages—written under the pseudonym Isabel Bolton. The novel was called Do I Wake or Sleep, and it was set in 1939. The plot is slim: it opens at the French Pavilion of the World's Fair in Flushing Meadow and ends on a park bench on 57th Street. There are just three characters—Bridget, a stunningly beautiful European exiled to America because of the War; Percy, the alcoholic novelist in love with her, and Millicent, the narrator, whom over the course of just twenty-four hours we follow as she roams the city. Millicent descends into the darkness to watch a sneering Hitler on a newsreel; she rides a taxi to a cocktail party; she shops at the dressmakers. All the while, through the filtering hum of the city, she dreams her youth.

Little happens outwardly in this novel—the central climax is a cocktail party brawl—yet when it was published, Do I Wake or Sleep earned some hefty praise. Diana Trilling considered it the best novel that had come her way in the four years she had been reviewing fiction for The Nation. Even more dramatically, Trilling regarded Bolton, "whoever she was," as "the most important new novelist in the English Language" (Reviewing the Forties 196). So smitten was Edmund Wilson with the beauty of the novel—a "little crystal" "cut to roundness and smoothed to convexity," "exquisitely perfect in accent" with "every syllable fall[ing] as it should"—that as legend goes, he fell

a little in love with the author and planned a meeting (Vidal, "A Lost World" 134). Gore Vidal, playfully envisioning the encounter in a 1997 essay, imagines Wilson's shock on discovering that his "young woman"—a girl he dreamed might be "equal in beauty to her prose"—was one Mary Britton Miller, a genteel, New England-born lady age sixty-three ("A Lost World" 135).

Do I Wake rather quickly tumbled from these flattering heights into obscurity, a state that lasted until 1997 when Steerforth Press once again came to the rescue, bringing it and two later novels, "The Christmas Tree" (1951) and "Many Mansions" (1952) back into print.[65] What Steerforth had done for Dawn Powell they now did for Bolton, a writer who, at first glance, seems Powell's fitting companion on the display table. Both lived in the Village; both were writing Manhattan in the forties. Both share an eye for the modern city. Like the Manhattan Cycle, Do I Wake nudges us to take notice of all the familiar details: General Sherman's statue on Central Park South; the Paramount clock; the Griffin Theater on 7th Avenue; the plane trees lining Fifth Avenue.

Yet, while they may write the same city, Powell and Bolton did not write in the same camp. Bolton's New York is out of focus, quivering: more pointillist than to the point. The city is blurred by love: a flickering explosion of birds; a sidewalk "seen through the tender lace of leaf and mist and blossom"; the adulation of a skyscraper. Everywhere the vertical is glorified. What Powell saw as dismal shafts of steel Bolton transforms into "choirs and choruses of lighted windows, human hives and cells swarming … cities of glass and iron—flickering, fluttering like bees, like fireflies" (17). On a speeding taxi-

[65] While it was largely assumed that Do I Wake was Bolton's first published work, it was in fact her third. Under her own name, she had published two collections of verse—Menagerie (1928) and Sanctuary (1932) as well as an autobiographical novel about her childhood, In the Days of Thy Youth in 1943. The three novels published under her pseudonym seem to herald a new voice and a new subject, Manhattan.

ride through the city, Millicent and Bridget do not look out at the crowds but up to the sky. Rockefeller Center reminds Bridget of Blake's "Give Me My Arrows of Desire"; for Millicent, it is like "a fountain straight into the sky—upward it lifted heart and eye" (34).

Relying on an entirely different recording instrument from Powell's—one that transforms the grit of realism into dust motes, emotive particles floating in midair—Bolton writes in a style attuned to the nuances of modernism, high high up. Here was a Virginia Woolf sentence and a Mrs. Dalloway Day.

The homage to Woolf partly explains Trilling's and Wilson's appreciation for the novel [66]—the sense of reading something new and yet doubly familiar: a style (and story) with obvious literary antecedents about a city wholly familiar—*theirs*. The novel does not begin on the way to a flower shop, but at the Futurama. A diplomat's dinner party in London is in this case a Martini lunch; a walk through Bloomsbury an imaginative stroll through Rockefeller Center with its "skating rinks, flights of stairs, fountains playing, dolphins spouting, flowers blooming, gardens on the asphalt, gardens in the air" (53). Millicent even bears Manhattan regrets. If Clarissa's are the misgivings of a London society hostess, married perhaps to the wrong man, Millicent's are the qualms of solitude and of a career "grinding" out "articles and inferior little stories" for New York magazines.

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[66] Nearly all of Bolton's critics and admirers, then and now, have noted the influence of Virginia Woolf in this novel In her Los Angeles Times review, Vivian Gornick also notes the allusions to Woolf and to the "poetic, interior, reverie-bound prose" found in the works of Jean Rhys, Ann Kavan, and Djuna Barnes. Woolf, however, was not the only influence noted by critics. Both Diana Trilling and Edmund Wilson recognized traces of Henry James. In his review of the novel, Wilson, for example, considers Bolton's Jamesian reliance on the "device of the sensitive observer who stands at the center of the action … the filter of whose consciousness alone the happenings of the story reach us" as pure Henry James (Review 23). Others, Doris Grumbach most recently, have drawn parallels between the novel and the work of Elizabeth Bowen.

This double familiarity, this overlapping of literary and urban pleasures, also explains the delight so many readers took in Michael Cunningham's The Hours, a novel with a similar rendering of Clarissa adrift in Manhattan. While more intricately plotted than Do I Wake, there is the same invitation to read and walk at the same time, to be the flaneur moving through New York or Los Angeles with well-thumbed book in hand—glancing up and down, back and forward at what one knows so well. Bolton's next two New York novels are written along similarly modernist lines. In The Christmas Tree Picasso is evoked from a penthouse window; in Many Mansions, we get another woman's introspective stroll around the city.

Another and related explanation for the fascination with Do I Wake may have been that it contains not just modernist reverie but also a clearly stated manifesto, a mini-essay on a subject bound to interest the American literary critic—the dismal state of American fiction. Over lunch at Chamborg, a Manhattan restaurant famous for its European atmosphere and perfectly cooked sole, Bridget, the European exile, gives a speech on what she considers the failings of the American novel. Bridget orders an aperitif; her New York companions order a Martini, a cocktail she deems altogether befitting the American character: the "quickie" she calls it, producing swift and effective results. American literature, she believes, is similarly overwhelmed by "quickie" tendencies. Breathlessly in love with the city, she is disappointed in the literature depicting it. "American novelists seldom went deep into the realities of character." Instead, they came "boiling up out of the decades, out of the twenties, out of the thirties—out of Pittsburgh, Chicago, the Deep South – New York, New England" to deal more with "circumstances, places—epochs, environments." The American novel misses the "inner, spiritual realism"

found in European novels, "almost as though the American artist stopped short of handling it." There was too much moralism; too much of an "almost neurotic determination to lay the raw nerve bare"; and too much "[f]alse sophistication":

> think of The New Yorker. Was there anything like that anywhere on earth, brilliant, brittle, sensitive to the point of private language—terrifying? It scared the daylights out of her. It was sick, it was neurasthenic; it was old before it had given itself a chance to enjoy its youth. ... All those desolated dogs—the devastated men—the devastating women; the battles of the sexes and the souls; they'd almost finished her. And, she might add, they weren't at all what she had crossed the ocean expecting to find. (91-92)

Why Bridget asks, when spared the tribulations of the European Wars and the European horrors, did the American writer so readily give in to the neurotic and personal, the grim surfaces, James Thurber and his desolated dogs? Why was there no modern day Walt Whitman to "do some shouting, to exult about it all?" Was there "not anyone to hand at least one nosegay to the architects—the engineers" of this "young, vigorous, exhilarating city" of "glass and iron and bright illuminations"—no one to celebrate the Boulder Dam, the T.V.A., the Futurama? She asks that American writers turn their gaze back across the Atlantic. Look to Proust, for from the experience of reading him, Bridget felt "she'd been endowed with a perfectly new apparatus for apprehending the vibrations of other people's souls." It was also Proust whom she believes signaled the culmination of the European novel, which had "about run its course, completed the cycle. What more was there to say, when it came down to talking about the human heart?" (83). For American writers, however, it was a different story. They hadn't yet touched the human heart; Proust was the unexplored frontier. Though he "wrote about a dying civilization, about himself, and was dying too," Proust still managed to keep the "personal note of anguish—despair" out of it, to remain "positively enchanted" by life. But where, in New York fiction, was the enchantment?

Do I Wake is itself, of course, an effort at fulfilling Bridget's injunction. Bridget and her friends had planned to lunch at the Algonquin; they'd met there before changing their minds and escaping in a taxi-cab across town. They flee the fast talk of the hotel to have a leisurely conversation at a French restaurant. The novel does the same, turning away from the satirical tradition to which Powell, Parker, McCarthy, and Wharton belong for an exultant Whitmanesque taxi-ride through a vertical landscape, a Woolfian ramble; the pleasures of Marcel Proust. What Bolton asks for is just the kind of rendering of urban experience that Mary McCarthy inveighed against in her essays "Characters in Fiction" and "Fact in Fiction."

Yet despite the obvious nod to Woolf, Whitman, and Proust, Do I Wake or Sleep also yields inconsistencies, a kind of divided voice. Bridget's speech, for example, is crisp argument—literary criticism inserted within reverie. It comes as a surprise, an essay in a novel almost wholly marked by the lyrical.[67] Bridget also plays satirist: just before and after her speech, she looks around the dining room. Drawing upon the very qualities she denigrates in American fiction, she does a quick measuring up, ticking off the types seated at the other tables. The Proust-loving European reads the room. Meanwhile Millicent, a journalist, modeled as one critic has pointed out, as a sort of Dorothy Parker figure, takes the dreamlike walks and plans to write just the kind of novel Bridget had celebrated. She is New York journalism gone soft; Millicent too seems to carry the weight of the sorrow that Bridget has brought with her from Europe (her daughter is back in Europe, Jewish and in danger). Yet Bridget's voice is all ebullience; Millicent's

[67] The novel is also self-referential—a novel about itself. While familiar enough to novel readers today, it was an approach considered rather unusual at the time. "Is it poetry? Or is it an essay?" asks Hortense Calisher. Diana Trilling could come up with no other word for it other than "intellectual novel," a category that normally didn't appeal to her.

enchantment is wistful, and sometimes dark. She delights in the spring day; she imagines the skyscrapers crumbling to the ground.

Millicent is everywhere in New York women's fiction after the war. A version of her wanders through a museum in Jean Stafford's "Children Are Bored on Sunday" (1948) and takes a wistful early morning walk to church in Stafford's "Between Porch and Altar" (1945); She sits in ancient, decrepit hotel lobbies and bars in Maeve Brennan's Manhattan short stories; She stumbles home from her department store job to her daybed and disappointed dreams in Shirley Jackson's "The Daemon Lover" (1947) and "Trial By Combat" (1948).[68] These versions of Millicent, however, do not quite fulfill Bridget's fantasy of a new American literature. For one thing, she is often found in just the magazine Bridget would rail against—The New Yorker. The ethos of The New Yorker had by mid-century turned away somewhat from the desolated dogs and devastating ladies that filled its pages at its inception. Brittle flapper sophistication had given way to a more introspective and understated ethos. While some have characterized The New Yorker story as more character-driven than plot-driven, aiming for an effect "most nearly presentational—an act … largely apprehended as implication and an event as pure experience" (Hassan 188)—one might also characterize it as a merging of two traditions: satire and sensibility.

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[68] Like Millicent—like the century itself—the heroines of these stories are often middle-aged. Shirley Jackson, for example, often wrote about women in their thirties or forties who have settled into lives very different from the dreams that brought them to the city in the first place. They do not fulfill the Hollywood fantasy—the young, eager girl recently arrived in Manhattan—anymore than Bolton would fulfill Edmund Wilson's of a newly arrived New York novelist. There is a certain irony in this—for past middle age, one begins to gain just what Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock argue is missing from the experience of female flanerie: invisibility, immunity from the gaze. As most women can probably confirm, while this state of affairs comes as a relief—at last, one can stare—it also can provoke a new indignation: the gaze is sometimes a sorely missed street phenomena; the subway journey drearier; invisibility not all it was cracked up to be. One wistfully recalls those days when one entered and was seen.

Jean Stafford, who in the fifties published some thirty stories in The New Yorker, perhaps best exemplifies this combination of satire and sensibility. Joyce Carol Oates described Stafford's fiction as "an art that curves inward toward the meditative, the reminiscent" and yet it is introspection with a "dry and ironic eye." (Wilson, Jean Stafford 137). Olga Vickery writes that Stafford is "firmly committed to the ironic version of the external world of manners and the internal world of psychological process (Wilson 61). Chester Eisenger calls Stafford a "true daughter of James," her fiction "a combination of the psychological novel and the novel of manners in work wrought with careful attention to the craft of writing" (Wilson 13). Stafford, says Ihab Hussein, is part Jane Austen and part Marcel Proust.[69] There's the keen eye for the surface detail, yet it seems less a matter of pinning down for type and more a patient accumulation of sharply observed impressions for quivering psychological effect. Her fiction is also indebted to Freud. In her essay, "The Psychological Novel," Stafford argues that while Freud "has made our moral attitudes more humane and he has modified our habits of observation." [70]

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[69] Although she lived most of her adult life in Manhattan, Jean Stafford was never entirely at home there. "The crying, thirsting, burning need of my life when I was a student," she confesses in an essay "was to get to Europe. To a western child, growing up and reading at the time I did, England was far more familiar than New England. Nor did New York beguile me—I didn't give a hang about Broadway ("Miss McKeehan's Pocketbook" 102). She was particularly uneasy within the New York Intellectual scene. Married to the poet Robert Lowell during her early years in the city, she found herself a regular on the New York cocktail party circuit, an experience that is the subject of her first short story for The New Yorker, "Children Are Bored on Sunday" (1948). Written while Stafford's marriage with Lowell was dissolving and not long before she would check herself into a clinic for alcoholism, "Children are Bored on Sunday" is one of her only efforts to fictionalize the estrangement she felt within the New York literary world (and with Lowell) and one of the only stories that directly addresses the problem with alcohol she battled for most of her life.

[70] Stafford was, however, never interested in playing Freud. Her aim was both to avoid sentimentality and at the same time avoid the cure or diagnosis. "One thinks at once of Proust's painstaking and loving examination of his past experience, his patient exploration of his relationships … One knows that his diagnostic methods cannot be entirely different from those of the psychoanalyst who rejects no part of his patient's reflections," yet "[b]ecause Proust is an

Yet while Stafford seems to heed Bridget's call to write a more Proustian (and Freudian) rendering of city life, she misses Bolton's Whitmanesque exultation. The qualities found in Millicent's excursions to Rockefeller center—the flaneur exults—are largely missing. Instead, we get Manhattan decaying. Stafford's streets are shabby and dark landscapes from which her solitary women retreat, often into an even darker bar. Mrs. Chester Ramsey in "The Captain's Gift" (1946) is "an innocent child," for whom the outside world has grown increasingly unreal. Seemingly oblivious to the passing of time, she lives in one of the few private houses left in her decaying inner-city neighborhood, ensconced amid Victorian antiques and family portraits.

Stafford's fiction also misses Bridget's judgments. Like any good psychologist, Stafford believed that a writer must "remain impartial and not sit in moral judgment upon their created people but allow the reader to draw his own conclusions It was one of the reasons she so disliked the fiction of say Sinclair Lewis, who "all but froths at the mouth … against the outrages of her characters" ("The Psychological Novel" 224). Unlike her contemporary, Mary McCarthy, Stafford believed judgment had no place in fiction. And if Mary McCarthy tried to bring journalism (and essay) back into the novel, Stafford believed in keeping them separate. In her essay "Miss McKeehan's Pocketbook," she alludes to this divide:

> I have two studies in my house now. In the upstairs one, I am a novelist and short-story writer. I work there in the morning, generally wearing a skirt, a smock, a Windsor tie, and a wig with a black velvet bow pinned to the front of it. In the afternoon I work downstairs where I am a journalist, making the mortgage money to keep a roof over the upstairs ivory tower. Down there I wear

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artist, his novel transcends its technique and is a novel and does not smell of the clinic," a transcending that she believed was rare: "few writers can use so subjective a system and remain as objective as he does, and his imitators seem generally to fetch up a morass of inartistic and embarrassingly personal soul-searching which is not any newer and not any less sentimental than The Sorrows of Werther" ("The Psychological Novel" 227).

> denim trousers, a blue work shirt, laced half-boots that resemble those worn by a wardress in a Soviet penal institution, and a green visor. (103)

In her later years, Stafford stopped writing short stories entirely (previously she had left the novel to write short stories) and supported herself mainly on non-fiction. Most of her critics and biographers interpret this as a "deterioration of Stafford's creative powers" and blame it on her drinking and on her financial difficulties: she needed the money, and journalism paid (Ryan 104). The passage makes clear that Stafford knows what is what. Journalism is downstairs, its purpose "making the mortgage money to keep a roof over the upstairs ivory tower." Journalism is also severity, the woman who looks like a man, a Soviet penal colony wardress wearing denim trousers and work-boots. Upstairs is where she wears a skirt. Yet, this may have been less Stafford's own feeling about her work and more the need to align herself with the attitudes of the day. Maureen Ryan argues that the late non-fiction doesn't actually point to creative deterioration. If one looks at her prose in the reviews and articles—elliptical, parenthetical, filled with asides—one even recognizes a kind of release. Always careful in her fiction to remain objective about the subjective—keep ego out of it, bury the satirist in the oblique—here she lets loose a forceful intellect and an unmistakable sense of humor.

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Publishing in The New Yorker at the same time as Stafford was Hortense Calisher, a writer whose approach to describing the city experience was quite different from Stafford's. Many of her early stories for the magazine are characterized by a similarly quiet, objective recording of daily life, and often they tell the story of a city indifferent

and in decay, a woman lonely in her apartment.[71] Yet the woman suffering alone in her apartment is really not Calisher's theme. Calisher, the "quintessential New Yorker, entirely comfortable on its streets, in its apartments, lovingly, almost patriotically wrapping the whole island in the elegant tissue of her words (Grumbach 56), wrote a number of early autobiographical stories about children growing up Jewish on the Upper West Side, and later, in her eleven novels, four novellas, a collection of essays, and an autobiography, she moves beyond the neighborhood to write a more expansive city, covering "a broad sweep—from Fifth Avenue to the seedy warehouses downtown" (Silver 45). Calisher also defined the theme of her work as a kind of voluntary homelessness, "not so much about place as it is about transportation"—the movement away from "enclosure" toward "the realization that there is no place in which to be at home" (Herself 347). Two of her later novels, The Trolley Car and The Railway Police are both novels of travel, trains and journeys within the city and beyond it.

The fiction is also characterized by a flight from a literary enclosure: most obviously, the short story form, particularly the kind published in The New Yorker. In her autobiography, Calisher writes a short essay in which she describes five favorite novels. On is Charlotte Bronte's Villette, a novel full "of that coziness which the psychological novel has lost, a novel truly crammed with the furniture of daily living," a novel that feels like walking into "a series of genre pictures, into parlors, salons, kitchens, schoolrooms..." (Herself 289). She includes Turgenev's Fathers and Sons; she also

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[71] The obvious example of this is "The Scream on 57th Street," published in 1962 and probably Calisher's best known short story, certainly her most anthologized one. Mrs. Hazlitt hears a scream. The neighbors claim not to have heard it. No one will take responsibility. By the end of the story, after long nights discovering "that the best way to learn how to live alone was to come to the place where people really were" (484), she begins to almost long for the scream as an answer back, some sign that the city is listening.

includes Isabel Bolton's Do I Wake or Sleep, not just because of the "breathless, cumulative phrases, flashing with participles," not just because of the "fusion of the sensations peculiar to the city strung upon the nerves of its inhabitants," but because it yields both essay and poetry. Millicent takes a Proustian (and Jamesian) walk around the city; Bridget holds forth on the faults of the American novel. One is recorder, the other judge. Calisher wants both.

In her autobiography, Calisher complains that too often her female contemporaries in the fifties—and she points directly to Jean Stafford—were writing of a "reality 'objectively ... that is from a recording sensibility but not a judging one" (Herself 381). Jean Stafford believed that "it is not the business of the writer to judge—that is the business of the reader" (Wilson, Jean Stafford 96). Calisher felt just the opposite. She had little patience for this moment of "pure art" when "formal resolutions were gauche and moral observations of any kind déclassé" (Herself 382) and the "literary artist ... found himself ruled out from direct statement" (383).

> In 1948, it was astonishingly true that the reigning ideal of the "proper short story—not only at The New Yorker ... but generally in America—was the absolute reversal of what I have called ego-art. Author should not appear. A story, a novel, possibly even a poem, was designed ... to drop from a hand which was nowhere.... later when I was more knowing if not wiser, I would term this method "the oblique." (332).

Ego was something Calisher liked to see in writing. The passage above comes from her autobiography, entitled Herself. The problem with The New Yorker, she complained, was that it invariably edited out the endings of her stories, where the conclusions and judgments might be found. In fact, she joked, The New Yorker edited out everybody's endings; there was even talk of putting out an anthology: missing egos assembled. Her

problem—or the problem The New Yorker had with her—was that she "had a rhetoric not always calm, though it did tend to collect."

> Stories? When I wrote them, I wanted to end them, and often in a burst did so. At the time this was felt to be unsuitable. Why? Because in her way, though still so anonymously, author did appear. I had violated the oblique, as I was increasingly to do, to the point of finally breaking away into other forms, novel to essay, where there was more natural space for it (386).

Calisher's desire to liberate herself from the enclosure of The New Yorker short story—by the end of the sixties, she would stop writing for the magazine—is really born of the same impulse that sent Mary McCarthy to Venice to write her view from the gondola. Like McCarthy, Calisher wanted to recover the direct statement. Like Mary McCarthy, she missed "the voluminous ramshackle world-of-comment of the Russian nineteenth-century novel." Like McCarthy, she wants the Return of the Author. Filled with mini-essays and authorial assertions, her fiction is characterized by what one character in her first novel, False Entry (1961) called a "monologuing eye."

Yet Calisher takes her dissatisfaction with the oblique to a place that McCarthy could not have approved—straight into Henry James. Her novel, The Railway Police, opens very much the same way as McCarthy's "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt"; a woman on the train detailing the surfaces of those around her. She describes the passengers on the train: "trim salesmen with their noses elongated by money-sniffing (the real money flies the air, of course), aunties in hats-on-a-visit, a ruck of the indefinable, middling personages who do crowd-service, starred with the one-sweatered girl who is always going down the aisle, jiggle-breasted, to the Women's" (87). She describes her own costume, "silk suit sharp-creased" and "all underwear appropriate to leg-crossing on platform, handbag by X, shoes by Y—all a perfect beige armor stopping just short of the

creature-skin that no Florida can tan, inside which the little lady sits, quiet and not always sad, in her altogether, of that tint so much too nacreously fair."

The passage clearly illustrates the difference in McCarthy's and Calisher's style. What most critics note about Calisher is her overwrought, long-winding style, her "rococo writing filigreed over hairsplitting thought" (Dennis 34). Morris Dickstein defended her:

> There are many writers who feel that the prose of a novel should be a transparent window on the world that the novelist should never draw attention to herself or stand between his readers and his characters. I suspect Hortense Calisher never dreamed of being this kind of novelist. She belongs to a different tradition descending from Henry James, in which the writer's own complex intelligence—his humming eloquence his subtle knowingness—becomes essential to his equipment as a storyteller.[72]

In this sense, Calisher was not attempting the same view on public life as McCarthy or Wharton or Powell. They may have wanted the return of the Author but sought (or at least claimed to seek) a kind of distance; they did not want to draw attention to themselves or stand between reader and writer. One of the difficulties with Calisher's fiction is that the authorial insertions and Jamesian contortions often bury the city in a tissue of words: "incident is subordinate to insight," Robert Phillips writes, and Calisher's "landscape is more often than not a psychescape of the protagonists." Her assertions, too, begin to read more like "prophetic revelation," which as Doris Grumbach points out, "does not extend well." A passage from her novel Journal from Ellipsia, a monologue on the human condition, illustrates this:

> On, on, on and on; and on, and on, on. The paradox about distance is that quite as much philosophy adheres to a short piece of it as to a long. A being capable of setting theoretical limits to its universe has already been caught in the act of extending it. The merest cherub in the streets here, provided he has a thumbnail—and he usually has ten—does this every day. He may grow up to be

[72] From a review of The Bobby Socker, New York Times Book Review 30 Mar. 1986, 5.

> one of the fuzzicists, able to conceive that space is curved, but essentially—that is elliptically—he does nothing about it. He lives on, in his rare, rectilinear world of north-south gardens, east-west religions, up-and-down monuments and explosions, plus a blindly variable sort of shifting about which he claims to have perfected through his centuries, thinks very highly of, and, is rather pretty in its way and even its name: free wall—a kind of generalized travel-bureaudom of "across." It follows that most of his troubles are those of a partially yet imperfectly curved being who is still trying to keep to the straight-and-narrow—and most of his fantasies also. His highest aspiration is, quite naturally, "to get a-Round"; his newest, to get Out. (Journal from Ellipsia 89)

Like Edith Wharton before her, Calisher is rebellious; she wants to "get Out." The irony is that her great rebellion takes us back to where we began: James and the misty landscapes of the psychological interior, the elliptical curves circling below the surface. Although intent on demolishing of certain narrative boundaries—the word "prison" frequently gets used to describe styles, forms, places—Calisher's liberation comes in embracing the very same tradition Edith Wharton had run from some sixty years before.

EPILOGUE

The subject of this dissertation—travelers in residence—strangely reflects a theme of my life in New York. I am always moving. When I wonder where the time has gone, I remind myself that I have lived in as many apartments in this city as the years of my stay. There have been, I think, sixteen addresses. Only some can I even clearly recall. After that first one in Queens—the Irish playwright down below—there was the apartment on West 11th Street I shared with two Yale graduates who only approved of me as the third because of the books I absentmindedly removed from my bag on meeting them. If we shared literary tastes, we shared nothing else. I moved. There was the apartment on East 22nd Street, a studio so small that when I opened the sofa bed, I could touch all four walls—reach into the closet, reach into the kitchen to turn on the stove. The windows looked upon a mercilessly gray wall. When I covered the walls with mirrors, instead of hoped-for expanse, I got an unremitting vision of just me, wherever I looked.

There was the apartment on west 56th Street, over an old French restaurant that had been around since the forties (now closed). It had all the details of Maeve Brennan's Café Etoile—the black and white tiles, the tin ceilings, the old Broadway stars hunched at the bar. Next door was a dance studio, loud enough that from my kitchen I could practice the rudiments of the tango. There was a fire in the apartment below, the clothes in my closet melted, and I moved again.

My favorite apartment was a dot at the northernmost edge of the map. I lived in Inwood, on the very highest hill, only a block from where the island fell away. On Autumn days I heard the disappointed cries of Columbia football fans. The city fell

below me like a sheer drop. I liked the A train and the wind on my face in taxi cabs along the West Side Highway when I came home late at night. I liked to imagine myself looking down on Manhattan. I also felt left out. Once, at a poetry retrospective at St. Mark's Church, I heard Philip Lopate recalling the late sixties and of living in Inwood and of feeling cut off from the scene, an endless A train away. He moved, and so did I.

The dissertation was written in two apartments: the first was on 8th Avenue and 55th Street, a sublet passed on to me by a producer for Public Television who had gotten a job on a soap opera. He had, like so many mid-century writers, taken his trade to Hollywood. He also had a yen for an earlier New York, filling his apartment with posters of the Titanic, ashtrays from the Stork Club purchased on Ebay. Unlike all the others, this apartment had a view. (A line from Maeve Brennan: "A view is where we are not. Where we are is never a view.") My view looked down on the Hudson and on the remains of what Brennan called "The Latin Quarter," low tenement buildings, the stage-set of West Side Story, what was left after Robert Moses came through. One of the newer buildings, a block of windowless concrete, seemed always just in the way of the sun as it set. At the top of the building, visible all night, was the BMW logo, a blue neon disc. My mother, when she first visited, mistook it for the moon.

Now, I live in Brooklyn on a street named Lafayette Avenue. It is the noisiest apartment of the sixteen, below my window a bus stop and a subway line, the screech and rattle a constant invasion. I cannot, as John Cage has urged, transform the car alarm into music. There is a café down the street owned by a French expatriate, and it is called the Café Lafayette. (I go there all the time, but unbelievably, the connection between it and Powell's café in Greenwich Village occurred to me only just the other day.) My

neighborhood, once a red light district, frequented by sailors and Brooklyn Navy Yard workers—my building used to be a rooming house for prostitutes—is now in the throes of gentrification. I participated, and like most gentrifiers felt resentment only weeks after moving in, at others doing the same. My corner is where the homeless have converged—the neighborhood squeezing them ever more tightly within just this one block. My corner is also the location for a barber shop, a Mexican restaurant, and two bars that are unequivocally hip. So far, they have managed to attract not only the young invaders, with their messenger-bags elegantly slung over the shoulder, but also the boys from the Walt Whitman Projects on the other side of Fort Greene Park. I live in the urban mix. From my bed late at night, I have listened to countless courtships—courtships between two worlds—taking place down below. From my window, I have also watched the residents of an entire building being evicted.

All those changing views and changing homes meant things were always merging. The views on New York today and the views of the "permanent visitors" and "travelers in residence" writing at mid-century kept overlapping, opening things up. The novels shaped what I noticed from my window or on my walks around New York—the remnants of the West Side, the bar below my apartment on 56th Street, the older Greenwich Village ladies with their jet black hair. There are hardly any left. My first friend in New York was one and probably had as much to do with my romance with the period as anyone else: Her name was Dee, the chain-smoking lady in pearls at the reception desk of one of the first publishing companies I worked for; she was known to slip to the ladies room to sip decorously from her pewter flask. After she befriended me, I would go to her apartment on West 15th where she would drink Scotch, and I would lie on her floor listening to

stories of the boy from the WPA and of her first kiss in a snowstorm on Washington Square Park in the fifties. Afterwards, we would go over to a dusty, antiquated Italian restaurant called Gene's on Eleventh Street and the elderly waiters in their red jackets would play court to her, and she, sharp-witted and always funny, would tell stories I'd heard many times but was happy to hear again because they always got better. Gene's is still there and surprisingly still the same, and so, thankfully, is Dee.

There are other connections as well. One of the subjects of this project, for example—the desire on the part of so many mid-century writers to flee interiors, to escape small towns and claustrophobic apartments, to change scenes, to meet new people, to *get out*—most certainly relates to my own divided nature: a bookish person and a social one, a person who often feels cooped up, longing for the street, longing like Philip Lopate to be part of the scene. (Reading this over, I couldn't help but notice my choice of words throughout—she "escapes" and she "flees"—a kind of fairy tale in which mid-century damsels are perpetually taking flight from novels and stories, apartments and small towns.) Even my desire to go to graduate school in New York undoubtedly relates. If Hortense Calisher's argument was that "the university had become willy-nilly the new café," then the café was a place I had never entirely wanted to leave. Nor, to take solipsism all the way, can I overlook the fact that at the same time I was attempting to write about women fleeing from interior novels or from the obliqueness (and bleakness) of New Yorker short stories, I was also attempting to make my own escape from what to me was an inhibiting genre—the dissertation. Reading all those mid-century writers expanded the view, but like that mirrored apartment on 22nd Street, it also seemed to keep reflecting it back my way.

In other ways, my relationship to New York has changed. I think of McCarthy's metaphorical urging: leave New York after 35. (I'm past that marker.) I think of a passage I like from Italo Calvino's essay, "Hermit in Paris."[73] He writes about his love for Paris, where he lived off and on, and how his relationship to the city had changed. He had come to the city as a young man through books, through Baudelaire and "the great novel cycles, Balzac, Zola, Proust" (167)—but admits that he no longer experiences the city in the same way: "I no longer see it in the spirit of discovery of the world, which is the adventure that belongs to youth." His apartment in Paris, in fact, had become a kind of retreat, a country house in the city, a place to read the city more than walk it. On the connection between the space of writing and the space of the city, he reflects that:

> There is an invisible, anonymous point which is the one from which the author writes, and that is why it is difficult for me to define the relationship between the place where I write and the city surrounding that space. I can write really well in hotel rooms, in that kind of abstract, anonymous space which hotel rooms are, where I find myself facing the blank page, with no alternative, no escape. Or perhaps this is an idealized condition which worked most of all when I was younger, and the world was there just outside the door, packed with signs, accompanying me everywhere; it was so physical that all I had to do was detach myself from it just a short step to write about it. Now something must have changed. I write well only in a space which is mine, with books to hand, as though I always need to consult something or other. Maybe it is not so much for the books themselves, but for a kind of interior space they form, as though I identified myself with my ideal library. (168)

These days, the books and the movies (which drew me to New York in the first place) are often more compelling than the street outside. Like Calvino, I am becoming more dependent on my books. I feel I need to consult something or other. Walks around New York—where nearly every street corner yields a memory—are now becoming more

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[73] Calvino, as it happened, had a passion for New York – put "New Yorker" on my gravestone, he once told his wife. As the author of Invisible Cities, however, he could never write about New York because New York was too visible. In this, "the simplest city…the epitome of a city, a kind of prototype of a city, as far as its topography, its visual appearance, its society is concerned," there weren't enough secrets (Hermit in Paris 168).

a travel through the past than the sense that around the corner, the new awaits. I am getting tired of moving, but I am thinking about doing it again—this time a back apartment, where the screech of the bus is muffled, where I can write, where the street is less of a distraction. Sometimes, though, there is a desire—I still have it—to be closer, closer to the world "just outside the door, packed with signs, accompanying me everywhere" and not farther away.

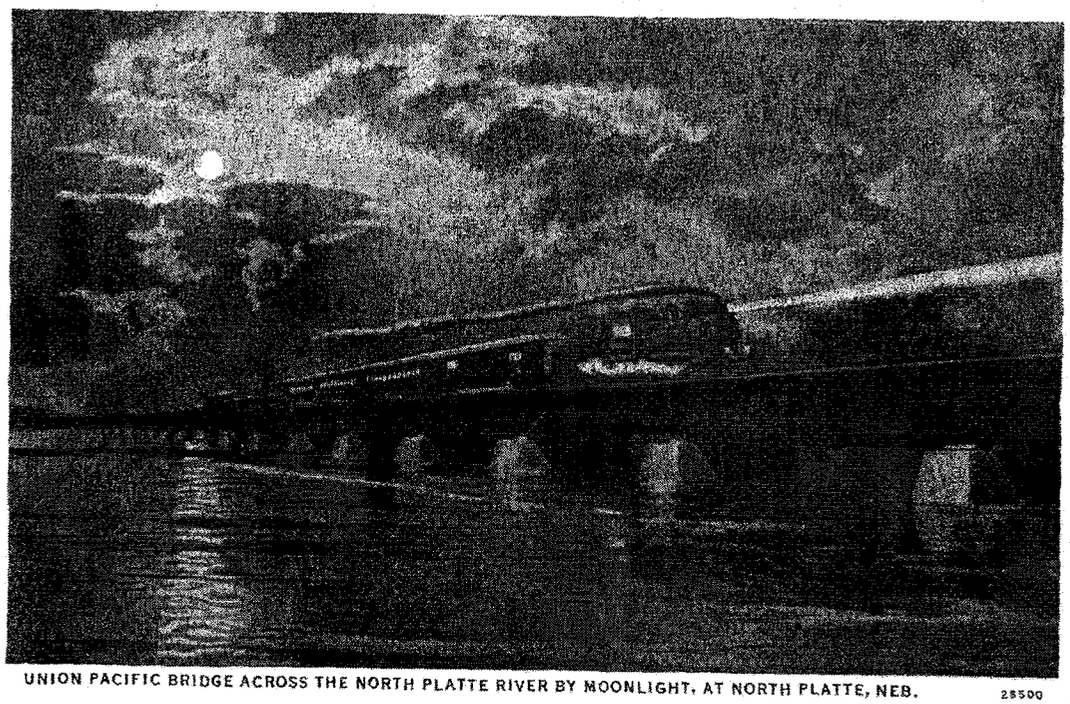
If the restlessness—the hotel spirit—of these mid-century writers appeals, so too does the restlessness of their writing. There's something about the struggle on the part of Powell and McCarthy and Brennan (and Wharton before them) to find a voice, a style, a form that interests me. Will it be satire or sensibility? Will it be journalism or fiction? Will it be the lyrical or the matter-of-fact? It was a moment—the in-between, moving towards post-modernism—full of drama, crisis, decision. For women writers, most of all, there was all that navigating around the question of gender: how to write like a woman, how to write like a man, how to write like oneself. There was also all that emphasis on what was serious and what was not. Will it be highbrow or middlebrow? Will it be magazine or novel? That this divide should interest me also used to puzzle me. We are past all that, aren't we? I remember a comment from someone in a graduate school class long ago. Isn't what you are talking about kind of "over," she asked. Embarrassingly, it wasn't over for me. Not only was there something in my relationship to the mid-century city that drew me back, but there was something in the struggle to locate voice, style, subject—between and against—that felt familiar, personal. The reasons for this, no doubt, are myriad and complicated. But there it was. I was looking for the voice, the form. I felt compelled to choose.

All of this came clear to me, bizarrely enough, while standing at a book table at the 92nd Street Y a year ago. There was a blizzard, but somehow I had managed to make my way uptown to hear two writers I love—Jan Morris and Shirley Hazzard—give a reading. Neither are New York writers, not even American ones, although I came to Morris after reading her book Manhattan '45. Morris, a journalist who has written Manhattan, Venice, Hong Kong, the Middle East—who seems to have gone everywhere and written everywhere—writes in a snappy, sharply observant style. Next to her was Shirley Hazzard, a novelist known for her exquisite sentence, for her prose-like-poetry, her images so carefully crafted that sometimes they hurt. She was known for being—they still used that word—a "feminine" writer. Why they were paired I do not know: perhaps it was their interest in travel. Or maybe the organizers of the reading were as struck by the contrast—in style and in form—as I was.

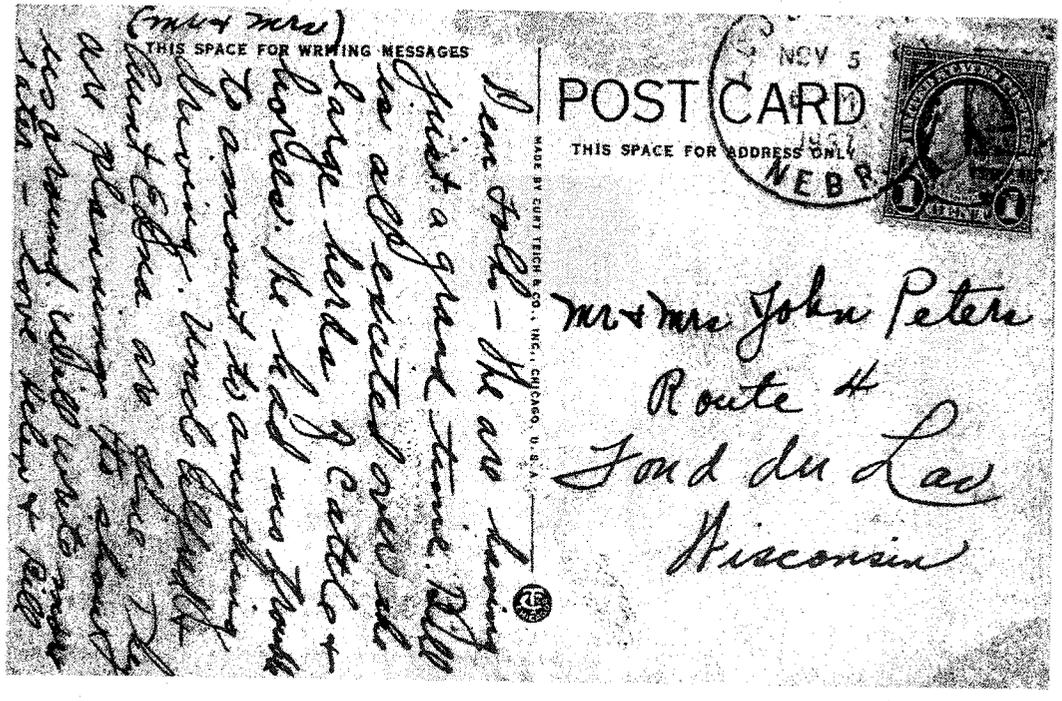
I watched the lines forming for books, mostly made up of older women, older than me, weighed down by scarves and coats and books. The room was stiflingly hot. I got in line and then realized I had only enough money with me to buy one book. I had to choose, and I wanted them both. There I was, in effect standing just where so many women writers found themselves over sixty-five years before: feeling forced to choose. There was even all that mid-century back-and-forthing about gender, skirts and pants, low and high. (Jan Morris—formerly James—had once been a man. She had a sex change in the seventies, and for a second I wondered—was that what the 92nd Street Y was trying to pair off, Hazzard a "feminine" writer against Jan once James?)

And then suddenly, it became clear to me that I had been spending too much time in the fifties. I didn't have to choose. Whatever reason I had felt the need to in the past

would have to be worked out. Jean Stafford might have felt the sharp divide, but it didn't have to be mine. I could work it out and work it all in—Jan Morris and Maeve Brennan; Mary McCarthy and Shirley Hazzard too. I could follow my journalistic impulses and my novelistic ones as well. I put both books back on the table. It was time to leave, the room was too hot, and out there was a thrilling blizzard and the 21st century.

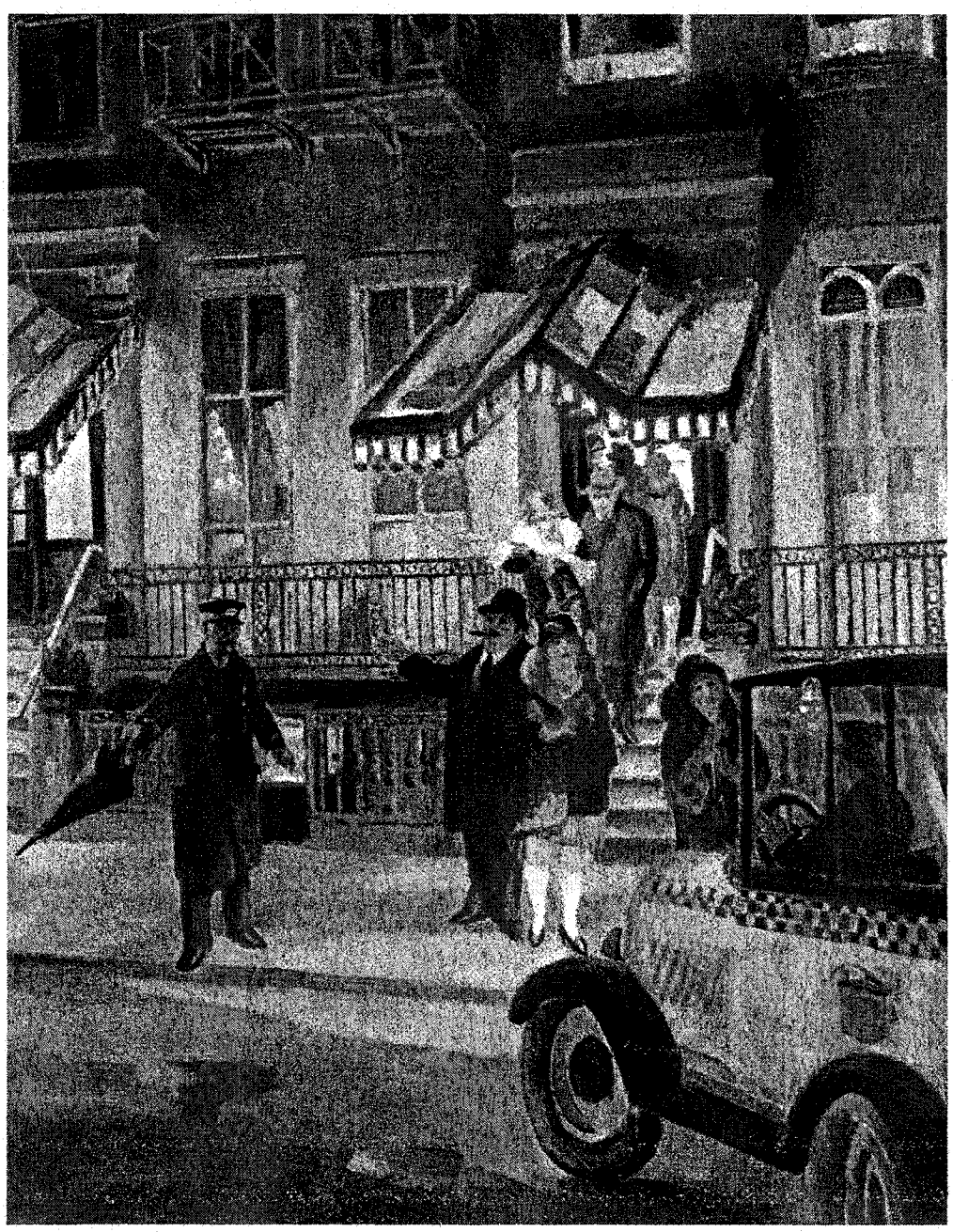


UNION PACIFIC BRIDGE ACROSS THE NORTH PLATTE RIVER BY MOONLIGHT, AT NORTH PLATTE, NEB. 28500



Hand-tinted photograph. Postcard dated 1937. Made by Curt Teich and Co., Chicago, Illinois.

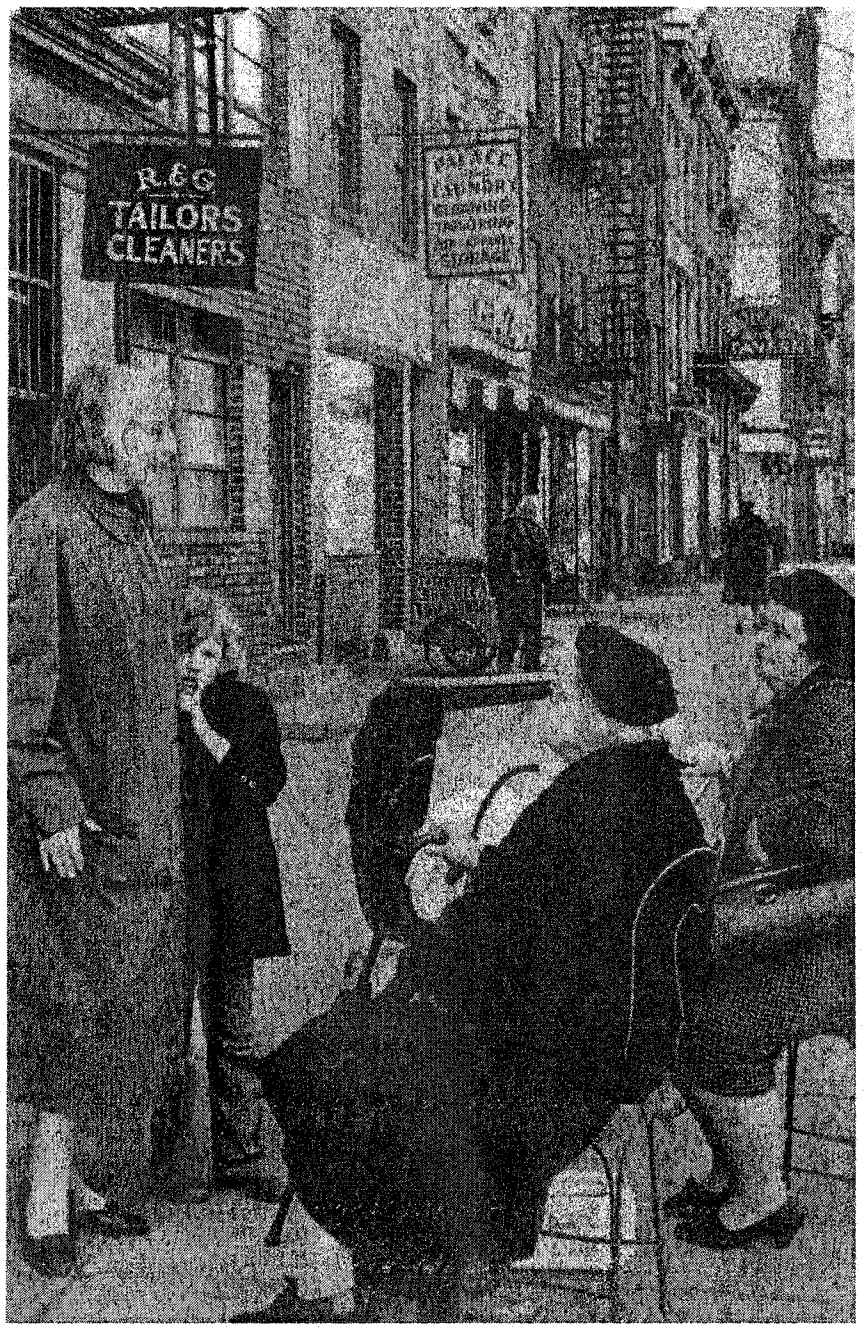
Cindy Sherman. "Untitled Film Still #21." 1978. Reprinted in The Complete Untitled Film Stills. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003.



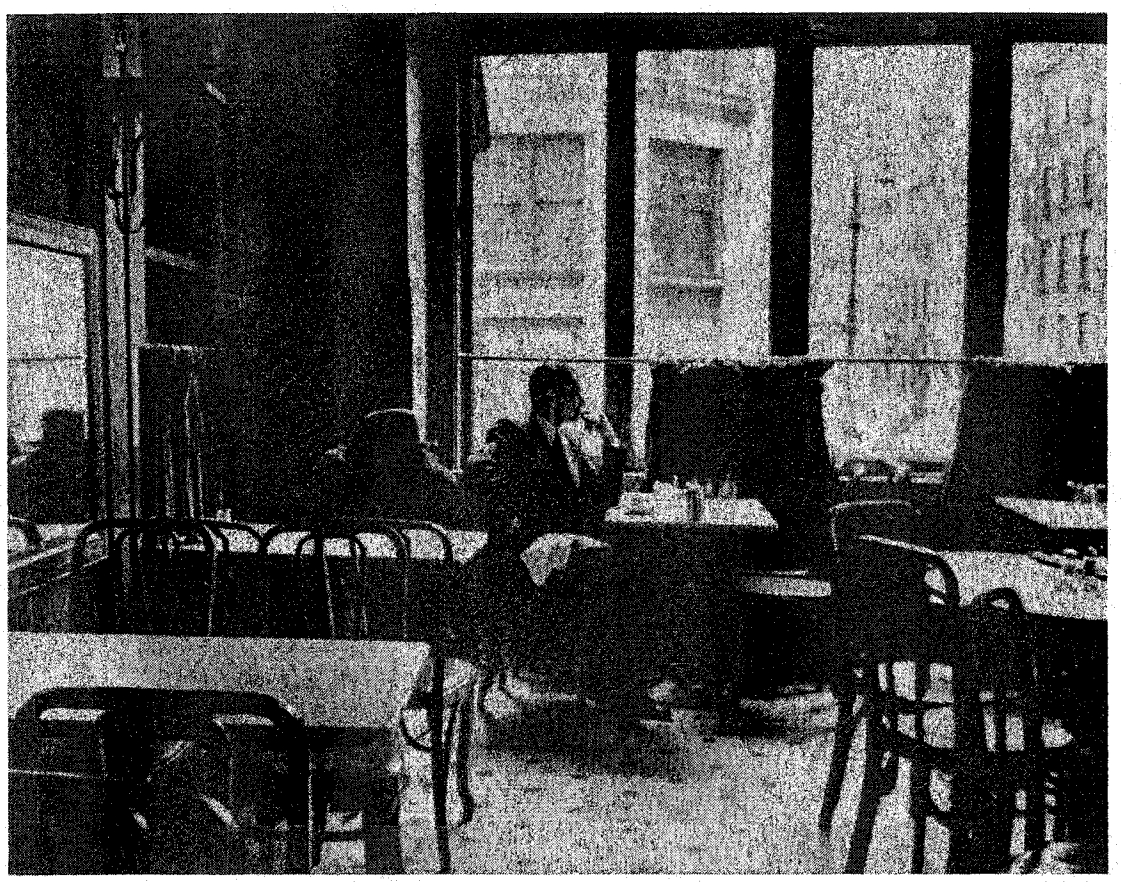
"The Lafayette" by John Sloan, 1928. In the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Painting by Reginald Marsh for the jacket cover of the first edition of The Wicked Pavilion (1954) by Dawn Powell.

Jacket cover photo for The Company She Keeps, reprinted in Frances Kiernan's Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.



Photograph of Jane Jacobs, standing on Hudson Street. Originally published in the New York Times, 1961. Republished in Stern, Robert A.M., Thomas Mellins and David Fishman. New York: 1960.



"Café Lafayette." Berenice Abbott, 1948.

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