

“NEWS THAT STAYS NEWS”:
TRANSFORMATIONS OF LITERATURE, GOSSIP, AND COMMUNITY IN MODERNITY

Lindsay Rebecca Starck

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2016

Approved by:

Gregory Flaxman

Erin Carlston

Eric Downing

Andrew Perrin

Pamela Cooper

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ABSTRACT

Lindsay Rebecca Starck: “News that stays news”: Transformations of Literature, Gossip, and
Community in Modernity
(Under the direction of Gregory Flaxman and Erin Carlston)

Recent decades have demonstrated a renewed interest in gossip research from scholars in psychology, sociology, and anthropology who argue that gossip—despite its popular reputation as trivial, superficial “women’s talk”—actually serves crucial social and political functions such as establishing codes of conduct and managing reputations. My dissertation draws from and builds upon this contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship by demonstrating how the modernists incorporated and transformed the popular gossip of mass culture into literature, imbuing it with a new power and purpose.

The foundational assumption of my dissertation is that as the nature of community changed at the turn of the twentieth century, so too did gossip. Although usually considered to be a socially conservative force that serves to keep social outliers in line, I argue that modernist writers transformed gossip into a potent, revolutionary tool with which modern individuals could advance and promote the progressive ideologies of social, political, and artistic movements. Ultimately, the gossip of key American expatriates (Henry James, Djuna Barnes, Janet Flanner, and Ezra Pound) became a mode of exchanging and redefining creative and critical values for the artists and critics who would follow them. From abroad, moreover, these writers examined various definitions of “Americanness,” and much of their work contributed to Americans’ increasing sense of self-awareness and self-confidence on the international stage.

How is modernism the product of gossip? What does the relationship between literature and gossip illuminate for us about the experience of community and nationhood in modernity? Can literature *itself* be considered gossip? Just as importantly: can criticism? These are the questions that propel me through the project.

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INTRODUCTION

“Good evening Mr. and Mrs. North America, from border to border and coast to coast and all the ships at sea!” - Walter Winchell

Walter Winchell, America’s first and most infamous gossip columnist, spent most of the 1930s and 1940s at Table 50 in New York City’s Stork Club. There he ate and drank for free while everybody who was anybody waltzed in and paid him court. Hollywood stars, socialites, musicians, athletes, foreign dignitaries and the American political elite—he knew all their names and all their secrets. He started writing gossip for the *Evening Graphic* in 1924, and at its height his column reached over 50 million households. During the Great Depression, 20 million people tuned in to his radio broadcasts. The decades flew by, full of people and glitter and scandal; but when Winchell died in 1972 there was only one mourner at his funeral.

On its surface, the story sounds like something out of a Fitzgerald novel: a tragic hero who crafts his existence out of rumors and dreams; an endless succession of parties and celebrities; the thousands of friends who drink one’s champagne or devour one’s column; and the lonely final scene. A character like Jay Gatsby or Dick Diver may seem to have little in common with Walter Winchell, but they all share one key element: a life built on air. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Winchell launched his career during the same year that Fitzgerald was exploring the myth-making qualities of gossip in *The Great Gatsby*; nor that as Winchell rose to power, Fitzgerald was analyzing the destruction of reputations and relationships in *Tender is the Night*. My contention in this project is that the technological, social, and political revolutions of modernity transformed communities and communication to such a degree that even *gossip*, ancient as it is, underwent a profound change in scope and status. Keenly cognizant of the power

of gossip, modernist writers drew upon its tools and techniques in order to examine the boundary between public and private life, navigate the highly fraught relationship between individuals and society, and negotiate the construction of national character.

How are modernism and New Criticism, as artistic and critical movements, the product of gossip? What does the relationship between literature and gossip illuminate for us about the experience of community and nationhood in modernity? Can literature *itself* be considered gossip? Just as importantly: can criticism? These are the questions that will propel me through the chapters that follow.

The purpose of this dissertation is threefold. First and foremost, I intend to show how gossip served to establish modernist communities, determining who was “in” and “out” of artistic and critical circles. Second, I will demonstrate how modernists in turn transformed gossip through their literature, illuminating its potential for progressive social reform while harnessing that power for their own causes. Both of these ideas require a turn to sociology: one of three disciplines that came into being simultaneously with modernism. While literary scholarship has been greatly enriched by work in linguistics and psychology—the other two disciplines that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century—fewer books have been written on the intersection of literature and sociology. The third goal of this study is to contribute to that underdeveloped field by revealing the shared roots of modernist literature and sociology, tracing groundbreaking work in both fields back to mutual concerns over the changes in individuals and communities that resulted from the technological, social, and political upheavals of modernity.

My foundational assumption is that as society evolved, so too did gossip. Modernist gossip is charged by the political, technological, and social order, and it works in ways distinct from those of either later modernism (post-WWII) or the Victorian era. Although typically

considered to be a conservative force that serves to keep social outliers in line, I argue that modernist gossip instead became revolutionary: a powerful tool with which modern individuals could advance and promote the progressive ideologies of social, political, and artistic movements.

Definitions & Connotations

The definition of gossip, much like the definition of art, depends on whom you ask. “All literature is gossip,” Truman Capote famously opined. In *Lady Windemere’s Fan*, Oscar Wilde writes: “Gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality.” Walter Winchell himself explains gossip as “the art of saying nothing in a way that leaves practically nothing unsaid.” *The Encyclopedia of Human Relationships* broadly defines it, less playfully, as “the exchange, in a context of congeniality, of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties.” Although I take this as my initial working definition of gossip, over the course of this study I will increase its complexity and specificity by introducing such elements as context, tone, purpose, and judgment.

First, to clarify my terms: By “gossip,” I do not mean contemporary tabloidism, celebrity scandals, or rumors true or false about threesomes, sham marriages, and other sexual escapades (although the modernists have plenty of these). When I use the word “gossip,” I’m drawing upon the sociological understanding of gossip as the exchange of perceptions and evaluations about an individual in order to judge that person’s fit for a specific community. The past few decades have witnessed a collective reclamation of gossip by psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary theorists alike—all of whom argue that although this genre of speech has traditionally been dismissed as superficial “women’s talk,” it actually serves crucial social and political

functions such as establishing trust, forming alliances, managing reputations, and navigating social norms.

The first two chapters of the dissertation address gossip as the *content* of speech: what people say about others when those others are not present in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* and how private information about lesbian relationships is made public through Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack*. The third and fourth chapters address gossip as a *genre*: the newsy, breezy Paris Letters that Janet Flanner sent to *The New Yorker* and the reputations that Pound promoted, demoted, and negotiated through his personal correspondence. Although the distinction between content and genre is often blurred—Janet Flanner writes of prominent personalities and scandals in the content of her Paris Letters; Djuna Barnes's adoption of the *roman à clef* situates her work within the gossip genre—by switching between one and the other I intend to highlight the way that modernists transformed gossip through *both* content and form, writing gossip in their work while also embedding it as a stylistic principle. In her memoir of the modernist era, Margaret Anderson categorizes her gossip as “literary,” “psychological,” or “intellectual”—and over the course of this project I, too, address different kinds of gossip, comparing artistic with political, fictional with journalistic.

In general, scholars can agree on a few key features of gossip: its informal, conversational, and personal nature; the fact that it takes place within a small group of acquaintances and that the subject of discussion is not present among them; and the sense of an illicit or covert activity. “It’s a certain atmosphere, most of all,” writes Patricia Spacks, “that makes gossip recognizable: of intimacy, of gusto, often of surprise and revelation” (“In Praise of Gossip,” 30). Questions about gossip that prompt much debate include whether it is more likely to subvert or uphold social norms; whether it is primarily a feminine activity, or if men

participate in gossip under a different name; whether it is limited to the home or if it can apply to “shoptalk” as well; and finally, how to determine when to dismiss gossip as trivial versus when to take its information seriously (Ayim 86). Most importantly, gossip is something that we are all doing constantly. Robin Dunbar, a social psychologist who eavesdropped at cocktail parties and coffee shops (all in the name of science), reports that his results “consistently yield the same pattern: about two-thirds of conversation time is devoted to social topics” (123). Similar studies reveal that “people are far less likely to talk about art, literature, cuisine, religion, ideas, politics, or events in the national news than they are about specific names and known individuals,” as conversation is “more often ‘localite’—the immediate social world inhabited by us and the people we know—than ‘cosmopolite’” (Emler 131). Although we tend to think of gossip as negative, psychologist Anna Marriot found that negative, critical remarks constitute only five percent of social conversation time.

Here, then, is what Eric Foster calls the “paradox” of gossip: it is “ubiquitous” despite every sacred, secular, and social sanction against it. “Be not a talebearer,” the book of Leviticus instructs us. In the Quran, we hear that the righteous “walk away” from gossip. An 1827 book of “Letters on Clerical Manners and Habits” advised theological students to “avoid the discussion of PERSONAL CHARACTER AND CONDUCT as much as possible; and that you prefer dwelling on those principles, doctrines, and facts, which are always and to all classes in society, interesting and instructive” (Miller 81). An anti-gossip quotation long attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt actually appeared much earlier, in the 1901 autobiography of Charles Stewart. “Men and women range themselves into three classes or orders of intelligence,” he wrote. “You can tell the lowest class by their habit of always talking about persons; the next by the fact that their habit is always to converse about things; the highest by their preference for the discussion of

ideas.” Such a mantra is in keeping with gossip’s reputation as idle at best, vicious at worst. This is why parents and teachers caution children against it; even the government gets involved when gossip becomes a matter of national security—witness the “Loose Lips Might Sink Ships” mantra of World War II.

For the sociologists and psychologists who study gossip, however, its reputation as shady and destructive is simplistic and reductive. In his essay “Gossip in an Evolutionary Perspective,” published in the *Review of General Psychology* in 2004, Dunbar argues that gossiping “is the core of human social relationships, indeed of society itself. Without gossip, there would be no society” (100). This argument is explained in greater detail in Dunbar’s book-length *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, a study which asks the question: “Why do we have language when other species do not?” One of the most popular hypotheses is that language evolved so that human societies could do things like coordinate hunts—but by comparing the social interactions of primates and humans, Dunbar instead suggests that language evolved as a more efficient substitute for grooming. Through grooming, primates strengthen social bonds and establish alliances; as groups of primates grew in size, language enabled them to achieve the same ends more quickly and over greater distances. Language, according to Dunbar, can accomplish three important goals: “allowing you to keep track of what your friends and allies are doing”; permitting “the exchange of information about free-riders”; and providing us “with a device for influencing what people think about us” (173).

This last point is especially pertinent for researchers who study the difference in gossip between groups of men and women.

At least among the younger group of subjects, the women tended to devote about two-thirds of their social topic time to other people's social experiences and activities (and about a third of the time to their own), whereas the men spent two-thirds talking about themselves (and only a third talking about other people)... The most plausible

interpretation is that the women are engaged in networking, while the men are engaged in advertising (Dunbar 176).

Dunbar draws a connection between this research finding and the roles of males and females in groups of primates. For our purposes, such discoveries provide an avenue into discussions about male modernists' appropriation of language that has been traditionally—and derogatively—considered “women’s speech,” as well as insight into how female writers redirected the power of gossip to better serve the progressive feminist agenda of the “New Woman.” Two chapters of this dissertation are devoted to women, and two to men. Indeed, the paradox of the final chapter is that the person I label “Modernism’s Greatest Gossip” (Ezra Pound) because of his skillful appropriation of “women’s speech” was also a misogynist who dismissed women’s talk and women’s words in his poetry and his private correspondence.

Although today the word “gossip” is most often applied to women and women’s speech, the original term was not at all gendered. It is derived from the Old English *godsibb*, which designated the sponsors at a baptism—or “siblings in God.” The word could also refer to a close friend or neighbor, and over time “the spiritual overtones became diluted to a more secular form of caring as expressed in neighborliness” (Tebbutt 20). In seventeenth-century England, “gossips” were those female acquaintances a woman invited to attend her at childbirth. The more experienced women offered practical advice and moral support in a space from which men were excluded. It was assumed that over the course of several days together, the women discussed family secrets and shared bawdy jokes. The mystery surrounding this experience, from the male point of view, gave rise to *Les Caquets de l’Accouchee* (*Chatter at Lying-In*): a popular literary genre supposedly written by a man who had snuck in and hid himself behind the bed-curtains. It was at this point that gossip was inextricably linked to groups of women, and it became customary to belittle and condemn gossip as idle “women’s talk.”

In her conclusion to *Women's-Talk: A Social History of Gossip in Working-Class*

Neighbourhoods 1880-1960, Melanie Tebbutt laments this very transformation:

Although the word 'gossip' originally possessed all the familiar connotations of friendship—affection, kindness, intimacy—the change which occurred in its meaning, to a negative pursuit, reflected a deliberate disempowerment of 'women's words': women's words were trivialized, in a desire to drain gossip of its power. Given gossip's important socializing function, criticism of women's speech can be seen as much as an attack upon women's support networks as an attack upon language (176).

Part of the impetus behind the contemporary reclamation of gossip (a reclamation made evident by the sheer number of studies devoted to gossip over the past three decades) is the conviction that "women's-talk" possesses its own intrinsic value. Historically, gossip provided a creative outlet for women who were excluded from the public and political sphere. Even as early as the 14th century, women were employing gossip for political ends. As Tebbutt writes: "Women were in the front line of attacks upon living standards or scares about children's wellbeing, and in communicating their concerns to neighbors mutually reinforced each other's anxieties, thereby fueling rumour and its expression in riots and even revolution" (29). Contemporary sociologists have uncovered additional purposes for gossip: in an article entitled "Women's Gossip and Social Change" (1995), Susan Watkins examines the way in which urban Jewish and Italian women in the 1920s-1940s learned about the advantages of hospital births (versus home births) and contraceptives through private, social conversations they had with other women. In this case, gossip "had consequences for the medicalization of childbirth and the decline of fertility" (469). More recently (2011), Watkins explored the purpose of gossip in Malawi, where information about who is sleeping with whom has significant implications for communities ravaged by the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Through gossip, people can find out which individuals are safe to date and which might be infected: a question, as Sarah Koenig put it while interviewing Watkins on *This American Life*, of "life or death."

Ancient Histories

Although our word for “gossip” originated sometime around the 14th century, the concept—particularly in literature—can be traced to the ancient world. The Latin word *fama*, derived from the verb *fari* (“to speak”) means literally: “what is said.” Classicists who write on *fama* are quick to point out that our contemporary derivatives of it—including both “fame” and “infamy,” a significant split which gives us some idea of the complexity of the term—are much narrower than its original list of meanings. In the ancient world, *fama* could mean “fame” or “infamy,” yes, but it could also mean “reputation,” “distinction,” “public opinion,” “talk,” “rumor,” “gossip,” “news,” “story,” “scandal,” and even “tradition.” The word is closely related to the word for fate—*fatum*—which is the past participle of “to speak.” The connection makes sense: talk, rumors, and gossip can not only make or break individuals’ reputations, but can also determine their destinies, or their fate in their communities. According to Philip Hardie, the distinction between *fama* and *fatum* was highly gendered.

fama-as-rumour stands for a chaotic, distorting, metamorphic, unfixed proliferation of words, largely on the lips of women, and for the power of words to disrupt a settled order or to divert action on to a new track. *fatum* is the term for the utterance or word that brings order into the world and directs events to a fixed goal. Both *fama* and *fatum* are nouns derived from *fari*, but while the former more often than not is the product of female speech, *fatum* is above all the word of the male god Jupiter... (103).

Even in the ancient world, then, gossip was seen as the province of women: “chaotic, distorting, metamorphic, unfixed,” and antithetical to reason, order, or logic. Still, there are many moments in the ancient epic where *fama*-as-rumour changes the course of events, where we witness firsthand the power of gossip to topple rulers from their thrones, send thousands of men to their deaths, or dissolve whole cities into bedlam. Gossip—like knowledge—is power, and its “marginalization,” seen “most strikingly in the gendering of gossip as a predominantly female activity, is itself the token of a wish on the part of those with power to relegate this uncontrolled

use of language to the status of the politically insignificant, just women's talk, old wives' tales" (Hardie 21-2).

According to Antonia Syson, "*Fama* embraces the informative, imaginative, and deceptive possibilities of communication" (3). This is why *fama* lies at the heart not only of the *Aeneid* and the epic genre, but also of narratives generally. In the introduction of Syson's book-length work on *fama* in the *Aeneid*, she diverges from Virgil to discuss *fama* in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. She argues that the famous first line of *Pride and Prejudice* ("It is a truth universally acknowledged...") is a kind of "anonymous collective judgment" highly reminiscent of *fama*. Along similar lines, *Middlemarch* "examines how a person's *fama* (or the English equivalent) can define an entire existence" (13).¹ The study that Syson cites—D.A. Miller's exploration of gossip in *Middlemarch*—is one of many scholarly works that analyze *fama* in literature. Although the term *fama* itself may not appear in these pages, the ancient concept remains, couched in our more contemporary term (nearly as broad and multi-definitional as *fama*): gossip. As Patricia Spacks argues in her frequently cited *Gossip* (1985): "The aesthetic pleasure of gossip begins here, in the fundamental structure of story, which creates the most apparent link between gossip and the novel" (14). Spacks's claim echoes Hardie's statements about *fama* as essential to the "structure" of narrative.

My contribution to the scholarly work on gossip in literature is to demonstrate how the form and function of gossip is transformed in modernity. We can see the conceptual shift that has occurred in the short span of a century by contrasting Jane Austen's approach to gossip with that of Edith Wharton. Austen's depiction of gossip is earnest and concerned: in *Pride and Prejudice*, it is Elizabeth Bennett's fear of what people will say about her youngest sister's elopement—

¹As Eliot's narrator asks of Bulstrode: "Who can know how much of his most inward life is made up of the thoughts he believes other men to have about him, until that fabric of opinion is threatened with ruin?"

how the neighbors' gossip will shatter her family's reputation—that drives Mr. Darcy to come to her rescue. He becomes Elizabeth's savior (truly, unironically), because he stems the tide of talk by forcing Lydia and Wickham to marry. Like her characters, Austen firmly believes in the power of gossip. For Edith Wharton, however, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, this fear of gossip is something to be satirized and undermined. At first glance *The Age of Innocence* may seem old-fashioned in its use of gossip as a kind of gilded cage, since the fear of scandal propels the plot forward and keeps its protagonist firmly in his social place. Wharton was writing, however, a “historical” novel; and by satirizing the vanishing drawing rooms of the nineteenth century from her twentieth-century perspective, Wharton embeds gossip in her text not to affirm social mores—as Jane Austen does—but rather to call them into question. It is the very absurdity and conservatism of gossip that reminds her audience how drastically their world has changed.

Recently, a special issue of *Modern Language Studies* (2014) published a collection of essays focused specifically on the relationship between literature and gossip. The pieces spanned centuries and geographies, ranging from French writings of the 17th and 19th centuries to Jorge Amado's 20th century *Tenda dos milagres*, Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, and of course, the novels of George Eliot. According to Andrew Counter, gossip can serve as both text and commentary: “Works of fiction,” he writes, “can associate themselves with forms and modes of gossip—or mimic the operations of gossip—in order to interrogate, criticize, or celebrate this profoundly human activity, even at the risk of becoming implicated in the unsavory aspects of gossip that they seek to expose” (Martin 140). Other scholars of gossip examine the role of “talk” in medieval England, the genres of diaries, letters (epistles), and sermons, and the chatty society novels of 18th- and 19th- century Europe. Although

none of these authors discusses modernism, they all underscore issues that I intend to explore in these chapters: the intersection between the public and private spheres; the question of power dynamics and gender roles; and new concepts of nationhood.

Sociologies

The modern world oversaw the emergence of the modern gossip column, the rise of Hollywood and the birth of the modern celebrity, the dissolution of small-town communities, the increasing depersonalization of cities and bureaucracies, and extraordinary advancements in the technologies that made these transformations possible. Early sociologists began to look for ways to examine and quantify the rapidly evolving and increasingly visible relationship between the modern individual and society. Karl Marx wrote of the individual's new and profound sense of alienation in the industrialized world; Max Weber examined the "iron cage" of modern bureaucracy, where the individual is contained and shaped by the bars of society. Emile Durkheim, who founded the first department of sociology in France in 1895, argued that as society develops, it breaks down—causing individuals to suffer from *anomie*, the collective unease that stems from the dissolution of social structure and order. Capitalism in modernity was both impersonal and disorienting, substituting "temporary transactions" in place of the "sustained human relations" that would counteract the effects of *anomie* (*Suicide*, xx). Georg Simmel, the fourth social theorist of this great quadrumvirate, shared many of these concerns. In his well-known essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," he wrote of the impersonality and indifference of life in modern society and the achievement of greater individual freedom at the expense of the emotional and personal attachment that was characteristic of smaller communities. As Virginia Woolf famously remarked, "On or about December 1910, human character changed"—and what

sociology demonstrates is that modernity not only impacts the individual character but also transforms the very essence of community.

Both sociologists and modernists, in other words, are concerned with the relationship between the modern individual and her community—a relationship that, I argue, is central to and made manifest in gossip. “*Fama*,” according to Hardie, is more than “the embodiment” of “rumours and gossip”—although it is also that. *Fama* also, “containing in her expansive person distortions and refractions of other aspects of ‘what is said’ ... affects the individual’s relationship to the group, whether that be his or her own society or the society of the future” (1). Gossip helps us to clarify the relationship between a character and his or her society, and the narrative in which that gossip is embedded provides us with the opportunity to examine the relationship between the writer and his audience. Through the gossip, the narrative, the stories told and retold, “the individual author seeks to regulate his or her reputation among a group, namely the readership... Words are produced by individuals, but they are the chief means by which individual human beings construct and regulate the multiplicity of groupings that make up human society” (Hardie 1-2). The construction and regulation of “reputation,” the “politics” of group formation and dissolution, the management of social norms, the effect of society on the individual—these are all questions of *fama*, of gossip, and they are questions that I will pursue throughout this dissertation.

My argument is founded on the assumption that gossip is more than just a product of communities: it is also a crucial element of their composition. Gossip establishes and shapes societies by influencing politics, reputations, and alliances. The majority of sociological research on the subject shows that gossip plays a key role in group formation and cohesion; most importantly, gossip is usually considered to be a conservative social force because it imparts the

rules and norms of the community. In his 2004 study on “Gossip as Cultural Learning,” psychologist Roy Baumeister concluded that gossip teaches people how to behave in interpersonal relationships. He and his team found that almost one fifth (18%) of all social rules were conveyed through gossip. One participant, for example, explained that she learned “do not date more than one guy at a time” after hearing all the negative comments made about an acquaintance who juggled a number of boyfriends at once. “At the group level,” remarks Eric Foster, “what begins as trusted exchanges in private becomes the knowledge, norm, and trust margins of communities, cultures, and other bounded social identities” (769). Even literary gossip comes across as socially conservative; as the editor of the special “Gossip” issue of *Modern Language Studies* notes in his introduction, “Gossip, like satire, is revealed by these essays to be broadly conservative in intent. While acts of gossiping are invariably hypocritical and at odds with their implied moral purpose, (the) gossip nevertheless often claims to be acting as both the guardian and the censor of public morals” (Martin 138). Gossip, with its emphasis on groups and boundaries, works to keep social outliers in line.

And yet as communities evolved, so too did the nature and function of gossip. As individuals at the turn of the twentieth century struggled to understand their new relationship to their society, as cities boomed and bureaucracies expanded, communication began to serve different purposes than it had in the close-knit villages of previous centuries. Individuals grappled with the experience of modernity that sociologists were calling “alienation,” “anomie,” or the brutal indifference of the “iron cage.” The rapid development of the modern world was simultaneously empowering and dehumanizing. My goal is to analyze this transformation, to understand how new communities changed gossip and how gossip was changed by them. Most importantly, I explore how those changes impacted the ideology and diffusion of modernist

literature. I argue that twentieth-century gossip became imbued with themes of resistance and subversion; modernist gossip became a means of establishing smaller, more intimate communities within larger, mechanized organizations. “People gossip about the powerful, rich, and famous in order to ‘cut them down to size,’” argues Robert Goodman. “Informal gossip networks flourish in large, bureaucratic organizations as a way of softening, resisting, or subverting their depersonalizing tendencies. Gossip offers passive resistance to many forms of power” (5). How is modernist literature a literature of resistance? How did gossip promote the dissemination of modernist ideas?

Modernity and Technology

Modernism is a subject ripe for the analysis of gossip because gossip, like nearly every other aspect of society, underwent a significant transformation in modernity. As Henry James observed in 1898, the world at the turn of the 20th century was “fast shrinking, for the imagination, to the size of an orange that can be played with” (*Theory* 56). Marshall McLuhan echoed James’s sentiment decades later when he coined the term “global village” to describe the effects of modernity on society. The gossip that once flew through a village could now fly halfway across the world and back before dinnertime. The marriage of print capitalism (born out of the linotype machine and the rotary press) with technological innovation reshaped the globe and produced the modern gossip column—extinguishing along with it, according to James, “all sense between public and private” (*Culture* xii). As early sociologist Georg Simmel theorized, in this increasingly mechanized and metropolitan era individuals began to suffer from the unique loneliness of the modern city-dweller who rides packed buses but does not make eye contact with his fellow strangers, who moves among crowds but does not know the names of his neighbors. Simmel calls this the dominance of the “objective” over the “subjective” spirit and

describes the “blasé” indifference that results from the overstimulation of the city. According to some scholars, printed gossip provided, in these early decades of the twentieth century, a sense of coherence reminiscent of the old familiarity and intimacy of villages and neighborhoods (Wilkes 259).

Winchell’s printed gossip columns were so popular through the 1920s that in 1930 he launched a radio program to spread celebrity and political gossip across the airwaves. He opened every radio broadcast with the line “Good evening Mr. and Mrs. North America, from border to border and coast to coast and all the ships at sea”—a greeting that captures the temporal and spatial transformations of modernity and the corresponding revolution in communication thanks to inventions such as the telegraph, telephone, and radio. Newspapers and commercial novels—and to this I would add gossip and literary magazines—“made it possible,” according to Benedict Anderson, “for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (36). Anderson depicts the emergence of national consciousness (which he calls both “limited” and “sovereign”) as a kind of “imagined community”—and part of the goal of this project is to analyze the part that gossip plays in establishing and negotiating ideas of nationhood.

Thus each chapter of this dissertation deals with an American expatriate living in Europe: Henry James, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, and Ezra Pound. From abroad, these writers examined various definitions of “Americanness,” and much of their work contributed to Americans’ increasing sense of self-awareness and self-confidence on the international stage. This will become most apparent in Janet Flanner’s “Paris Letters,” written for the nouveau riche of *The New Yorker*, and also in Pound’s tireless attempts to strengthen American culture and literature through foreign influences. Even Henry James’s highly aestheticized gossip, as we will

see in the first chapter, is founded upon a new concept of Americanness: one that is empathetic, heterogeneous, and open to difference.

What Henry James was not as open to, we will discover, was modern technology. While all of the subjects of this study grapple with revolutions in communications in the early part of the twentieth century, James was the writer most suspicious of them. In this he was not alone. Groups of all sizes are impacted by (and profoundly impact in turn) technological advances, and individuals at the turn of the century expressed the same anxiety over these developments that we often hear today about rapid advancements of our own. In 1926, the central question at a meeting of the Knights of Columbus Adult Education Committee was: “Do modern inventions help or mar character and health?” The committee members wanted to know whether “modern comforts ‘softened’ people, high-rise living ruined character, electric lighting kept people at home, and radio’s ‘low-grade music’ undermined morality” (Fischer 1). The telephone, which was initially marketed as a device for businesses, broadcasts, and emergencies, surprised everyone—and dismayed many—by quickly becoming a device for purely “frivolous,” social purposes. Skeptics complained that the telephone “encouraged too much familiarity and incivility and that it undermined neighborhood solidarity” (3). The telephone companies, on the other hand—once they realized the marketing potential—argued that the device actually increased sociability. “It’s a weekly affair now, these fond intimate talks,” boasted Bell Canada in a 1921 advertisement. “Distance rolls away and for a few minutes every Thursday night the familiar voices tell the little family gossip that both are so eager to hear.”

The major issues at stake were the old ideals of sociability and privacy. Would people stop visiting each other, now that they could simply pick up the phone? Were neighbors and operators listening in on people’s calls? These concerns were not, in fact, new to the telephone;

there had been similar anxiety surrounding the invention of the electric telegraph in the 19th century. Wrote a journalist at the time: “One of the evils of this age of railroads and telegraphs is that we are forced to know people as they are” (*Atlantic* 544). Even more fearsome than the telegraph or the telephone, according to some, was the invention of the x-ray. In her social history of electricity, Linda Simon reports that the x-ray seemed “even more insidious than the camera, popularly known as the ‘Peeping Tom.’” As she goes on to explain:

Unlike a conventional camera, this device could see through walls into one's home, through clothing into one's pockets, through flesh to reveal one's organs. Worse than the telephone, which could 'pursue business men into their libraries and 'ring them up' in the very bosom of their families,' worse than the phonograph, which could reproduce 'the most intimate of domestic confidences,' the X-ray machine, the 'crowning menace,' could transcend every possible barrier and make it impossible to find 'any refuge from the world of outside affairs.' With the X-ray, privacy was obliterated (279-280).

Yet, Simon continues, even its detractors saw technology as a double-edged sword. Individuals were forced to ask themselves two questions: “What were the risks of increased knowledge, not just of news and information but of other people?” but also: “In a world teeming with news, what were the risks of insularity?” Users of the telegraph “worried about privacy and exposure,” yet at the same time “the potential for connection made them aware of a yearning to transcend personal boundaries” (42). In explaining the reactions to these new technologies, Simon also describes the “unimagined possibilities for sympathy and empathy,” the potential for more expansive and more profound human *connection*, that were suddenly opened up to the world. Although Henry James sometimes seems to set up his characters *against* technology, they are in fact inextricable from it. Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory regards sociological networks as the interaction of humans with non-human “actors” such as, in this case, telephones or telegrams. Technology acts upon humans just as humans act upon technology; the one is necessarily bound to the other.

According to Marshall McLuhan, “Electric speed at bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an

intense degree” (5). Where people used to be “responsible” only for their neighbors, the modern world expands the scope and meaning of “neighborhood,” bringing more diverse individuals into contact with one another in the crowded streets of the metropolis or the printed pages of mass-market newspapers and magazines. Indeed, while the topic of modernist gossip has yet to be explored in depth, the broader theme of modernist community is one that has garnered a great deal of attention from contemporary scholars. In her seminal *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (2001), Jessica Berman argues that modernist writers radically reimagined community in their work, “transposing” the idea of community “from the domain of public citizenship and the state to a liminal zone where community is both intimate and political, both local and worldly” (7). Where Berman looks for evidence of the cosmopolitan in the community, my work on gossip will often do the opposite: emphasize the proliferation of smaller, more intimate communities in an increasingly cosmopolitan world.

One critical tool with which to approach these communities is through network theory, which investigates the connections among individuals through concepts such as centrality (the prominence of a node in a network) and cohesiveness (the similarity of one node to another; the frequency and intensity of their connection). In the 20th century, network theory has explored aspects of economic, political, and industrial organization as well as communal and familial relations. Gossip is one significant way by which information—whether substantiated or not—moves within and between social networks. It also provides a means of measuring the centrality and cohesiveness of individual group members, as demonstrated in sociological studies such as one that identified the main gossipers in a sorority as the “movers and shakers” of the group: those with those most power and influence (Jaeger et al., 166). Network theory will be most prominent in the final chapter on Ezra Pound, whom I will propose to be the greatest “mover and

shaker” of all the modernists, and the one who—through gossip—brought modernism forth and secured its lasting impact. “Make it new!” was Ezra Pound’s directive to the modernists, and making it new is precisely what they did to gossip.

Methodology & Scope

Why is it necessary to look at gossip through the lens of literature? Is that not what sociology and psychology are for? This project takes as its premise the idea that literature permits us to analyze elements of gossip that are difficult to access in the world outside the text. I am not the first person to explore the relationship between the two realms; in 1989 E.B. Gelles suggested that, with its relationship to storytelling, gossip satisfies the emotions in the same way that literature does. According to Patricia Spacks, “Gossip is not a fiction, but both as oral tradition and in such written transformations as memoirs and collections of letters it embodies the fictional” (*Gossip* 4). I go even further by arguing that literature may be a place where we can analyze how gossip works and what purposes it serves. Reading literature *as* gossip opens up a whole new avenue of research—one that may even resolve some of the problems Eric Foster catalogued in his review of contemporary sociological and psychological research: namely, that due to the intimate nature of gossip, it is difficult for an outsider to comprehend it through the typical methods of questionnaires, video and audio recording, eavesdropping, experimental research, and participant observers. Social anthropologist Max Gluckman (1963), cited heavily in gossip literature, noted how he could *not* penetrate certain groups “because I did not know enough gossip.... The outsider cannot always detect the slight personal knockdown” (309).

If we turn from ethnographic studies to literature—or rather, if we complement ethnographic studies *with* literature—I believe we might illuminate aspects of gossip that so far have gone unexamined. As readers, we are, after all, “insiders”: we’re the confidants of the

narrator, we're in the characters' minds. In this sense, I intend for my dissertation to contribute to scholarship on the sociology of gossip while also taking its place in the literary criticism on modernism. By analyzing key modernist figures as nodes in literary networks, by exploring the way in which texts navigate the boundaries between insider/outsider and private/public, and by examining the groups that were created through both the production and reception of modernist texts, this dissertation approaches a sociology of literature. Through gossip, I show how news, rumors, and ideas circulated among artists and critics until modernism acquired the collective social force necessary to become a true movement.

This project takes as its model socio-literary works such as Wendy Griswold's *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (2008), which argues for the inherent sociality of reading and the existence of an elite and influential "reading class", and Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (1998), which reads the cultural products of modernism as integrated within an "economic circuit of patronage, collecting, speculation, and investment" (3). Rainey's argument is that modernist art is not separate from politics, society, and economics, but invested in and inextricable from even those institutions it claims to critique. Other recent work on modernism and sociology that has established important connections between modernist aesthetics and the artists' socio-political situation include Andrew Goldstone's *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man*, (2013) and Jonathan Goldman's *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity* (2011). Hoyt Long and Richard So's "Network Analysis and the Sociology of Modernism" argues for the use of statistical analysis and relational sociology to illuminate the dynamics of modernist groupings. While my project does not incorporate statistical analysis, I do call upon network theory to support my claims

about the circulation of information, the formation of groups, and the mutual influences of modernist artists.

Significantly, much of the previous work that has been done in this field centers on the concept of value: prizes and prestige, collectors and speculation, patronage. When Lawrence Rainey examines the dollar amount awarded to *The Waste Land* by the editors of *The Dial*, for example, the question he raises is the *worth* of the poem. James English's *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2008), while not specific to modernism, examines the function of literary prizes in popular culture and interrogates concepts of literary value. My analysis of gossip is similarly concerned with the accrual and determination of value within and between creative and critical groups. Gossip is, at its core, an *evaluative* activity: through gossip, we establish opinions and make judgments about absent third parties. Each community establishes its social norms by deciding, first and foremost, what it values.² As Barbara Herrnstein Smith remarks in her *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (1988), value is always tied to a group. "When we state the value of a literary work," she writes, "we are usually not *only*... declaring its past or present value for *ourselves* but also estimating its probable value for others" (13). Northrop Frye, in his rejection of evaluation as a critical tool, actually called statements of value "leisure-class gossip" (128). How does modernist gossip, I ask, redefine artistic "value" for the modernists themselves, the critics of their work, and the poets and writers who would follow them? How does it promote influence and innovation? These, too, are questions that will recur throughout the project.

²For an analysis of judgment, moral authority, and gossip in Jane Austen's novels, see Gregory Flaxman's *Gilles Deleuze and the Fabulation of Philosophy* (2011).

Structure & Themes

The chapters of this dissertation are loosely arranged in chronological order, beginning with the proto-modernist Henry James. I then move into the twentieth century and high modernism with Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, and Ezra Pound. In the Flanner and Pound chapters in particular, I focus on the era between the wars and the rise of fascism. I will conclude with an analysis of retrospective accounts of modernism in two of the most popular and unique memoirs of the age: Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* and Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Every one of the figures I examine lived, at one point or another, as an American expatriate in Paris. In two of the chapters, I analyze the gossip embedded in works of literature (Henry James's *The Ambassadors* and Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack*), and in the other two I read the writers' correspondence as literary gossip that served to establish and promote certain group identities (Janet Flanner's "Paris Letters" for *The New Yorker* and selected letters of Ezra Pound). Every chapter draws in different ways upon sociological theories of gossip and group formation, and each one takes as its themes the aforementioned issues of value, community, publicity, and nationhood.

My approach is grounded in close reading but includes crucial analyses of the relevant socio-historical contexts. Like Shari Benstock in her revisionary history *Women of the Left Bank*, I situate my work at "the intersections of life and art, the crossroads of memory and history, myth and biography" (ix). While exploring the incorporation of gossip into literature, it will also be necessary to analyze gossip as social phenomenon. In other words, in order to understand how gossip fosters literary communities, we need to have a clear sense of its effect on lived, historical communities. These four chapters, which cover writers and genres that span the public-private spectrum, work together to support my overarching argument: that modernist gossip addressed

the new and often unsettling relationship between individuals and their society, fostering distinctly modern communities and standards of value through shared linguistic techniques and common goals. Modernist gossip, we discover throughout these chapters, is deeply invested in the creation of a new world order.

My first chapter explores the aestheticization of gossip in Henry James's late novel *The Ambassadors* (1903). James, I argue, not only uses gossip as a narrative device in order to drive forward the plot, but also embeds it as a formal principle in the novel. Stylistically, gossip functions through James's innovative combination of focalization and free indirect discourse. While most critics gravitate towards the visual metaphors (field-glass, windows, etc.) that James employs to describe his depiction of consciousness, I suggest that *The Ambassadors* emphasizes the limitations of the visual and offers up gossip as a means of expanding one's range of perception, perspective, and understanding. Jamesian gossip is "magnificent" rather than "base"—this is the distinction drawn by James himself—because it is analytical instead of dismissive. Lambert Strether, the hero of the novel, gossips in order to understand his fellow characters' motivations and experiences. Thus Strether's gossip is a kind that Thomas Pavel calls "good" gossip: "an informal exercise in hypothesis devising and evidence finding... Its purpose is the understanding of the person or the situation discussed" (qtd. in Ayim, 90).³ By using gossip as a tool for investigation rather than criticism, James—through Strether—studies and evaluates not only fictional individuals but also the relationship between the United States and Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century.

If the gossip of Chapter One is investigative and ultimately empathetic, the gossip of Chapter Two is decidedly progressive. Written simultaneously for the insiders and outsiders of

³Ayim alludes to Charles Sanders Peirce, an American mathematician, philosopher, and scientist (a pragmatist whose work is often associated with that of William James) who described science as "the pursuit of those who are devoured by a desire to find things out" (90).

Natalie Barney's *Academie des Femmes*, Djuna Barnes's cryptic, playful *Ladies Almanack* publicizes (albeit in coded language) the coterie's private lives and loves. By positing Barnes's text as an inheritor of the earliest work of "gossip literature," *Les Caquets de l'accouchee*, I demonstrate how Barnes critiques and subverts social norms through the trivial chatter of "women's talk." As in James's *The Ambassadors*, here gossip becomes both content and form: in the end, *Ladies Almanack* inverted the contemporary theories of "sexual inversion" by depicting the supposedly "abnormal" as normal and redefining the boundary between private and public. Barnes's propensity and reputation for drawing deeply from the well of her personal experience, moreover, means that we read her work as a type of *roman à clef* with her real-life subjects in mind: Natalie Barney as Dame Evangeline Musset, Thelma Wood as Robin Vote. Part of the purpose of this chapter, in reading Barnes's work "as gossip," is to evaluate the usefulness and validity of this strategy as a critical approach.

Chapter Three introduces Janet Flanner's "Paris Letters," written for *The New Yorker* between 1925 and 1975. As the fledgling magazine's first (and, for many years, only) foreign correspondent, Flanner was uniquely situated to contribute to the development of *The New Yorker's* emerging voice and style as well as to Americans' new sense of self-importance on the world's stage. Flanner conceived of her role as a "high-class gossip" who reported on fashion, art shows, and public personalities, and yet in the years leading up to the Second World War, the content of her letters became increasingly political. Although Flanner preferred the explicit treatment of politics that characterized her work in later years, even dismissing her earlier letters as "lightminded," I argue that her ironic, sharp, and witty observations juxtaposing French and American culture helped set the tone for Franco-American relations in the years between the wars. In this chapter I trace the parallel emergence of *The New Yorker* with the new American

national consciousness that would come to dominate the twentieth century. I analyze Flanner's "Paris Letters" as gossip, comparing them with Walter Winchell's famous columns, and demonstrating how their tone of shared understanding—written as if from one insider to another—worked to solidify Americans' feelings of cultural, economic, and political superiority over the European continent.

My fourth and final chapter proposes Ezra Pound as "Modernism's Greatest Gossip" and explores the way in which Pound incorporated the techniques of "women's talk" in his extensive correspondence. Pound's gossip, I contend, serves a very specific purpose: he criticizes, promotes, and evaluates his friends and colleagues in order to establish a community of likeminded artists and promote his personal values as poetic standards. Indeed, he is so successful that those values and standards will become the norm for poets and critics alike for decades afterward. In this chapter, I employ network theory to argue for Pound as a crucial "node" of modernist groupings. I also draw upon social scientist Nicholas Emler's theory of gossip as a means of making "reputational inquiries," or a tool that "allows individuals and communities to accumulate behavioral evidence about others and to form and refine judgments about their vices and virtues" (133).⁴ Pound, I contend, uses gossip to establish and manage artists' reputations. What Emler calls "knowledge of the social landscape" becomes, in Pound's case, knowledge of the artistic and literary landscape—and it is this brand of knowledge that confers upon him a certain literary power and enables him to transform the possibility of modernism into a reality.

⁴Useful information we can learn from and about our neighbors include elements both banal and political, such as: "...to whom can we safely lend our garden tools and who is in a position to lend us theirs; whom we can trust to support our political ambitions; to whom should we turn for the best advice about buying a new car or about investment opportunities; with whom should we form partnerships, whether business or marriage; whom should we particularly avoid offending; and so on..." (Emler 134).

My conclusion touches briefly upon a subject that deserves a dissertation entirely of its own: the gossip of modernist memoir. I argue that gossip in Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* and Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* contributed to the transformation of modernism into a "myth" that continues to impact both popular and critical perceptions of the interwar years in Paris.

Beyond Modernism

When does the era of modernist gossip end? Scholars have not yet reached a consensus on when modernism itself came to a close, but this dissertation stops at the onset of World War II—yet another moment at which communities and nations were transformed. The emergence of television impacted the content and form of gossip (Winchell did not thrive with the new media), as did the Internet several decades later. The gossip of this dissertation is print-based, produced and circulated in an era when the boundary between public and private, though tenuous, was still fairly clear.

Modernist gossip is distinct from the gossip of the periods that preceded and followed for two reasons in particular: the first is that it was personalized, and the second is that it was productive. Heidegger's main complaint about gossip was that it was "idle talk"; and the trouble with idle talk was that it provided "the possibility of understanding everything without making the thing one's own" (qtd. in Spacks, "In Praise," 22). Yet the modernists of this dissertation did in fact make gossip their own: they each stamped it with their own unique aesthetic. Jamesian gossip is analytical, Barnesian gossip is archaic, Flannerian gossip is ironic. Pound's is obstinate, generous, chaotic, and poetic. Gossip becomes for each of these writers as much a stylistic principle as a mode of conveying information. In this, they are not alone: Walter Winchell's gossip also became famous for its stylization, for the phrases he coined and the allusions he

invented. In an article for the journal *American Speech* in 1931, Paul Robert Beath analyzes what he calls “Winchellese.”

Some of the expressions for falling in love used by Winchell are *pashing it*, *sizzle for*, *That Way*, *Go for Each Other*, *garbo-ing it*, *uh-huh*; and in the same category, *new Garbo*, *trouser-crease-eraser*, and *pash*. Some Winchellisms for marriage are *middle-aisle-it*, *Altar it*, *handcuffed*, *Mendelssohn March*, *Lohengrin it*, and *merged*. For expectation of offspring he uses *expecting a blessed event*, *Act of God*, *baby-bound*, and *being stork’d*. Expressions for divorce include *On the Verge*, *have it Paris’d*, *have it abrogated*, *curdled* (usually for merely falling out of love), *have it Reno-vated*, *have the seal shattered*, and *being melted*. One word of which he is inordinately proud is *phffft* which he uses for anything which acts like a wet firecracker (44-45).

After transcribing other classic Winchellisms, Beath points out his unusual spelling (“a curious mixture of the phonetic and the unphonetic”) and his odd abbreviations. What we discover here is that the form of Winchell’s gossip—his actual language—is as colorful, inventive, and personalized as the content of his columns. Gabler writes that Winchell’s “smart, slangy prose” had been credited by H.L. Mencken “with having enlarged the American vernacular” (xii). Winchell’s gossip was “personal and intuitive” (137); he set himself up, as drama critic Alexander Woollcott put it, “against the vast impersonality which, at the time of his advent, was deadening the American newspaper into a kind of Congressional record” (xii). Modernist gossip was, as I shall demonstrate throughout this dissertation, similarly individualized, marked with a particular voice and aesthetic.⁵

It was also highly productive. By this I mean that modernist gossip performed specific—and usually deliberate—cultural, social, or political work. Henry James, as we shall see, used gossip to battle against what he saw as the increasing impersonality and indifference of the modern age. Djuna Barnes employed it to subvert social norms, while Janet Flanner helped develop the distinctive brand of national consciousness that would guide American involvement

⁵“The great modernisms,” Frederic Jameson writes in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” were “predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body” (114).

in world affairs. Ezra Pound, finally, turned gossip to productive ends by using it to publicize his personal artistic values and promote the movement that would become modernism. Most of them were interested, too, in what “Americanness” would come to represent in the twentieth century. What would it mean to be an American citizen, an American reader, an American artist? Gossip, with its power to make and break communities, became a crucial means of managing these definitions domestically and internationally.

Modernist gossip, as I define it in the chapters that follow, was always directed toward a limited circle. Pound was never speaking for or to the masses; he was the one who insisted, after all, that the masthead of *The Little Review* be “Making No Compromise With the Public Taste.” When he talked of the “public,” as he told Amy Lowell in August 1914, he meant “a few hundred people and reviewers” (Paige 38). Janet Flanner, we will see, was also writing for a limited circle of middlebrow readers: New Yorkers who aspired to the cultural elite and hoped that Harold Ross’s magazine would provide the knowledge they needed to belong there. It is important to note that Ross, from the beginning, defined the magazine in part by those who did *not* count themselves among its readers: most famously, the “old lady in Dubuque. “It will not be concerned in what she is thinking about,” he wrote, adding that he meant no “disrespect”—but *The New Yorker* was intended for a metropolitan audience, or (even better) a national audience with metropolitan interests. The very title of the magazine implied a limited region and audience, which allowed the magazine to position itself and its readers as particular, as elite.

The work of Djuna Barnes was also written for an in-group who would understand its coded jokes and allusions much better than the general public ever could. Indeed, the goal of the second chapter is to explore what happened when this seemingly “private” text became public. Like Barnes, Henry James desired an appreciative audience but wrote in such a way that his

readership would be limited to those with the patience to wade through the long, circuitous sentences and the use of italicized pronouns (often without referents) whose significance was implied but not always clear. Wendy Griswold, as I noted above, observes that the “reading class” is always only a fraction of the population—and James’s reading public, according to Dorothea Krook, was subject to a “progressive, ever accelerating shrinkage” around the time of *The Ambassadors* (14). His novels are written for an ideal reader, a Maria Gostrey who—as we shall see in the first chapter—understands instinctively the magnificence of James’s purpose.

The Ambassadors in particular is a novel intended to work against the speed and thoughtlessness of mass consumption. “Take... *The Ambassadors* very easily and gently,” James famously instructed the Duchess of Sutherland. “Read five pages a day—be even as deliberate as that—but *don’t break the thread*” (*Ambassadors* 28). Heather Fielding incorporates the visual metaphor of the magic lantern to show how James employed certain technologies to “solve the problem of instrumentalization,” to slow readers down so that they cannot go “skipping” (the word James uses in “The Art of Fiction”) directly to the end of the story (226). James wants to protect the novel “from readers for whom it is a means to an end” (242), she writes; what he “detests about mass culture” is “that it makes readers into consumers and gives them absolute control over the text” (239). James’s sentiment resounds among the modernists who were vocal about setting their work *against* mass culture, mass consumerism, and mass audiences—an opposition that, led in part by Frederic Jameson’s “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” (1979) has since been deconstructed.

We know that modernists incorporated modern advertising imagery and strategies into their work (Mark Morrison), that they negotiated reputations through economies and monetary prizes (Lawrence Rainey), and that even the posture of aesthetic autonomy, or art for art’s sake,

was a mode of managing and transforming the social dimension of literary production (Andrew Goldman). Indeed, one could even argue that the highly personalized gossip I described above had as much to do with marketing as it did with aesthetics. In *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, Aaron Jaffe argues that modernist authorship was based on “a kind of textual imprimatur,” the “stylistic stamp of its producer.” Jaffe writes: “At once a distinctive mark and a sanctioning impression, the imprimatur, as I define it, turns the author into a formal artifact, fusing it to the text as a reified signature of value” (20). In this light, even the most personalized style becomes yet another mode of commodification and commercialization: the selling of the self along with the object produced.

This dissertation argues that the modernists incorporated and transformed the popular gossip of mass culture into literature, imbuing it with a new power and purpose. They aestheticized gossip in their work in order to push forward progressive political, social, and artistic agendas. Ultimately, their gossip became a mode of exchanging creative and critical values. In contrast, gossip in the twenty-first century, I suggest, has once again become depersonalized and even “idle.” Once spoken or written, gossip is picked up and repeated by millions, losing any personal stamp or signature along the way. The boundary between private and public, worried over by Henry James and cautiously navigated by the modernists, has been almost utterly dissolved through social media, reality television, and increasingly personal reports about famous political and cultural figures. We are so inundated with gossip from so many millions of sources that we have become over-stimulated, so inured to shock that our attitude to scandal is what Georg Simmel would call “blasé.” Gossip in our own era feels once again like waste—trivial, valueless speech—and it is my hope that, among its other goals, this

project will also serve as a reminder of what “good gossip” has accomplished for writers and readers and what it might yet achieve for creative and critical communities today.

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CHAPTER ONE:
THE MAGNIFICENT GOSSIP OF HENRY JAMES'S *THE AMBASSADORS*

We believe that narrative consists not in communicating what one has seen but in transmitting what one has heard, what someone else said to you. Hearsay.

- Deleuze and Guattari, "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics"

Although Henry James declared it to be "quite the best, 'all round,'" of his "productions," *The Ambassadors* (1903) is a novel about whose merits critics have long been ambivalent. "James's reviewers," Alan Bellringer notes, "divide into those who condemn his indefiniteness and his effeminacy and those who admire his subtlety and fineness" (150). In its original serialized form, the novel barely made it into *The North American Review*; editor Henry M. Alden of Harper and Brothers argued against it, insisting: "We ought to do better." After serialization, in the first month of its publication as a self-contained novel, it sold a total of only four copies. Much of its unpopularity is due to the fact that so little occurs in it. In summary, a middle-aged American man is sent to Paris by his wealthy, widowed fiancée in order to retrieve the woman's son and bring him back to Massachusetts. While in Paris, our protagonist dutifully discovers his wayward charge and is soon initiated into the young man's circle of friends. Consequently, he sees life in a way he never saw it before and so he changes his mind and reverses the purposes of his mission. The young man ultimately refuses our protagonist's plea for him to stay in Paris, and at the end of the novel they both prepare to return to America. Defenders of the novel maintain that what the narrative lacks in action, it makes up for in contemplation. Because that contemplation most often takes place in conversations the characters

hold with each other about other characters when those others are not present, *The Ambassadors* is an ideal candidate to explore the form and function of gossip in the fiction of Henry James.

One of the most fascinating formal elements of the novel is James's decision to delay the introduction of the major characters in his drama. The novel is divided into twelve "books"—one for each month of serialization—and we spend the first two of them in the company of only three characters: Lambert Strether (our hero), Maria Gostrey (his confidante), and Mr. Waymarsh (his stodgy American friend). We traverse several pages more before we finally meet Chad Newsome (the object of Strether's quest) and, two full books after that, Madame de Vionnet (Chad's bewitching female companion). Dorothea Krook, a critic and great admirer of the novel, calls this prolonged introduction a "brilliant Jamesian *tour de force* in the line of suspense. Chad has been talked about for some sixty pages before Strether sets eyes on him. He has been approved, disapproved, analyzed, atomized in Strether's colloquies with Maria Gostrey, with Waymarsh, with Little Bilham, with his own soul" (33).

Although Krook does not use the word "gossip" to describe these conversations, that is, in effect, what they are. In categorizing them as such, I am drawing upon the broad, textbook definition of gossip cited in my Introduction: "the exchange, in a context of congeniality, of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties" (*The Encyclopedia of Human Relations*). Although we tend to think of gossip as an empty rather than an analytical discourse, for James the whole point of gossip is its evaluative function: the judgments regarding absent third parties made while discussing those absent third parties. Through stylistic choices such as focalization and free-indirect discourse, James "associates narrative consciousness and personal conscience, adding an automatic moral component to narrative technique" (Held 41). Strether's task as the central consciousness of the

novel is to evaluate Chad's behavior, which he does by analyzing Chad's actions and motivations through third-party conversations.

The moral "approval," "disapproval," and "analysis" Chad undergoes in Strether's conversations not only fall under the category of evaluative gossip but also centers (however discreetly) on gossip's most popular subject: sex. Indeed, Strether's whole purpose in traveling to Paris is to determine Chad's relationship status. Strether will soon discover that Chad's mother is correct in her conviction that if Chad is refusing to come home to Massachusetts, it must be because there is a woman keeping him in Paris. The real question is: what kind of woman is she? In the chapter that follows I argue that *The Ambassadors*, despite its canonical status as high literature and its position as one of the three great novels of James's "Master" phase, is a novel deeply concerned with the genre of communication conventionally considered to be the most vulgar and the most trivial: gossip. Furthermore, this juxtaposition between low and high, "base" and "magnificent," does not escape James's notice; the issue comes up in one of the earliest exchanges between Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey. The two have only known each other "a few hours," and yet Strether finds himself speaking openly with Maria about his friend Mr. Waymarsh. Strether remarks upon this strange "freedom" he feels, and Maria asks him to clarify. "Being here, you mean, with me?" she asks.

"Yes, and talking to you as I do. I've known you a few hours, and I've known *him* all my life; so that if the ease I thus take with you about him isn't magnificent"—and the thought of it held him a moment—"why, it's rather base."

"It's magnificent!" said Miss Gostrey to make an end of it. "And you should hear," she added, "the case *I* take—and I above all intend to take—with Mr Waymarsh."

Strether thought. "About *me*? Ah that's no equivalent. The equivalent would be Waymarsh's himself serving me up—his remorseless analysis of me. And he'll never do that"—he was sadly clear. "He'll never remorselessly analyze me." He quite held her with the authority of this. "He'll never say a word to you about me."

She took it in; she did it justice; yet after an instant her reason, her restless irony, disposed of it. "Of course he won't. For what do you take people, that they're able to say

words about anything, able remorselessly to analyze? There are not many like you and me. It will be only because he's too stupid." (83)

I quote this passage at length because the problem Strether poses to Maria is a crucial one for the subject at hand. Is Strether's easy manner in discussing Mr. Waymarsh with Maria (in other words: gossiping about him) "magnificent," or is it "base"? Does it prove that he and Maria share an unusual connection and a common curiosity about the affairs and dispositions of their fellow humans—or is it simply mean-spirited? Strether explains to Maria that Mr. Waymarsh, in contrast, would never speak of Strether to her; and in making this admission, Strether acknowledges an imbalance in their friendship. Maria banishes Strether's hesitations by arguing that not everyone *can* "remorselessly analyze" the way that he can. When most people gossip, they simply evaluate based on their preconceived ideas about what constitutes proper behavior. Strether only evaluates, however, after a detailed *analysis* of his fellow characters, a curious and empathetic investigation that profoundly alters his assumptions about the meaning and function of propriety, society, and virtue. To Maria, this type of conversation, this attempt at understanding and evaluating others, demonstrates a kind of insight and imagination that Mr. Waymarsh, being "too stupid," simply does not possess. Although Maria's dismissal of Waymarsh in this passage may come across as cold, her criticism stems more from her impassioned defense of the curious, familiar, and analytical conversation she shares with Strether than it does from any real personal antipathy.

In this chapter I will endeavor to prove that Strether's gossip is "magnificent" not only according to his confidante, Maria, but also according to his creator, Henry James himself. The important questions to pursue here include: what sets Strether's gossip apart from the trivial talk of others? How is Strether's "remorseless analysis" different than other types of gossip? What are the factors that determine whether gossip is magnificent or base? And how is James's

portrayal of and interpretation of gossip informed by the tumultuous social, political, economic, and technological upheavals of the era in which he lived? Henry James is not the first writer to have produced a novel centered on gossip, nor is he even the first in the English tradition: Consider, for instance, the social chatter of Jane Austen's heroines or the power of rumor and reputation in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. My contention, however, is that gossip is so deeply planted in James's narrative that it becomes not only a subject of its content, but also a significant aspect of its form. Another way of saying this is that James "aestheticizes" gossip, embedding it as a stylistic principle. I argue, furthermore, that these formal choices—which distinguish *The Ambassadors* from its gossipy predecessors—are distinctly modern and, for that matter, modernist; that they are inextricable from and illustrative of the socio-historical moment in which James was living and writing; and that they suggest not only a completely different model for understanding James's work, but also a compelling new angle for theories of the novel more generally.

Although we are accustomed to reading James as the master of fictional psychology, this question of gossip (is it "magnificent" or "base"?) is an intensely *social* one—and it is a highly appropriate question for this intensely social novel. The history of Henry James criticism, as we shall see, has tended to conflate James's study of consciousness with psychology, whereas I propose that we ought to consider his treatment of consciousness as a type of sociology. "One of James's most valuable contributions to modern literature," observes Ellen Wayland-Smith, "was his exquisitely detailed dissection of narrative consciousness and the channels linking one consciousness to another" (121). Although there exists an abundance of critical literature regarding the first half of this statement (the "dissection of narrative consciousness,") my argument addresses the second half, which has yet to be fully analyzed in Henry James studies:

the “channels” that connect “one consciousness to another.” We will discover the Jamesian vision of gossip to be both “magnificent” and modernist for a number of reasons, not least of which is its reliance on the careful crafting of perspective to foster both empathy and ambiguity—but for now, it is enough merely to recognize the simple fact of gossip as a means of forging connections between one “insular” consciousness and another. By constructing the space of gossip as a shared liminal zone between individual minds, James imagines a state of social consciousness and being that transcends the troubled boundary between public and private: a boundary that was growing ever feebler and more fraught as the modern world advanced.

In an analysis of gossip and *modernism*, readers may wonder, why Henry James? He was, after all, an inheritor of the Victorian tradition, and his early novels are far more realist than modernist. Yet over the course of his career his work grows more complex, more impressionistic, and consequently more opaque, so that in the three novels of his Master Phase (*The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl*, and *Wings of the Dove*) one can detect the innovative techniques and narrative structure that impacted and shaped the generation of writers that followed him. In his study of *The Psychological Novel 1900-1950*, Leon Edel argues that Dorothy Richardson—one of the pioneers of the stream-of-consciousness technique—learned it from James. Richardson includes a scene in *Pilgrimage* where her protagonist, Miriam, holds a copy of James’s *The Ambassadors*. Miriam reflects: “And it was he after all who had achieved the first completely satisfying way of writing a novel. If this were a novel...” (*Pilgrimage* III, 410). This question of the book’s status—is it a novel, or is it not?—affirms the experimental quality of James’s work, separates him from his predecessors, and secures his place among the other modernists whose novels would also flout fictional convention and break the narrative mold: Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner. According to Virginia

Woolf, for one, James's novels act as "the bridge upon which we cross from the classic novel... to that other form of literature... the modern novel" (unpublished manuscript, qtd. in McWhirter, 170). For Richardson and Edel, what set James apart were his experiments with perspective and point of view. Edel defines the Jamesian point of view as the "illumination of the situation and characters through one or several minds" (55). In *The Ambassadors*, we experience a "kind of mutual irradiation... Strether illuminating Maria, she illuminating him, both illuminating Waymarsh, and Waymarsh in turn holding up his lamp to look at the other two... Gradually the novel will shift into the mind of Strether, and it is his mind that will light up the whole revelation of his task..." (54). The effect of "mutual irradiation" is one that must occur through gossip: since none of the characters are mind readers (more on this later), they can only be enlightened through third-party conversation. Therefore it is gossip that deepens and sharpens their understanding of their situations and each other.

Over the course of this chapter, I will examine how gossip functions in the novel both in its content and its form. Stylistically, gossip is "aestheticized" in three primary ways: first through James's use of absent characters as devices that drive conversation, secondly through his reliance on a single character's perspective to "focalize" the narrative, and third on his mastery of free indirect discourse. I will begin by reviewing the history of Henry James criticism and the importance of psychology for its critics, examining the emergence of sociology as a discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, and analyzing the difference between the psychological and the sociological conceptions of consciousness. I will also address the socio-historical context that heightened James's interest in the relationship between the individual and his society—namely, the modern dissolution of the boundary between the private and public spheres, a dissolution made more rapid by technological innovation and the corresponding transforming of social

institutions. “The globe is fast shrinking,” James wrote in his *Notebooks*, “to the size of an orange that can be played with.” The world of the twentieth century—the world of *The Ambassadors*—was one in which cables could be shot from one side of the Atlantic to the other, where what happened in Europe in the morning could be talked over in America that very evening. The technology that bridges physical distance, James understood, can also serve to increase the emotional and psychological distance between individuals; and on the other hand, certain people can be most present in one’s minds when they are most absent from one’s life. This inherently modern paradox is, in fact, precisely Lambert Strether’s situation.

Absence, Presence, Magnificence

The element of absence is significant to the novel’s subject and its structure. In analyses of what this novel is “about,” various critics have named a number of “absent” characters or ideas such as Woollett, Massachusetts; Mrs. Newsome; and America itself. One critic, Alan Bellringer, cites James’s “predilection for indirect methods of presentation” (106). He argues: “What James is doing principally with Strether’s visit to Europe is to make a study of America *in absentia*, as it were” (101)—a compelling idea that I will return to later on. Characters such as Chad and Mrs. Newsome are also studied *in absentia*, through Strether’s analysis of them in his conversations with Maria Gostrey. The absence of these characters is necessary for others to have the space to talk about them. We have already heard Dorothea Krook’s opinion of Chad’s delayed entrance into the novel: she calls this narrative strategy a “brilliant Jamesian *tour de force*” (33). Krook uses the same language to describe the complete absence of Mrs. Newsome, Chad’s mother, who sends ambassador after ambassador to Paris while remaining off-stage. “To create a principal actor in his drama who never appears in the visible action, remains unseen from start to finish, yet whose absent presence is potently felt throughout the action as a prime

agent of what happens,” writes Krook, “is a great Jamesian *tour de force*” (17). We hear of her letters and her cables, and we learn of her personality through what Strether says about her to Maria, Chad, and Madame de Vionnet, but we never see the woman herself. In a certain sense, this technique is a move *beyond* modernism; while modernists do play with absence and ambiguity in their work (consider E.M. Forster’s 1924 bestseller *Passage to India*, a novel structured around a moment that remains off-screen and ambiguous), those holes and gaps in the text do not become fully exploited until something like Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot* (1953), where the title character never appears and perhaps never existed in the first place.

Henry James’s Mrs. Newsome, in any case, does exist—in the minds of the other characters, at least, and therefore in the mind of the reader, as well. She dispatches Strether to retrieve her son from Paris, at first sending many letters after him. When she finds that Strether has not achieved the success she hoped—that he is, in fact, changing the course of the whole mission—she puts her daughter and her daughter’s family on the next boat in order to recover Chad and relieve Strether of his duties. At this point, in her anger and disappointment, she stops writing to Strether; her letters arrive with decreasing frequency before ceasing altogether. If Mrs. Newsome had been present for him before, Strether finds—oddly enough—that she is even more prominent in his mind when she stops communicating with him.

It struck him really that he had never so lived with her as during this period of her silence; the silence was a sacred hush, a finer clearer medium, in which her idiosyncrasies showed. He walked about with her, sat with her, drove with her and dined face-to-face with her... and if he had never seen her so soundless he had never, on the other hand, felt her so highly, so almost austere, herself: pure and by the vulgar estimate ‘cold,’ but deep devoted delicate sensitive noble. Her vividness in these respects became for him, in the special conditions, almost an obsession... He knew it for the queerest of adventures—a circumstance capable of playing such a part only for Lambert Strether—that in Paris itself, of all places, he should find this ghost of the lady of Woollett more importunate than any other presence (303).

Most importantly, for our purposes, the more Mrs. Newsome withdraws herself from Strether's life, the more he wants to talk about her. Strether "talked to [Maria Gostrey] of Mrs. Newsome in these days as he had never talked before" largely because a barrier of discretion has fallen; he knows that Mrs. Newsome no longer trusts him. Therefore, "if he now told Maria things about her that he had never told before this was largely because it kept before him the idea of the honour of such a woman's esteem" (303). Here, then is our first opportunity to complicate the textbook definition of gossip I cited in the introduction: while gossip takes advantage of its subject's absence, it also—simultaneously—makes the absent *present*. Strether's gossip is intended to bring Mrs. Newsome before him in order to remind himself of her "honour" and "esteem"; there is no intent to slander, no sense of scandal to convey. Indeed, what could Strether say that is scandalous about Mrs. Newsome? She is the perfect, cold New England Puritan. It is Strether, in fact, who has caused some measure of scandal of his own not only by delaying his return home, but by delaying Chad, as well. Thus while Strether talks of Mrs. Newsome, he is well aware that Mrs. Newsome talks of him.

How might we distinguish between these two types of talk? To return to the original terms of opposition: is the gossip *about* Strether as "magnificent" as the gossip he engages in? When Strether receives a cable from Mrs. Newsome, demanding his return, he immediately understands that his friend Mr. Waymarsh is behind it. "Waymarsh has been, 'unbeknown' to me, I'm convinced," he tells Maria Gostrey, "in communication with Woollett: the consequence of which was, last night, the loudest possible call for me" (296). When Maria asks what Waymarsh has done, Strether replies that he has "simply... written a letter. One will have been quite enough. He has told them I want looking after" (297). Strether is calmer than Maria Gostrey would expect him to be under these circumstances; "How wonderfully you take it!" she

tells him. “But you’re always wonderful.” For Strether, it is impossible to be angry when he believes that Waymarsh “has acted from the deepest conviction, with the best conscience and after wakeful nights” (297). By the time the new set of ambassadors arrives, Strether seems resigned to his status as an object of conversation. When Waymarsh goes to dinner with Chad’s sister Sarah, Strether tells Maria Gostrey, “They won’t talk of anything worse than you and me.” “Well, we’re bad enough, perhaps, thank heaven,” she laughed, “to upset them! Mr. Waymarsh at any rate is a hideous old coquette” (370). Earlier in the novel, Maria had claimed that Waymarsh’s refusal to gossip was because he was “too stupid” for the task; now, when he does gossip, she has a new insult prepared for him. Maria’s point of view may come across as inconsistent—and her humor a little brutal—given that in addition to reversing her earlier verdict, she is also judging Waymarsh for gossiping while she is in the very act of talking about and evaluating *him*.

And yet for Maria, as for Henry James, there is a world of difference between her conversations *with* Strether and Waymarsh’s conversations *about* Strether. Strether’s discussions with Maria about Chad, Madame de Vionnet, Mr. Waymarsh, or Mrs. Newsome are all conducted through careful analysis, in pursuit of a deeper understanding of his fellow man; but when the Woollett crowd talks about Strether, they are merely evaluating, criticizing, and chastising without attempting to comprehend. We see this in the way Mrs. Newsome and her daughter react to Strether’s attempts to tell them how Chad has been improved by Europe. Neither woman wants to hear it; they merely shut Strether down and eventually break off their ties with him. By the time this happens, of course, Strether doesn’t seem to mind—because he is not the man he was. Through his conversations with the new friends he makes in Europe, Strether *changes*: he experiences what James in his Preface calls a “revolution” of the soul.

Acutely aware of this inner transformation, Strether makes a determined effort to hide it from the new set of ambassadors. The knowledge that he is being talked about influences the way he presents himself to them: “He wasn’t going to have Sarah write to her mother that night that he was in any way altered or strange” (324). The trouble, of course, is that he is changed—whether Sarah reports on it or not.

The most obvious example of this change is the way he handles the discovery of Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s physical relationship. Coming from Woollett, he was used to believing that a “virtuous attachment” implied chastity; now, after several months in Paris, his idea of “virtue” is so changed and his opinion of Madame de Vionnet is so high that, even knowing the relationship for what it is, he still hopes Chad will not abandon her. As Madame de Vionnet puts it, “we all love Strether” (343) because he is generous of spirit, slow to judge, open to personal growth, and instinctively empathetic. His gossip contributes to these qualities, whereas the gossip of his American companions serves only to confirm their preconceived notions. Their discussions of other people make them more rigid, more narrow-minded—more, in short, of what they always were. This quality is what Strether explains to Maria near the end of the novel. “That’s just her difficulty—that she doesn’t admit surprises,” he says of Mrs. Newsome. “She had, to her own mind, worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for me as well as for herself. Whenever she has done that, you see, there’s no room left; no margin, as it were, for any alteration. She’s filled as full, packed as tight, as she’ll hold” (447). Strether, on the other hand, is open to impressions, open to experience, and open—most importantly—to others. While his American companions use gossip only to reinforce their own worldview and shield themselves from others’ perspectives, Strether’s gossip serves as the force

behind his “revolution”: it is gossip that opens his eyes and his mind, expanding his perspective and transforming him so completely that he reverses the purpose of his mission.

Strether starts off as the ideal ambassador because he believes in his mission and believes that in order to accomplish it, he must “put himself in relation, and he would be hanged if he were *not* in relation” (122). And yet this “relation” to others—this eagerness to see and to learn and to feel before it is too late—is what brings about his inner transformation and what drives Mrs. Newsome, deeply disappointed in him, to relieve him of his duties. As Ross Posnock describes it, “Strether's internalizing of difference and his dissolving of unitary identity estranges him (perhaps permanently) from the ‘iceberg’ sterility of Mrs. Newsome, who remains congealed in self-identity...” (242). Like Chad, at the end of the novel Strether “affirms self-ownership by rejecting his ‘funny alliance’ with his European companion. But, unlike Chad, his impulse of ownership is compromised by a ‘letting go’ of self that makes him less an entity to be possessed than a nexus of relations to others” (228). Strether’s consciousness is permeated by his companions: he absorbs their words, thoughts, and deeds as part of his own experience. As he tells Miss Barrace, “I seem to have a life only for other people” (255).

The mingling of multiple consciousnesses makes for a novel that is rich and multidimensional but also, simultaneously, complicated and ambiguous—qualities that have split readers between those who find it brilliant and those who find it unsatisfying. Among the latter group is Andre Gide, who complains about the very “relations” that others find so compelling. “Another thing: these characters never live except in relation to each other, in the functioning of these relations: they are desperately mundane,” Gide writes. “I mean by this there is nothing of the divine in them, and that intelligence is what makes them act or vibrate. I do not feel so much that the author is snobbish as *profane*: yes profane, incurably so...” (as qtd. in Bennett, 13).

Gide's grievance, I suggest, has less to do with the novel itself than with what readers have come to expect from Henry James. The history of Henry James criticism is a history of psychological readings, not social ones. I contend that if we approach a novel such as *The Ambassadors* from the vantage point of sociology rather than psychology, of talk rather than vision, we will be less frustrated by James's refusal to capture a discrete, insular mind and more enlightened by his portrayal of the individual entangled in the social networks of his community.

Consciousness & Sociology

Sharon Cameron opens *Thinking in Henry James* (1989) by gently chiding "Anglo-American" scholars of the novel for their unexamined practice of equating "consciousness" with "psychology." Henry James's work in particular, she writes, "has come to epitomize this assumption, and his interest in, even obsession with, the workings of consciousness taken to exemplify the fact that he writes the psychological novel par excellence" (1). This trend in Henry James criticism, dominant for the majority of the last century, is due in no small part to the retrospective statements James himself made about his novels in the Prefaces he put together for the multi-volume New York Edition of 1909. Of *Roderick Hudson*, for example, he writes: "The centre of interest throughout *Roderick* is in Rowland Mallet's consciousness, and the drama is the very drama of that consciousness—which I had of course to make sufficiently acute in order to enable it, like a set and lighted scene, to hold the play."⁶ Similarly, the difficulty of the design of *What Maisie Knew* was the effort "to make and to keep her so limited consciousness the very field of my picture while at the same time guarding with care the integrity of the objects represented." The technique of *The Ambassadors* is "that of employing but one centre and keeping it all within my hero's compass," while the structure of *The Golden Bowl* demanded a

⁶This quotation and the others in this paragraph are taken from the Prefaces to volumes of the New York Edition. Electronic versions can be found here: <http://www.henryjames.org.uk/prefaces/>

careful treatment of the “register” of *two* consciousnesses: Maggie and the Prince. “Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness,” James reportedly told himself while writing *Portrait of a Lady*, “and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish.” At this point we can hardly be surprised by James’s “confession” in his Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* that “I never see the *leading* interest of any human hazard but in a consciousness (on the part of the moved and moving creature) subject to fine intensification and wide enlargement.”

According to Cameron, these Prefaces “psychologize the idea of consciousness by imagining it as centered, subjective, internal, and unitary... asserting that the self is where consciousness resides” (77). Although Cameron will go on to argue that the novels themselves contradict this conflation of psychology with consciousness, the idea of James as a writer of psychology is deeply rooted in the critical tradition, established by his contemporaries and reaffirmed by scholars generations later. His good friend and frequent correspondent William Dean Howells said of him, “Here you have the work of a great psychologist, who has the imagination of a poet” (*Question* 19). Reviewer F.M. Colby wrote in 1902 that James “surveys a mind as a sick man looks at his counterpane, busy with little ridges and grooves and undulations” (339). Stuart P. Sherman acknowledges the critics’ recognition of James as “a learned historian of manners,” “the chief of the realists,” “a master of psychological analysis” (*Question* 75). For T.S. Eliot, what distinguishes James is his interest in and his expression of a “deeper psychology” as opposed to a concern with the more intellectual and political affairs of the world. In all fairness to these critics, it is easy—and, it must be admitted, often productive—to associate Henry James with his brother, William. It has been said more than once, remarks James Olney, that “William James was a psychologist who wrote like a novelist and Henry James a novelist

who wrote like a psychologist" (46). Although it was Henry, as Leon Edel points out in *The Psychological Novel 1900-1950*, whose work propelled the high modernists to staggering heights of artistic innovation, it was William who provided critics with the terminology to describe those experiments. In his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William suggests that consciousness is not in fact a "chain" or a "train," the metaphors which early psychologists had used to explain the process of thought. On the contrary, argues William: "It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life*" (239). Readers seized upon the concept of the "stream-of-consciousness," and we critics have used it in our analyses of modernist literature ever since.

William's work in psychology was significant for many reasons, not least of which was the timing of its publication. Over the latter half of the nineteenth century, the discipline of psychology had been steadily branching away from its roots in philosophy. William Wundt founded the first laboratory of experimental psychology at Leipzig University in 1879. One decade later William James published his comprehensive textbook of the new discipline (*The Principles of Psychology*), and another decade after that Sigmund Freud came out with his groundbreaking *Interpretation of Dreams*. Although it was completed in 1899, Freud insisted that the book be dated "1900" so that it would herald a new science for a new century. The emergence of psychology as a rigorous "science" in its own right, with legitimate and reproducible methods of investigation and experimentation, is a trend that resounded through the two other fledgling disciplines of modernity: linguistics and sociology. Like the new psychologists, linguists and sociologists spent the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth disengaging their work from its humanistic heritage (stemming, as

they did, from philosophy and literature), seeking methods and results that relied more on fact than they did on speculation. Even modernist literature was not immune to this desire for scientific precision. Ezra Pound famously insisted upon the priority of “technique” in poetry (rather than the outdated Romantic notions of inspiration or spontaneous emotion) in order to ground the evaluation of a poem in more “objective” criteria. Pound’s critical essays and letters insist upon the concrete image, the *mot juste*, the dangers of abstraction or redundancy. His three principles of Imagism make it possible to judge the technical “success” of a poem in a manner unique to modernism. As K.K. Ruthven observes in *Ezra Pound as Critic*, “To represent poetry as technical experimentalism... indicates not only the prestige of scientism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses of the arts but also its status as a ground on which discussion can take place” (112). Pound’s “scientistic metaphors” are intended to establish the authority of the critic and legitimate the discipline, thus paralleling the efforts of early writers in psychology, linguistics, and sociology.

Artists at the turn of the century were, in short, working in an intellectual atmosphere that was highly charged with this revolutionary energy. Henry James obviously could not be unaware of the progress in psychology (his brother sent him a copy of *The Principles of Psychology*); nor could he remain ignorant of the types of questions raised by early sociologists, since he shared their preoccupation with the complicated new relationship between individuals and modern society. Several decades after James’s death, critic Richard P. Blackmur would suggest that it was in fact the state of the modern world that propelled James’s investigations into the consciousness of the individual. James’s notion of “the individual as isolated and detached from society in everything but responsiveness,” writes Blackmur, “...is a concept that springs, I think, from those changes in society that are related to the facts of population growth and the

mass-form of society” (qtd. in Stone 54). James’s individual, we see now, is not “isolated” or “detached” at all; how can he be, as a product of his time, his culture, and his social circumstances? Lambert Strether is in many ways the essence of Woollett, Massachusetts when he arrives in Paris. When he tells Maria Gostrey where he hails from, he adds: “I feel it so that I certainly must look it, speak it, and, as people say there, ‘act’ it. It sticks out of me... the fact of where I come from” (63). Only through his relations with others—his social networks, his conversations with Maria—does he come to be anything else. In this respect, James’s withdrawal into the study of consciousness, the life of the mind, is not solely psychological; it is, instead, social. Furthermore, this study of consciousness is inextricable from the economic, technological, and political upheavals of modernity that James observed and worried over.

I am not arguing that James’s fiction should be read purely sociologically anymore than it should be read purely psychologically. Rather, I present *The Ambassadors* as a prime example of the idea that an individual’s psychology is connected to his friends, his acquaintances, and his society—a man’s mind cannot be insulated from those who surround him, and so it does not belong to him alone. It is, in fact, this highly social conception of consciousness that sets Henry James apart from his psychologist brother. “Every thought,” for William James, “tends to be part of a personal consciousness.” As an example, William places us all in a “lecture-room” that contains “a multitude of thoughts, yours and mine, some of which cohere mutually, and some not.” He continues:

My thought belongs with my other thoughts, and your thoughts with your other thoughts... Each of these minds keeps its own thoughts to itself. There is no giving or bartering between them. No thought even comes into direct *sight* of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law. It seems as if the elementary psychic fact were not *thought* or *this thought* or *that thought*, but *my thought*, every thought being *owned*. Neither contemporaneity, nor proximity in space, nor similarity of quality and content are able to fuse thoughts together

which are sundered by this barrier of belonging to different personal minds. The breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature (226).

While Henry James, too, recognizes these “breaches” between thoughts, I contend that he does not view these breaches as “absolute.” As a novelist, after all, how can he? His life’s work depends on his ability to “fuse” thoughts—his own and his characters’, his characters’ and his readers’—so that the “barrier of belonging to different personal minds” is, if not completely knocked down, at least partially dismantled. Are we not, as we read, living as vicariously as Lambert Strether, reading the transcripts of others’ conversations, invading others’ private thoughts, absorbing others’ experiences into our own?

Returning, for a moment, to *Thinking in Henry James*, we find that the book rests upon Cameron’s theory that consciousness in Henry James can operate *outside* of its individual subject. This is what she means when she refers to (and advocates for) the split between “psychology” and “consciousness.” According to Cameron, James’s later fiction “records the outrageous triumph in which the mind and the world, the self and the other, consciousness and the things it appropriates—or however these oppositions are rhetorically formulated—converge or are even interpenetrated” (30). By reading *The Golden Bowl* (1904) as a series of scenes where one individual’s consciousness comes to dominate another individual, or *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) as proof that “thinking exists in the public domain, where it can be viewed” (150), Cameron externalizes consciousness and undermines William’s description of the “absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism” of thought. She is careful to explain that the novels do not critique the idea of consciousness itself, but rather the assumption that it can be “psychologized.” In her own words:

In the novels I have described, consciousness is not stable, not subjective, not interior, not unitary, as James’s Prefaces claim. But it is also, as a consequence, not dismissed or deconstructed. Rather it is disseminated. In the novels consciousness is not in persons; it

is rather between them, whether this manifests itself between Rowland and Roderick, or Isabel and Pansy, or Isabel and Merle, or between Maisie and Sir Claude... For in the novels consciousness is disengaged from the self. It is reconceived as extrinsic, made to take shape—indeed to become social—as an *intersubjective* phenomenon. What is radical about this reconception is that it dispenses with the idea of a psychology while preserving the idea of consciousness. In fact, it valorizes consciousness just to the extent that consciousness can be separated from the confines of the self (77).

The idea of consciousness “disseminated,” existing not *in* persons but “rather between them” is a compelling one. Moreover, the split she describes between consciousness and psychology was not only significant for James’s work but also for writers and scholars in other disciplines.⁷ I’d like to push Cameron’s argument even further by supplying the term for the “*intersubjective* phenomenon” that she alludes to but does not name: society. Cameron argues that the exploration of consciousness should not be “psychologized,” and sociology provides a potential solution. At the turn of the twentieth century, just as James was writing the three late novels that would constitute his Master phase, the first sociologists were setting up camp in Paris. While in his novels James was attempting to portray the dispersion of consciousness, or the “thought” that exists between individuals, these early social scientists were beginning their research into the collective consciousness that makes up modern society.

Widely accepted as the founder of sociology, Emile Durkheim formally established the discipline by setting up the first department of sociology (thus becoming its first professor) in 1895 and founding the journal *L’Année Sociologique* in 1898. Durkheim was deeply indebted to Auguste Comte’s doctrine of positivism, a school of thought insisting that empirical evidence and scientific facts were as essential to the study of society as they were to the natural sciences. Consequently, what set Durkheim apart from the social theorists who preceded him was his insistence on the existence of “social facts” that could be studied in the same way that a biologist

⁷Cameron spends several pages of her introduction on the parallels between James’s study of consciousness and Husserl’s phenomenology (23).

would study the cells of a living organism. One analogy for Durkheim's method of social analysis is that of a dissection: he wanted to open up society to figure out the way that it worked.⁸ The notion that society can be studied as a *whole* was a startling and groundbreaking claim for the new science, in large part because it prioritized the collectivity over the individual. This emphasis on the "whole" over the "parts," was, of course, deliberate—as early social scientists were struggling to separate their young discipline from its philosophical parents, they were also trying to distinguish it from the equally nascent psychology. What Durkheim shared with psychologists was his claim about the scientific basis for his work and his recognition that society (and individuals with it) had been permanently altered by the technological, political, and economic revolutions of modernity. He differed in where he placed his attention: the group, not the individuals.

Durkheim himself recognized the revolutionary nature of his ideas. As he writes in *Suicide* (1897):

But whenever science has revealed the existence of an unknown force, it has been met with incredulity. Since one must alter the system of commonly accepted ideas to give way to a new order of things and construct new concepts, lazy minds resist. However, we must agree on this: If sociology exists, it can only be the study of an as yet unknown world, different from those explored by other sciences; and this world is nothing if not a system of realities (344).

Suicide is, itself, one of Durkheim's best-known works, as significant for its pioneering method of social research as it is for Durkheim's deliberate and visible efforts in it to distinguish sociology from psychology and political philosophy. Its hypothesis is an example of the "hardest case" methodological approach: if Durkheim can prove that there are social patterns and forces at work in the most "individual" of all decisions—whether to live or whether to die—then has he

⁸It is important to remember that Durkheim was writing in an intellectual world that had been profoundly impacted by Karl Marx; the idea that material causes lead to social outcomes was already, to a certain extent, "in the air."

not proven his point for all other cases? Critics of *Suicide* point out that Durkheim “borrowed” most of his statistics from earlier researchers and that he mistakenly drew inferences about individuals from inferences about the groups to which they belong: an error in logic known as the “ecological fallacy.” For the purposes of early sociology, however, the true significance of the work lies not in its “discoveries” about the nature of suicide but rather in its groundbreaking approach to social issues. *Suicide* is less about actual suicide than it is about *anomie*: the idea that as society develops, it is breaking down, which means that modern man lacks the kind of collective social order he needs to feel useful and content. The hypothesis that suicide can be attributed to something more than a single individual’s unhappiness, that it can represent and refract the larger, collective unhappiness of a whole society in flux, is deeply disconcerting. (If an individual does not control her own happiness, what *does* she control—if anything?) It also serves as a concrete example for Durkheim’s idea of the “collective consciousness” that he expounds upon in other writings such as *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). There, he writes: “It is quite true that society does not contain other active forces except those of individuals, but individuals when they unite form a psychic being of a new kind, which consequently has its own way of thinking and feeling... When consciousness, instead of remaining isolated from other consciousnesses, combines with them in a group, something in the world has changed” (344).

This sociological vision of the “combination” of consciousnesses is precisely what Cameron is trying to illuminate in James’s Prefaces, *The Golden Bowl*, and *The Wings of the Dove*. However, she does not take her theory far enough; she does not quite reach sociology in her attempts to find a replacement for—or rather, a complication of—the conventional psychological reading critics have tended to employ especially for the late novels. There is very

little plot-related “action” in *The Ambassadors* apart from the “revolution” that Lambert Strether experiences in his own psyche, his own soul—and yet that inner revolution becomes actualized in how he comports himself in the world: how he interacts with others, what sort of advice he gives, which interpersonal entanglements he accepts and which he breaks off. An individual’s consciousness, in other words, influences and shapes the consciousness of others. I contend that James’s study of consciousness in *The Ambassadors* is as social as it is psychological in its portrayal of the working of minds upon other minds. Lambert Strether is, after all, not altered by *Paris*—he is profoundly impacted by the people that he meets there, by the social gatherings, by the “psychic being” (as Durkheim calls it) of a society so different from the one he has known at home. Most importantly—and here is the crux of my argument—the influencing and shaping of consciousness is not something that merely *happens*; on the contrary, this sort of transformation requires (in life as in literature) a vehicle. For Henry James, that “magnificent” vehicle of revolution and transformation is “base” and lowly gossip.

Pronouns, Style, and Perspective

In his Preface James explains why, in his depiction of a single consciousness, he rejected the style of the first-person: “the first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness, and that looseness, never much my affair, had never been so little as on this particular occasion” (45). The third person, on the other hand, is far more rigorous, more technically excellent: “Strether... encaged and provided for as *The Ambassadors* encages and provides, has to keep in view properties much stiffer and more salutary than any our straight and credulous gape are likely to bring home to him, has exhibitional conditions to meet, in a word, that forbid the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation” (46). The self-revelation must come slowly, sometimes painfully, in fragments—just as it does in life. The demands we readers make on Strether are

similar to the demands made by Madame de Vionnet: his task as the center of consciousness is not simply to relay his own perspective, but to interpret and report on the perspective of others. After meeting Chad's sister Sarah in a small party, Madame de Vionnet asks Strether to get inside Sarah's head. "You who sat where you could see her, what does she make of it all?" asks Madame de Vionnet. "By which I mean on what terms does she take it?" (390). Many critics have focused on James's treatment of individual consciousness, but this moment is an example of how he establishes those all-important "channels" linking one consciousness to another. James accomplishes this social feat by homing in on *point of view*, both actual and perceived, and in doing so he lays the groundwork for future modernist experimentation in perspective.

Yet is it truly possible to understand someone else's perspective—to demonstrate empathy, in other words—through gossip? Or does the act of speaking of an absent other merely transform that other into an object (of conversation) rather than a subject in his or her own right? For French linguist Emile Benveniste, the third-person is a specific kind of pronoun, one utterly distinct from the first- and second-person. What Benveniste calls the "disparity" between these two groups of pronouns is made evident by Arab grammarians: "For them, the first person is *al-mutakallimu* 'the one who speaks'; the second, *al-muhatabu* 'the one who is addressed'; but the third is *al-ya ibu* 'the one who is absent'" (322). The first- and second-person are always unique, always specific, and always contingent on the moment of speech: they refer to the speaker and the addressee, respectively, and in both cases there is "a person involved and a discourse concerning that person." The third-person, however, is never "involved"; the third-person is always "outside 'I-you'; this form is an exception to the relationship by which 'I' and 'you' are specified. Consequently, the legitimacy of this form as a 'person' is to be questioned" (323). Benveniste goes on to label the third-person a "non-person," and shows how it is employed in

“nonpersonal” forms of discourse. “From its function as a nonpersonal form,” he explains, “the ‘third person’ takes this ability to become a form of respect, which makes another being more than a person, as well as a form of insult, which can annihilate him as a person” (326). One can only use “I” or “you” when the referents of both “I” and “you” are present; in contrast, by its very definition the third-person must always be missing from the conversation. The sign of the third-person, therefore, is absence.

This brief analysis of the grammatical third-person helps us to clarify the link between the literary third person and gossip in *The Ambassadors*. In James’s novel, the third-person becomes a means of encapsulating the two elements most crucial to gossip: absence and perspective. Furthermore, Benveniste’s labeling of the grammatical third-person as a “nonperson” cuts directly to the heart of gossip: the speakers’ perception of the absent other. Perhaps one reason why gossip has been considered cruel, trivial, and base is that the subject of the conversation—who is not present—becomes a “nonperson” in third-party discussions. The evaluative and judgmental elements of gossip can become manifest only after speakers have stripped the subject of personality, humanity; only after, in other words, the absent other’s status as a *subject* has been transformed into an *object* of conversation. The third person, as Benveniste explains, is never “involved,” always existing “outside ‘I-you.’” This person’s status as an outsider makes it easier for the speakers to pass judgment. The concept of those “inside” the conversation and those pushed “outside” parallels the research of those social scientists who argue for gossip as an essentially conservative force: its main purpose is to mark the “outliers” of a community and ensure that others remain fixed within the social norms. Indeed, James’s selection of the word “encages” to describe Strether’s relation to the narrative calls to mind Max

Weber's image of the "iron cage" of modern society: the accumulation of social structures that fence the individual within the established social order.

The importance of third-party conversation is so important to the novel that even when Strether finally has Chad to himself, face-to-face across a "small table in the brilliant halls" of a café in Avenue de l'Opéra, he imagines Maria Gostrey "sitting up, a mile away, in the little apartment he knew... listen[ing] hard enough to catch" what he and Chad are saying. Strether "found too that he liked that idea, and he wished that, by the same token, Mrs. Newsome might have caught as well" (158). Before his talk with Chad has even begun, Strether imagines how it will be perceived and interpreted when he conveys the news of it to others. Chad, meanwhile, returns the favor by "reporting on" Strether to "these friends," Madame de Vionnet and her daughter—such is Maria Gostrey's assumption, which proves to be correct. "I've heard a great deal about you," says Madame de Vionnet to Strether when they finally do meet, a confession that still manages to strike Strether unprepared. "The thing indeed really unmistakable was its rolling over him as a wave that he had been, in conditions incalculable and unimaginable, a subject of discussion. He had been, on some ground that concerned her, answered for; which gave her an advantage he should never be able to match" (211). An interesting sentiment coming from Strether, who has made Madame de Vionnet (with Chad) a subject of his own discussion for weeks already, and who feels he has gained none of the "advantage" she seems to have acquired in a matter of days.

By aligning gossip with power, Strether also acknowledges the related equation of gossip with knowledge. What disturbs Strether about Madame de Vionnet's offhand remark is that she knows more about him than he does about her—and indeed, she will continue to know more (though he struggles daily to even the balance), right up until the very end. "You can't make out

over here what people do know,” Strether says rather helplessly to Waymarsh early on in the affair (133). Even Maria Gostrey, the character who has been written into the novel specifically to act as a confidante and guide for Strether, knows more than Strether does about the nature of the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet, and yet instead of telling Strether what she knows, she skips town so that he will not have a chance to put the question to her. Maria abandons Strether in the hope that he will discover the truth for himself, but it takes a very long time for him to do so. “It came to him in fact,” Strether muses to himself near the climax of the novel, “that just here was his usual case: he was for ever missing things through his general genius for missing them, while others were for ever picking them up through a contrary bent” (407). Although at certain points Strether fancies himself a keen observer of human affairs, he misinterprets what he sees time and time again: first he believes Chad to be involved with Madame de Vionnet’s daughter; later he believes the romantic attachment to be “virtuous.” It is because of his own blindness (a blindness forgivable, for the most part, since it usually stems from his desire to believe that people are better, more honest, and more insightful than they really are) that he must depend so fully on others’ reports of the situation: in other words, on gossip.

Yet while “gossipy” characters in other novels tend to come across as vulgar or trivial, Strether somehow maintains our sympathy—in part because he is the underdog, in part because he is high-minded and empathetic, but largely because he persists in his often-thwarted quest for knowledge with no other goal in mind but for the knowledge itself and the apparent well-being of those he studies. His only logic, he famously tells Maria at the end of the novel as he elegantly sidesteps her marriage proposal, is “not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself” (512). His gossip is what Thomas Pavel calls “good” gossip; it is investigative and sympathetic

rather than mean-spirited. Strether recognizes the power of gossip to shape reputations, but he uses it to promote the reputations of his friends instead of his own. He heeds Madame de Vionnet when she implores him to use his gossip for her benefit. “Do speak of us in such a way—!” she beseeches him, referencing the conversations she knows he will have with Chad’s sister, and correctly perceiving that she herself will be the subject of them. “As that something can’t but come of it?” Strether replies. “Oh, something *shall* come of it! I take great interest!” (348). In this moment, Strether recognizes and accepts the power of influencing others through opinions and reports. He is ready to head into battle against Chad’s family on behalf of Chad’s lover.

Madame de Vionnet believes in Strether; specifically, she believes in the power of his perspective. Throughout the novel she emphasizes the importance of hearing things from his point of view. “I wish you’d tell me about her,” she says to Strether of Mrs. Newsome. “Hasn’t Chad talked to you?” Strether wants to know. She replies: “Of his mother? Yes, a great deal—immensely. But not from your point of view” (282). A little later, when they are speaking of Chad’s future, Madame de Vionnet again emphasizes the importance of hearing Strether’s take on the situation. “But for myself,” she says, “the question is what *you* make.” Strether replies: “Ah I make nothing. It’s not my affair.” “I beg your pardon,” she interjects. “It’s just there that, since you’ve taken it up and are committed to it, it most intensely becomes yours” (285). One of the reasons Madame de Vionnet values Strether so highly is because of his gift of sharing his perspective with others. Somehow he is able to convey more than Chad does, at least when it comes to Chad’s family. “You somehow make me see them,” she says. “Or at least feel them.” As readers, we must share Madame de Vionnet’s reliance on Strether’s point of view simply because that perspective is nearly all we have. Indeed, it was James’s exact intention to employ “but one centre” of the novel, containing all the drama “within my hero’s compass” (Preface to

The Ambassadors, 42). Although the novel follows a number of characters and traces a variety of relations, James writes that “Strether’s sense of these things, and Strether’s only, should avail me for showing them; I should know them but through his more or less groping knowledge of them, since his very gropings would figure among his most interesting motions...” (43). While James had experimented with this technique in previous novels, critics generally cite *The Ambassadors* as the work in which the central consciousness was most thoroughly and effectively realized.

This technique is known as “focalization,” or the “mediating and limiting” of “narrative point of view through a character’s point of view” (Held 33). Since both “focalization” and “point of view” are terms that rely on metaphors of sight, most analyses of the technique work through visual analogies. In the article “Windows of Focalization,” Manfred Jahn opens with a diagram of focalization that explains point of view through the eye, the lens, and the visual field. James’s famous “house of fiction” metaphor⁹ demonstrates his “propensity to think in terms of pictures and visual art” (Morrison 249) and explains why his critics often follow suit. In the preface to *Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer is variously described as “a pair of eyes,” “a field-glass,” and “a window.” Yet as Heather Fielding convincingly argues, in *The Ambassadors* the focalizer functions less as a window than an obstacle, limiting the reader’s view into this fictional world rather than opening it. According to James, writes Fielding, “readers do not ‘see’ anything—not even ‘strange shadows’—through Lambert Strether” (230). Invoking James’s metaphor of the magic lantern, Fielding argues that Strether’s consciousness “becomes an image projected onto the novel’s subject matter, rather than a clear portal through which a reader looks... Through Strether’s point of view, the novel omits rather than transmits information,

⁹“The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will” (Preface to *Portrait of a Lady*).

presenting only what ‘there would be room for’” (230). If we are frustrated with Strether’s ability to transmit to us what he has seen, so too is Strether troubled by his inability to convey his observations to Mrs. Newsome. “I’ve been interested *only* in her seeing what I’ve seen,” he tells Maria. “And I’ve been as disappointed in her refusal to see it as she has been in what has appeared to her the perversity of my insistence” (446).

We recall Strether’s claim to Waymarsh that his whole purpose in coming over was to “see” the situation for himself. “You can’t make out over here what people do know,” he tells his friend. “Then what did you come over for?” asks Waymarsh. “Well, I suppose exactly to see for myself—without their aid” (133). We may justifiably read Strether’s statement here as ironic, since we have learned that he requires the aid of his companions throughout the novel in order to “see” anything for himself. Peter Brooks describes *The Ambassadors* as “the most obvious example of a perceptual adventure and dilemma, a kind of detective story where the detective, Lambert Strether, eventually gets it all wrong because he’s willfully blinded himself—yet in getting it wrong discovers the perspectives in which it is all right” (2-3). Strether’s “gropings,” his efforts to clarify and illuminate the situation at hand, take place through third-party conversation—since it is only through conversation, and the ensuing contemplation of those conversations, that anything can be learned. James remarks in his Preface that this is the whole purpose of Maria Gostrey’s character: she has no significance for the content. Her only reason for being is to act as Strether’s confidant, to gossip with him, to lead him toward the light. As James points out, she is in this sense more the reader’s friend than Strether’s. She is the device that makes it possible for James to channel the whole story through Strether. Because of the limits of Strether’s consciousness, both we and he are forced to rely on the only methods of

social discovery we have at our disposal: observation, conversation with others in order to compare and analyze those observations, and contemplation.

The whole challenge of the novel, then, is to convey what has been seen to those who have not seen it. The only way to do this is through language—through gossip. According to Benveniste, what distinguishes language from other types of communication is precisely this: the ability to report not only what one has seen, but what one has *heard* about what someone else has seen. Interestingly, Benveniste arrives at this conclusion by examining the communication of bees in order to distinguish it from human language. One difference is that, relying as it does on physical dances and gestures, bee-talk “necessarily occurs under conditions which permit visual perception, i.e., in daylight.” Unlike human language, “it cannot be made effective in darkness” (5). Benveniste’s insistence that language must be able to take place under conditions which do *not* permit visual perception better aligns with the Jamesian metaphor of the “magic lantern” for *The Ambassadors* (a projection tool that functions in the dark) than it does his earlier metaphor of the “field glass” or the “windows.” Another difference between bee-talk and human language is that the bee-receiver of the message cannot reply to it; there is no dialogue. Most importantly for our purposes, however, is the bee’s inability to relay the message he has received.

There is no indication, for example, that a bee goes off to another hive with the message it has received in its own hive. This would constitute a kind of transmission or relay. Human language is different; for in the dialogue the reference to the objective experience and the reaction to its linguistic manifestation mix freely and without limitation. The bee does not construe a message from another message. Each bee, once advised by the scouting bee’s dance, flies out and feeds at the spot indicated, reproducing the same information on its return, not with reference to the first message but with reference to the fact it has just verified itself. Now the characteristic of language is to produce a substitute for experience which can be passed on ad infinitum in time and space. This is the nature of our symbolism and the basis of linguistic tradition (6).

The whole purpose and significance of language, according to Benveniste, is that it enables us to transmit knowledge between third-, fourth-, and fifth-parties who are further and further removed

from firsthand experience of whatever the message relays. “Telling” is more efficient than “showing” because not everyone needs to be able to see—only to listen. This concept recalls Robin Dunbar’s theory of gossip as a more efficient social tool than grooming, although both work toward the same purpose of managing reputations, establishing bonds, and navigating relationships among allies and enemies.

In their reference to Benveniste’s bees in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari conclude that language “is not content to go from a first party to a second party, from one who has seen to one who has not, but necessarily goes from a second party to a third party, neither of whom has seen” (85). This “translative movement proper to language,” this transfer from first to second to third party, is “indirect discourse.” “There are many passions in a passion, all manner of voices in a voice, murmurings, speaking in tongues,” they write; “that is why all discourse is indirect” (85). Although all discourse may be indirect, and although much of literature consists of such reportage, not all discourse is *free* indirect—and in this is where Henry James comes in. Free indirect discourse, which was most prominent in the work of Jane Austen, became a popular narrative style in nineteenth-century fiction. The technique is crucial to our understanding of gossip in Henry James because, like the very content of his fiction, the style underscores the gaps and the tensions between the individual and society, or between “private and public aspects of the self” (Nadell 6). Free indirect discourse proceeds by contradictions and ambiguities because it works through a multiplicity of voices. In a single sentence, as Gregory Flaxman observes in “A More Radical Empiricism,” James has us “shuttl[ing] along a telescopic line of perspectives, dilated at certain points and contracted at others, descending into the ambiguities of free-indirect discourse that dispatches with anything like a unitary consciousness

or self-same subject” (65). Although we may think that we’re “with” Strether throughout the novel, key linguistic shifts actually compel us to move between multiple perspectives.

One oft-cited example of this technique in *The Ambassadors* is in the very first book, when Strether descends into the hotel lobby to meet Maria.

When in a quarter of an hour he came down, what his hostess saw, what she might have taken in with a vision kindly adjusted, was the lean, the slightly loose figure of a man of the middle height and something more perhaps than the middle age... and a line, unusually deep and drawn, the prolonged pen-stroke of time, accompanying the curve of the moustache from nostril to chin, did something to complete the facial furniture that an attentive observer would have seen catalogued, on the spot, in the vision of the other party to Strether’s appointment (58).

In many ways, this passage is “classic James.” For our purposes, the most salient example of the free indirect style at work occurs in the second and third clauses: “what his hostess saw, what she might have taken in with a vision kindly adjusted...” At first it seems as though the physical description of Strether will be from Maria’s point of view; but then we find that it cannot be from her point of view, because she did *not* actually see Strether in this way, but only *might have* seen him in this way if her vision had been “kindly adjusted.” The narrator proceeds to adjust it for her, and for us, and a lengthy description follows. Near the end of the passage there is a second slippage, when “an attentive observer *would have seen catalogued*” in “the vision of the other party to Strether’s appointment”—that is, Maria. An attentive observer cannot, however, see the cataloguing of Strether’s “facial furniture” in Maria’s expression because a) there is no attentive observer present and b) we have already been told that Maria herself *might have* perceived Strether’s appearance in a certain way but, in reality, has not. This kind of prose, in Flaxman’s words, serves to “unravel and baffle judgment—what was seen or heard? What happened, to whom, for whom?” (“Empiricism” 65). It is in this manner that free indirect discourse “throws into relief the question of who speaks (the ultimate answer is, of course, nobody), destroys the

notion of the individual subject as verbal master of a visual plenitude, and renders opaque the language of everyday communication (Gunderson 168). James's style, in other words, does *not* clarify our vision as a pair of glasses would; instead it obstructs us, confuses us.

On the other hand, perhaps the visual metaphors of the window and the field-glass are not meant to convey a sense of "clarity," of unobstructed and sharpened vision into the world, but are instead intended to underscore the limitations of that vision—of our vision, of any vision. The narrator who stands looking out a window in James's house of fiction has a clear view from where he stands, but he cannot see behind him or to either side. He knows—and is frustrated by knowing—that other narrators at other windows have different perspectives than he, so that what he sees cannot ever be the *whole* truth, but only the truth according to where he stands. This is why Deleuze can argue that "it's the point of view that explains the subject and not the opposite" ("On Leibniz"). The point of view determines what the observer knows, and what he knows determines his actions and reactions. In this sense every observer can only ever be a "partial observer" (*WP* 129). Vision is always limited: we remember the diagram of the visual field in Held, which covered only a portion of the entire visible world, and we remember Benveniste's bees, who (like us) could not see in the dark. Unlike the bees, as Benveniste pointed out, humans use language to overcome obstacles and obstructions to vision—whether that be darkness or window-frames—and in *The Ambassadors*, the tool best suited to overcome Strether's visual handicaps is gossip.

Although Strether comes to Europe to "see" for himself, he only sees what characters choose to reveal to him or what interpretations they share with him. After speaking of Chad with Maria for the first time and hearing her insight on the matter, Strether compliments her vision.

"You see more in it," he presently returned, "than I."
"Of course I see *you* in it."

“Well then you see more in ‘me’!”

“Than you see in yourself? Very likely. That’s always one’s right. What I was thinking of,” she explained, “is the possible particular effect on him of his *milieu*.”

“Oh, his *milieu*—!” Strether really felt he could imagine it better now than three hours before.

“Do you mean it can only have been so lowering?”

“Why that’s my very starting point” (103).

Here their gossip of Chad expands Strether’s perspective. He feels, thanks to Maria, that “he could imagine it better now.” The “it” is ambiguous here—does it mean Chad’s situation? If so, how does Maria see Strether *in* it?—but so too are many of the other pronouns and nouns. What Maria describes as Chad’s “*milieu*” is never explained, either; we wonder if it means Paris, or Chad’s circle, or some person in particular. Yet even though it is not explained, Strether instantly seems to grasp her meaning. “Oh, his *milieu*—!” he exclaims. And the following question that we assume would go from him to Maria, since she brought up the milieu in the first place, is actually posed by her to him. The last line belongs to Strether. But how is it that Strether suddenly has a “starting point” regarding Chad and his milieu, if he had not really considered the milieu until two seconds earlier in this very conversation?

I will return to the question of these shifty, indeterminate pronouns in the final section of this chapter. For now, I would like to focus instead on how, despite James’s seeming insistence on the significance of vision, he uses gossip as a means to overcome its limitations. What matters is *not* what Strether sees, but what he hears. His point of view is expanded through gossip. He reflects as much to himself when dining with Waymarsh, who is pressing him on what he knows. “‘Well,’ said Strether almost gaily, ‘I guess I don’t know anything!’ His gaiety might have been a tribute to the fact that the state he had been reduced to did for him again what had been done by his talk of the matter with Miss Gostrey at the London Theatre. It was somehow enlarging...” (131). The passage, typically, feels paradoxical: Strether’s state has “been reduced,” but that

diminishment is “somehow enlarging.” We can take this to mean that the constriction of his point of view compels him to supplement his perception of the situation with other points of view: and in doing so, his own vision has expanded. “You’ll do more—as you’re so much better—than all of us put together,” Maria tells him at one point admiringly, to which Strether “bravely” replies: “I think I’m only better since I’ve known *you*!” (107). James’s use of free indirect discourse makes the narrative point of view “multifaceted,” manifesting itself “through a complex network of small-scale linguistic structures” (Held 36). The free indirect narrative represents, for Gerard Genette, “a complex whole within which analysis, or simply description, cannot *differentiate* except by ripping apart a tight web of connections among the narrating act, its protagonists, its spatio-temporal determinations, its relationship to the other narrating situations involved in the same narrative” (215). What begins as a linguistic and structural network becomes a network between characters, and finally a network between character, reader, narrator, and author. These are the “channels of consciousness” that comprise James’s fiction.

Another way to describe these channels and networks might be, in Flaxman’s terms, “an assemblage of relations.” As he points out, much of James’s fiction centers on obscurity, secrecy, and conspiracy. “We should heed the etymology of conspiracy,” he writes, “of a ‘breathing together,’ since so much of what is inferred in James’s fiction will be whispered, inaudible, the dim murmur of rumor and innuendo” (“Empiricism” 64). Strether senses meaning even when he cannot quite grasp it. At one point he feels as though he is “moving in a maze of mystic closed allusions” (262); in another moment “it came to him, perceptibly” that there was “something behind these allusions and professions that, should he take it in, would square but ill with his present resolve to simplify” (258). As Strether tries to penetrate the web of allusions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities, so too are we forced to do exactly that through the thicket of

James's free indirect prose. Although at points we may feel as though we are *with* Strether, in his consciousness, in reality our experience in the novel is not nearly so simple. Like Strether, we encounter multiple voices, multiple perspectives—in his words—“sounding together.” He reflects that he “had heard, of old, only what he *could* then hear; what he could do now was to think of three months ago as a point in the far past. All voices had grown thicker and meant more things; they crowded on him as he moved about—it was the way they sounded together that wouldn't let him be still” (426). Strether takes this, as should we, “as proof of the change in himself.” Although he begins the novel as “encaged,” over the course of the narrative he succeeds in freeing himself from many of these initial constraints—not through what he has seen, necessarily, but from what he has said, heard, and inferred.

His European expedition is the catalyst that initiates his liberation. Strether's first “revolution” is to recognize his metaphorical cage for what it is; his second “revolution” occurs when he steps outside of it. According to Alan Bellringer, “The steps in Strether's journey as he questions his predetermined aims, as he relaxes, delays, revises his opinions, changes sides, revises his views again, accepts and criticises the role of others and eventually decides to return to America are not meaningless and confused. He abandons moralism for a more refined, rational viewpoint” (138). That “moralism” of Woollett, Massachusetts is condensed in the figure of Mrs. Newsome: a woman so certain of her own perspective and so closed down to the points of view of others that she stops communicating with Strether when she does not agree with his reports. Strether equates Mrs. Newsome with “moral pressure,” and laments her ability to reach him “somehow by the lengthened arm of her spirit, and he was having to that extent to take her into account; but he wasn't reaching her in turn, not making her take *him*” (416). He understands

where she is coming from (before his time in Paris, he was coming from the same place), but she has no interest in attempting to understand *him*. According to Paul Armstrong:

In Woollett, the world may have seemed stable, determinate, and independent of interpretation— ‘real,’ pure and simple—because the ‘categories’ and ‘terms’ that made it up were never radically questioned. Strether's bewilderment in Paris reveals that his earlier reality was only an interpretive construct, a framework of assumptions and hypotheses now cast into bold relief because they have been surprised (qtd. in Hocks 65).

Unlike Strether, Mrs. Newsome has no desire to question or reinterpret her “framework of assumptions and hypotheses” about the social world. Strether, through the “remorseless analysis” of his gossip, spends the whole novel doing precisely that.

Henry James complicates our working definition of gossip because, unlike Mrs. Newsome, Strether does not objectify or dismiss others when they do not conform to his expectations of them. Instead, Strether uses gossip as a means of understanding why others behave the way they do, of getting into other minds—he turns gossip, in other words, toward empathy. Justice, for James, “consists in finding the most perfect perspective from which to view the case—the perspective best suited to its truth or solution” (Flaxman 66). Before sending Strether off to meet Madame de Vionnet for the first time, Maria implores him: “Don’t consider her, don’t judge her at all in herself. Consider her and judge her only in Chad” (180). She asks Strether to evaluate Madame de Vionnet from Chad’s position, through Chad’s eyes—an exercise in empathy if ever there was one. This is why, instead of using gossip to push a social “deviant” (such as Chad) to the outside or endeavoring to bring him back into the fold, Strether reverses his entire mission and makes up his mind to join him. By the time Mrs. Newsome sends her second set of ambassadors, Strether’s actions (or lack thereof, according to Mrs. Newsome) have set him, in her mind, squarely on the outside of her inner circle. He no longer judges as Mrs. Newsome would judge—he has learned to make his own “private” evaluations. Chad tells his sister that he and Strether have been “judging” the situation “together”; Strether adds that he

believes Chad has, all this while, “been doing a lot of special and private judging”—just as Strether has been doing himself, through his conversations with Maria Gostrey and others (429). Strether loses his privileged place on the inside because he has “too much imagination,” as Chad tells him (437)—he is too willing to place himself in the position of others, and too willing to make personal judgments that do not align with the accepted code of his community.

According to Sallie Sears, “Whatever his other inward inconsistencies, Strether is consistent in always living by his sense of duty. In the beginning this sense is identical with Woollett's, but what happens in the book is a great swing from a public to a private conscience, from an established, predetermined, black-and-white, fixed code of conduct to a personal, flexible, more relativist code in which each case is judged by its own merits” (23). While gossip usually serves to maintain the moral code of the “public conscience,” here Strether’s investigative gossip actually serves to undermine it. Through his conversations and his subsequent contemplation, he challenges the very social conventions that propelled his journey in the first place. Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s relationship may not be “virtuous” in the Woollett sense of the word, but in Paris Strether comes to learn that perhaps this Puritan definition of “virtuous” is too stringent; perhaps a relationship really can be “virtuous” without being chaste. As Henry James explains it in his Preface to the novel:

There was the dreadful little old tradition, one of the platitudes of the human comedy, that people’s moral scheme *does* break down in Paris.... The revolution performed by Strether under the influence of the most interesting of great cities was to have nothing to do with any *betise* of the imputably ‘tempted’ state; he was to be thrown forward, rather, thrown quite with violence, upon his lifelong trick of intense reflexion: which friendly test indeed was to bring him out, through winding passages, through alternations of darkness and light, very much *in* Paris, but with the surrounding scene itself a minor matter, a mere symbol for more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett (42).

By defining Strether’s “revolution” as being thrown “forward” rather than “backward,” James suggests that his protagonist *benefits* by having his “moral scheme” broken down by Paris. The

moral scheme of Woollett, Massachusetts is in many ways representative, for James, of a broader American morality greatly in need of critique. As Sarah Wilson writes:

His late work gives us our first twentieth-century expression of a problematic nationality that has both thematic and formal significance. The modernist techniques that he pioneered must thus be recognized as arising through his resistance to conventional understandings of national difference and through the epistemological variations that follow from that resistance (509).

The study of gossip in *The Ambassadors* is, therefore, more expansive than it seems: it encompasses not only interpersonal relationships but also the relationship between the United States and the modern world.

America in absentia

Typically Henry James's work is divided into three phases: the first and earliest phase revolves around the "international" theme (more specifically, the contrast between America and Europe) and ends with *Portrait of a Lady*; the second, "middle," phase is more concerned with social and political issues on one continent or the other; and the third "major" or "master" phase returns to the "international" theme with more subtlety and depth. *The Ambassadors* falls neatly into the third and final category: Alan Bellringer, we recall, argued that with Strether's visit to Europe, James is making "a study of America *in absentia*, as it were." Bellringer continues: "The work functions by representing one country in another. It conveys home thoughts from abroad, not in the sense of nostalgia but in the sense of a fearless constructive, loving analysis" (101). In my discussion in the previous section, I demonstrated how Strether performs a "constructive, loving analysis" of his fellow characters "*in absentia*" largely through third-party conversations. Strether's gossip in this sense is parallel to the analysis James performs of America throughout the novel. As Gertrude Stein remarked, Henry James was "the only nineteenth century writer who being an American felt the method of the twentieth century" (qtd. in Wilson, 590)—and it is important, I contend, to read James's aesthetic, modernist innovation alongside his preoccupation

with Americans at large in the world. His later novels grapple with what it means to be an American at the turn of the twentieth century, an era that oversees the increasing dominance of cosmopolitanism over localism along with the technological and social advancements that are part and parcel of that transformation.

The characters in *The Ambassadors* cannot help but represent their respective nations. Strether, we remember, defines himself as “Woollett” to the core; this is the first fact he offers Maria when he introduces himself to her. Maria is herself an American, but an American with the self-consciousness and critical reflection that comes from living abroad. “I bear on my back the huge load of our national consciousness, or in other words—for it comes to that—of our nation itself,” she tells Strether. “Of what is our nation composed but of the men and women individually on my shoulders?” (66). Miss Barrace who—like Chad and Little Bilham—is one of those who exists between Europe and American societies, tells Strether that she finds his stodgy friend Mr. Waymarsh to be “a type, the grand old American” (137). What she loves about him, she adds later on, is that “he doesn’t understand—not one little scrap. He’s delightful. He’s wonderful.... I show him Paris, show him everything, and he never turns a hair. He’s like the Indian chief one reads about, who, when he comes up to Washington to see the Great Father, stands wrapt in his blanket and gives no sign” (206). Waymarsh is the “type” of “grand old American” who is close-minded, pragmatic, and spiritually imperialist; he doesn’t want to see or understand anything other than what he already knows. Frankly, he finds Europe rather repulsive. In his first meeting with Strether, he declares that “such a country as this ain’t my *kind* of country... Look here—I want to go back” (73). At the end of the novel it is Strether who returns, and Waymarsh who stays, but Waymarsh stays to travel with Chad’s sister and her entourage, who are as stubbornly impassive and American as he is. Unlike Strether, they will not

be changed by their journey; we are led to believe that they will return home the same as they were. Strether, on the other hand, returns home—as Maria Gostrey phrases it—“to a great difference” (511).

This idea of “great difference” is the heart of *The Ambassadors*. According to Richard Hocks, the “anti-imperialist, pragmatist” strains in the novel emerge from the conflict between personalities and nationalities. “For all his artistry,” Hocks argues, “Henry James was a man of his times, and in *The Ambassadors* we encounter a domestic analogue to nationalist coercion and manipulation. And we discover in the figure of the protagonist Strether a sometimes heroic, sometimes hapless, yet poignant struggle for freedom and ‘the right of differences to exist’” (7). Here Hocks is invoking Ezra Pound, who saw in James a “great labor of translation, of making America intelligible, of making it possible for individuals to meet across national borders.”

Pound concludes his essay on James:

No man of our time has so labored to create means of communication as did the late Henry James. The whole of great art is a struggle for communication...And this communication is not a leveling, it is not an elimination of differences. It is a recognition of differences, of the right of differences to exist, of interest in finding things different (*Instigations* 110-111).

Pound’s insight on James—like his insight on so many of his literary forbearers as well as his contemporaries—is both persuasive and precise. Sarah Wilson concurs that elements of *The Ambassadors* in particular “reveal James’s modernism as a resistance to national conformity and the conventional” (509). In the late fiction, she argues, “Modernization of American conceptions of nationality will be brought about by American acknowledgment of the inescapability of internationalism; so, too, will modernism in the novel be brought about by a focus on the complex differences and connections that America bespeaks for James” (511). While Strether, our hero, is “opened” to difference through his communication with others, a character such as Mrs. Newsome—so American that she does not leave America—is, we recall, “filled as full,

packed as tight, as she'll hold" (447). We are led to believe that even if she *had* come, she would not have been moved as Strether has been moved. "I see that what you mean," Miss Gostrey states early on, "is that if your friend *had* come she would take great views, and the great views, to put it simply, would be too much for her" (96). And so she stays home. Like America, Mrs. Newsome is physically absent from the text of the novel; she can only appear in the consciousness and conversations of her many ambassadors. Thus Strether's analysis of her—his swing from speaking of her "honour" to reflecting on her intractability—is also, always, an analysis of America.

The result of Strether's "loving, constructive analysis" of his fiancée and his nation is highly modern in the value he (and through him, James) places on *difference*, or heterogeneity. Significantly, the means of that analysis is also highly modern: Strether's revolution would not have been possible, or at least it would not have unfolded as it did, if he had not been in constant contact with Mrs. Newsome so that he could clearly see how as he changed, she remained the same. James's examination of America *in absentia* relies, in other words, on modern technology. Telegraphy in particular infuses not only the content of the novel but also its formal elements as a novel of consciousness. According to Ellen Wayland-Smith, critics have largely neglected the extent to which James's "high-literary concept of a 'center of consciousness' was grounded in the very real-world vocabulary of electric messaging... James's center of consciousness acts like a receiving device in electric communication: it is a sensitive 'register' placed in contact with a given movement or vibration, 'receiving' and 'recording' those patterns that it is able to detect" (121-122). Wayland-Smith draws upon late-nineteenth-century experiments in psychology and paranormal activity to ground her argument about *The Ambassadors*: Lambert Strether rejects telegraphy, his method of communication with Mrs. Newsome back in Woollett, Massachusetts,

for telepathy, the type of sensitive and receptive kinship he feels with Maria Gostrey. James's depiction of consciousness, in this case, becomes a matter of receptivity: Strether is the "center" of the novel because he feels the most, and because impressions leave the greatest impact upon him. Pound is correct in defining the labor of Henry James as a struggle to create "a means of communication"—and part of what we see in *The Ambassadors* is the effect of modernity, or modern technology and social institutions, on the consciousness of an individual like Strether.

As the "center" of the novel, it is Strether's duty both to receive and to transmit messages—which he does with varying degrees of success. As much as we appreciate Strether, we find that he is not as adept at picking up signals as we would like for him to be; instead, he must rely on others. As Wayland-Smith astutely remarks, "The communicative impasses that form the heart of James's fiction almost invariably result from a case of failed or distorted reception: one end of the communicative loop is equipped with receptors that literally cannot hear, or cannot see, the signals being sent" (123). Strether, for all of his centrality, winds up suffering from a failure in reception; he cannot read the signs between Chad and Madame de Vionnet, and so he is stunned—even devastated—to discover the sexual nature of their relationship. According to Mark Goble, "James's last three novels are fixated almost morbidly on the negative capabilities of communication—on the effects of reticence, of messages not delivered or somehow misunderstood—and direct us again and again to fathom the consequences of exchanges between characters that do not happen" (398). Although *The Ambassadors* contains the "greatest number of specific references to telegrams found in any of James's novels" (413), those telegrams become an "'uncommunicating' communication" for James, who prefers circuitousness and indirection to something so "short, direct, and shockingly imperative" (420). This is why gossip is so crucial to the novel: it is an *indirect* method of investigation. In its

emphasis on subtlety and implication, Jamesian gossip is both more illuminating and more complex than direct confrontation. James, who complained about the way modern readers rushed through novels, offers his aestheticized gossip to his readers as an alternative to modern technologies: an alternative that, unlike the telegraph, requires time, intimacy, and attention.

In “Wired Love,” Mark Goble argues convincingly that James’s incorporation of modern communication technologies only underscores his skepticism of them. “To put it simply,” Goble explains, “James romanticizes...the experience of communication while at the same time he indicts the telegraph itself on several counts... [W]e finally see precious little pleasure associated with [the telegraph’s] poetics of rigor and compression, with its coercive instrumentality, and with the utter modernity, surely as apparent in Paris as in America, that this particular technology foretells” (420). Mrs. Newsome’s communiqués are strident, cold, and direct. The tone of her first letters “struck” Strether as “the hum of vain things” (113). Later on he laments the “want of tact” in her replies (183), a complaint that indirectly and subtly criticizes her mentality as well as her language. Strether wants to convey the fact that Chad has changed (for the better!), but Mrs. Newsome will not hear it. Although the technology of the telegram could convey his words directly, it cannot convey his meaning:

Again and again as the days passed he had a sense of the pertinence of communicating quickly with Woollett—communicating with a quickness with which telegraphy alone would rhyme; the fruit really of a fine fancy in him for keeping things straight, for the happy forestallment of error. No one could explain better when needful, nor put more conscience into an account or a report; which burden of conscience is perhaps exactly the reason why his heart always sank when the clouds of explanation gathered... Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he held that nothing ever was in fact—for any one else—explained (157).

If nothing can ever be “explained,” then communications must instead be implied, suggested, or delicately circumvented. Goble argues that James’s major stylistic discovery of the master phase was “that the most circuitous may be experienced as the most immediate” (400)—and I would

suggest that the “circuitousness and indirection” of gossip is one way to move beyond the inevitable disappointment of direct explanation. It is also, in its way, highly modernist in its emphasis on multiple perspectives, heterogeneity, and absence.

This sort of circuitous, indirect speech abounds in *The Ambassadors*. One particularly memorable instance is when Maria and Strether are discussing the possibility that Chad and his friend Little Bilham have been in contact throughout Chad’s absence, that Little Bilham may have been filling Chad in on Strether’s movements and interpretations. “Is it then a conspiracy?” Strether asks Maria.

And she looked at him at last as if, little material as she yet gave him, he’d really understand. ‘For an opinion *that’s* my opinion. He makes you out too well not to.’ ‘Not to work for me tonight?’ Strether wondered. ‘Then I hope he isn’t doing anything very bad.’ ‘They’ve got you,’ she portentously answered. ‘Do you mean he *is*—?’ ‘They’ve got you,’ she merely repeated. Though she disclaimed the prophetic vision she was at this instant the nearest approach he had ever met to the priestess of the oracle. The light was in her eyes. ‘You must face it now.’ He faced it on the spot. ‘They *had* arranged--?’ ‘Every move in the game. And they’ve been arranging ever since. He has had every day his little telegram from Cannes.’ It made Strether open his eyes. ‘Do you *know* that?’ ‘I do better. I see it’ (151).

The conversation is almost comical, with Maria suggesting conspiracy and Strether struggling to grasp her meaning. Her conspiracy theory is, in keeping with two of James’s preoccupations, predicated on technology (the daily telegram from Cannes) and visibility (something she can “see”). Strether answers her every statement with a question, emphasizing his verbs (he *is*, they *had*, you *know*) in a way that seems somehow to underscore his ignorance. The use of pronouns instead of proper names forces readers, like Strether, to identify the subject Maria merely implies. In a way, she is training him to read her and the situation; and after a number of similar conversations, Strether becomes more adept at filling in the blanks. He becomes especially

skilled at this game with Madame de Vionnet, with whom he feels a particular kinship. This kinship becomes clear when they meet each other in the chapel.

Looking about for a chair, so that he instantly pulled one nearer, she sat down with him again to the sound of an ‘Oh, I like so much your also being fond--!’”

He confessed the extent of his feeling, though she left the object vague; and he was struck with the tact, the taste of her vagueness, which simply took for granted in him a sense of beautiful things (275).

Their communication is so perfect that they can, quite literally, finish each other’s sentences. In fact, they do not need to finish them at all to understand each other. Strether is delighted by the “vagueness” of their conversation, which he attributes to its “tact”: the quality that, we recall, he found missing from Mrs. Newsome’s cold American telegrams.

Part of Strether’s initial difficulties with communication may be the “Americanness” of his outlook; a perspective that will change—incorporating more of the national “difference” essential to personal and international empathy—the longer he stays abroad. According to Sarah Wilson, “Within the late fiction, more often than not the particular certainty of perception that is unseated is a facile and conventionally American outlook... [James] seeks to excavate an Americanness that seems ideally suited to the epistemological uncertainties of modernity” (512). Strether is the perfect candidate to overcome his essentially “Americanness”—or to show a better side of that nationality than his compatriots—because he possesses “the oddity of a double consciousness” (56). Richard Hocks argues that this “double consciousness” is reflected in the novel itself: James avoids the “limitations of his confining point of view to expand the horizons of his novel’s universe” by “layering the *narrative* consciousness over that of the *character*’s point of view in ways that the two mutually interact” (31). Another way to conceptualize this is to consider Strether’s point of view to be a “perspective with a perspective.” Because James chose to write his novel in the third-person, Strether is not the narrator. Instead, the narrator seems to talk to us about Strether talking about other people; in this sense, the novel becomes a

form of gossip and Strether becomes the “third-party” or the absent “third-person” being discussed, even as that discussion (the text itself) establishes his presence—a presence that, to borrow Wilson’s term, we might call “a palpable manifestation of absence” (513).

Wilson’s own label for Strether is, fittingly enough, a “third term” located between Madame de Vionnet (who represents archaic Europe) and Mrs. Newsome et al. (the archetypal blind, inherently imperialist Americans). “Related to both,” Wilson writes, “but distinct from both, he embraces the full potential of modernist indeterminacy.” By cutting off ties with the Newsome clan and refusing to remain with Maria Gostrey, the “final Strether of the novel...chooses to remain uncomfortable and in transit” (528). Strether’s discomfort is also his strength and his reward: it is his ability to consider and adopt perspectives other than his own, his willingness to allow “difference” to flourish that makes him a hero and elevates him to a status far beyond the naïve, bumbling American he sometimes performs. James’s hero-in-transit thus becomes an entire community in and of himself, a kind of community that Jessica Berman would term “radically modern” (7). In *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*, Berman argues that certain modernist writers posit an alternative to “the threat of totalitarian models of community” in the first half of the twentieth century through formal and stylistic choices such as Virginia Woolf’s “sentences dissolving boundaries” in *The Waves* or Gertrude Stein’s “wandering pronouns” in *The Making of Americans*. Although Berman includes a chapter on Henry James, her focus is on his depiction of modern femininity. I would contend that Lambert Strether also redefines modern community and expresses its cosmopolitan nature in his refusal to choose between individuals or nations and his desire instead to embody “a great difference.” He is the only character of the novel who is truly, at his core, an “ambassador”—with all the negotiation and translation such a position requires.

Strether's primary role, which he shares with the reader, is that of an interpreter: and even though he often mixes up the signs, it is the *process* of interpretation that matters. As Armstrong observes, "Interpretation is itself a moral activity for James because understanding others can lead to ethical self-awareness (as it does for Strether) and to a justifiable moral choice (although perhaps not a necessary and certain one)" (Hocks 65). The act of reading is akin to Jamesian gossip because it requires attention and care—"constructive, loving analysis"—and leads to the "ethical self-awareness" established through empathy. It is, as critics have pointed out, quite a task to learn to read James's "circuitous" prose—but so would we learn to read the signs conveyed by an intimate acquaintance who, when gossiping, says as much through his tone or his countenance as he does through words. Remarks Alan Bellringer, "Conversation in *The Ambassadors* is an ironic art with much fencing, probing, ambiguity, and surprise. The participants take pleasure in understanding each other's speculations without having to confirm facts and spell out names" (51). This makes it challenging for readers who, like social scientists who study gossip, must approach the conversation from a position outside of it.

James's language is the language of insiders and intimates: it is shaped by "abstract moral vocabulary" ('terms,' 'claim,' 'right,' 'better,') and "deictic nouns and pronouns, that is, ones which have an indicative function but no independent content" ('it all,' 'this kind of thing, everything') (51). In other words, one must be standing within the circle to fully understand that which is being referred to outside of it. The reader who cannot grasp a certain reference must either accept her ignorance and propel herself forward, or come up with her own private meaning.

The reader has to substitute his own explicatory references for phrases like 'to show it *there*,' which means 'to show his new cultivation in America,' or 'an important exception,' which means 'Madame de Vionnet herself.' The speakers take up each other's phrases and refine the meaning without necessarily revealing all that they imply

and infer. They agree on the words, words whose content is vague or minimal, but retain different private interpretations (Bellringer 52).

This type of prose is, in other words, gossip—and like gossip, James’s form in *The Ambassadors* is intended to distinguish insider from outsider, private meaning from public knowledge.

James’s interest in the insider-outsider dynamic is inextricable, I contend, from his concerns over private information and that which is made public. James’s primary complaint about modernity was the disintegration of the boundary between public and private life, a collapse accelerated by the diffusion of modern technologies. “One sketches one’s age but imperfectly if one doesn’t touch on that particular matter: the invasion, the impudence and shamelessness, of the newspaper and interviewer, the devouring *publicity* of life, the extinction of all sense between public and private,” James writes in his *Notebooks*. “It is the highest expression of the note of ‘familiarity,’ the sinking of *manners*, in so many ways, which the democratization of the world brings with it” (82). His readiness here to oppose “democratization” with decorum has left James with the reputation as an aesthete, an individual suspicious of and withdrawn from the technological and social networks of modernity. Yet although he may not always have been pleased about its effects, James understood that the modern revolution in communication signaled and made manifest a corresponding revolution in the study of human consciousness that he pursued with such intensity. Indeed, I would argue that instead of distancing himself from these socio-technological transformations, James embedded them into his prose in order to explore the effects of modernity on consciousness and, consequently, to propose a solution to “the devouring *publicity* of life” by reformulating the boundaries between the public and private spheres. Gossip, for James—a certain kind of gossip, both intimate and progressive—is a powerful tool for negotiating those changing borders.

Henry James was so concerned with the intrusion of the public into his private life, in fact, that he famously burned a towering heap of his personal papers before he died. This bonfire comes as little surprise to those who knew James, or knew of his writing; “from his earliest writings onwards,” argues Richard Salmon, “James revealed an acute concern with the cultural space of authorship, and its movement across a shifting boundary between private and public spheres. His reviews of such figures as Hawthorne, Flaubert and George Sand are full of rebukes directed towards the ‘invasion of privacy’ practised by biographers, journalists and the publishers of authors’ private manuscripts” (2). As early as 1877 James had expressed his ambivalence—and even guilt—over his perusal of Balzac’s recently published personal papers. “The first feeling of the reader of the two volumes which have lately been published under the foregoing title is that he has almost done wrong to read them,” James laments. His only consolation is in reflecting that “he has not broken open a cabinet nor violated a desk, but that these repositories have been very freely and confidently emptied into his lap [...] we are thankful for it; in spite of our bad conscience” (*Correspondance* 68-69).

In *The Ambassadors* we witness the value James places on privacy, along with his sense of premature nostalgia for the loss of it, in his plethora of balcony scenes. When Strether first sees Little Bilham, the man is gazing down on him from a private balcony; “and the issue, by a rapid process, was that this knowledge of a perched privacy appeared to him the last of luxuries” (125). These opportunities for the modern individual are rapidly dwindling: there are few spaces left where one can be both part of the world and also set apart from it. These days it is not only Strether looking up and analyzing the silent, “perched” observer (James) where he stands: it is the new mass public—capricious, anonymous, undisciplined.

Indeed, the emergence of the “increasingly diffuse and anonymous mass media” and the all-consuming culture of modern publicity was even more troubling to James than the invasive practices of contemporary biographers and interview-hungry journalists (Salman 7). Salman argues that in his later fiction, James struggled to confront and engage with these forces; “publicity” in his novels became “a phantasmagorical condition which disorients the process of perception and undermines the stability of perspectives” (11). Thus we see that instead of withdrawing from these elements of the modern world, as so many critics have contended, James incorporated them into his studies of consciousness. We have already examined James’s adoption and transformation of modern technological innovations; but just as significant, I contend, is the way that James addressed and negotiated his characters’ personal privacy in an increasingly public world. Many scholars analyze this negotiation through *The Reverberator*, a slight novel based on the true-life story of the wealthy young American May McClellan. She published a gossip piece about her Italian hosts in *The New York World* in 1886 and was then astounded by the outrage that ensued. “What May McClellan, the ‘innocent maker’ of the ‘bomb,’ fails to take into account is the ‘reverberation’ of publicity: its capacity to return upon its original source,” remarks Salman. “Scandal is no longer spread simply by word of mouth, but by a print media, which is circulated rapidly in time and indefinitely through space; hence, its effects are not easily localized according to the intentions of its initiator” (130). Henry James was, as one might expect, one of the outraged; he criticized May in his letters to others after meeting her in person. Her story represents, essentially, James’s greatest fears about modernity: the new journalists’ hunger for personal stories and private lives to be sold as entertainment to a callous, highly critical public.

And how can we blame James for this particular preoccupation, when—given his position as a well-established author—the danger of the media hits so close to home? “Whereas, formerly,” explains Salman, “authorship had occupied a space between private and public spheres, in the latter half of the nineteenth century it was increasingly subsumed into the latter” (78). Suddenly it is not only the author’s work that is up for sale; now his life, his personality, becomes an object for consumption. For the record, James was not the only individual concerned about the fate of privacy in modernity: the first attempt to address the related legal issues was the article “The Right to Privacy,” published in *The Harvard Law Review* in 1890. In it, Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis argued that the press “is overstepping in every direction the obvious bounds of propriety and decency. Gossip is no longer the resource of the idle and of the vicious, but has become a trade, which is pursued with industry as well as effrontery.” The core of the problem is, according to these authors, modernity itself:

The intensity and complexity of life, attendant upon advancing civilization, have rendered necessary some retreat from the world, and man, under the refining influence of culture, has become more sensitive to publicity, so that solitude and privacy have become more essential to the individual; but modern enterprise and invention have, through invasions upon his privacy, subjected him to mental pain and distress, far greater than could be inflicted by mere bodily injury (qtd. in Salman, 82).

The modern individual yearns for privacy precisely because it has become impossible to achieve. This is why James was so conflicted about reading the published diaries and letters of his fellow artists, and why he burned masses of his correspondence before he died. He hoped to confound the public, to forestall what he called the “insurmountable desire to *know*” (LC II 297).

And yet didn’t James also possess that same “desire to *know*”? Doesn’t Strether? We have labeled Strether’s gossip “investigative”: he arrives in Europe expressly on a mission of discovery. After learning what he can, he sends a daily report to Mrs. Newsome—a report that he does imagine, at one point, as a newspaper headline. “This echo—as distinct over there in the dry

thin air as some shrill ‘heading’ above a column of print—seemed to reach him even as he wrote. ‘He says there’s no woman,’ he could hear Mrs Newsome report, in capitals almost of newspaper size, to Mrs Pocock; and he could focus in Mrs Pocock the response of the reader of the journal...” (177). The “reader of the journal” here is someone Strether knows and someone he can visualize—a vastly different reader from the anonymous masses of a vague and amorphous “public.” He can predict and understand his reader’s reaction (even if he does not agree with it). The problem, it seems, is not in the “desire to know,” nor in the investigative gossip, nor in the report of that gossip; rather, it’s a matter of the size and scope of the audience. Gossip is perfectly acceptable—even desirable—when the gossip is as sensitive a “register” as Lambert Strether. Strether’s gossip, we have seen, is empathetic: he turns his investigation toward the acknowledgment and acceptance of “great difference” rather than using it, as Mrs. Newsome does, to maintain the “moral” status quo. I have argued that this concept of gossip, furthermore, is a distinctly modern and progressive one. With the right speaker and the right audience, the circulation of third-party reports can enact change through individuals that may well carry over into greater social and political spheres.

For all its progressive elements, Jamesian gossip seems to have more in common with the nineteenth-century salons than with the twentieth-century media (Salman 136-137). Strether’s empathy comes from his willingness to take each individual case on its own merits, since what passes as “virtuous” in Woollett may not hold true in Paris. In the salons, people are confronted with those of whom they speak; but the anonymity and indifference of the mass media strips away these elements of presence and perspective, leaving only absence—the third-person pronominal absence of Emile Benveniste, who demonstrates through linguistic analysis the objectification and “nonpersonal” aspects of this kind of discourse. At its worst, modern gossip

increases the distance between individuals, transforming subjects into objects of conversation and criticism, and converting people's lives and stories into commodities available for purchase and for callous entertainment. This is the "trade" of gossip, "pursued with industry as well as effrontery," that Warren and Brandeis allude to and harshly critique in "The Right to Privacy." This genre of discourse is highly modern in its instrumentalization and indifference; this is the gossip that depersonalizes individuals, contributing to the coldness and cruelty of the newly bureaucratic social order, to the experience of modernity that Max Weber calls "the polar night of icy darkness." This is May McClellan's gossip, Walter Winchell's gossip. It is not, however, Henry James's gossip.

At its core, James's contribution to modernist gossip was to employ the personal and intimate conversational style of the nineteenth century as a weapon with which to tackle the social and political issues facing individuals in modernity. Jamesian gossip in *The Ambassadors* is evaluative and critical, but it passes judgment on social norms and homogenous modes of thought rather than on specific personalities. Although social scientists argue that gossip is an essentially conservative social force, the aestheticization of gossip in *The Ambassadors* does something else entirely: through its emphasis on perspective and relative value, Strether's gossip promotes "great difference" and endeavors to loosen social structures rather than cement them. Through Strether, James offers us a vision of gossip that promotes open-mindedness and empathy—the type of gossip that will prove to be the engine of social change in modernity.

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CHAPTER TWO: THE SUBVERSIVE GOSSIP OF DJUNA BARNES'S *LADIES ALMANACK*

*Be she old or be she young,
A woman's strength is in her tongue.
- Welsh proverb*

Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* (1928) is a wily, protean work that does not fit neatly into any genre. Labeled an *almanack* and structured in monthly installments that reference the seasons, moon phases, and tides, the book lacks the more practical advice characteristic of the medieval and early modern almanacs from which it borrows its structure and its style. Instead of offering weather forecasts or tips for planting, Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* traces the life of its lively, irreverent, and impressively seductive protagonist, Dame Evangeline Musset. We begin with her birth in January, follow her development among a supporting cast of all-female friends and lovers, and end with the throng of women mourning at her funeral procession in December. For Julie Taylor, this appropriation of the almanac genre "informs Barnes's satire on teleological theories of sexuality and on the understanding of sex in terms of reproduction and futurity," largely by mocking the traditionally masculine authority of the almanac and the quasi-scientific discourse of modern sexologists (726). Daniela Caselli, meanwhile, argues in *Improper Modernism* that the "genealogy" of *Ladies Almanack* is "paradoxically dependent on genres characterized by their heterogeneity and instability" (48). The traditional almanac is itself a deliberately arcane document full of riddles, prophecies, and mysteries.

By the time Barnes sat down to write her almanac, the genre had already been subverted by more comical almanacs—such as the *Poor Robin* series, which emerged in England in the

mid-seventeenth century—seemingly written in a spirit of self-parody. Whereas a more serious almanac writer will tell his readers to “expect much *Snow* or *Rain*, and bad Weather” around “the end of *January*, and middle of *February* 1671,” Poor Robin helpfully predicts “Sharp weather and hard Frosts... in *Green land*” (qtd. in Wardhaugh, 21). His prophecies poke fun at the mysterious by underscoring the obvious: “If on the second of *February*, thou go either to Fair or Market with store of money in thy pocket, and there have thy purse picked of it all, then that is an unfortunate day.” It is this tradition of playfulness, enigma, and satire that Barnes invokes in her *Ladies Almanack*, qualities that provoke rich and multilayered readings. Moreover, as Susan Sniader Lanser argues, although “the surface form of the text is the monthly chronicle,” its borrowed forms and cultural allusions do not end there. *Ladies Almanack* “resembles the picaresque fable in structure, the mock epic in tone; it uses or parodies a host of forms including the saint’s life, the ode, the prayer, the love song, the allegory, classical mythology, and Sacred Scripture itself” (Lanser, “Speaking in Tongues,” 157). What is missing from Lanser’s list, as well as from the critical literature surrounding Barnes in general and her *Ladies Almanack* in particular, is *gossip*—a genre that, I contend, Barnes inherits, highlights, and transforms. Barnes’s repeated dismissal of the *Almanack* as one of her “less serious” works parallels the general consensus on gossip as trivial language, unsuited to serious topics or intellectual pursuits. In a certain sense, the entire content of the *Almanack*—a group of women gathering and conversing without any masculine “oversight” or interruption—reflects the popular definition of gossip, a genre of conversation that has long been linked to female speech.

Situated squarely between the journalism of her early years and the more decadent dramatic works that came later, Barnes’s *Ladies Almanack* is typically read as a *roman à clef*: a fictionalized, hyperbolic representation of Natalie Barney’s circle in Paris. I will begin this

chapter by analyzing Barnes's take on the *roman à clef*, just as others have examined her appropriation of the almanac. Her text demonstrates a particular kinship, I argue, with Marcel Proust's own transposition of reality in his massive *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Both writers incorporate and, to varying degrees, critique the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conception of sexual "inversion," reworking sexological theory in such a way as to normalize the seemingly abnormal. They accomplish this feat through the aestheticization of gossip, turning conversation toward community formation. Remarkably, by using gossip this way in their literature, they "invert" its very purpose. Although sociologists argue that gossip functions as a conservative social force, one that maintains the social norms of the community by keeping outliers in line, Proust and Barnes demonstrate its ability to restore those outliers, through talk, to the heart of the group that attempted to excise them. Ross Chambers illustrates this phenomenon by comparing the "gossipee" to the ancient scapegoat: "The gossipee—of the group but excluded from it—thus fulfills the classic conditions of the scapegoat described by Rene Girard: s/he who is accused of scandal becomes the bearer of the group's collective responsibility for its own disorders, and is excluded from the group for that reason" (214). In other words, the subject of conversation is paradoxically included in the group even in the very moment of her exclusion.

This image captures the essence of Barnes's relationship to the group of women that she caricatures in *Ladies Almanack*. She is, as the oft-referenced debate between Susan Sniader Lanser and Karla Jay demonstrates, at once inside the clique and outside of it. According to Lanser in "Speaking in Tongues: *Ladies Almanack* and the Language of Celebration" (1979), the text was "allegedly created for the amusement of Barnes's lesbian friends, who persuaded her to publish it and financed the venture" (156). As the work of an insider, the *Almanack* "celebrates female sexuality and autonomy, and suggests that love between women is a subversive act"

(*Frontiers* 40). This seminal essay is now frequently read alongside Karla Jay's "The Outsider Among the Expatriates: Djuna Barnes's Satire on the Ladies of the Almanack" (1990), which strongly contests Lanser's point. Jay argues instead that Barnes's sense of "exclusion" from Barney's circle is what inspired the *Almanack*, a text whose "biting satire, verging on viciousness" reveals her "bitterness" (185). "The wealthy clique of expatriates in Paris," writes Jay, "would probably not have understood the emotional toll of poverty on Barnes who was perpetually placed in the role of the beggar at the feast, the celebrant in the borrowed gown, the one to partake of others' hospitality without being able to return it" (185).

This disagreement over Barnes's position in the coterie resounds in similar debates over her sexuality, and scholars' interpretations of her work reflect varying degrees of faith in Barnes's now-famous declaration: "I'm not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma." Whereas Andrew Field professes to take Barnes largely at face value (he calls this statement "essentially correct" (37)), feminist scholars such as Julie Abraham or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar seem perfectly at ease calling her a "lesbian writer." According to Scott Herring, "[I]f Barnes was 'unfeeling' about the plight of modern homosexuals in general and the lesbians around her in particular, she was also quite unconcerned about Western forms of modern homosexuality" because she was "suspicious of prescriptive identity categories and the communal compulsions that structure them" (155). For Herring, the real problem is the reductive classification that can accompany sexuality. For Frances Doughty, similarly, "the issue is not whether Barnes was a lesbian or a heterosexual, but that she was neither." One's sexuality conveys much more than physical attraction, emotional attachment, or even social performance; "it also conveys a sense of tribe and tribal allegiance" (Doughty 149). If we accept Barnes as "neither" lesbian nor heterosexual,

then we also begin to understand her position outside of—or beyond—the “tribe.” She describes the circle from the inside, and yet she does not include herself within it.

This unique position confers a specific kind of power. As an insider, Barnes is able to acquire an intimate knowledge of the coterie; as an outsider, she is willing to publicize what she has learned. Although some critics—and indeed, Barnes herself—might protest that the *Almanack* was written only for the “special audience” of Natalie Barney’s circle, the first print run of 1,050 (fifty more copies than the first print run of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, six years before) suggests that Barnes hoped to distribute the text far beyond the Rue Jacob. After its pre-assigned distributor reneged on their agreement, Barnes and her friends went out selling copies in the streets of Paris—just as French almanacs have always been sold to the public. In her preface Barnes alludes to this tradition by calling *Ladies Almanack* a “one-penny” book, though in fact she sold it—especially the copies she colored by hand—for a bit more. In 1929 she wrote to Natalie Barney that she sold all 50 copies she had carried with her into the United States and was hoping to sell another 100 at five dollars apiece as long as they slipped uncensored and unobstructed through the Postal Service (Wells-Lynn 84). This letter underscores just how many thousands of miles the *Almanack* has traveled beyond Barney’s circle.

Moreover, Barnes’s attempt to distribute the text so widely in the late 1920s seems to contradict her claim in a letter to Natalie in 1967 that *Ladies Almanack* was “in the private domaine, privately printed, written as a jollity, and distributed to a very special audience” (Series II, Box 1, Folder 46). Natalie Barney, who repeatedly asked Barnes to reprint the *Almanack* or include it in a volume of her selected works, obviously did not share this perspective on the text. In fact, in an effort to convince Richard Aldington to publish the work in 1928, Barney had insisted on its relevance to the general public. “All ladies fit to figure in such an almanack should

of course be eager to have a copy, and all gentlemen disapproving of them,” Barney had written. “Then the public might, with a little judicious treatment, include those lingering on the border of such islands and those eager to be ferried across” (qtd. in Caselli, 35). In Barney’s opinion, then, *Ladies Almanack* was as important for readers outside the circle as it was for those women on the inside. Perhaps she recognized, even before Barnes did, the power of publicized “gossip” to subvert and to shape social mores.

Whereas Barney invokes the “public,” Barnes emphasizes the “private” nature of her text—yet this emphasis is, as I have noted, at odds with the facts of its publication and distribution. Barnes had no intention, in 1928, of keeping this work “private”; if she had, she would not have had “bold young women” on the Left Bank “merrily and effectively hawk[ing] it” (Field 125), nor would she have agreed to reprint it in 1972. By the time she did so, most members of Natalie Barney’s original circle had passed away, which meant that forever after *Ladies Almanack* could only be read and puzzled over by an audience of “outsiders.” What interests me here is this transition from a seemingly “private” text, written to entertain Barnes’s partner Thelma Wood during a long period of convalescence,¹⁰ to a “public” one. How and why does the text make public the private affairs of this group of women? How do we reconcile its original status as a coterie publication with its reputation today as a feminist manifesto and cult classic? How does *Ladies Almanack* both reflect and transform the gossip genre, and how does it turn the typically conservative function of gossip to its own subversive ends? In this chapter I contend that the *Almanack* has always evoked the mystery and the power of community: first by representing the members of Barney’s circle to themselves, secondly by representing the members of that community to the world beyond Rue Jacob, and finally by establishing a

¹⁰According to Amy Wells, part of the purpose of the *Almanack* was “to raise money during Wood’s hospitalization for a spinal cord injury” (*Secrecy and Sapphic Modernism* 78).

community of feminist scholars writing through and about the text. Like gossip itself, the *Almanack* distinguishes “insiders” from “outsiders” and, in doing so, impacts our perception of social norms.

In so doing, the *Almanack* situates itself as a direct descendant of what scholars generally agree to be the first instance of “gossip literature”: the 17th-century French series *Les Caquets de l'accouchée* (*The Chatter at the Lying-In*). Like the narrator of the *Almanack*, the scribe of *Les Caquets* positions himself (or herself, as I will suggest) on the margins of the group so that he gains entry to the intimate conversation while also maintaining his status as an outsider when he publishes what he hears. The massive popularity of *Les Caquets*, we shall see, was directly linked to the public’s fascination with the conversation of this exclusively female space—a space similar to that of the *Almanack*. In the following two sections I examine the content of the *Almanack* as gossip and the way Barnes’s treatment of life as art reflects the influence of Marcel Proust, whose *À la recherche du temps perdu* demonstrates gossip’s role in group formation as well as the power of talk to shape individual identity. In the second half of this chapter, I will analyze the way in which Barnes incorporates elements of gossip into the form and style of *Ladies Almanack*. It is this aestheticization of gossip, I contend, that turns its typically conservative aims to more subversive ends and reveals the break between the type of communities that existed before modernity and the type that would come after.

Gossip and the *roman à clef*

Whereas Henry James’s gossip is largely contained within the novel (characters talking about other characters), the gossip embedded in Djuna Barnes’s work points to people and places outside the text. In *Ryder* (1928) and *The Antiphon* (1958) she draws heavily on the experiences of her childhood, modeling characters after family members, while *Nightwood* (1936) is

generally understood to be a fictionalized portrait of Barnes's relationship with silverpoint artist Thelma Wood. Barnes's biographers tell the story of the time Barnes read part of *Nightwood* aloud to Thelma—after which Thelma “knocked Djuna down and threw a cup of tea at her” (Herring 15). “It does not diminish the great artistic achievement of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* to say that the novel was also revenge,” adds Phillip Herring. “[T]he writing helped Barnes to purge herself of the anger and disappointment at the failure of her relationship with Thelma Wood. Barnes denied this, but the spirit of revenge or satire motivated all of her best work, which usually targeted her family” (16). Whether or not this claim holds true for all Barnes's characters, it seems to fit her scathing depiction of Henriette Metcalf (renamed “Jenny Petherbridge” in *Nightwood*), the woman who “stole” Thelma away. Although neither Thelma nor Henriette turned out well in *Nightwood*, Barnes's friend Dan Mahoney reportedly was delighted by his reincarnation in the character Dr. Matthew Mighty-Grain-of-Salt-Dante-O'Connor. Andrew Field writes in his biography of Barnes that when T.S. Eliot wanted to cut down one of the passages in *Nightwood* regarding the childhood of Dr. O'Connor, Mahoney “wrote to Djuna begging her not to excise that portion. I know of no other instance,” adds Field, “of such correspondence between author and character in literary history” (138).

Ladies Almanack, too, is typically read as a *roman à clef* whose subject is the lesbian circle surrounding Natalie Barney—American socialite and famed *Amazon*—in interwar Paris. While Barnes claimed that she never authorized the book to be interpreted in this way, we know from letters and annotations in the margins of several copies (Natalie Barney's own, for one) that the “lesbian seductress” Dame Evangeline Musset is a caricature of Barney herself. Her followers are transformed into “frigid Patience Scalpel (Mina Loy), ethical Lady Buck-and-Balk (Una, Lady Troubridge), and her friend Tilly Tweed-in-Blood (Radclyffe Hall), the coachman-

costumed Cynic Sal (Romaine Brooks), vain Senorita Fly-About (Mimi Franchetti), Doll Furious (Dolly Wilde), and the journalists Nip and Tuck (Janet Flanner and Solita Solano)” (Gilbert and Gubar, 236). Barney seemed not to mind that Barnes was using her life as fodder for literature. On the contrary: she loved Barnes’s depiction of her and wrote in her letters for decades that *Ladies Almanack* was “a constant joy” to her and a “delight” (Series II, Box 1). Janet Flanner confirmed in her introduction to *Paris Was Yesterday* that Barney was the model for the protagonist Dame Musset and that she herself “was one of a pair of journalists called Nip and Tuck” (xvii). The transformation of these real-life women into characters turns the text into a “game,” according to Frances Doughty, “without which the reader would lose the pleasure of recognition, the little self-congratulatory moment when she ‘gets it’” (151). For Melissa Boyde, the *roman à clef* is particularly suited to the salons of modernist Paris. As she writes, “Circulating within the coterie environment of the salon and associated with secrecy and revelation, the *roman à clef* could be seen as a kind of currency, according value to its writers and readers, much as earlier forms of courtly poetry had done” (156).

According to Barnes’s biographer Andrew Field, this type of allusive writing is highly distinctive of the modernists. The expatriates arrived in Paris, he remarks, knowing few or no European writers and believing their own American literary tradition too shallow to be useful. “Thus began the first great modern period of referential writing,” Field observes, “in which the expatriates sometimes seem not to be novelists but biographers trapped together in a hall of mirrors with nothing to do but describe each other describing each other” (40). In her later years, Barnes chastises her contemporaries for precisely this sort of poorly written memoir. She writes to Natalie Barney in 1968 that she has become “depressed” in reading Kay Boyle’s revision of Robert McAlmon’s *Being Geniuses Together*, calling it an “egregious display” of Boyle herself.

“If you can’t make the passage of time as it was, or better than it was (in the rough sense) by quality, not much short of superb artistry, then why at all?” she laments (Series II, Box 1, Folder 46). Her archives, housed in the Special Collections of the University of Maryland, contain boxes full of letters she wrote in response to editors and academics, refusing their requests for comments on her contemporaries. In 1973 she replied to Virginia Spencer Carr, a professor who was writing a biography of Carson McCullers, with the line: “I make it a habit not to write about anyone personally, or to answer questions [about them]” (Series II, Box II, Folder 47). To Michael Patient, who hoped that Barnes would tell him something of Natalie Barney, she wrote more forcefully in 1968: “I have neither written nor spoken (for the public) of my contemporaries in over forty years, nor for that matter, about myself. Such material should be turned into art, (if one can manage it, and wish to devote that much time to it) or such would, it seems to me, be better left unsaid, unwritten” (Series II, Box 11, Folder 56).

Before this forty-year interval of silence—“for the public,” at least—on the lives of her contemporaries, Barnes distinguished herself by writing celebrity interviews. Like *Ladies Almanack*, these pieces, too (published between 1914 and 1931), were considered “lighter endeavors,” “almost hack work, the way she spoke of them”; “done to pay the rent” and excluded from her *Selected Works* (Messerli 3). Yet even at this early stage in her career, she managed to transform the material of life into art, producing pieces that were not so much “standard journalism” as “fascinating experiments in the impressionistic characterization that Barnes would perform” in her later works. Alice Barry warns those researchers tempted to use these interviews “as a historical resource” to keep in mind that “in the hands of Djuna Barnes the celebrity interview, unlike an interview in today’s news magazine or newspaper, is a form of art which does not depend entirely for its immediacy or value upon the actual words of the person

interviewed” (10). The boundary between life and art, for Djuna Barnes, was always permeable. This is, no doubt, why generations of readers have interpreted her fictional works as depictions of reality—why we persist in locating Thelma in Robin or Natalie Barney in Dame Evangeline Musset. And in this, I would contend, we are not wrong; for it is not the use of life as material that Barnes condemns, it is the use of life without artistry. In this, as we shall see, she is like Marcel Proust, who writes in the second volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* that works of “genius” are created by those writers who know how “to make use of their personality as a mirror, in such a way that their life, however unimportant it may be, is reflected by it, genius consisting in the reflective power of the writer and not in the intrinsic quality of the scene reflected” (*Within a Budding Grove*, 2).

Barnes succeeded in writing about her friends and lovers in a style so careful, so ornate, that gossip crossed into the realm of high modernism and became art. However, since she mistrusted others’ ability to shape the material of life—as well as the public’s power to interpret it—she refused to provide commentary on others and she asked her friends, for their part, not to share reminiscences about her. To Peggy Guggenheim, she wrote in March of 1978:

But Peggy, you know what I think about this ‘tell all’ to the idiot public. Please do not speak of me, or say anything to these public gossips and slanderous tongues... I know, everyone is writing writing about everyone. Its’ [sic] the ‘thing’—and how they love the 20’s, knowing nothing about them, told or not told. And nothing is correctly reported. We are in a nasty age...” (qtd. in Caselli, 191).

Although we know that Barnes, in her later years, insisted on a hermit-like existence, it still seems somewhat paradoxical to hear her lamenting the way that “everyone is writing writing about everyone”—especially given her own propensity to write about others, albeit much more artistically. Her insistence that “nothing is correctly reported” applies to both the memoirs of the period and the public taste for celebrity gossip that emerged in the 1920s and flourished in the decades that followed. *Ladies Almanack*, if gossip, is at least gossip concealed beneath layers of

archaic language, riddles, and satire so that the “idiot public” would be hard-pressed to understand it. It’s startling, moreover, to hear Barnes—whom we tend to consider so highly modern, so subversive in her day—complaining about the new age in which she finds herself. “I presume myself not to be exactly prudish,” she writes to Barney in the 1960s, “but quite shocked with what is written now, at plays and on the boards, at magazine covers on the stalls, at speech and action in the streets, and as for the recordings of horrors and ‘things to be’ ... who can contain or understand it?” Barnes’s suspicions of modernization and her nostalgic adherence to a former way of life extend even to improvements such as elevators. After lamenting for a few lines more about the proposed changes to modernize her apartment building (including “self-operated lifts (that scare everyone to death)”), Barnes concludes, “We are fighting the matter, but the zoning laws went through, they may not stand... everything for progress! I wonder how Proust felt?” (Series II, Box 1, Folder 45).

In this particular allusion to Proust, Barnes aligns herself with the author’s sense of a society in decay: the end of the era of nobility and the fashionable drawing rooms of the bourgeoisie, the conflict of the older, statelier way of life with the sudden, mechanized onslaught of modernity. “We are always feeling with Proust as if we were reading about the end of something,” observes Edmund Wilson (150). The tone throughout Proust’s masterpiece is one of “lamentation and complaint,” but it is also sharp and satirical. He manages to critique simultaneously the aristocratic culture in decline and the bourgeois circles on the rise. He destroys, according to Wilson, “the social hierarchy which he has just been expounding. Its values, he tells us, are an imposture: pretending to honor and distinction, it accepts all that is vulgar and base... [I]t either ignores or seeks to kill those few impulses toward justice and beauty which make men admirable” (115-116). Barnes shares Proust’s suspicion of the social

hierarchy as well as his position simultaneously inside and outside of the world he describes. In this next section I analyze the impact of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, particularly his depiction of the way that identity is molded through third-party conversation, on Barnes and *Ladies Almanack*. I also juxtapose both writers as *prophets*, examining how each laments certain elements of the age while acting as the harbinger of social change. Wilson, invoking Proust's half-Jewish heritage, reminds us of his "capacity for apocalyptic moral indignation of the classical Jewish prophet" (116), and Wallace Fowlie explicitly calls him "the prophet of the increasingly complex world of modern man" (130). In an article aptly entitled "'The Voice of the Prophet': From Astrological Quackery to Sexological Authority in Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack*," Julie Taylor argues that the tradition of prophecy is crucial to Barnes's "critique of contemporary discourses on sexuality." She writes, "Barnes's *Almanack*, I think, implicitly invites a comparison between the discredited discourse of prophecy and that of authoritative modern claims that make a similar investment in the idea of the future" (726). Both Proust and Barnes, I contend, employ the trope of prophecy in order to critique the social mores of their age and herald changes to come.

"...neap-tide to the Proustian chronicle..."

One of the qualities Barnes shares with Proust is a keen interest in society and a talent for analyzing and transforming it through art. In this next section I first demonstrate the connection between her text and Proust's with respect to their content and examine why Barnes would choose Proust—of all authors—to include in her 1927 foreword to *Ladies Almanack*. I then turn to the manner in which Barnes borrows and transforms a number of Proustian elements, the most significant of these being the use of life as art, the construction of identity through conversation, and the negotiation of the boundary "inside" and "outside" of the coterie. Whereas Proust

highlights the significance of this boundary and moves his characters like chess pieces back and forth across it, Barnes, as we will see, works to dismantle it. In Barnes's work, there is no clear division between "inside" and "outside," "public" and "private." Famously defining the "public" as "that part of ourselves we are ashamed of" (Barnes, *New York*, 219), she shows that for the modern individual, the parts of ourselves that we would most like to keep private are in fact those parts which are most exposed. This is, I argue, the sharpest division between the social world that Proust describes and the private lives that Barnes makes public in her *Ladies Almanack*.

In her correspondence, Barnes emphasized time and again her "great admiration for Proust as a writer." In a letter to Emily Coleman on 5 January 1939, for instance, Barnes writes: "Well I have raved to you so long about Proust that I can't be too wounded that you think he is better than Nightwood. I don't see how they can be compared, however, nothing at all alike.— Proust is the greatest writer (to me) of the last century, in spite of the falsity and boredom of Albertine" (Series II, Box 3, Folder 13). This statement is particularly illuminating because, while it expresses the same esteem for Proust that Barnes reiterates elsewhere, it also reveals her disappointment with Albertine—the woman who becomes the representation of lesbianism in Proust's work. While *À la recherche du temps perdu* may indeed present us with "perhaps the most thorough theorization of male homosexuality that had yet been undertaken by anyone in fictional form" (Carlston 30), scholars generally agree that Proust's theorization of *female* homosexuality leaves something to be desired. Natalie Barney's biographers delight in recounting the single encounter between Proust and *l'Amazone*, whom Proust wanted to meet so that he could learn more about the kind of lesbian community that he was hoping to depict in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. He was so awkward, however, that when he finally sat down with Barney

he could do no more than to speak pompously about himself. He never asked her about her friends or her lifestyle, and when *Sodome et Gomorrhe* finally appeared in print, Barney's circle found his portrayal of lesbians to be absurd. As her friend and fellow writer Colette remarked, "Was he misled, or was he ignorant?—when he assembles a Gomorrah of inscrutable and depraved young girls, when he denounces an entente, a collectivity, a frenzy of bad angels... with all due deference to the imagination or the error of Marcel Proust, there is no such thing as Gomorrah" (qtd. in Rodriguez, 252).

Barnes acknowledges Proust's (failed) effort by paying ironic homage to *À la recherche du temps perdu* in her 1972 foreword to *Ladies Almanack*. Here Barnes underscores the correspondence between the two texts by calling her *Almanack* "neap-tide to the Proustian chronicle, gleanings from the shore of Myteline." A "neap-tide" is the moment at which, due to the position of the sun and the moon, there is the least difference between high and low tides; the two extremes are as close together as they can be. The "shore of Myteline" references the port and capital city of the island of Lesbos, where the ancient Greek Sappho set up her community of female artists and lovers and wrote the poetry that so inspired the women of Left Bank Paris in the early twentieth century. By invoking Proust's chronicle in the foreword to her "penny" *Almanack*, Barnes succeeds in raising the stakes of her text while potentially undermining his. As Lanser points out in a footnote to "Speaking in Tongues," it is "interesting that in a proposed revision of the foreword to *Ladies Almanack*, Barnes changed the word 'neap-tide [to the Proustian chronicle]' to 'sister,' thus stressing the need for a specifically female counterpart to Proust's text" (Broe, 390). Lanser calls the *Almanack* a "corrective" to *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, but I believe it makes more sense to think of it as a "complement." Barnes's text is not intended to replace Proust's, but to stand alongside it, complicate it, converse with it.

The most obvious kinship between the two texts is each one's status as a *roman à clef*. Scholars frequently cite the salon of hostess Geneviève Straus as the source of both Proust's content and his form. Straus became the model for Oriane de Guermantes; Madame Arman de Caillavet, another salonière, provided the material for Odette Swann and her group, just as Lydie Aubernon served as the model for Madame Verdurin (Re 177). So much of the novel's material is drawn from Proust's personal life and the political events of his day—the Dreyfus Affair being the most prominent—that readers still commonly conflate Proust the author with Marcel the narrator. Writing about *À la recherche du temps perdu* in a book entitled *Gossip: The Untrivial Pursuit*, Joseph Epstein remarks on the correspondences illuminated by Proust's biographers before reminding readers of the dangers of reading too literally. “Whenever the spirit of roman à clef is at work in fiction,” notes Epstein, “the all but irresistible temptation is to extrapolate from the book back into life”—yet sometimes Proust “transmogrifies certain of the models on which his characters are based, and sometimes, for his own artistic reasons, does the reverse, making them less monstrous than they might actually have been in life” (131). One example of this, as Lucia Re points out, is that even though Madame Straus serves as the model for Oriane de Guermantes, Oriane turns out to be more superficial, more narrow-minded, and crueller than the woman who inspired her character. Proust wrote of Straus's conversation that “one could fill a volume if one related all that has been said by her that is worth not forgetting,” whereas “Oriane's conversation in the *Recherche*—indeed, all salon conversation in the novel—is instead distinctly unmemorable chatter, for which the narrator shows nothing but contempt” (181). For all the narrator's seeming “contempt,” however, it is *conversation* that structures the novel and grounds its theory of character and identity.

Barnes studies this very theory, observing how “personalities,” for Proust,

emerge through conversation, almost never because of what they actually say (for this is often, as has been noted, mere chatter) but because of the respective positions they assume. What matters is how they negotiate and define their social space. Their positions, and hence the nature of character itself, are by rule subject to abrupt and drastic change. Like the social self, character for Proust is but a fictitious, unstable performance within the realm of conversation (Re 182).

Proust’s characters repeatedly surprise us, displaying qualities that at first seem unexpected but which then, upon further reflection, we find to be completely congruous with what we knew of them. Character is “unstable” because it is a consequence of social perception, not a reflection of some sort of inner core. Indeed, as Proust tells us within the first few pages of *Swann’s Way*, “[E]ven in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole, which is identical for everyone, and need only be turned up like a page in an account-book or the record of a will; our social personality is a creation of the thoughts of other people” (20). Barnes employs the Proustian idea of personality in all her work, though perhaps most obviously in *Nightwood*. As T.S. Eliot remarks in his preface to the novel, the characters are “all knotted together, as people are in real life... it is the whole pattern they form, rather than any individual constituent, that is the focus of interest. We came to know them through their effect on each other, and by what they say to each other about the others” (xx). We come to know them, in other words, through gossip.

For both Proust and Barnes, the most powerful consequence of the seemingly trivial social chatter flowing through salons and coteries is to determine one’s “position” in this social space. In other words: who is in and who is out? In Proust, this phenomenon may be most memorable in Mme Verdurin’s insistence on her “little nucleus,” or “little clan,” who are expected to dismiss any of the world outside it. “But as the ‘good pals’ came to take a more and more prominent place in Mme Verdurin’s life,” we are told, “the ‘bores,’ the outcasts, grew to

include everybody and everything that kept her friends away from her..." (207). Although Swann is several classes above the "little nucleus," his infatuation with Odette leads him to follow her right into it; and Mme Verdurin, for her part, doesn't mind if he socializes with "les ennuyeux" elsewhere as long as he calls them such in the presence of her inner circle. Yet when she learns more about the breadth and wealth of his circle, she becomes suspicious of his allegiance and begins to oust him by speaking ill of him in his absence. "Did you see the airs Swann is pleased to put on with is?" she demands (311). When another of her "little clan" asks for him one evening, Mme de Verdurin makes the final break: "Heaven preserve us from him; he's too deadly for words, a stupid, ill-bred boor" (315). The man to whom she is speaking, though astonished, accepts this declaration as truth. In this way, we see how Mme de Verdurin—through a complicated mélange of authority and fear—uses the power of gossip to delineate precisely who is "in" and who is "out" of her circle.

Barnes chooses another route to explore the nature of a "little nucleus": rather than drawing and redrawing the potent, invisible boundaries of the drawing room, the talk within her novels establishes a community by refusing to recognize that anything exists outside of it. Eliot's introduction to *Nightwood*, Daniela Caselli argues, is "an acknowledgment that there is no 'outside' in *Nightwood*, no possibility of innocence from where to speak or read" (170). Every character in the novel expresses one trait or another that "excludes" him or her from the "mainstream" of society: Felix is Jewish, Nora is lesbian, the Doctor is transgender. And yet we cannot consider these figures to be "outsiders" because there is no mention of what they are outside of. As Carlston explains it, "Just as there is no organic, unmediated, 'healthy' sign in *Nightwood*, there are also no healthy human beings, with an unmediated relation to blood, culture, or history" (80). Jane Marcus has read this collection of "unhealthy" figures as Barnes's

way of “mak[ing] a modernism of marginality” (223). “I see the body of the Other—the black, lesbian, transvestite, or Jew—presented as a text in the novel,” she writes, “a book of communal resistances of underworld outsiders to domination” (221). In *Libidinal Currents*, Joseph Allen Boone agrees: “In [Barnes’s] universe, the abject can begin to stand upright, the marginal to move center stage, and the underdogs of society join together to attest to the queer communion that exists on the other side of the day’s ‘torment’” (251). Such a view does not, of course, represent a complete consensus. Scott Herring argues in *Queering the Underworld* that the night, as a metaphor for Barnes’s work, is “deeply anticomunitarian.” “There are no marginalized others who take center stage in an attempt to voice themselves both within and against a dominant language,” Herring contends (181). Barnes focuses on “unbelonging” rather than belonging, “anticommunity” instead of community.

According to Herring, in fact, in *Nightwood* Barnes promises a sort of exposé of the Parisian slums—a piece fit for a contemporary gossip column, I might add—and then refuses to deliver. In this sense she follows her own example in the articles she wrote earlier in her career on the Greenwich bohemians. “Tattling on unfamiliar others,” Herring remarks of her essays on bohemia, “Barnes shows that there may be nothing spectacular to see when she invites her readers to look into bohemia and then discredits her authority as both an ethnographic insider and as a participant-observer” (165). What Herring calls “tattling,” I call “gossip”—a connection here made explicit by the nature and history of journalism. The era in which Barnes was writing her interviews and exposés was the same era in which the first official gossip columns emerged. Her paradoxical position as both insider and outsider of the bohemian world she describes means that Barnes, “in complex maneuvers of tone and position,” can “publicize the bohemian life while also bemoaning its denigration into a tourist spectacle; ironically, she simultaneously

satirizes the tourist public... that this very publicity would elicit, and wryly trivializes the stance and principles that set bohemians apart from the ‘public’” (Goody 91). She slides easily from identification with the bohemians (“you of the outer world, be not so hard on us, and above all forbear to pity us”) to mockery of them (the waiter who “feels that he has to be negligent before he can be Nietzsche”) (*New York* 232, 234). Nancy Levine also remarks upon this strategic positioning in Barnes’s “Coney Island” essays, in which we see her perspective on the “freaks” she describes shift “from outside to inside, from the position of the observer to that of the observed.” Levine argues that these essays demonstrate Barnes’s “mastery” of the double-sided “objective” and “subjective” approach to reporting” (31).

When Lucia Re writes that character for Proust is “like the social self...a fictitious, unstable performance within the realm of conversation” (182), she might just as well be writing of Barnes. For Barnes, too, the social self and the authorial self are “fictitious” and “unstable,” which is why she can transition so easily in her work from subjective to objective, from insider to outsider and back again. The effect of this approach in Barnes’s journalism and in *Nightwood* has, we see, been well documented. What I intend to do in the following pages is consider Barnes’s slippery status as both insider and outsider with respect to *Ladies Almanack*. It is this “unstable” positioning, I argue, that underlies the critical debate surrounding the text. It is also this positioning that enables the text to function as gossip, since with her *Almanack* Barnes makes public an essentially private coterie. Her famous definition of the “public” as “that part of ourselves that we are ashamed of” (which appeared, in fact, in one of the abovementioned articles on the bohemians of Greenwich Village) emphasizes the highly fraught and distinctly modern relationship between private and public lives. Proust, according to Lucia Re, uses the nineteenth-century salon as “a model for both the radical reversibility and relativism that

characterize the social realm” and “the deep, hidden authenticity associated with the private... that give[s] writing a sense of stability and truth” (182)—but Barnes, I argue, uses the twentieth-century salon in order to undermine any sense of “stability” or “truth.” What we would most like to keep private—“that part of ourselves that we are ashamed of”—becomes, in the twentieth century, fodder for gossip journalists, the very stuff of publicity.

***Ladies Almanack* and the aestheticization of gossip**

Herring, we saw, described Barnes’s journalism as the act of “tattling on unfamiliar others” (165). In this section I take a closer look at how *Ladies Almanack* is also a form of “tattling” on “others” who are at once familiar and not. Although some scholars have remarked upon the text’s apparent “hatred of gossip” (Doughty 148), I argue that the passage most commonly used to demonstrate Barnes’s moral “censure” against “sins of indiscretion” (Berni 86) should instead be read ironically. The lines most explicitly related to gossip are these, near the beginning of the August chapter:

‘[T]is a gruesome thing when a Woman snaps Grace in twain with a bragging Tongue, for truly such have clack in our City, and run about like mad Dogs, as if Love and its doings were a public Smithy, where all Ears are shod with: “She is so large, so wide, and said she, when we went down to Duty, thus and so, and so she did!” Or as if Love were a Saw-mill whose Dust must be cast in every Eye, or as if it were meet to discuss in public assembly that which by Nature was hidden between two Pillars (48).

Here a woman’s “Tongue,” usually invoked in the text as a way of giving pleasure, becomes the means of publicizing what should be private. Dehumanized, female gossips “clack” like hens and “run about like mad Dogs.” And yet what at first seems in this passage to be a rejection of gossip—and a scathing one at that—becomes ironic when the reader realizes that the whole narrative is complicit in this kind of “talk.” We read in part out of prurient curiosity: we want to know how these women behave with one another, what they do and whom they do it with. We want gossip, and the narrator gives it to us. The “Saints Days” section in February, for example,

lists some of Dame Evangeline's conquests: a "Near-Bride" when she was "fast on fifteen," "Harlots" at age thirty, and "when forty she bayed up a Tree whose Leaves had no Turning and whose Name was Florella" (14-16). We know that when she was ten, she was "deflowered by the Hand of a Surgeon" (26), and we know that Daisy Downpour tries to seduce her by "thrill[ing] loose a shoulder" and "exposing" to the Dame's gaze "the machine-hooked glory of a Pair of near-pink Undergarments, most luringly loosened in the Weave at full good four Points" (63). Like all good gossip, the image is sexy and provocative—which is why the narrator has chosen to tell us about it.

For all her complaints about women who run around "bragging" of their lovers, Dame Evangeline herself never hesitates to boast. Similarly, for all of the narrator's condemnation of gossip, the whole purpose of her text is to open a window into the closed world of this lesbian coterie. The narrator's feigned reluctance to share her report only serves to further pique our interest. Just as a gossip would say, "I shouldn't be telling you this..." before telling us exactly what she "shouldn't," so too does our narrator inform the reader that she recounts "with unwilling Hand... what a woman says to a Woman and she be up to her Ears in Love's Acre" (42). The whole section of July, in fact, proves the power of women's speech and the seductive potency of language—yet instead of openly celebrating that power, the narrator pretends to despair of it. "Yea," she writes in a weary tone, "though the Recipient [of such love language] be as torpid as a Mohammedan after his hundredth Ramadan, as temperate as a Frost in Timgad, as stealthy as a Bishop without a Post, still and yet, and how again it will command her; so encore." She then goes on to describe *how* it commands the woman seduced, including: "up-stairs and down, right side and wrong, peek-a-boo, or all fronts-face, in Mid-moon and Mad-night, in Dawn, in Day...." (45), all phrases that hint not-so-subtly at sex. While complaining of the

nature of women's words, she simultaneously proves their power—and in so doing, draws our attention to her own text as a similarly intoxicating force of seduction, conversion, and subversion. Lanser, who titles her famous essay on *Ladies Almanack* "Speaking in Tongues," rightly observes that a woman who "snaps Grace in twain with a bragging Tongue" is "always both verbal and sexual" (162). Following Lanser, I contend that the "bragging Tongue" is the instrument of gossip as well as of pleasure, and that Barnes takes pleasure in harnessing the power of gossip for the form and the style of her text.

Ladies Almanack is, of course, far from a direct representation of reality; its aesthetic is hyperbolic, imaginative, and parodic. Barnes "codes" the content in an old-fashioned, highly stylized prose that poses "severe stylistic obstacles to the reader" (Kaup 91). The language is deliberately archaic ("Now this be a Tale of as fine a Wench as ever wet Bed," the story begins), with outdated word choices and old-fashioned rhetorical flourishes such as capitalized nouns and long, ornamental sentences with multiple clauses stacked one on top of the other. Some scholars suggest that one purpose of this difficult, obscure style was to avoid censorship—something Barnes had already suffered through with *Ryder* and which could have been much worse considering the content of the *Almanack*. The public's unease with lesbianism had been underscored in 1921 when Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap were found guilty of obscenity for publishing the "Nausicaa" chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*. A number of scholars have argued that Anderson and Heap were put on trial because they—as lesbians—represented a threat to social norms as dire as the text itself. As Adam Parkes explains, the facts and atmosphere of the trial suggest "that the battle was as much between two deviant women and a male, heterosexual establishment as between the forces of censorship and the supporters of James Joyce" (284). Even John Quinn, their defense attorney, was biased against them from the start; in 1920 he

wrote to Ezra Pound: "I have no interest at all in defending people who are stupidly and brazenly and Sapphoistically and pederastically and urinally, and menstrually violat[ing] the law, and think they are courageous" (Baggett 180). No wonder then that in 1929 Barnes writes to Natalie Barney that she hopes to be able to sell copies of *Ladies Almanack* in the United States—that is, "if they get through the [US] post."

In addition to evading the censors, the highly stylized and "linguistically dazzling" prose of the *Almanack* also worked to satirize and dismantle modern scientific theories on sex and homosexuality (Berni 84). Kaup categorizes Barnes's prose as "neobaroque," highlighting its "noncommunicative" and "transgressive" qualities (85). "In *Ladies Almanack*," she writes, "the miraculous aspects of Dame Evangeline's life are treated as seriously, or as non-seriously, as the myths of modern sexology—both are subjected to neobaroque procedures of artificialization and exposed as fictions" (95). Frann Michel approaches the prose from another angle, building upon the work of Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray to show that Barnes's text is an example of what she calls "feminine writing": "nonauthoritative, disruptive of order or mastery" (34). Feminine writing, argues Michel, with "its word play, parody, attention to language and the materiality of language, sounds like what is usually described as modernist writing or the writing of modernity" (36).

Because of these qualities, modernist literature—especially as introduced in classrooms and textbooks—is notorious for its "difficulty," for the intense labor a reader must perform in order to "decipher" the text. Even in 1972, Susan Sniader Lanser reminds us, when Harper and Row reprinted a facsimile of the original text, the book went unreviewed by *The New York Times* because all three reviewers the paper approached "claimed they were unable to decipher it" ("Introduction," xix). Many feminist scholars since then have striven to break the code,

describing their work in terms of “unveiling, decoding, and unlocking” (Caselli 38). Anne B. Dalton, perhaps most memorably, refers to Barnes’s oeuvre as a “Pandora’s box: once one manages to open it, the content streams out irrepressibly” (117). One such method of decoding is to read the *Almanack* as a *roman à clef*, where each character stands in for a true-to-life figure whose life, once we can identify it, opens the way to a clearer understanding of the text.

More recent critics such as Caselli and Herring, however, reject this approach to Barnes’s work. “Rather than decoding *Ladies Almanack* as if it were a riddle hiding a solution (which critics have often located in biography or context),” writes Caselli, “I argue that the text’s difficulties are instrumental to opening up the relation between pleasure and meaning, that is to say exploring the politics of representation” (39). Scott Herring agrees, arguing that Barnes’s promise of “tattling on unfamiliar others” is an empty one because she brings us into bohemia only to show us that there is “nothing spectacular” to see there.

The refusal to represent properly what the audience expects, that is, will develop into a commitment to antirepresentation, a commitment that also owed a great deal to her impersonal modernist counterparts, Joyce, Eliot, and Eugene Jolas... Promising insight, she undoes her slumming narratives even as these stories seem to grant geographic and cultural specificity. Within this epistemological uncertainty, ethnic and sexual freaks are lost the moment they are found. This is only to say that within the Barnesian night world, there is no perverse bohemia (165).

Seen in this light, Barnes’s prose is not a code inviting readers to unlock the meaning within; it is, instead, an “exploration of the politics of representation” or a “commitment to antirepresentation” that draws attention to the difficulty of fully representing or understanding anything at all. Herring’s analysis especially, remarks Carolyn Setz in a recent review (2014) of trends in contemporary Barnes scholarship, “offers a way of conceptualizing Barnes’s difficulty in terms of an anticomunitarian spirit that shuns the redemptive queer ‘self’ in favor of a type of writing that may seem to, but never does *tell all*” (376). The concept of “telling all” that we see peppered through criticism on Barnes—with some critics arguing that all is told, if only we

can learn to read the language, and others insisting that the whole point of the text is to refuse the telling—supports the connection between Barnes’s work and gossip. Whether we label it “neobaroque,” “feminine” or “antirepresentative,” Barnes’s prose calls attention to the boundary between insiders and outsiders. The critics who attempt to decode her text believe that the reader can be brought inside, with the right tools; the critics who refuse to decode it seem conflicted about whether we are all outside of it or whether there is “no ‘outside’” (Caselli 170) at all. When Caselli calls *Ladies Almanack* “an enactment of desire of deferral,” I read this “desire” as the desire to know and the “deferral” as the author’s readiness to reveal. The pleasure of the text lies in the promise of gossip, as much as in the gossip itself.

For all Caselli’s remarks against biographical readings and Herring’s rejection of the text as “representation,” however, even they cannot resist reading the characters of *Ladies Almanack* with respect to their historical counterparts. Herring, for example, observes that in the March chapter, “Barnes, who was frequently strapped for cash and often dependent on Peggy Guggenheim’s philanthropy, mercilessly satirized Hall’s aristocratic pretensions and class privilege by deeming her and her lover Lady Una Troubridge ‘Tilly Tweed-in-Blood’ and ‘Lady Buck-and-Balk’ (18). In a caricature that now seems quite prescient, Barnes chastises the two for their commitment to gay marriage and desire for a normalizing, state-sanctioned existence” (166). The key word here is “caricature,” which is yet another stylistic element of the text that Barnes borrows from gossip. As cultural historian Melanie Tebbutt observes in *Women’s Talk*, “Gossip’s narrative capacity easily turned its subjects into characters, giving recollections of gossip a certain caricatured quality that, incidentally, made it such a rich source of material for comedians who focused on working-class domestic life” (131). Another example from the *Almanack* is the caricature of Barnes’s friend Mina Loy as Patience Scalpel, the heterosexual of

the text who claims not to understand “Women and their Ways as they were about her, above her and before her” (11). Patience’s “scalpel” is her voice, “as cutting in its Derision as a surgical Instrument...” (12), and her month is January in order to underscore her frigidity. “Sluts!” she said pleasantly after a little thought, “Are good Mothers to supply the with Luxuries in the next Generation; for they themselves will have no Shes, unless some Her puts them forth! Well I’m not the Woman for it! They well have to pluck where they may. My Daughters shall go a-marrying!” (13). It is no coincidence, I believe, that Patience’s passage here is interrupted (“penetrated,” even) by an illustration of Dame Evangeline with the ribbon underneath reading: “Thus Evangeline Began Her Career.”¹¹

Dame Evangeline is the most fascinating and well-developed caricature of the *Almanack*. Whereas the model for its protagonist, Natalie Barney, quietly entered the world in Dayton Ohio, the emergence of her fictional counterpart Dame Evangeline Mussett is much more sensational:

[S]he had been developed in the Womb of her most gentle Mother to be a Boy, when therefore, she came forth an Inch or so less than this, she paid no Heed to the Error, but donning a Vest of superb Blister and Tooling, a Belcher for tippet and a pair of hip-boots with a scarlet channel (for it was a most wet wading) she took her Whip in hand, calling her Pups about her, and so set out upon the Road of Destiny... (7).

Here Barnes, as a number of critics have pointed out, parodies the sexologists of her day who defined lesbianism as a type of “inversion”—in this case, a male born into a female body. (It is this definition that Radclyffe Hall’s protagonist accepts for herself in *The Well of Loneliness*.) The most oft-cited formulation of this phenomenon is likely Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s description of the “masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom” (264). One of the goals of this

¹¹Tyrus Miller analyzes this origin myth in detail in *Late Modernism* (1999). “Mobilizing the ordinarily ‘margin’ elements of graphic and typographic design against the senses of the text—a discourse, dominant both materially (in the book format) and ideologically (in the book’s social context)—Barnes literally opens the space from which the lesbian will emerge. To put it in a formula: the heroine of modernist affiliative (lesbian) community is born from the literal rupture of the filiative discourse that Patience Scalpel represents” (140).

theory was to maintain neat categorizations of male/female sexuality and avoid the “degeneration” and “social decay” that seemed the logical outcome of gender blending. “In short,” explains Carla Berni, “the sexual inversion model defends against the threat posed by individuals whose desires denaturalize both gender and desire, releasing the body from the realm of nature and placing it within cultural/semiotic practice” (89).

In the introductory pages Dame Evangeline Musset is seemingly presented as a “congenital invert” who proves the theory; and yet her favorite pastime is that of “converting” other women to her lifestyle, seducing them away from their husbands and bringing them home to her bed. She enjoys the challenge, sometimes pursuing married women who adamantly refuse her at first, only to come around in the end. “For this Morning,” she announces in the November section of the *Almanack*, “...ten girls I had tried vainly for but a Month gone, were all tearing at my shutters” (79). In this way, as Lanser remarks in an introduction to the *Almanack*, Barnes “refuses the ideology of novels like *The Well of Loneliness* and *Sodom and Gomorrah* that represent homosexuals as a third sex, or ‘hommes-femmes’” (xxxvii). Although Dame Musset may have been born an “invert,” the lesbian community that she creates defies the theory of “constitutional abnormality” through the conversion of women who were not, it would appear, born as she was. This is why, “rather than read[ing] her as simply a reinscription of sexology’s stereotypes of penis envy,” Kathryn Kent reads Musset “as both a figure of Barnes’s appropriation of the phallic and a representation of possibilities for the (re)productive powers of lesbian desire” (92).

These “(re)productive powers” become evident in Barnes’s second account of the birth of a lesbian. Alongside a hand-drawn illustration of a host of winged women dropping an egg, Barnes writes that these angels were “all gathered together, so close that they were not

recognizable, one from the other” and explains that nine months later the egg “fell to Earth, and striking, split and hatched, and from out of it stepped one saying, ‘Pardon me, I must be going!’ And this,” announces Barnes, “was the first Woman born with a Difference. After this the Angels parted, on and the Face of each was the Mother look” (26). As we shall see, this report of a group birth demonstrates a great deal of similarity with the very first instance of gossip literature (*Les Caquets de l’accouchée*); it also provides a theory of lesbian birth that complicates the reductive theory of inversion. “In this image,” notes Kent, “Barnes wrestles not only reproduction but the idea of mothering from their heterosexual context, and rewrites them to include what can happen in various lesbian spaces, perhaps even the Parisian salon” (Kent 91). It is precisely this kind of reproduction that worries those sexologists concerned with maintaining clear categories of sexuality. By *producing* a lesbian simply through the power of community—a “community outside of official institutions and history” (Kaup 93)—this group of women not only defies the definitions and categories ascribed to them, but also calls into question the legitimacy and veracity of these categories from the start, emptying them of significance. Barnes offers a new myth of origins that contradicts sexology’s claims about the nature of homosexuality and suggests an alternative world order.

In her examination of gossip among British working-class women from 1880-1960, Melanie Tebbutt stresses the connection between gossip and myth. Gossip’s “myth-making qualities,” as she calls them, include its reliance on repetition as a narrative form, on the “exaggeration of small experiences which could become ‘representations of large meaning,’” and on the strong personalities whose characters and actions, once told and retold, seemed somehow larger than life (4-5). Like gossip, *Ladies Almanack* incorporates a repetitive, ritualistic structure that Barnes borrows from the genre of the almanac; like gossip, the *Almanack* also “exaggerates”

common experiences by reading the protagonist's life through the lives of the saints and the extraordinary phenomena of cosmology; and finally, like gossip, the caricatures of already strong personalities catapult figures such as Natalie Barney to a status that is "larger than life." By incorporating these elements of oral storytelling, Barnes also succeeds in presenting her text as a kind of legend, as a myth that proposes to undo the equally "mythological" theories of contemporary sexology. "The subaltern genre of legend resignified by Barnes in *Ladies' Almanack* holds another explanation for its pseudonymous publication," writes Kaup. "Less than an 'author' or a 'known contemporary,' Barnes merely assumes the anonymous persona of a popular follower of her heroine who records, rather than invents, a collective oral legend" (93). Positioning herself as a recorder rather than an inventor, Barnes implies—as every good gossip should—that she did not make up this story. Instead she heard it, saw it, and now reports it.

Collective myths, as anthropologists and sociologists have proven, form the basis of community: like gossip, they define the boundaries of a group and serve to structure that group's norms and standards. "Patron saints," as Kaup points out, "are venerated by their devotees; by analogy, Dame Musset's queer sainthood implies the existence of a community, a lesbian community. The preface addresses this community, introducing *Ladies' Almanack* as the book 'which all Ladies should carry about with them...'" (94). Within the text, we see this community gather itself around Dame Evangeline Musset, becoming most prominent at her funeral in the December chapter. "First forty Women shaved their Heads... and carried her through the City on a monstrous Catafalque." At the burial, those forty are "joined" by more "Women who had not told their Husbands everything," and "the Mourners barked about her covetously, and all Night through, it was bruited abroad that the barking continued, like mournful baying of Hounds in the Hills, though by Dawn there was no sound. And as the day came some hundred Women were

seen bent in Prayer” (82-84). Readers may notice the use of “bruted,” a word that is etymologically linked to the French “noise” but which in this instance means “rumored,” “reported,” even “gossiped.” Thus the community referred to here is not only the forty and then the hundred women who mourn the departed Dame, but also the community “abroad” that circulates the news of this grief. That community is, in a very real sense, the audience of the *Almanack*: those very readers and scholars who, by reading the book and writing about it, contribute to the dissemination and the expansion of Dame Evangeline’s life story. Criticism becomes itself a kind of gossip—a phenomenon that I will examine more closely in the following chapter on Ezra Pound—because we critics appropriate the story, retelling it in a way that makes it our own, “exaggerate[ing]... small experiences” into “representations of large meaning” (Tebbutt 5), and establishing ourselves as members of the community that has read and written of the text.

If this is the case, however, where is the line between the public and the coterie? Here we return to the questions posed earlier in this chapter about the relationship between public and private and how Barnes negotiated that relationship in her work. Barnes, we remember, insisted in her later years that the book was a “private” affair, whereas Natalie Barney saw early on its potential for a wider audience. For Daniela Caselli, Barney’s letter to Aldington urging a wider publication and distribution of the *Almanack* (see p. 5 of this chapter) indicates “a closed club policy... The narcissistic and voyeuristic pleasures promised by *Ladies Almanack* are, according to Barney’s letter, both exclusive and potentially open to everyone willing” (35). The text “plays with secrecy and resists disclosure,” endowing it with the peculiar power to grant its readers entry to the coterie while simultaneously holding them forever outside it. As a figure both included in and excluded from the group that she describes, Barnes’s position on the margins

provides her with knowledge of the inner circle that she can then publish far beyond it. This position is, I argue, crucial to gossip literature of any kind and is, in fact, inherent to the “gossip genre” as a whole. In this next section I will turn to the ways in which Barnes’s text echoes the earliest examples of literary gossip before analyzing, in my conclusion, what makes the gossip of *Ladies Almanack* so deeply and distinctly modern.

The “gossip genre”

One of the most memorable reminiscences of Natalie Barney’s salon appears in the *Autobiography* of William Carlos Williams, who visited expatriate Paris in the 1920s. Ezra Pound appointed himself Williams’s tour guide and took him to see Barney and her famed *Temple de l’Amitié* at 20 Rue Jacob. In the *Autobiography*, Williams describes Barney’s “old *salon*” as “one of the wonders of the last century... You might think it was something preserved in amber from the time of the Renaissance” (228). He pronounces Barney “gracious” and compliments her garden. Then he adds:

The story is told of some member of the Chamber of Deputies, a big, red-faced guy who had turned up there after a routine social acceptance. To his annoyance, as he stood lonely in the center of the dance floor, he saw women about him, dancing gaily together on all sides. Thereupon he undid his pants buttons, took out his tool and, shaking it right and left, yelled out in a rage, ‘Have you never seen one of these?’ (229).

The anecdote is intended to be funny, and it is: the image of a man so frustrated by a roomful of uninterested women that he pulls out his penis is farcical, bawdy, and irreverent. In other words, it is a model piece of gossip. More importantly, however, this lively account of the confrontation between a male bystander and a group of indifferent women exposes a specific type of masculine anxiety that Melanie Tebbutt attributes to “male fears of a powerful female domestic society over which they had little control” (26). Although this moment in Barney’s garden is both hyperbolic and specific, the scene underscores the more general tensions at play between men and groups of

women—a dynamic with a long and complicated history that Barnes incorporates and turns to her advantage in her *Ladies Almanack*.

The *Almanack* represents the female space of Natalie Barney's *Academie des femmes* by describing a world populated by women. The only man in the text with a speaking role is Dame Evangeline's father, who worries over his "erring Child" whom "Society" has already deemed unfit for inclusion. When Evangeline passes families on the way to church, the ladies "with their Babes at Breast, and Husbands at Arm... snatch their Skirts from Contamination," making it clear that "Evangeline was in order of becoming one of those who is spoken to out of Generosity, which her Father could see, would by no Road lead her to the Altar" (8). Essentially, Evangeline's father fears the condemnation and exclusion that comes from gossip: the talk that will keep Evangeline from "the altar," just as Natalie Barney's parents feared the scandal that came with the newspaper articles reporting their daughter's identification with the Greek poet Sappho. Dame Evangeline's father appears only in the prologue to the text; he and other men are excluded from the body of the text. In March, Lady Buck-and-Balk announces that she wishes "we could do away with Man altogether!" Tilly Tweed-in-Blood replies, more practically, that men are needed "for the carrying of Coals, lifting of Beams, and things of one kind or another." Patience Scalpel, our token heterosexual, overhears them and refers to men as "the dears." "And is there one hereabouts?" she wants to know. The answer from the other women is a most resounding "No!" Patience calmly sips her tea and tells the women that they would "not be half so pleased" with themselves if there were no men, for they would have no means of setting themselves apart from social norms and expectations. The last man mentioned in the *Almanack* is the surgeon whose hand "deflowered" Dame Evangeline, a story that outrages her listeners.

The decidedly female space of the *Almanack* links it with the female space that has informed our definition and understanding of “gossip” for centuries. Although the old English word *godsibb* (“godfamily,” used for those present at the baptism of an infant) was originally non-gendered, by the seventeenth century it had come to refer to the “close female friends whom a woman invited to attend her at childbirth” (Tebbutt 20). These gatherings of women in the days immediately preceding and succeeding the delivery provided crucial support for the mother-to-be in matters both physical and emotional: her friends and neighbors—her “gossips”—brought food and drink, offered advice (often from firsthand experience), and assisted in the event of a difficult labor if a trained midwife were not available. The purpose of this female space was to prioritize the mother, freeing her from “the normal demands placed upon her sexuality, time and physical energies. The presence of other women ensured the effective policing of these strictures” and also—or so it was believed—“made them privy to many family secrets which husbands may well have preferred to remain hidden” (21). As a space from which men were unapologetically barred entry, the delivery or “lying-in” room became associated with talk, secrecy, and female exclusivity.

Masculine curiosity over what transpired among the women inspired a series of popular French texts in the 17th century entitled “Chatter at the Lying-in” (*Les Caquets de l’accouchée*), supposedly written by an eavesdropping man who reported hearing “tales of erotic adventures, remedies for unwanted pregnancies, and various hot tips for lovers” (qtd. in Tebutt, 21). The collection is narrated by an anonymous male who hides at the bedside of a new mother (his cousin), and it consists of seven installments: one for each day he listens in on and records the women’s conversation. *Les Caquets* became “the best-known example of an early seventeenth-century literature that purported to transcribe idle female conversation” and also “something of a

hit” (Butterworth 143); originally published in 1622, they were reprinted seven times before 1650. Kirk Read situates *Les Caquets* within what he calls “the ‘gossip genre,’ namely, medieval works such as the *Les quinze joies de mariage* and the *Les Evangiles des quenouilles*, wherein men play a similarly beleaguered outlier to their wives’ gynocentric *coterie* at and around the time of birth” (13). According to James Grantham Turner, “Male authors evidently felt compelled to don female disguise and penetrate, in imagination, that inaccessible world behind the facade of virtue, where women supposedly generate and transmit the truths of sex. Men wanted to regard themselves as the controlling source of all knowledge, the worldly authorities who inscribe their expertise on the blank and innocent female” (53). The women in the birthing room posed a threat to the man of the house because, as Caroline Bicks observes, they “compromised” his “position as patriarch when they moved into his household: they edged the husband out of his spouse’s bed, sitting around it as the woman of the house entertained them both during and up to a month after the birth. Most importantly,” she continues:

... the mother and her female attendants reminded the husband of his inferior powers when it came to telling stories about his spouse and her offspring. Their tales could initiate a story about a man’s patriarchal identity (in its most literal sense) that might not match his own. Whether or not they knew more than the husband or the state, they witnessed and (in the case of midwives) testified to what few men could lay claim to having seen or known (25).

Significantly, this passage from Bicks’s *Midwiving Subjects in Shakespeare’s England* touches upon the two aspects of gossip that make it most potent: its kinship to storytelling, an element that draws people in; and its role in determining who has the privilege of knowing what, which drives people apart.

While it is true that three full centuries stand between *Les Caquets de l’accouchée* (1622) and *Ladies Almanack* (1928), a reader confronting the *Almanack* for the first time might not be blamed for thinking it much older. For Monika Kaup, as we have seen, Barnes’s “transgressive

and ornate style was shaped by the neobaroque, a mode recuperated from the 'obsolete' styles, forms, and themes of the historical baroque by twentieth-century writers in Europe and in the Americas" (85). What we call the baroque was in fact the era spanning the entire 17th century and running over into the 18th—the time when *Les Caquets de l'accouchée* were being printed and reprinted by popular demand. There were doubtless a number of reasons why Barnes chose to adopt "Renaissance diction and orthography" and the "chapbook-calendar framework," but for Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, her ultimate purpose was "to present the lesbian 'Crusade' (34) as a genuine Renaissance for women" (236). While it is unlikely that Barnes read *Les Caquets* (her French, we know from her regret over not being able to communicate well with Natalie Barney's French housekeeper, was probably not up to the task), I believe that placing these texts side by side better illuminates how each incorporated elements of gossip in order to respond to and contribute to the "Renaissance" of its age.

Domna Stanton, writing of the socio-political context in France at the time of *Les Caquets*, remarks that these pieces coincided with the "troubled Regency of Marie de Medicis (1610-1617)," an unpopular ruler who seemed to symbolize "a dominant fertile female and an excluded and/or emasculated male" (40).

That Marie incarnated the woman on top in deviation from the fundamental Salic Law of the kingdom, the virago who usurps the place of her rightful ruler, and thereby turns the world upside down, may also explain in part why the end of her regency coincided with the onset of the first and perhaps most virulent of the *querelles des femmes* in the seventeenth century, which endlessly debated the rightful place of men and women, both reworking dominant gender norms to confront new conditions and contesting them.. (41).

If Marie is the woman who turns the world of *Les Caquets* upside-down, the woman who turns the modern world upside down in *Ladies Almanack* is Dame Evangeline. In an essay describing Barnes's appropriation of "medieval and Renaissance images found in French popular art" (509), Laura Behling analyzes the degree to which *Ladies Almanack* also "inverts" society. As Behling

writes, Barnes is “deliberate” in “casting of her unconventional subject matter within the suggestive confines of not only sterile reproduction but also in the trope of *le monde renverse*, indeed modeling some of her illustrations after the woodcuts of the world turned upside down in *L’imagerie Populaire*” (512). Both *Les Caquets de l’accouchée* and *Ladies Almanack* respond to the social and political upheaval of their time by satirizing contemporary notions of “inversion,” calling attention to the revolutionary nature of their respective decades and their narratives.

To achieve this, both Barnes and the writer(s)¹² of *Les Caquets* position their texts as gossip even while they purport to critique those who gossip. What the narrator of the *Almanack* and the narrator of *Les Caquets* have in common is a dual identity, simultaneously inside and outside of the groups of women that they satirize. The hidden scribe of *Les Caquets* “takes appropriate pains to distance himself and his endeavor from female talk; but because of the nature of his project and his evident fascination with what is said, similarities inevitably remain” (Butterworth 144). He speaks to the reader in a prologue (“*Au Lecteur Curieux*”) in which he claims that the purpose of his text is a moral one: his goal is to “reform” social mores and “regulate” individuals’ behavior (“*Voy donc, amiable lecteur, cest ouvrage de bon oeil; il n’a esté mis au jour que pour reformer les moeurs, reigler les actions et retrancer les abus*” (37)). In a short poem that he inserts immediately afterwards, he explains that the reader will be amused at the triviality of the conversation (“*la matière est si triviale*”) and begs pardon of his cousin, the woman who allowed him into the room, helped him hide, and who might now be angry that he has published the “mystery” of the “secrets told in her house” (“*Si l’accouchée est en collère / De me voir conter le mystère / Du secret dit en sa maison...*” (39)). Interestingly, the material that follows is not as “trivial” as the reader has been led to suspect. The women do tell tales of

¹²While the author of the texts remains anonymous, a number of scholars suggest that they were composed by several authors—particular since the success of the first installment inspired copycats.

adultery (from their own experience and that of others), of pregnancies both desired and unwanted (with a particular emphasis on loose young girls who wind up with “*un pain sur la journée*” (66)), and of potentially scandalous romances; they also complain a great deal about the cost of marrying off their daughters and the burdens of motherhood.

Yet most of the women’s time is spent speaking of the governance of the city, neglecting personal matters to discuss greater social, political, and religious issues. They drop the names of cardinals and ministers, while speaking of “the provision of relief for the poor, the unregulated activity of royal financiers, and typographical errors in the printing process” (Butterworth 148), among other topics. They complain of corruption (“*tout est aujourd’huy corrompu, l’argent fait tout*” (62)), religious wars (“*d’où sont venus toutes les guerres civiles qui ont miné et deserté toute ceste monarchie depuis quatre-vingt ou cent ans?*” (64)), or the dwindling distinctions between the social classes (“*aujourd’huy l’on ne cognoist plus rien aux habits... quant on parle à quelqu’un, on ne scait si l’on doit dire Monseigneur or Monseieur simplement*” (73)). As Butterworth insightfully remarks, “What is characteristic of the *Caquets* is that matters of public interest often first appear as intimate secrets to be shared: that is, they take the form of gossip. For example, a discussion about corruption and the sale of offices develops from a private conversation” (148). Her essay “Gossip and the Public Sphere” argues that the feminine space portrayed in *Les Caquets* lays the foundation for what Habermas will call the public sphere, while Kirk Read’s *Birthing Bodies in Early Modern France* suggests that the conversation of *Les Caquets* foreshadows the emergence of the salon. (The earliest salons, he reminds us, were also conducted out of bedrooms.) In general scholars agree that the critique of current events through gossip transforms *Les Caquets* into a form of satire. For Domna Stanton, this satire is essentially conservative: “Far from being a trivially private text, as Bakhtin claims, the male-narrated

Receuil general des caquets de l'accouchee recuperates the 'loose talk' of women at the lying-in, and then uses it as a screen to denounce social disorder and to proclaim the cure of rigid, patriarchal rule" (qtd. in Butterworth, 150). While this view of *Les Caquets* falls neatly in line with gossip's reputation as a conservative social force, I contend that such a reading takes a highly nuanced, multilayered text at face value. The male narrator claims that this is his first time in this forbidden space and yet he seems to possess an intimate knowledge about the women's world. How does our interpretation of this first instance of literary gossip change if we read the writer as female?

A number of critics have remarked upon the "feminization" of the male narrator as the days of confinement progress, the boundary between observer and observed blurring just as the boundary between private and public blurs when he begins to publish what he hears. I would like to get a step further and suggest that the author actually *is* a woman, and that—much like Djuna Barnes—she uses her position as an insider to publicize "feminine" secrets to outsiders. Butterworth writes, "That gossip crosses the boundary between secret and public is also a theme in *Les Caquets*. With his rhetoric of peering into secret places, the male spy is complicit in this relentless making public, or broadcasting" (146). This is, I argue, exactly what Barnes does with the *Almanack*, using a trusted or privileged position in order to transfer gossip from Natalie Barney's bedchambers to the public streets of the Left Bank. Furthermore, if we read *both* texts as having been written by women, the satire of *Les Caquets* becomes subversive rather than conservative. For example, when one of the assembly wonders aloud whether women should be reading the Bible ("*Mais est-ce à faire aux femmes à lire et manier un livre si hazardeux...?*" (56)), instead of taking the question at face value we can read it as ironic—particularly since this group of women proves to be well-read and well-versed in recent publications and the printing

process in general. Similarly, there comes a passage where the women speak intelligently of religious figures and affairs but then undercut their own conversation by declaring at the end of it that women should not “mix themselves up” in affairs of the Church because in addition to being “stupid” about the rationale for what is done, they are also too quickly moved by “anger” (“*car, outre que noutre sexe est imbecille à proposer les raisons de part et d’autre, nous nous laissons incontinent emporter à la colère*” (65)). The line doesn’t make sense if read literally, since the women have just disproven it in the preceding conversation—and so again, it seems most logical when read ironically. Although this may be something men say of women (that they are not smart or rationale enough to discuss religious affairs), the text itself shows us that the critique carries no weight.

If we take this passage to be representative of the text as a whole, we find that dismissing their own speech as “trivial” or “mere chatter” actually provides women with the freedom to say whatever they wish about matters of political, economic, and religious significance. As Kirk Read observes, a speaker “undermines her authority on the one hand, while demonstrating a passionate and well-informed critique on the other: a vigorous debate worthy of the most lively *ruelle*” (49). By “undermining” their own critiques, by dismissing their words as mere “gossip,” (*caquet*), they protect their right to their opinions—a right which the male-dominated public sphere does not confer on them in other spaces. Supposedly “idle” talk, as Stanton reminds us, “betrays the secrets of the dominant, can challenge their powerful public image and create cohesion among the unempowered. Woman’s ‘loose tongue,’ with its erotic connotations, can constitute a threat to the superordinate image and interests of men, and thus to the perpetuation of early-modern gender norms that regarded a closed mouth as a sign of female chastity” (40). In this way *Les Caquets*, “while often appearing disorganized if not incoherent, construct a new

view of woman's secret strength—the nature, form and substance of her speech” (Randall 97). In claiming to mock female speech, the text actually elevates that speech to something worthy of public circulation and consideration. If we read *Ladies Almanack* as an inheritor of this tradition of gossip literature, then we may recognize how Barnes’s text, too, critiques and inverts social norms through the trivial chatter of “women’s talk.”

Whether the narrator of *Les Caquets* is masculine or feminine, his (or her) most important quality is his (or her) marginality. “The women’s *ruelle* suggests a writing from the margins,” Catherine Randall explains in her essay “Gossiping Gospels.” “Here, the male secretary occupies that place, representing both the ingression of male institutionalized power into female space, as well as the relegation of the male in a strong female text, to a *marginal* role: *he* becomes the gloss or marginalia on the greater body of their text” (112). Read uses the same terminology, arguing that this “chronicle issued from the *ruelle* is itself marginal, or better, intermediary, defining a *ruelle* of its own, between the intimacy of sequestered gripes and confidences and a public critique of real actors in the daily life of finance, labor, religion, and government in contemporary Parisian society” (50).

The same descriptors of “marginal” and “intermediary” could easily be applied to the position Barnes takes up in her *Almanack*, existing somewhere on the boundary of the coterie she depicts through caricature and hyperbole. As Bonnie Kime Scott points in a passage on Barnes, “marginality” was for “many women of her generation,” an ideal state of being that could be achieved at least in part “by living abroad, ex-patria” (21)—and Barnes tended to hold herself, as many memoirs tell us, more on the outskirts than most. Her interest in “marginal” figures in her work has been well documented by scholars of *Nightwood* in particular. Julie Abraham, for example, writes that Barnes “focuses on those who are outside the circle of power that the

official history bestows and legitimates: Jews, wives, daughters, gay men, and lesbians” (124). Jane Marcus announces in her essay “Laughing at Leviticus” that Barnes “makes a modernism of marginality” (223)—a quotation that has been alternately supported and challenged by a number of scholars.¹³ According to Daniela Caselli, even Barnes’s “current marginality” as a modernist figure “needs to be recognized as culturally significant because it derives from the uncritical reaction to her unpleasant dissection of what works as central and what works as marginal, and at which price” (33).

I build from the work of these critics to argue that these crucial matters of marginality—outsider versus insider, public versus private—are what place both *Les Caquets de l'accouchée* and *Ladies Almanack* squarely within the “gossip genre.” One of the core functions of gossip, according to Eric Foster’s survey of current research in the *Review of General Psychology* (June 2004), is to establish “boundaries to distinguish insiders from outsiders.” As early as 1963, Max Gluckman notes in *Current Anthropology* that “The more exclusive the group, the greater will be the amount of gossip in it” (309). Gluckman describes the three types of social groups that demonstrate his point: professional groups, “like lawyers or anthropologists, whose gossip is built into technical discussion so tightly that the outsider cannot always detect” the nuance or hidden meaning of the conversation; groups of a high and hereditary social status, who can use “gossip as a social weapon” by alluding not only to each other’s scandals but also to the scandals of their forebears; and groups that have exclusiveness “thrust upon them” through issues of ethnic minority or geographic isolation, who capitalize on the pervasive fear of gossip and scandal to reassert communal values and enforce social norms (309). Groups of women fall largely, I would argue, under the umbrella of this third and final category. True, the members of

¹³For two prominent examples of critics who argue against this reading, see Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld* (2007) and Erin Carlston, *Thinking Fascism* (1998).

Natalie Barney's salon had "chosen" to be there in the *Temple de l'Amitié* at 20 Rue Jacob, "chosen" to be in expatriate Paris; none of them had this identity exactly "thrust upon them." And yet, as Gilbert and Gubar have argued, "The residence of lesbian modernists in foreign countries... symbolized their alienation from all countries, their realization that, as lesbians, they had been banished from or had had to withdraw from the ground of their origins, the supposedly native land that is heterosexuality... lesbianism itself was imagined as a perpetual, ontological expatriation" (219). In other words, these women had been exiles from the start—even before they left the United States.

Separation and Resistance

In her seminal *Women of the Left Bank* (1986), Shari Benstock concurs. Modernist women who came to Paris were looking for "freedom from external restraints, from the cultural expectations that kept women locked into social forms or placed them in the service of husbands and children" (78). In France, women were both inside of French culture, but also forever outside of it. "They were not French," writes Benstock, "they were not part of this society, they were not affected by French mores and prejudices... They were separate. It was this very need for separateness that brought them to Paris" (78). True, they had felt "separate" even in the United States, but at least in France, that "separateness" felt like a choice. In Paris they found each other, met in bookstores and salons, and formed communities. But even these communities were ones that had to be established outside the bounds of masculine, heteronormative institutions. Natalie Barney's famed *Académie des femmes*, for example, the weekly meeting of female-only artists and patrons, was founded as a "counterpart" to the all-male *Académie française*. As Karla Jay writes in her introduction to Barney's memoir, "Barney wanted to create a corrective to this patriarchal bastion more than thirty years before the esteemed 'Immortals' got around to doing so

on a token basis” (14). Thus the establishment of the all-female salon was both a choice, and not a choice; it was a reaction to social and cultural practices over which Barney and her followers had no control.

In its own “separate” way, then, *L’Académie des femmes* was an act of resistance. Indeed, according to French feminist theorist Monique Wittig, a significant aspect of homosexuality is “the desire for something else that is not connoted... this desire is resistance to the norm” (114). Benstock references this quotation in her preface and then adds: “Modernism itself participated in ‘resistance to the norm,’ but it also—and simultaneously—reinforced the normative” (x).¹⁴ While it may seem facile or inconsistent to describe a phenomenon as both reinforcing *and* subverting communal norms, this is in fact what a growing number of sociologists have determined about gossip. In an essay entitled “The Legal Regulation of Gossip: Backyard Chatter and the Mass Media,” law professor Robert Post describes exactly this paradox. “One the one hand,” he writes, “gossip threatens to subvert community norms by exposing back-stage behavior and revealing the pretensions, faults, peccadillos, and scandal of community actors. On the other hand, gossip reaffirms community norms by bringing social pressure to bear on their enforcement” (65). As he continues, however, he distinguishes between the *content* of gossip and the *activity* of gossiping itself.

If the content of gossip is always two-edged, always both reinforcing community norms and threatening to blow communities apart, the activity of gossip supports the first of these tendencies. By carefully choosing the audience for our gossip, we maintain the boundaries of the very community that the content of our gossip potentially endangers. When we confine our gossip to ‘insiders,’ to those who share our interest in community as a whole, we establish that, in Gluckman’s words, our scandal is ‘virtuous’ in that ‘its aim [is] to demonstrate some kind of unity’ (66).

¹⁴Although Benstock does not cite any specific examples here, we might read the work of poets such as Pound or Eliot through the lens, recognizing how in their innovative methods of collage and the re-appropriation of ancient history, they produced literature that could only be understood by educated classes who had the privilege of the same classical training.

In other words, although gossip always “threatens” to “subvert community norms,” it never truly does—because the act of gossiping remains conservative to the core. The premise of this passage is that we “confine our gossip to ‘insiders’”—but Barnes does not.

By writing as an insider while also disseminating her text far beyond the coterie, Barnes destabilizes the boundary between public and private and subverts the very norms that gossip typically upholds. Perhaps the most fascinating and formidable element of gossip is this: that when it leaves the coterie and enters the public domain, it begins to stretch the limits of social norms rather than constricting them. The fear of “scandal” in the twenty-first century does not exist the way it did in Henry James’s day—in part, I would like to suggest, because the social, technological, and artistic revolutions of modernity transformed gossip to its core. The way in which *Ladies Almanack* makes public the private lifestyle of Barney’s circle echoes, even if distantly, the emergence of celebrity columns and gossip papers in the United States around the same time. Natalie Barney, who first appeared in newspapers as an infamous and scandalizing lover of women, found herself in postwar Paris to be practically passé. “After the war,” remarked her longtime partner Romaine, “when point of view had broadened, [Natalie] actually became popular and this was a sore disappointment to me. It was not long before I was again meeting at her house the very hornets I had hoped to escape forever” (qtd. in Rodriguez, 239). I argue that modern gossip served to “broaden” point of view, with scandalous stories circulating so thoroughly that they eventually were normalized, and that Barnes’s treatment of Natalie Barney’s circle contributed to this phenomenon. “To the young expats,” writes Rodriguez, Barney no longer carried the stigma of scandal. In fact, to many she seemed like an antique with her formal manners, her friendships with the Duke of this and the Princess of that, and her

aloofness from Left Bank bohemia” (245). The gossip surrounding Barney—including Barnes’s *Almanack*—did not “ruin” her, but instead made her respectable.

By describing an inverted world in which the previously abnormal is the only norm, Barnesian gossip subverted social standards and prophesized the changes to come. Although for the most part the *Almanack* languished in critical obscurity until the late 1970s, it remains a distinctly modern and modernist text in the way it plays across the boundary between private life and public life. Henry James, as we saw, was aware of the slow dissolution of this boundary and was wary of it; in her later years Djuna Barnes, too, would express concern over invasions of her privacy and declare her disgust with “postmodern” celebrity culture.¹⁵ But in 1928, when she penned the “private” *Almanack* and then distributed it to the general public, she participated in modernity’s greater project of publicizing—not to mention commodifying—the most private of lifestyles.

Barnes changed, too, the way that we think of talk among groups of women: the female “tongue” which for centuries had been denigrated becomes now an instrument of power as well as pleasure. It is no coincidence that *Ladies Almanack* begins and ends with the image of a tongue, opening with “the consolation every Woman has at her Finger Tips, or at the very Hang of her Tongue” (6) and closing with the tongue of Dame Evangeline resisting the fire that has consumed the rest of her body. “And when they came to the ash that was left of her,” says the narrator of the mourners, “all had burned but the Tongue, and this flamed, and would not suffer Ash, and it played about upon the handful that had been she indeed” (84). The woman’s tongue

¹⁵To Natalie, September 26 1964 (Series II, Box 1, Folder 45): “Changing of the seasons stirs up the deeper parts of the forgetting mind, and what strange things it does for ones present time... one or the other are most certainly legendary, and from what I can gather, it was the 1920’s that everyone, particularly the young now, are enchanted with; I wonder what they would have done with the time then had they been in it? Sometimes we are thrown on the TV screen here, I came along with T.S.E. and James Joyce, Fitzgerald and Hemingway... all photographed, I believe, by Man Ray. Very strange, all in all.”

is here elevated to the status of a holy relic: and like all holy relics, it continues to nourish the community of believers long after the saint has departed.

Instead of upholding the norms of the mainstream community, then, Barnesian gossip established a new one with its own social norms and set of values. While scholars such as Caselli and Herring insist that this was never her intention, that she was never interested in community *per se*¹⁶, the decades have proven that one has grown up around her work all the same. I opened with the idea of how texts speak to and about one another, and so in closing, I would like to point to Gilbert and Gubar's theory of literary "affiliation." In *No Man's Land*, they define the "*female affiliation complex*" as the triumph of "choice" and "continuity" over theories of "anxiety" or "authorship." They insist that "no modernist literary woman wrote more tellingly than Virginia Woolf about both the problems and the possibilities of matrilineal (literary) affiliation, in part because no modernist woman of letters was more intensely conscious of the influential existence of aesthetic foremothers" (196), and the quotation they use to demonstrate their point should call to mind the female space of both *Les Caquets* and *Ladies Almanack*. Woolf labels her powerful group of female muses the "harem" (a word heavy with irony) and describes the emotion they call forth in those who would follow their lead:

Then, inevitably, we come to the harem, and tremble slightly as we approach the curtain and catch glimpses of women behind it and even hear ripples of laughter and snatches of conversation. Some obscurity still veils the relations of women to one another. A hundred years ago, it was simple enough. They were stars who shone only in male sunshine; deprived of it, they languished into nonentity, sniffed, bickered and envied one another, so men said. But now, it must be confessed, things are less satisfactory. Passions and repulsions manifest themselves here, too, and it is by no means certain that every woman is inspired by pure envy when she reads what another has written ("Indiscretions," 1924).

Whereas *Les Caquets* is written by the male scribe hiding behind the curtain, here it is the female scribe who must find the courage to pull the curtain back so that she can join her literary

¹⁶"Barnes supposedly told her late-life friend Hank O'Neal, 'I don't want to make a lot of little lesbians'" (Lanser, "Introduction," xv).

mothers, sister, wives, and lovers. The gossip of Woolf's "harem," of Barnes's *Almanack*, is not the worthless, trivial pursuit we have so long dismissed it as being; instead, it is a means of prophecy, a way of looking back while also moving forward—it is, in other words, the promise of social change to come.

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**CHAPTER THREE:
JANET FLANNER'S "HIGH-CLASS GOSSIP" AND AMERICAN NATIONALISM
BETWEEN THE WARS**

For if this is a moment of crises in disarmament, it is also a moment of crises in dress.
- Janet Flanner, *Paris Letter*, February 1932

The "Letter from Paris" had already become something of a journalistic genre by the time Janet Flanner sat down to pen her first missive for *The New Yorker* in the autumn of 1925. Ezra Pound had published "The Island of Paris: A Letter" in *The Dial* in 1920; Edna St. Vincent Millay had written a series of letters called "Diary of an American Art Student" for *Vanity Fair* in 1922. Harold Stearns and Elizabeth Eyre de Lanux were writing Paris letters for *Town and Country*, and Solita Solano—Janet's partner—was sending a few of her own to the *Detroit Athletic Club News* even as she was helping Flanner type and copyedit hers for *The New Yorker*. Perhaps the most famous (and least enjoyable) were Henry James's series of Paris Letters written for the *New York Tribune* between 1875 and 1876, a project that one scholar calls a "spectacular failure" (Weber 218). James managed to struggle through twenty letters before quitting the job, lamenting all the while to his friends and family (in his private correspondence) and to the general public (in the letters themselves) that he had nothing to write about. "To say that there has been nothing at all to see, to hear, or to talk about during any given fortnight in Paris is doubtless never a perfectly exact statement," he admitted in the *Tribune* in April 1896, "but I may safely say that for a couple of weeks past the objects of interest have been rather of the minor order" (126). In July, he reiterated this complaint with an attempt at justification: "It is quite in the nature of things that a Parisian correspondence should have flagged during the last

few weeks; for even the most brilliant of capitals, when the summer has fairly marked her for its own, affords few topics to the chronicler” (188). How is it that an author who brings Paris so brilliantly to life in voluminous novels cannot manage to fill a newspaper column?

The answer lies in the style and subject matter that a successful Paris Letter requires. In his eventual break with *The Tribune*, James wrote to his editor Whitelaw Reid that he simply did not know how to make his writing “‘newsy’ and gossipy.” He claimed that he was “too finical a writer” for this type of prose and that his letters would doubtless continue to appear “more ‘literary’ than is desirable” (James xxix).¹⁷ The distinctly Jamesian gossip of a novel such as *The Ambassadors* apparently did not translate well into newspapers, since gossip—as James employs it—is not a commodity for mass consumption, but a moral activity that promotes “loving, constructive analysis” (Bellringer 101) through sustained attention to the motivations and actions of individuals other than ourselves. The patience and care required for this kind of gossip may suit readers of novels, but not of newspapers. The audience of *The Tribune* wanted letters that were more immediately entertaining, more easily digestible. They wanted to read of parties, dinners, personalities—and James, since he did not want to write about the lives of his personal acquaintances, instead spent hundreds of words describing the architecture of the Paris Opera House. In one letter he seems finally willing to break his own rules to describe the drama of a duchess hosting a charity ball—but upon closer inspection, we find that he is not describing an *actual* duchess or ball but only (in excruciating detail) the plot of a play he has recently seen. He is so profoundly, and perhaps deliberately, unaware of the goings-on in Paris that he can write in

¹⁷Evidently James’s lack of inspiration in “Gay Paree” left *Tribune* readers feeling uninspired, as well. When he requested a raise from his editor, Reid offered to pay him more per letter if he consented to send them less frequently. “In the columns of the *Tribune* during this period there are letters of praise for most of the correspondents but none for James” (Leon Edel, Preface to *Parisian Sketches*, xvii).

February of 1876: “It appears that for a number of weeks past we have been in Carnival. I confess that I never suspected it” (91).

James’s task in his letters from Paris was not to depict the morning skyline (although in one letter he did so beautifully, with long sentences and painterly strokes)—but perhaps the problem was that he did not quite understand what his task was. Janet Flanner, on the other hand, received clear directives from the beginning. When Harold Ross was looking for contributors who could help animate his fledgling *New Yorker*, his wife remembered the newsy, breezy letters Flanner had written to her from Paris and wondered if these could be turned into a regular column. What Ross wanted, Jane Grant told Flanner, was

anecdotal and incidental stuff on places familiar to Americans and on people of note whether they are Americans or internationally prominent—dope on fields of the arts and a little on fashion, perhaps, although he does not want the latter treated technically; there should be lots of chat about people seem [*sic*] about and in it all he wants a definite personality injected. In fact, any of your letters would be just the thing (qtd. in Weber 227).

Flanner accepted the offer and set to work, meeting and exceeding Ross’s expectations for the column. Her first Paris Letter appeared in *The New Yorker* on October 10, 1925, and she dispatched her last in August 1975 before returning to the States for good. Over the course of that half-century, she signed all of her letters “Genêt”—the name Ross had assigned to her in keeping with the magazine’s style of anonymous, collective authorship.¹⁸ Ross’s reasons for choosing this name are unclear, although most readers assume that he thought of it as a French version of “Janet.” No one knows, remarks Brenda Wineapple in her biography of Flanner, if Ross was aware of the allusion to Edmond-Charles-Édouard Genet, often remembered as Citizen Genet, who “was the first minister of the French Republic to the United States and no

¹⁸“No names appeared on the magazine’s cover. Ross’s idea was that the magazine would speak for itself and would create what Lionel Trilling derisively called its writers’ ‘corporate’ existence, an interchangeable aloofness and humor and a low-key, if not altogether repressed, public-spiritedness” (Wineapple 98).

insignificant letter writer himself” (98). (Flanner, Wineapple adds, “must have been flattered.”) The allusion is relevant whether or not it was intended, since Flanner’s Paris Letters acquired their signature irony and flair largely by juxtaposing French and American culture. If “Americanness” had yet to be defined at the beginning of what would come to be called the “American century,” Flanner’s letters played a significant role in shaping and sharpening that definition.

Whereas Henry James could remain blissfully unaware that Carnival was underway, Flanner could not. Her task was to keep her finger on the pulse of the city, which she achieved by culling the French papers for the most striking, glittering, and revealing pieces of news. Later on Flanner would recall that there were eight daily secular journals in Paris at the time, and her job was to read them all (Weber 229). Over the years she would continually disparage her own abilities as a reporter, worrying that she did not possess the “hunter” instincts that good newspaper work required; and yet “what *The New Yorker* primarily wanted from her and she richly supplied was not news but news in context—framed, enlivened, stylized” (Weber 232). Lacking Henry James’ 19th-century sense of privacy and decorum, Flanner “capitalized on expatriation, itself a commodity of the twenties” (Wineapple 104). She wrote about gallery openings, film premiers, fashion shows, auctions, the weddings and funerals of the political and cultural elite, the trials of swindlers and serial killers, new books and restaurants. She also wrote of the status of the French franc and current events in French government, although economics and politics were reported—particularly in the early years—in the same light, semi-disdainful tone with which Genêt wrote of everything. “Bread has advanced one franc eighty the kilo: duty on sugar has gone up 25%,” she reported airily in April 1926.¹⁹ “Other interesting momentary

¹⁹All dates used for the Paris Letters are the dates of publication. The letters were written from 1-3 weeks before they were printed.

prices are: Renoir's 'Nude at the Toilette,' 27,000 francs; Utrillo's 'Eiffel Tower' 10,000; Derain's 'Jeune Pensive' 10,000; and two canvases by Pissarro 25,000 and 54,000 respectively, auctioned at the Hotel Drouot" (51). Among her greatest talents as a writer for *The New Yorker* were these unlikely juxtapositions: bread with art, Charlie Chaplin with Gertrude Stein, high fashion with hard economics.

Although she grew more skilled at the task over the decades, the clarity, irony, and humor of her style already shines through her first letter in the fall of 1925, dated September 25 but printed on October 10. "Paris has not chosen to alter much in the last two weeks," she begins.

[T]hat is, so far as the externals are concerned. It is a breathing spell, as we said. Americans are still going through the city towards the northern ports in millions, carrying everything away that's portable, and the American Express is hard pressed to find crates enough to house the antiques that are on their way to make American homes beautiful. Paris is a little preoccupied with all this week's talk about the war debt (it seems they must pay some of it, anyway) and has gossiped less than usual. What little rumor there is, is one day that the Countess So and So is actually in the city, and the next day that it was only the maid who had arrived. The last word as I write is that anyone who thinks anyone of consequence is back in town yet is a yokel. It seems they are all at Deauville or Biarritz or Venice recovering from the *Grande Semaine* (28).

In this initial paragraph the reader encounters multiple hallmarks of the Genêt style: the absence of the first-person singular pronoun, and the reliance instead on the collective, knowing "we"; the wry, condescending commentary on Americans in Paris (especially Americans spending boat loads of money); the equally disdainful remarks about the French and their war debt; the self-reflexive treatment of what the writer calls "gossip"; and the assumption that the readers of the Letter constitute a community of insiders. Genêt assumes that her audience understands what she means by the *Grande Semaine*, and so she does not define or explain it. She spends the rest of the letter describing the Parisians' love for the lectures of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the "smartest" place to dine and party all night (which is different than last year's "smartest" place, which the Americans "have ruined"), the Autumn salon, the wheat and wine crop, the strike of the bank

clerks, the latest fashion news (pearl-gray stockings), the wedding of Tristan Tzara, and those members of the elite currently staying at the Ritz. She approaches economic crises, new artistic productions, and fancy weddings with the same cool distance. Nothing is serious; everything is ironic, clever, sophisticated.

She wrote in what has come to be recognized as the distinctive *New Yorker* style—and yet in 1925 *The New Yorker*, like the nation itself, had yet to define its tone, its position, and its path. My goal in this chapter is to show not only how the form of Flanner’s letters helped shape the magazine, but also how their content contributed to Americans’ new ideas about themselves and their place in the world. As Brooke Blower points out in *Becoming Americans in Paris*, “Americanness—that collection of sensibilities, values, and forms of social organization that ‘America’ evoked during the first half of the twentieth century—did not derive from domestic preoccupations alone. It also emerged as an international concept at a time when Americans and Europeans became enmeshed in an interrelated web of controversies and causes” (3). Flanner’s missives, written for an American audience but compiled from fragments of French newspapers, constitute one of the key threads in this “interrelated web” of transnational identities, politics, and cultures. The Paris Letters are transatlantic in their composition and their publication, their content and their form. Flanner considered herself to be, Wineapple tells us, “a high-class gossip columnist” (100), and like gossip, her letters constructed and promoted a particular kind of community. The atmosphere of “shared understanding” that she cultivated was, like gossip, a means of distinguishing insiders from outsiders. By treating American tourists, the European elite, and French citizens with the same gentle disdain, she fostered in her readership a sense of superiority that was indicative of *The New Yorker*’s future direction and also reflexive of Americans’ increasing awareness of their role on the world’s stage.

To explore these issues in more depth, this chapter will pose and answer two interrelated questions. First: what makes these letters “gossip” and how do we position them in relation to other newspapers and gossip columns of the era? Second: what did these letters accomplish for *The New Yorker* and for American culture more generally? By examining both the form and content of these letters as gossip, I will show how they bound together a certain kind of community. In the years between the wars, this community came to be defined by its “Americanness,” as Flanner’s tone and themes emphasized Americans’ essential differences from and advantages over their European counterparts. In reading Flanner’s Paris Letters as gossip, we encounter much more than the “glittering array of anecdotes” (Wineapple 100), the revealing “interplay between cultural and economic forces” in transatlantic politics (Gonzalez 43), or the “ceaselessly detailed... pattern of Paris life that went unobserved by the casual tourist and also remained, perhaps, unknown to the expatriate resident” (Benstock 100)—although these elements, too, are compelling and highly deserving of the scholarly analysis they have so far received. Nearly all of the previous studies on Flanner’s work focus on the French community that inspired her letters, but through the lens presented in this chapter, we illuminate instead the letters’ impact on the community who received them. How did Flanner’s “high-class gossip” reflect and contribute to the emergence of a new American national consciousness? How does transatlantic gossip function differently than the more “domestic” gossip of a figure like Walter Winchell? What do Flanner’s letters reveal about the changing role of gossip in modernity?

We’ll come to find, over the course of this chapter, that Flanner’s own brand of gossip evolved in the years between the wars. In the 1930s, she replaces her paragraphs on fashion with paragraphs on politics. As events grew increasingly dire on the Continent, her irony would shift from detached to bitter. Although Flanner herself would eventually dismiss her early letters as

“lightminded,” revealing an “intellectual emptiness” that embarrassed her (qtd. in Benstock 105), I argue that from the very beginning her epistolary gossip performed the significant cultural work of creating and maintaining a uniquely American consciousness, especially with respect to the United States’ relationship with France in the years leading up to the Second World War. Her unique perspective was as both an insider and outsider to the United States, just as she was simultaneously an insider and outsider in Paris. At the age of 80, she reflected that her time in Paris had been “doubly” satisfying because she felt she was “living both at home and abroad—living surrounded with the human familiarity of American friends and acquaintances, and the constant, shifting stimulation that came from the native French.” Along with this “double life,” observes Benstock, “came a double vision. Genêt placed Janet inside history because she was there, as well as outside it, as an American in Paris, a woman, a spectator” (104-5).

This position as an insider-outsider is what lends Flanner’s gossip its force and its appeal. She writes from one group of insiders (broadly defined as the “Parisians”) to an entirely different group of insiders (the readers of *The New Yorker*), all the while transmitting knowledge about art, culture, and politics in a way that made her readers feel as if they already knew it. Benstock describes Flanner as a person who was “sympathetic toward those who were socially useful” (117)—and even if she may not have seen her own early work as “socially useful,” this chapter will prove that, in fact, it was. I will begin by placing Flanner’s work in the context of the emerging *New Yorker* before comparing her gossip with that of Walter Winchell, whose career took off at the same time that Flanner was writing. Finally, I will analyze the form and content of the letters with respect to the relationship between America and France, paying particular attention to how Flanner’s style evolves in the years leading up to the Second World War.

The New Yorker

According to Flanner, Harold Ross told her early on: “I don’t want to know what you think about what goes on in Paris. I want to know what the French think” (Weber 229). This directive served to distinguish Flanner’s column from the other Paris letters steaming across the Atlantic, in which writers recorded their own impressions rather than scouring the papers for the opinions of the French citizens among whom they lived. Hemingway’s letter for *Esquire*, for example, was constructed out of a “gloomy stringing together of memories,” “a call for America to remain free of any future European war,” and “a closing hymn to the autumnal beauty of the city” (Weber 220). Flanner, in contrast, is doing something new: juxtaposing pieces of French news in the manner of a modernist collage, and then framing the piece in the lofty tone of one sophisticate speaking to another. Written under a pseudonym, her letters on the one hand presented themselves as being impersonal, stripped of name and voice; and yet on the other, her task (as conveyed by Harold Ross, through Jane Grant) was to “inject” a “definite personality” into her descriptions. As it turned out, Flanner excelled at managing this apparent paradox, frequently writing her own opinion as if it belonged to everyone. “After looking at the 3,000-odd canvases” in the Autumn Salon, she writes for example on 24 October 1925, “you go out with a feeling that one of your eyes may be orange and the other pink and that one of your shoulders is certainly six inches higher than the other” (30). The direct address makes this personal experience sound like fact; the vivid prose and present tense express a startling immediacy. Her subjective-objective evaluations, her antithetical juxtapositions, her lyrical prose, her presumption of shared interests and values on the part of her audience, and her ironical tone combined to create a new kind of literary journalism. This is why Jane Grant can write that Flanner “established a new standard, constructed a new mold” (Grant 224) and why Flanner

herself once remarked that her work constituted “a new type... which I had to integrate and develop, since there was no antecedent for it” (*Paris* xix).

Flanner’s distinctive brand of journalistic prose contributed to *The New Yorker*’s nascent ideology and its sense of being uniquely positioned in the magazine world. In his history of *The New Yorker*, Ben Yagoda credits Flanner with “doing as much as anyone to establish essay-journalism as a *New Yorker* tradition” (77)—a tradition that may have come as a surprise for Harold Ross himself, whose original intention had been to make *The New Yorker* a humor magazine. Although he eventually shifted away from the idea of humor as a founding tenet, he kept it as a guiding stylistic principle in part because it had become by the early 1920s the “coin” of the cultural elite. Humorists, notes Yagoda, “could float above the sentimental and mundane,” the “provincial, solemn, boring” (34). They were respected; they were popular. One’s ability to perceive the humor in a given situation, furthermore, signals membership within a group of shared tastes and values—and for American readers of a certain class and education, that group was represented by *The New Yorker*. When Ralph Ingersoll, a former editor of the magazine, wrote in *Fortune* years later that “*The New Yorker* has changed the wit of a generation” (qtd. in Yagoda 56), he exposes the magazine’s project of *training* its audience to understand and appreciate it. In order to change the wit of a generation, *The New Yorker* needed to teach people what was funny and what was not. Since humor is, like other types of taste, a marker of class,²⁰ *The New Yorker* was at its core an instruction manual for the nouveau riche of the early twentieth century, a guidebook for those aspiring to the cultural elite.

This underlying purpose was not, of course, stated outright. In his prospectus for the new magazine, Ross declared *The New Yorker* to be “a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan

²⁰In making this claim I am drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of taste in *Distinction*. Dutch scholar Giseline Kuipers examines the relationship between taste and humor in *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke* (2015).

life... It will be what is commonly called sophisticated, in that it will assume a reasonable degree of enlightenment on the part of its readers.” He goes on to describe in more detail what the magazine will be—a place to find entertainment, reviews, editorials, illustrations, columns discussing the “goings and doings in the village of New York”—but the more compelling part of the prospectus is his explanation of what the magazine will *not* be. It will not be “highbrow,” for instance; it “will not deal in scandal for the sake of scandal.” Most importantly, and certainly most famously, it will absolutely *not* be intended “for the old lady in Dubuque. It will not be concerned in what she is thinking about” (qtd. in Yagoda 38-39). The magazine is not only too “metropolitan” for the old lady in Dubuque (a word Ross employs in both the first and last sentence of the prospectus) but also too “sophisticated” for her. And if readers were not clear yet on what sophistication meant, the magazine would soon show them. To be sophisticated, *The New Yorker* had to be “knowing, a trifle world-weary, prone to self-consciousness and irony, scornful of conventional wisdom or morality, resistant to enthusiasm or wholehearted commitment of any kind, and incapable of being shocked” (Yagoda 57). To be sophisticated, its readers had to follow suit.

For Faye Hammill, *The New Yorker*’s “sophistication” was lodged firmly within the intersection of art and consumerism. She invokes John Guillory’s conception of the middlebrow (its “nervous ambivalence”), to show how the word “implies aspiration to membership of an elite.” Magazines such as *The New Yorker* “sell themselves through an appeal to the desire for social and verbal privilege. They overtly address an audience that is sophisticated, yet covertly provide lessons in sophistication” (18). Between 1890 and 1920, the demographics of New York City changed such that the old White Protestant aristocracy was displaced in prominence and power “not simply by Jews and Catholics, but by an entire new class of New Yorkers who had

earned rather than inherited their money and who expected to earn their way into society on their merits” (Yagoda 59). *The New Yorker* addressed this new class and promised to get them where they wanted to go.

The appeal of *The New Yorker* was not only that it told the members of this nascent class what they needed to know in order to take their place among the intellectual and cultural elite, but also that it imparted these lessons in a way that presumed previous knowledge on the part of its readers. According to Jeffrey Gonzalez, the magazine aimed to give the nouveau riche “a sense that they belonged in high society just as much as the old-money elite they were displacing” by “offer[ing] readers information they thought they needed to pass as part of the upper crust, while simultaneously pretending those readers already knew everything they needed to” (44). Flanner contributes to the development of this particular *New Yorker* approach by presuming a certain knowledge base on the part of her readership. When she remarks upon Sylvia Beach’s publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example, she does not describe the text or its context; the assumption is that *Ulysses* is so important that readers will be familiar with it already. Although many of them will not know of the book, Flanner’s mention of it alerts them to its existence and significance without talking down to them.

Furthermore, even when Flanner does define or describe a key person, place, or thing in her letters, she does so with such subtlety and aloofness that the prose never feels didactic. “The interment number of the famous *Little Review* has at last been published here; like any other mythical good American, this Middle-Western radical finally went to heaven in Paris,” she writes in 1929 (*Paris* 56). In the next few paragraphs, she will go on to name key artists the review published and allude to its trouble in the courts; although here, too, she will not summarize or contextualize the trial, but instead vaguely allude to “the memorable police-court

reception given the book in New York”—something her readers, she implies, ought to remember on their own. In her opening sentence, she does not define *The Little Review* as a little magazine, nor does she name its editors. She simply calls it “famous,” “radical,” and refers to its “Middle-Western” roots. The tone has been set so that, as Flanner goes on to instruct her readers about its importance, it will seem as though she is continuing to discuss the journal with friends in the know rather than teaching strangers about its history. She writes, in other words, as if she were gossiping. In this next section we will look more closely at the connection between *The New Yorker* and gossip.

Talk of a Different Town

Gonzalez writes that Flanner’s task in her Paris Letters was “to make available an insider’s knowledge of the ‘City of Lights’” (45). As I have mentioned above, part of her job was to make the readers of her letters feel like “insiders,” too. The juxtaposition between those in the know and those outside of it reflects one of the key social functions of gossip: “to help form and solidify friendships or intimacy,” to “distinguish insider from outsider” (Foster 769). When Flanner apologizes in October 1925, for instance, for not being able to talk more about “the American scourge,” she remarks that “Americans are still here in plenty, but the worst is over, and Parisians are having to find something else to complain about” (30). The first element to note here is the humor. If the reader finds this tone funny, she rests assured of her status within the writer’s circle. In his essay on gossip and humor, John Morreall highlights the social quality of laughter, invoking Bergson to argue that “[b]oth gossip and humor foster intimacy and solidarity” (62). The second element of note is the way in which Flanner distances herself in one fell swoop from both the massive influx of Americans in Paris—using such language as “scourge” to describe the visitors and “the worst is over” to signal the end of the tourist season—

and also from the Parisians, who “complain” too much about the Americans. Which group, then, should readers side with? The answer is neither. Genêt positions herself above the fray, gently mocking each in turn; and since she writes in the tone of insider to another, readers find themselves, too, feeling superior to both parties in question. This is how the Paris that could have reminded her audience of their “inferiority” becomes instead “the Paris these newcomers needed—one that did not position them as culturally impoverished” (Gonzalez 44).

In “The Metropolitan a Master Subject,” Jeffrey Gonzalez analyzes the rhetorical techniques by which Genêt fosters a sense of shared understanding with readers in her inner circle, making them feel more “metropolitan” (which is to say: more sophisticated, in Ross’s construction of the term) with every new letter. “The key to the seduction of this readership,” he writes, “lay in creating a slippage between stated and intended audiences” (44). Flanner’s most important tool is what Hayden White calls “the ironic trope,” which “‘negat[es] on the figurative level what is positively affirmed on the literal level,’ destabilizing the fixed relationship between what is said and what is meant” (Gonzalez 45). As Claire Colebrook puts it: “To read irony, you do not just have to know the context; you have to be committed to specific belief and positions *within* that context” (12). In keeping with *The New Yorker*’s aim of training its audience to appreciate it, Flanner’s letters also show readers the position they must take with respect to her subject matter in order to participate in her circle of sophisticated gossip. She teaches them, in the example I used above, how to look at American tourists (themselves included—and it is here where the irony becomes utterly self-reflexive) and Parisian natives without explicitly announcing any such directive. The stance, rather, is *implied*—which is yet another sign of Genêt’s apparent faith in her readership. They will pick up what she puts down. “Irony, as the tone that invites collusion, turns the colluding pair against the object being ironized,” Gonzalez

observes, underscoring the letters' tone of superiority. "Thus, Flanner lifts her readers above what has been fetishized as the world's cultural capital" (46).

Flanner's other related rhetorical technique is the cultivation of a sense of intimacy with her audience. In her article "'What Strange Intimacy': Janet Flanner's Letters From Paris," Monica Pearl compares Flanner's private and public letters for their style and personal qualities to demonstrate how both express (different kinds of) intimacy. Pearl analyzes a letter Flanner wrote to Natalia Denesi Murray in which Flanner describes to Murray what the house and garden are like in her absence. ("The iris in the garden are going to be blue and my spirits will match," she laments.) Although Flanner self-consciously remarks that it is "absurd" for her to be writing "material idiocies devoted to a minute garden" rather than "items of deep consequence to you [Murray]," Pearl contends that it is "precisely" these minutiae that make the letter intimate, passionately familiar. According to William Decker in *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (1998), "Familiar letter writing is an intensely metonymic discourse inasmuch as it typically abounds in the registry of quotidian 'realist' minutiae that become more or less explicitly significant in reference to the addressee's absence" (15).

In Flanner's public letters for *The New Yorker*, the same metonymic effect is achieved "stylistically by suggesting a shared intelligence, a shared knowledge" (Pearl 310). Pearl's example is a passage Flanner wrote about Sartre: "As nearly as can be made out by dullards who would have thought that an important new French philosophy must be founded on something more than a 'disgust for humanity,' Sartre's form of existentialism is, indeed, founded on a disgust for humanity" (*PJ* 49). Pearl reads this passage as a moment when Flanner is simultaneously "conveying knowledge and suggesting shared intelligence: explaining existentialism without the reader quite realizing that he or she is acquiring knowledge, in a way

that is informative, simplifying, and subtle” (311). Although the letters are technically “public,” in that they could be read by anyone, Flanner’s style gives the reader the impression that they are actually composed for a more limited and intimate audience, directed to people like the reader herself: cultured, metropolitan, elevated, and ironic.

This is what makes Flanner, to use her own term, a “high-class gossip.” Her news from Paris reads as both public and private. In certain passages she writes of official governmental and financial news, as any journalist would (albeit with a critical eye and a decided slant); and in the very next she is telling her readers who dined with whom and what they all wore. When she reviews Basil Woon’s “The Paris That’s Not in the Guidebooks” in October 1926, her description of his prose and his purpose could very easily be applied to her own work:

It [“The Paris That’s Not in the Guidebooks”] is written for our compatriots who, already familiar with the Louvre and the Mona Lisa, are more interested—so far as Paris is concerned—in the Ritz bar and Mrs. Jean Nash. Besides two chapters devoted to Mrs. N., invaluable information is included for art-lovers on how long it takes Boni de Castellane to dress each morning, why Anthony Drexel closed his house in the Rue de Grenelle, how Viola Cross-Krauss launched new styles at Lanvin’s, why Ganna Walska mourns, etc... The book is a gold-plated mine of private information made public, of wholesale accuracy and shrewd characterization (69-70).

In her account of Flanner’s letters, Shari Benstock recycles Flanner’s words on Woon: “Her letters take special interest in *making private information public*; they are based on fastidious *accuracy* and *shrewd* observation; they make no effort to capture anything but the contemporary scene” (103, emphasis mine). While I will go on to prove that her letters actually capture much more than the contemporary scene, the tension Benstock highlights between public and private embeds Flanner’s work within the gossip genre.

Like other gossip journalists, Flanner publicizes private information, offers up personalities as commodities, and critically evaluates her news in the same moment that she conveys it. Moreover, in keeping with the conventional history of gossip as a decidedly female

activity, the Paris that she constructs in her letters provides “a central place for women, whose activities are described, promoted, and analyzed at length. This is a world defined by a woman’s perspective—Flanner’s own—and it is often doubly focused, first through Flanner’s prose and second through the women subjects she chose to write about” (Benstock 109). Unlike the stereotypical female gossip whose speech is trivial and wasted, Flanner’s focus on important women—Isadora Duncan, Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein, and many others—undermines and offers an alternative to the more masculine modernism represented by figures such as Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway.

Like most gossip, the appeal of these letters relied in large part on the perceived exclusivity of the group to which they were addressed. In offering her readers easy access to Paris, the cultural capital of the world, Flanner contributed to the positioning of *The New Yorker* as a kind of currency that promised entrance into a certain artistic and intellectual elite. Harold Ross had always conceived of his magazine as localized, aimed at a “limited circle” whose very boundaries would be defined by the journal.²¹ “This notion of the limited circle, the in-crowd of *New Yorker* readers, is crucial to the magazine's pose of sophistication,” observes Faye Hammill. It thrived not only on the same brand of irony and intimacy that Flanner offered in her Paris Letters, but also on its localized focus. In its early years, the magazine emphasized New York through features such as “The Story of Manhattankind” and “Are You A New Yorker?,” with the wry spinoff, “What Kind of New Yorker Are You?” As Yagoda points out, “In the middle 1920s ‘New York’ represented to America and the world a panoply of desirable qualities: sophistication, wealth, the new” (57).

²¹Ross: “My theory was that the more local humor is, the better it is within its limited circle” (qtd. in Yagoda 37).

The New Yorker's "Talk of the Town" fostered this sense of the limited, localized circle and demonstrated the most kinship with Flanner's letters. A compilation of mini-essays written by various authors, the "Talk" section offered slanted, entertaining perspectives on key people, places, and events in the city. Ralph Ingersoll claimed to have invented the form of the "Talk Department," which was to have featured short pieces on "those fields of Metropolitan interest which were our special province: each of the arts, Park Avenue and a touch of Wall Street, the beginnings of what's now known as Café Society." According to Ingersoll, when "[d]one right, the whole would give the reader—unobtrusively—the feeling that he had been everywhere, knew everyone, was up on everything" (Yagoda 90). This desire to know what everyone else is doing invokes gossip, the intimate discussions held among friends, and indeed Ross's idea for the "Talk" section was that it should sound like "dinner-table conversation" (90). Stylistically, the section employed the first-person plural that suggested a sense of exclusivity, of belonging. "There *was* a 'we,' and they knew who they were" (Yagoda 49). Flanner will pick up on the pronoun and put it to work in her own *New Yorker* pieces. Like the Paris Letters, "Talk of the Town" toed the line between gossip and news, the style simultaneously literary and journalistic. The tone and title of the feature demonstrated, according to Yagoda, how *The New Yorker* "was picking up on something in the culture: it was a moment when the air reverberated with the sound of speech" (70). The one-line captions beneath the cartoons, the colloquial "Talk of the Town," the implied intimacy of "Paris Letter"—all of these modes and techniques fostered the impression that the magazine was speaking to a select group of trusted equals.

This emphasis on local culture, people, and events left little space in the magazines for concerns beyond New York; and indeed, when Flanner began writing her letters from Paris, she was the journal's only foreign correspondent. Her position, argues Gonzalez, "speaks to the

importance of Paris in the cultural imagination—to be sophisticated, Paris was the chief foreign space one needed to know something about” (44). Even Flanner’s letters did not leave New York far behind. According to Benstock, the letters “succeeded by casting the unknown in terms of the known. Paris was always introduced by way of New York, and American attitudes were firmly imbedded in the various vignettes” (102). The tension between the “limited circle” of the *New Yorker* readership and the transatlantic content of Flanner’s letters is a theme I will return to below, when I discuss the role that Flanner’s “high-class gossip” played in the development of a new national identity.

Domestic vs. Transatlantic Gossip

In addition to talking about people and events in the city, *The New Yorker* talked a great deal about other publications. According to Hammill, the magazine made “extensive reference to the print culture of the city. Engaging with, evaluating, and mocking the other periodicals of 1920s New York, Ross’s magazine...position[ed] itself, in the process, as a tastemaker and cultural arbiter” (31). The 1920s witnessed an explosion of new publications “[t]hanks to a booming economy, favorable postage rates, the consolidation of a national advertising market, and technological advances that allowed speedy photo reproduction, printing, and binding” (Yagoda 33). In referencing these other newspapers and magazines, *The New Yorker* not only established itself as a key node in the social network of metropolitan publications, but also distinguished itself from its competitors. “Reporters ‘read’ the city,” argues Hammill, “not only by visiting cultural sites and crime scenes, parties and prize fights, but also by surveying and quoting from the New York press. During the interwar period, *The New Yorker* was saturated with references to other magazines and newspapers, and with gossip about editors, columnists and press magnates” (17). In this light, it seems perfectly logical that Flanner would construct

her Paris Letter almost entirely out of news she gleaned from local papers. In composing in this mode, she was perfectly in keeping with—and also contributing to—*The New Yorker* approach. The major difference was that Flanner recounted the content of the French papers, while other writers of *The New Yorker* referenced the form and style of American publications and reported gossip “about editors, columnists and press magnates” (Hammill 17).

In this manner *The New Yorker* managed to project an image of itself as looking down on tabloid magazines and “scandal for the sake of scandal” while actually participating in the very gossip culture it mocked. Indeed, in November 1925 *The New Yorker* itself had benefited from the taint of scandal when the editors published young socialite Ellin Mackay’s “Why We Go To Cabarets,” a personal essay that complained about the oppressive high-society functions of the debutantes and argued in favor of the more exciting, democratic recreation of modern nightclubs. The first few months of the magazine had been so unsuccessful that by November it seemed in danger of folding, and Mackay’s piece is generally credited with turning the tide of its fortune. Jane Grant, Ross’s wife, wanted to publish the piece because she knew it would be controversial, and before it appeared she “leaked page proofs to the *Times*, *Tribune*, and *World*, all of whom ran front page stories” about it (Henry 60). James Thurber first heard of *The New Yorker* when he read about Mackay’s article in the *Paris Herald*—a fitting twist, perhaps, considering *The New Yorker*’s reporting of *Herald* news through Flanner’s letters over the next several decades. According to Ingersoll, the piece “‘took Park Avenue in a storm of gossip,’ giving the magazine new visibility among ‘the Social (Capital S) in metropolitan New York’” (qtd. in Henry, 60). Even in its earliest days, then, the magazine capitalized on society gossip and scandal while claiming to be above such things. Flanner’s letters, existing in a liminal zone between society gossip, travelogue, and political news, fit easily into this mold.

One example of *The New Yorker's* proclaimed position toward gossip is the Ralph Barton cartoon that appeared in the issue printed October 24, 1925. Barton drew Frank Hause, editor of the tabloid paper *The New York Daily News*. The caption below Hause's image read:

Colonel Frank Hause—Who, as editor of the *Daily News*, produces a newspaper which (along with its sister luminaries of the Fourth Estate, the *Graphic* and the *Mirror*) presents the news in the luscious form in which it is discussed over our best dinner tables by the people who read the *Times*.

As Hammill explains, the joke is on “high-society New Yorkers” who “may only ever be *seen* reading quality papers” such as the *Times*, but who “know a surprising amount about the contents of the tabloids” (19). Hammill goes on to point out that through features such as “The Talk of the Town” and “Reporter at Large,” *The New Yorker* itself actually printed a great deal of the same information found in the tabloids—often quoting directly from those other papers. Even if the allusions and quotations were being offered up for mockery, readers got the content all the same. *The New Yorker* is making fun of an activity in which it, too, is a willing and highly skilled participant. (We saw Flanner doing the same thing in one of her letters, when she wrote playfully of the popular guidebook full of “private information made public,” a seeming allusion to her own column and yet one that is left implicit.) According to Hammill, “This cartoon feature is slippery and difficult to interpret, yet it clearly shows *The New Yorker's* simultaneous fascination with, and disdain for, gossipy tabloids and mass circulation weeklies” (21).

One reason why *The New Yorker* could not (and did not want to) entirely separate itself from gossip was that the magazine was coming into its own simultaneously with the modern gossip column. “In the late nineteenth and early 20th century,” observes Kathleen Feeley in her survey of gossip scholarship and theory, “U.S. journalism became a big business, which included the rise of the tabloid as well as a greater emphasis upon ‘human interest’ content, including gossip reporting” (470). Walter Winchell launched his column “Mainly About Mainstreeters” for

the *New York Evening Graphic* in 1924—one year before *The New Yorker* appeared on newsstands. Five years later he moved to *The New York Daily Mirror*, where he wrote weekly gossip under the column heading “On Broadway.” Drama critic Alexander Woolcott, we recall, wrote “approvingly” of Winchell’s impact on the increasingly dry and impersonal American journalism (qtd. in Gabler xii). The battle against “impersonality” recalls Grant’s explanation to Flanner of what Ross was looking for in her Paris Letters: news about fashion and art and people, all with “a definite *personality* injected” (emphasis mine). Both Winchell and Flanner are credited with having transformed American journalism—and they effected this transformation through their distinctive brands of gossip. We do not debase Flanner or her work by setting her alongside Winchell; on the contrary, I contend that the comparison between the two reveals the power and significance of gossip journalism in the years between the wars.

Neither Winchell nor Flanner invented gossip, of course. In his biography of Winchell, Neal Gabler reminds readers of the news of “family life and scandal” in the early-nineteenth century penny press and of Louis Keller’s bawdy *Town Topics* in the 1880s. Although the early twentieth century press was “restrained by its own sense of decorum” as well as by the potential legal ramifications of invading individuals’ right to privacy,²² the public’s increasing fascination with celebrity culture and famous “personalities” exerted “an almost inexorable pressure toward gossip.” With the demand already in place, writes Gabler, “all that was needed to cross the line to gossip was someone with the audacity and nerve to begin writing frankly about the various private doings of the celebrated—someone who would defy the taboo. That was where Winchell came in” (78). Since his editors refused to publish the scraps of gossip that he brought to their attention, Winchell collected them into a column, “sneaked them past his editor, and ran them

²²In 1890 Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis published a highly influential article entitled “The Right to Privacy” in the *Harvard Law Review*.

with an apology for his breach of taste” (Gabler 79). He was not, in fact apologetic; instead, he found that he was wildly successful. That success would persist for decades.

By one estimate, fifty million Americans—out of an adult population of roughly seventy-five million—either listened to his weekly radio broadcast or read his daily column, which, at its height in the late thirties and forties, was syndicated in more than two thousand newspapers; it was, according to one observer, the ‘largest continuous audience ever possessed by a man who was neither politician nor divine.’ It was said that when he switched papers in New York, two hundred thousand readers followed him, and one report attributed nearly half the readership of the Hearst newspaper chain to Winchell's column.” (Gabler xi-xii).

What drew the American populace to Winchell’s column week after week was not only their insatiable desire for celebrity news and gossip. Winchell also appealed to their sense of disenchantment with the entrenched elite and the increasing disenfranchisement of the masses. Winchell was “plebian,” democratic; he, too, had been born poor. He saw gossip as “a weapon of empowerment for the reader and listener. Invading the lives of the famous and revealing their secrets brought them to heel. It humanized them, and in humanizing them demonstrated that they were no better than we and in many cases worse” (Gabler xiii).

Flanner’s gossip had a slightly different—although not completely unrelated—effect. As a writer for *The New Yorker*, part of her task was to frame her news in a way that made it seem as if her readers already knew of it. On the surface her letters were not, unlike Winchell’s columns, intended to be “democratizing,” since she was supposed to be speaking to an elite group of sophisticates who were already familiar with the names of the various “personalities” she dropped into her prose. As we have seen, however, she was actually training her audience to play the part of the cultural elite, providing access to the higher intellectual classes by offering lessons that did not come across as lessons at all. In this sense, Flanner’s gossip also became a tool for managing social classes and fostering a distinct sense of community. In this, she parallels Winchell. Winchell’s gossip, like Flanner’s, “offered a social currency that bound this new

national order together, a sort of glue redolent of the old order of neighborhoods, intimacy and mutual regard” (Wilkes 259). Gabler cites sociologist Louis Wirth’s observation that the 1920s witnessed America’s transformation from a “community” of the 19th century to a modern “society.” In a community, “individuals knew one another and were bound by ties of kinship and neighborhood,” whereas in a society, “secondary relationships increasingly supplanted primary ones.” Gossip, Gabler concludes, provides a “common frame of reference” that has been lost in modern metropolitan society; it enable[s] the creation of “a national ‘backyard fence’ over which all Americans could chat” (81).

The transition from community to society is one that early sociologist Georg Simmel theorizes in “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” Whereas “metropolitan” for Harold Ross was code for “sophisticated” (which itself became code for “ironic”), for Simmel the metropolitan comes to stand for the domination of an objective over a subjective spirit in life and the increasingly brief, instrumental, and dehumanizing quality of interpersonal interactions. The city-dweller’s state of incessant overstimulation results in what Simmel calls a “blasé outlook,” a sort of self-protective, ingrained indifference to new stimuli that does not seem entirely unrelated to *The New Yorker*’s world-weary pose, its refusal to register any form of shock. According to Simmel, the city’s insistence on “punctuality, calculability, and exactness” results in a “structure of the highest impersonality”—a claim that, as we have seen, was leveled at early twentieth-century journalism—even though the city also, paradoxically, provides its citizens with the space they need to cultivate and express their own unique personalities.

The limitations of small nineteenth-century communities, where individuals were policed more strictly by the norms and boundaries of the group, have given way to the terrifying, exhilarating freedom of the metropolis. The tension between “impersonality” and “personality”

in the city is expressed in both Flanner's and Winchell's transformation of impersonal journalism into something reflective of personality. Their work forged a community of modern individuals within the metropolis, with a shared set of interests and a common approach to the people and events that passed through their lives. Their gossip also expanded what Simmel calls the "inner life" of the city, which exists far beyond its physical bounds. "The sphere of life of the small town is, in the main, enclosed within itself," he writes. But for "the metropolis it is decisive that its inner life is extended in a wave-like motion over a broader national or international area" (17). The journalism of Flanner and Winchell came to represent, therefore, a metropolitan "inner life" that felt simultaneously communal and global.

In this way both Winchell's domestic and Flanner's transatlantic gossip contributed to the development of a modern American consciousness, a new sense of nationhood and community. Flanner's letters, like Winchell's columns, construct "a subterrain of common viewpoints, frames of reference, and implicit understanding; often, they contain private jokes and personal messages" (Benstock 104). Interestingly, Flanner and Winchell also share a certain structural style. The "typology" and "graphic design" of Winchell's "On Broadway" column was highly modern. His habit of collecting fragments of gossip and then juxtaposing them alongside one another in his column had the effect, writes Gabler, of a "high-velocity montage of snapshots, a fragmentary new journalistic form that mirrored the modernist experiments in high literature then being conducted by Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, Celine and others" (79-80). Flanner's letters, too, could read as a kind of modern or modernist "montage." Benstock describes her form as "the appearance of random cataloguing that is, in fact, a judicious juxtaposition of subject and style" (107). Flanner switches easily, as we have seen, from a passage on art to a passage on politics,

from fashion to economics. Her letters embodied, according to Benstock, the “contradictions and cross-currents that revealed the extent to which the era was at odds with itself.”

How strange that Gertrude Stein's experimental prose fiction should have coincided in time with the French penchant for American cocktails (spelled, provisionally, *coqueteles*), that the publication of early portions of *Finnegans Wake* should have been contemporaneous with the first Hollywood 'talkies' starring Maurice Chevalier, or that the Académie Française should ever have debated at great length the gender of the automobile” (Benstock 109).

Flanner’s letters are usually read more as literature than gossip precisely because of this “judicious juxtaposition,” as Benstock calls it, between high and low—and also for her wry tone, her vivid descriptions, and her critical eye. And yet analyzing the Paris Letters as gossip complicates our perception of the letters themselves while also illuminating the crucial role of gossip at this turning point in the history of American journalism. Recent scholars of media and journalism have highlighted our culture’s “bifurcated” and “over-simplified” understanding of news as “serious or tabloid, hard or soft, political/economic or social/cultural” (Feeley 470). Reading Flanner’s letters from Paris as gossip, I contend, helps deconstruct this traditional binary and exposes the profoundly political nature of all gossip journalism and its role in the creation, destruction, and definition of modern communities. “Although the Paris Letters may seem like an unlikely political forum,” as Benstock remarks, “they nevertheless reflect a consciousness that was politically motivated (117). In the next section, I examine how Flanner’s letters contributed to the emergence of a new sense of American identity in the years leading up to World War II.

American Identity through Antithesis

Continental complaints of the “American invasion” of Paris between the wars were not entirely hyperbolic. According to Brooke Blower, the number of American residents in the city “rose from 8,000 in 1920 to 32,000 in 1923 to an estimated 40,000 at a high point during the mid and late twenties.... Unlike previous Grand Tour travelers,” she adds, “who had come to absorb

the refinements of the Old World, these postwar Americans... flaunted the habits and tastes of the New World instead" (6). While we tend to remember the "Gay Paree" of Hemingway's *Moveable Feast* and Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* as a glittering era of creativity and camaraderie, the historical reality is not quite as charming. Although many proprietors were grateful for the American dollar, other Parisians complained of the Americans' ostentatious displays of wealth. As one writer in the journal *L'oeuvre* lamented: "France is becoming an Anglo-Saxon colony. There are too many of these parasites here, eating our food, drinking our wine, going untaxed, and paying ridiculously little for everything they consume, thanks to the exchange" (qtd. in Blower 70).

Frustrations with the Americans erupted in 1926, when Parisians attacked visitors on a "Paris by Night" bus tour, smashing windows of the buses and forcing tourists off them, and again in 1927 when French demonstrations over the Sacco-Vanzetti execution devolved into violent riots. These scenes of outrage contrasted sharply with a number of other momentous, peaceful occasions that reminded French and Americans of their historically and mutually sympathetic relationship. When Charles Lindbergh landed in Paris, for example, the newsvendors shouted, "*Ça y est!...Bonnes nouvelles!* The American has arrived." At Montmartre that evening, reports Flanner on 11 June 1927, "Zelli and Florence stood champagne to the Americans, as did excited patrons in humble bars, gallantly offering bad brandy to their Yankee clients... The Ministry of Foreign Affairs flew the Stars and Stripes, as did most of the tramcars."

Paris between the wars was, in fact, a place and time of contrast and contradiction. My following analysis of the significant juxtapositions embedded in Flanner's letters shows how both her style and her subject matter contributed to Americans' increasing sense of self and self-

importance on the international stage. Flanner admired the historian Edward Gibbon, whom she took as a “model” for his use of “antithesis, at once enriching and economical through his use of opposites” (Flanner qtd. in Yagoda, 76). “By antithesis,” she wrote in her diary, “one can get an effect instead of supplying a thought. Gibbon used it but I have no business to, since his serious business was a balancing of weather; and all I am trying to do is weather events” (qtd. in Zox-Weaver, 113). Despite her tone of self-deprecation, Flanner proved herself quite successful at juxtaposing opposing ideas. The “effect” that she achieved was the development and definition of American identity in the twenty years between the wars. For example, the lines quoted above regarding French excitement over Lindbergh’s arrival come at the tail end of a paragraph describing French antipathy toward Americans during the St. Cloud Davis Cup elimination tennis matches. The French spectators at the sporting event, Flanner reports on 11 June 1927, “applauded not only the French players when they won points, but also the American players when they lost them. But Lindbergh’s arrival that night brought out a brighter nocturnal side. The irritation over the false Nungesser news, for which during a fortnight Paris had blamed the United States, was immediately forgotten” (53).

This passage is more complex than it might initially appear. Throughout the paragraph, Flanner sets up oppositions, sometimes within sentences and sometimes between them: how the French react to the French players vs. how they react to the American players; the French attitude toward the tennis match by day vs. the French attitude toward Lindbergh by night; the American pilot’s successful transatlantic journey vs. a French pilot’s failure two weeks earlier; the true account of Lindbergh’s landing in Paris vs. the false reports of Nungesser’s arrival in New York City. The allusion to Nungesser, the French pilot, may be lost on present-day readers

but would have struck a chord with American readers at the time. On May 16, 1927, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a short piece below the headline: “UNCLE SAM, SCAPEGOAT.”

Anti-American demonstrations are reported from Paris as a result of the unfortunate disappearance of Nungesser and Coli somewhere over the Atlantic. America was blamed for the false hopes raised by the French press which faked the news of the arrival of the airplane in New York. Next, United States weather bureau officials were falsely accused of having withheld vital information which, had it been forwarded, would have resulted in delaying the start. America was held responsible even for the distribution of a message of congratulation written by M. Painleve.

The desire to blame misfortune on someone else is universal. The remarkable thing about the attitude of the French people at this juncture is not that they are hunting for a scapegoat but that they instinctively are hunting for it on this side of the Atlantic. Whatever goes wrong in France is America’s fault. We shall be blamed if M. Poincare comes down with the hives or an Italian masterpiece is stolen from the Louvre (10).

I quote this article nearly in full because it makes explicit the French attitude that Flanner implies. In typical fashion, she references a tennis match in the same breath and with the same ease that she describes Lindbergh’s arrival and the fatal final flight of Nungesser. Flanner would never state outright that “whatever goes wrong in France is America’s fault”; she brings up the “irritation” only to tell us, within the same sentence, that it was “immediately forgotten.”

“Letters,” observes Monica Pearl, “construct selves and relations through the use of ‘we’” (309)—and when the writer of the *Tribune* article uses “we,” he refers to all Americans, indiscriminately, setting them up against the French. Flanner’s use of first person plural is more complex, however, and it changes over time. In October 1925, in her very first letter for *The New Yorker*, the pronoun appears twice: first when she starts out by reporting that Paris has altered little over the past fortnight (“It is a breathing spell, as we said”) and later when describing the “thrilling” new fashion of pearl-gray stockings (“If in two or three years they continue wearing gray and several million other women follow suit, there will no longer be any doubt that, just as we’re prophesying, gray stockings are rare but very chic”). In these cases the “we” lends an air

of authority and gravity that would be missing if Flanner chose to use “I.” Moreover, the use of the plural pronoun with verbs such as “say” and “prophesy” make it sound as though Flanner has discussed these issues with friends: she is reporting, in other words, her gossip about the personalities, events, and fashions that her own “crowd” finds most worthy of discussion. By sharing this conversation with her readers, then, Flanner includes them in the “we”—they become part of the in-crowd, as they, too, now have the information they need to predict the next fashion craze in New York City.

In this sense, Flanner’s early use of “we” refers neither to the Americans nor the French, but to a specific group: the elite readers of *The New Yorker*, who possess the knowledge and power to view both parties with the critical distance typical of such sophisticates. As the years wear on, however, the pronoun subtly changes to express a national difference similar to that announced in the 1927 *Tribune* article. In a piece on Paul Poiret in 1935, for example, Flanner describes his business dealings and then remarks (in a parenthetical aside): “In France fortunes are made by what we would call mismanagement” (*Paris* 152). Here the “we” seems to refer to Americans in a much broader sense, so that the seemingly lighthearted aside becomes an implicit commentary on the distinction between the French and American approaches to finance. Economics were indeed the most divisive issue for the two nations between the wars, since “the war debt question—American insistence on French payment, French foot-dragging on moral grounds—was a source of continual political quarreling, while tariff negotiations proved to be an economic battleground” (Blower 10).

In his 1999 article “L’Image de la France en Amérique a la fin de la Grande Guerre,” William Keylor describes how the perception of France within the States devolved from that of a sympathetic nation devastated by the Germans and in need of American support to that of a

weak, dependent, and self-pitying country who refused to make good on their war debt: “The memory of the loyal and honored ally was replaced, in the eyes of a growing number of Americans, by the image of an ungrateful country, obsessed by its own ruins, by its economic and demographic difficulties, by its threatened sense of security, in short, by its cruel and tragic destiny” (translation mine, Cochet 165). Although some French citizens had already begun to joke bitterly that the “U.S.” stood for “Uncle Shylock,” many of them were also—according to Flanner—surprisingly supportive when the American stock market crashed in 1929.

Generally, the French people’s sympathy in our disaster has been polite and astonishingly sincere, considering that for the past ten years they have seen us through one of the worst phases of our prosperity—which consisted of thousands of our tourists informing them that we were the richest country in the world, that they should pay their debts, that we had made the world safe for democracy, that we were the most generous people in the world, that they should pay their debts, and that we were the richest country in the world. Only in a few malicious French quarters has it been suggested that now certain small American investors can afford to paste Wall Street stocks on their suitcases and toss them to the crowd, as they pasted and tossed five-franc notes here that marvelous summer when the franc fell to fifty (*Paris* 61-62).

Although in this case the “we” refers to “Americans,” Flanner also manages to distinguish within the passage between the speaker and her audience, the tourists, and the American investors who had so shamelessly thrown their wealth in the face of the French earlier that decade. The “we” contains many more layers than the simpler “we” of the *Chicago Tribune*. Here, Flanner means “Americans” in contrast to the French, but she also describes certain Americans worth mocking: those who pasted franc notes to their luggage, those who claimed to be generous and rich. The first person plural, then, is a seemingly straightforward term that is actually loaded with irony.

Although Flanner often seasons her letters with comments on the economic crisis in France, including a number of casual references to the war debt debate, the majority of her prose during the early years of the Paris Letter is taken up with culture. It is through this cultural commentary that she succeeds in fostering a uniquely American sense of identity and difference.

Don Hausdorff argues that “an early *New Yorker* strategy for dealing with serious domestic issues was to resist differentiating events of political and economic consequence from less significant stories, and to treat each with the same flippant tone” (Gonzalez 53). In the same vein, Flanner’s lighthearted asides about differences in French and American culture, though treated “flippantly,” are grounded in shrewd and accurate observation; and over the course of the interwar years, her cultivated detachment will serve to detach Americans from their French hosts by exposing their differing positions on everything from the war debt to literature to gardening. “Through radio entertainments and advertisements, through sporting events and Gallup polls,” writes Blower, “people in the United States were learning to see themselves as pioneers of a strikingly modern era and a compelling ‘American Way of Life,’ a slogan coined in the 1930s to capture these crystallizing definitions of national character” (2). It is my argument here that Flanner’s transatlantic gossip played a key role in this “crystallization” of national character and that the Americanness she outlined in her letters became increasingly relevant as Europe slid ever closer toward the Second World War.

Most of Flanner’s witty insights about Americans and their French acquaintances were slipped into sentences that seemed peripheral to the main idea of the passage. Yet these apparent asides served a purpose much greater than that of mere adornment: as they accumulated, they suggested an idea of American ideology and culture that stood above and apart from their French counterparts. In December of 1926, for example, Flanner mentioned in passing that finding an apartment in the city has been difficult of late, made even more so “by the recent Parisian appreciation of American bathrooms” (103). Not only are American and Parisian bathrooms dissimilar, but also the higher standard of the American style is preferable. In August 1934, Flanner spends a whole paragraph describing how “informal, or American, gardens have gained

a considerable toehold in France.” She describes the formal *jardins à la française* in the “Louvre and Luxembourg beds” as being “rigid.” In contrast, “The American garden now popular here has, naturally, no design whatever, demands water only for sprinkling, consists of bowers of perennials” (68-69). While the subject of bathrooms and gardens may sound trivial, in both cases Flanner is analyzing something much more noteworthy: the French perspective on American priorities. Americans, as these examples prove, value amenities that are modern and styles that are practical and efficient. Flanner implies the same traits when writing of the French women’s adoption of American low heels. (In garden terms, low heels reflect the practicality of perennials). She concludes her passage on gardens by noting that “Bromfield’s garden is, in the American style, supposed to bloom from early spring to late autumn, and no nonsense about it” (69)—and that final phrase, “no nonsense,” applies to the American personality as much as to the shrubbery.

This idea of the American personality as efficient, modern, practical, and “no-nonsense” has become so deeply rooted in our national psyche that it feels as if we have always understood ourselves this way. And yet there are two factors to bear in mind: the first is that these qualities acquire force and meaning through comparison. Americans can only be “modern” when compared with the old-fashioned, old-world French; their gardens can only be considered “informal” in the context of the strict French formal arrangement. If the letters did indeed create their own audience (Benstock 103), they did so in large part through these juxtapositions and antitheses. Like gossip, Flanner’s comments maintained an “in” group versus an “out” group, an us versus them. The second factor to remember is that, as Brooke Blower reminds us, “[a]t the dawn of the twentieth century, Americans’ place in the world had been far from certain.” Blower argues that Americans may have “sometimes imagined themselves to be leaders in industry and

democratic politics, but culturally they continued to take many of their cues from Europe” (2). Indeed, the reason why many of the expatriates turned to Europe and European traditions was that they perceived a serious deficiency in literary and artistic traditions within the United States.²³ It was while they were in Paris that they, along with other observers inside and outside the States, “began to discern the contours of a new and, many thought, utterly distinctive American society populated by distinctly American inhabitants” (Blower 2). According to Warren Susman, the expatriate often “proved the best propagandist for America abroad, spreading American ideals, discussing American life, and writing constantly about the American scene” (55). So it happened, then, that in the interwar years “a fractured and far-flung population, drawing into the orbit of emerging national markets and media, increasingly began to imagine themselves as a united people” (Blower 2).

If Flanner’s letters represent a significant contribution to the consolidation of American national consciousness, it is in part because Paris itself played such a crucial role in this respect. As Jeffrey Gonzalez argues, Flanner’s satirical approach to her subject matter performs what he calls a “mastery” of Paris, as she encourages her audience to join her in turning “their noses down on what had been considered the world’s most glamorous city” (45). Americans in Paris, temporarily constituting the greatest “colony” of citizens outside of the United States, were “one of the most visible signs of the growing overseas presence of the U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century” (Green 1). Although it may not be possible to pinpoint precisely when the “American century” began—militarily, with the Spanish-American war in 1898; economically, when American exports to France outnumbered American imports from France, in 1911; culturally, with the “hugely successful Wild West Show touring Europe from 1887 to 1906”; or

²³According to Susman, it was not only the artists themselves, but also their patrons and collectors who turned to Europe for their artwork. Only after 1910, with the success of such events as the Armory Show, did patrons such as John Quinn begin purchasing work from Americans (36).

politically, when the United States entered the first world war in 1917 (Green 4-5)—the century was most definitely underway by the time *The New Yorker* hired Flanner in 1925 and the term “Americanization” was gaining in popularity and significance. Before the First World War, it referred mostly to the exportation of raw materials (as in W.T. Stead’s *The Americanization of the World*, 1910) and the more general trend of modernization (as in Baudelaire’s critique of American ideals of progress at the 1855 World Fair). Indeed, there was a sense that the “Americanization of France,” according to the Goncourt brothers in 1867, meant “industry prevailing over art, the stream thresher whittling down painting’s pride of place” (qtd. in Green, 3). Broadly defined, Americanization implied economic and industrial gains with a corresponding loss in cultural and spiritual wealth. Stead concludes his *Americanization of the World* with the dramatic biblical allusion: “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Stead 164).

Flanner’s letters, on the other hand, highlight something new: the Americanization of culture. Gardens and home styles may emerge out of specific economic conditions, but they become representative of cultural mindsets. The object of Paul Poiret’s lecture tour in America, for instance, “was to beg American women to stop dressing like men or even like other American women, a too democratic tendency at which he found our matrons excelled” (*Paris* 152). Here Flanner discusses not economics or politics, but women’s fashion—and yet in linking fashion to the “democratic tendency” of American women, she also suggests a value judgment that reverses Poiret’s misguided opinion. Something similar occurs when she writes of the death of Marie Curie, adding that “in America, radium is characteristically supposed to have been found by Mme Curie, and in France, naturally, the discovery is accredited to Monsieur” (*Paris* 117). Although she does not clarify why it is “characteristic” of Americans or “natural” of the

French to assume the discovery was made by the woman or the man, we deduce from her phrasing that there exists a modern American feminism in contrast to the old-world mindset of the French.²⁴ Here Americanness is defined by a cultural attitude as much as by its economic foundation. When Flanner does write of Americanization, she includes in the term the supposedly American mores that the French are loathe to accept. In April of 1926 she remarks: “Few American realize to what a literal and bitter degree the Europeans talk of ‘Americanizing’ the Continent. By this they mean primarily, our system of financial efficiency, but Puritanism seems to follow in its wake.” She adds that Paris has “been the center of freedom and gaiety for centuries” but that now, seemingly under the American influence, the city has been subject to a series of “raids such as have of late darkened Broadway” (51-52). By expanding the scope of the term, Flanner—like the expatriate artists among whom she lived and worked—contributes to the idea of Americanization as a cultural and even moral phenomenon, thus working against the long-established idea that Americans had no culture to speak of at all.

If American shoe styles and bathrooms were popular among the French, so too was American literature. “It is necessary to note,” Flanner remarks in a letter printed January 2, 1926, “the sudden influence and interest caused in Parisian literary circles by the American literary middle West. The Chicago, Indiana, Ohio twang of verity is what the sophisticated Parisian brain wants” (35). Eight years later, in January 1934, she will write of France’s enthusiastic reception of William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*. According to one French columnist, whom she quotes in her

²⁴Flanner’s feminism becomes much more explicit in other moments, such as when she describes the French suffrage movement for her American audience. “Apparently the flatness of the whole suffrage campaign lies in the fact that, in being originally classed among those humans unfit for suffrage, the French women were not properly insulted. Where American women were excluded from ballots along with idiots and their own children, the French ladies are merely lumped as pariahs along with policeman and soldiers. It seems not to be enough” (July 1932). One detects, notes Benstock, Flanner’s “understanding and latent disapproval of a French consciousness much in need of education on the question of women’s rights” (117).

letter: “Veritably, between the Faulkner heroes and we French there is some kind of fraternity which up to now we have never found in American novels.” Another critic, though overall a fan of Faulkner’s novel, will take issue with the fact that the protagonist “is kidnapped in—how typically American—an automobile” (27). Were Flanner’s readers aware that being kidnapped in an automobile was “typically American”? (I confess that I was not, until I read this letter!) If there is an American mode of kidnapping, we learn from Flanner, there is also a French attitude toward murder, “which can be summed up thus: the manner of killing is as important as the manner of living” (*Paris* 164). Silly as it may seem, there is truth to the idea that a critical observer may notice a cultural or stylistic pattern that can only be perceived from a distance. The remark on the American style of kidnapping seems to foreshadow the establishment of the “film noir” genre after World War II, when French film critics, watching film after film that they had missed during the embargo, recognized a shared set of traits and themes of which the directors themselves had remained largely unaware.

The broad national ideologies implied in Flanner’s early letters become ever starker and more explicit as tensions on the Continent increase. The differences she had merely suggested before now become defining characteristics. In 1938, writing an “Annals of Crime” piece on the murder of the young American tourist Jean De Koven, Flanner states: “Only a typical postwar German like Weidman, unfamiliar with the value of money as the rest of the freer world knows it, would have killed so many people for so little. And only a typical American, like poor Miss De Koven, would have been so sociable, so confidential, and could have seemed so rich” (*Paris* 217). These remarks are intended to be humorous, but by the next year Flanner’s analysis of “typical” national characteristics has lost any hint of comedy. On February 18, 1939, she describes the essential differences in how the English and the French view Hitler and the

situation in Germany. In the same letter she apologizes for what some might read as sweeping stereotypes, admitting that these opinions are “approximations” to which many French and English “would individually take exception.” Yet, she continues in a sentence of self-justification, “at a moment when every word of Roosevelt, Daladier, Hitler, or Mussolini provokes a world repercussion, the average unexpert man, especially in France, can’t hear himself think and generalities become his sign language” (76).

Perhaps it is for this reason—perhaps generalities have become Flanner’s sign language, too—that in July of 1939 Flanner decides to explain the “ideological tensions” in Europe in explicitly national terms. The conflicts cannot be ascribed to politics, she writes, referring to the “unintelligent tendency to think that France, England, Russia, Germany, and Italy have done what each has done because they are, respectively, a Republic, a Monarchial Democracy, a Soviet Union, a Nazi Totalitarian State, and a Fascist state.” On the contrary:

France, England, Russia, Germany, and Italy have acted and reacted as they have because they are French, English, Russian, German, and Italian. Before it’s too late and men on separate sides of the Rhine start shooting each other as Nazis and Democrats, it should be recalled that in 1870 they shot at each other as Bismarckians and Second Imperialists, and in 1914 as Absolute Monarchists and Republicans. In other words, they shot at each other then, as they may again, because they were German and French (52).

One wonders if Flanner’s strident belief in essential national characteristics in 1939 emerged out of her study of French versus American cultures and personality types over the fourteen years prior. Is it her examination of the “Frenchness” and “Americanness” of her fellow citizens that inspires her reflection on what she calls “the Germanness of the Germans,” or, “the most persistent phenomenon in Europe over the last hundred years”? “In the past,” she concludes, “European nations have changed politics the way their leaders have changed coats, but their national character hasn’t altered. It is the national German character which the national French and English characters are up against right now” (54). Gone in this passage is any trace of irony,

any veiled implications. On the eve of World War II, Flanner says exactly what she means—even to the audience of *The New Yorker*.

Paris, Germany

This is not to suggest that all of Flanner's writing in the years immediately preceding World War II was straightforward and sincere. On the contrary: she continued to make frequent use of irony—although, as a number of scholars point out, in these later years the irony becomes harsher, more caustic. In the 1930s, she wrote more of European concerns than she did of the expatriates, in part because many of the expatriates had departed. Instead of assuming that her reader shared her interest in the economics of fashion, Flanner now assumed “that her reader shared her concern for European stability, shared her own liberal politics... The lively and audacious opinions of the early years became caustic, her style marked by humor of the bitterest sort” (Benstock 119). We find one example of this turn toward darker humor in a letter from 18 August 1934, in a passage that, under peaceful circumstances, would sound like a lighthearted travelogue but which here serves a starkly different purpose.

European vacationing has developed such a new routine this summer that it is just as well few transatlantic tourists are here to struggle with the novelties. While the question on going to Vienna used to be 'Will they be giving 'Der Rosenkavalier?'" now it is 'Will I be shot?' Music lovers at Salzburg are less concerned with Mozart than with wondering if they can get across the border without a diplomatic passport and a return-trip ticket—the present frontier-crossing requirements. As for Munich, one doesn't ask if that little restaurant neat the Vier Jahreszeiten still really serves good food, but if its proprietor was really killed with the others on June 30th (69).

European politics, she wrote at one point to her mother, “had started developing their appalling capacity for sounding like fiction, for sounding like horrifying thrillers” (Wineapple 139). The paragraphs on fashion in her early letters came to be replaced with paragraphs on politics, and the metropolitan humor of the 1920s was superseded by the bitter irony of the 1930s. While this is not the direction *The New Yorker* might have imagined for itself, Flanner felt that she became

“especially invaluable” to the magazine “once she began substituting political news for gossip in her fortnightly letter” (Wineapple 140-1). I would contend that this was less a “substitution” than an expansion of perspective: the more trivial, quotidian trends and tensions in Paris that Flanner reported in the early years grow naturally into the political gossip that immediately precedes the war. Flanner is still reporting on events, films, dinner parties, and fashions as she reports on politics—in fact, she proves how inextricable the two are. In January of 1939, for example, she links the imminent war with gaiety in society: “Perhaps because of the general relief at having peace, maybe because of fear of war, Parisians spent an unprecedented fortune during the holidays, not on presents to others but principally on gifts of champagne and fine food for their own stomachs” (64).

By the end of 1939, however, Flanner had fled the country. It was from New York City, at the end of 1940, that she wrote the piece entitled “Paris, Germany,” compiled from reports about life in the city under German occupation. “Gone was her cheekiness,” writes Wineapple of Flanner’s tone in this article, “gone was her detachment” (172). Flanner calls Paris “the capital of limbo” and describes the resentment and despair that have become a part of Parisian life. She calls the Germans “termites” who infest and eat away at the high-end shops and luxury goods of the city; she reports that the German “passion for bureaucracy” has “pinned each French individual to a sheet of paper, the way an entomologist pins each specimen insect, past struggling, to his laboratory board” (52). In keeping with her long-established pattern of sharing the French perspective on issues, she tells her readers that the Parisians call the Germans “*corrects*” and “*emmerdeurs*.” These two words represent “merely the intellectual periphery of a vocabulary not yet filled in with words for the despair and anguish which some of the conquered French are beginning to feel not with their brains but with their stomachs and hearts” (52). For a

writer to lack words, Flanner's readers know, the situation must be dire indeed. For Wineapple, the sincere tone of this piece reflects an "implicit indictment of Genet" and her "Olympian detachment," her "neutral disinterest." Neutrality, Flanner suggests through the style of this article, "is no longer a sign of social and cultural superiority" (172).

"Apparently," Flanner writes at the end of this article, "the best thing about Parisian morale is that Parisians remain, under the Germans, just what they were under the French. Parisians grumble, argue in cafes about the new politics as they did about the old, are logical, critical, sardonic, witty, realistic, civilized as they always were, but they have an earnest, a desperate and humble, hope that is new" (62). After having spent the previous fourteen years building a community of readers by showing them what set them apart from—and often above—the French, Flanner's change of tone in "Paris, France" now marshals that community in support of the French citizens they have come to know so intimately through her letters. The "high-class gossip" that she once dismissed as "lightminded" actually comes to serve a very weighty purpose indeed. By representing Paris in a way that enabled her American audience to feel a certain "mastery" over the cultural capital of the world, Flanner helped promote a new American confidence and consciousness that would grow even stronger and more distinct over the latter half of the twentieth century.

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CHAPTER FOUR: EZRA POUND, MODERNISM'S GREATEST GOSSIP

"Literature is news that stays news."
- Ezra Pound

By now Hugh Kenner's labeling of modernism as *The Pound Era* has been deconstructed and challenged for its explicit privileging of one man over other artists of the period and its implicit neglect of the networks, communities, and chains of influence that made modernism into a true movement, a revolution, rather than a passing fad. Pound has fallen into disfavor: his poetry does not enjoy the sort of audience that flocks to Eliot, for example; his didacticism is outmoded; his outspoken support of Fascism (and subsequent imprisonment) cost him sympathy and admiration; and his attitude toward his female colleagues is widely criticized as misogynistic. In *Women Editing Modernism*, Jane Marek's tone ranges from dubious to scathing as she describes Pound's "lack of interest in most other writers," his "disdain for women's literary aspirations," and—above all—his tendency to treat "women's editorial functions as a service to his own interests" (186, 188, 180). Yet I would contend that despite his complicated and troubling relationship with his female colleagues—or perhaps because of it—Pound was the modernist who most fully appropriated the techniques of "women's talk" in his writing. In this chapter, I will analyze how Pound gossiped in his correspondence in order to promote the reputations of artists who shared his vision of modern art, thereby establishing a productive community of creative critics and also redefining artistic "value" for the poets and the scholars who would follow him.

Scholarship on modernism over the past few decades has emphasized the significance of groups, networks, and artistic associations in the creation and dissemination of the movement. Jessica Berman's seminal *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* underscores the "constant making and un-making of human inter-connections" in modernist fiction, arguing that this work "becomes immersed in the politics of connection, in the performance of affiliation already on the brink of dispersal. This performance often creates radically new forms of cosmopolitan communities" and "engages with the inadequacies of dominant categories of affiliation, especially regarding gender and nationality" (7, 27). Whereas Berman makes a case for cosmopolitan community in a global sense, other scholars home in on particular aspects of modernist networks such as salons (Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*; Crunden, *American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism*), parties both actual and fictional (Barnet, *All-Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem*; McLoughlin, *The Modernist Party*), and models of artistic influence (Brown, *Intertextual Dynamics Within the Literary Group*); Ellman, *The Nets of Modernism*). This trend toward analyzing groups and networks has necessitated a turn to sociology, and works such as Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism* (1998) and Andrew Goldstone's *Fictions of Autonomy* (2013) draw productively upon sociological theory in order to engage directly with "the social relations of... literary production" (Goldstone 4).

However one may feel about Pound as a poet, critic, or fascist, he remains one of the most central, active nodes of modernist networks—a position that he chose deliberately. Pound's assistance to fellow artists included "aesthetic advice," "technical expertise," and "practical support through creating a network of editors, publishers, and patrons" (Bornstein 22). As Pound himself wrote: "If it lie within your desire to promote the arts," as he believed it lay in his, "you

must not only subsidize the man with work still in him, you must gather such dynamic particles together; you must set them where they will interact, and stimulate each other” (*Selected Prose* 27). This is a theory of artistic innovation, but it is also a theory of networks. Pound consistently encouraged his colleagues and mentees to form groups because he was convinced that this sort of mutual interaction was the basis for both critical and creative innovation. As he wrote to Harriet Monroe in 1912, “It’s only when a few men who know, get together and *disagree* that any sort of criticism is born” (Paige 12). Fifteen years later he was still pushing for community formation, telling Louis Zukofsky: “Group is very useful, for gathering information, etc. both enlightenment, and stimulus to action.... Two not enough; four or five real lives, and it moves” (Ahearn 14). According to Matthew Hannah, who incorporates sociological network theory into a dissertation on modernist groupings and regroupings, by moving among and between these networks, modernists could “traffic in the latest aesthetic theories, meet likely sources of money, and practice solidarity against potentially hostile publics like particles leaping from one atom to another” (20). Ezra Pound “acts as what network theorists call a ‘symbolic analyst’—a key to entire networks, a superconnector of superconnectors. In the many collisions among dynamic particles within modernism, Pound causes more reactions than perhaps any other node” (26). He is, in other words, central to analyses of modernist communities.

Gossip theorists refer to someone in Pound’s position as a “mover and shaker” of his chosen group: one of the “most active and influential” members of the community. In “Gossip, Gossipers, and Gossipees,” behavioral scientists Jaeger et al. conducted a series of surveys with sorority sisters to produce sociograms that illustrate the interpersonal dynamics within the house. Their findings indicate that these movers and shakers, who are “among the most active gossipers and the ones most frequently gossiped about,” are the most popular and the most powerful

members of the community (166). While it is unlikely that Pound would win a popularity contest either among his contemporaries or among readers and scholars today, he did successfully position himself as both gossiper and gossipee in order to establish and navigate key modernist groupings. “Knowledge of the social landscape, exchanged as gossip, is thus crucial knowledge about the links in social networks,” writes Nicholas Emler (132)—and if we substitute “artistic” or “literary” for “social,” we begin to see why the exchange of this type of information was so significant for Pound. My contribution to scholarship on Pound and artistic communities is my reading of Pound’s correspondence as gossip, since this reading examines how those communities were made and unmade, and how information circulated within and between them. The study of Poundian gossip is the study of the flow of modernist ideas: my emphasis is on the production, promotion, and dissemination of new creative techniques and critical theories. If gossip serves as the material by which individuals “continually group and regroup in different combinations” (Emler 132), then gossip is vital to understanding the formation and disintegration of modernist communities. In analyzing Pound as modernism’s greatest gossip, I also contribute to the contemporary reclamation of this seemingly “trivial,” “superficial” speech by proving how gossip made modernism.

One of the perks of Pound scholarship is that one need not go very far afield in order to ascertain Pound’s relevance to various aspects of the modernist movement, since he was not bashful when it came to highlighting his contributions. “Dopo tant’anni,” he wrote to Marianne Moore in 1918, “I am not yet in the position of a Van Dyke or a Tennyson; but still, I have got Joyce, and Lewis, and Eliot and a few other comforting people into print, by page and by volume” (Paige 143). After hearing of Simon Guggenheim’s proposal for a fellowship for the arts in February 1925, Pound wrote to him directly. “[I]f there ever was a man who worked

constantly and without reward for fifteen years for the very objects your endowment professes to further,” he declared, “I am that man” (Paige 197). By this he means that not only did he write modern poetry, but he also worked unceasingly to modernize others; he identified new talent, honed it according to his own standards, and brought it to the attention of editors and patrons. He defined poets as nothing less than “the advance guard of the psychologist on the watch for new emotions” and announced that he himself possessed a “flair for genius” (Ruthven 84-5). Pound’s distinctive brand of genius, as K.K. Ruthven notes, was a fusion of “critical acumen” with “creative talent” (84). Whatever one may think about his poetry or his politics, when it comes to the making of modernism, Pound simply cannot be cast aside. As T.S. Eliot wrote in *Poetry* in September 1946: “It is on [Pound’s] total work for literature that he must be judged: on his poetry, *and* his criticism, *and* his influence on men and on events at a turning point in literature.” The direct result of that “total work for literature” was the movement we now call modernism.

In the pages that follow, I contend that Pound’s correspondence demonstrates how modernist gossip and criticism are involved in the production of something *new*. Although social scientists tend to argue that gossip in the world is a conservative force that serves to keep social outliers in line, Pound’s correspondence and his criticism prove that gossip can also have the opposite effect. Poundian gossip, we find, is not trivial or superficial—on the contrary, it is revolutionary. Instead of maintaining the established artistic order, it promotes influence and innovation. It does this in two distinct ways: first, through the establishment of groups of creative critics; and second, by continually questioning the accepted definition of artistic “worth” or “value.” I argue that Pound works to accomplish these two goals through the conversations—the “literary gossip”—that he maintains in his correspondence. As D.D. Paige observes in his introduction to Pound’s *Selected Letters*, Pound understood that for “the health of the arts,” he

had to form “an *avant garde*: in a military as well as a literary sense.” The future could not be entrusted to a single individual; the legacy of modernism required “a generation that would battle for the arts with the same vigour and tenacity with which he battled. The personal letter was his means of contact, and his high aim determined its extent” (xx). This is why Pound was such a prolific letter writer. In May of 1916 he complained that his life was “still ‘nothing but letters letters letters all day,’ to Quinn, Lewis, Joyce, Elkin Mathews, Harriet Monroe and the rest, and now and again Dorothy ‘raging *for me to come forth* to supper’” (Moody 295). He had always been an active correspondent, but when Harriet Monroe published a handful of his letters in *Poetry* in 1915, that correspondence earned “an enviable reputation. It grew alike privately and publicly, fed in the former instance by the passing about of letters and in the latter by their scrappy publication in literary magazines, until it became for about five years nearly as well-established as his legitimate reputation” (Paige xvii). In other words, by using his letters as the means by which he established and maintained the literary reputations of his contemporaries, Pound also managed to secure his own.

The gossip of this chapter has little to do with celebrity scandal (although we will see some of this in the headlines surrounding the Bollingen Prize controversy) and everything to do with the management of social groups and reputations through third party conversations. I make this distinction in part because some scholars on Pound have remarked upon the infrequency of his “personal” remarks. “He very rarely writes gossip or sends news of himself,” writes D.D. Paige. “He rarely talked about personal matters,” Barry Ahearn concurs in his introduction to the letters of Pound and Louis Zukofsky. “...So quiet is he about his private life that when he mentions ‘Olga’ (Rudge) for the first time in December 1931, the mystified Zukofsky asks, ‘Who’s Olga?’” (xv). It is true that Pound’s single-minded focus on the arts and the future of the

movement leaves little time for small talk. Yet, as I will demonstrate, his letters still lay bare his profound interest in people and personalities: he is always writing about what others are thinking, doing, publishing. This is gossip of a different kind. One of the most common injunctions against gossip in popular culture is the statement (misattributed to Eleanor Roosevelt) that “great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people”—but I contend that one of the most capacious, most complicated minds of the early twentieth century produced and promoted modern art precisely through the discussions *about people* that he initiated and sustained through his extensive correspondence. For Ezra Pound, there was no distinction between talking about people and talking about ideas; he proved that the two are frequently, in fact, one and the same.

The reminiscences of his contemporaries testify to his curiosity about people. John Cournos, a Russian-American poet and journalist, wrote that Pound “revealed a keen interest in any stranger he met, casting upon him an appraising eye, taking prompt stock of the furnishings of his mind, annexing him if he proved worthwhile with a frank eagerness I never met in anyone else” (qtd. in Moody 235). Iris Barry described Pound in London in 1917 as “striding about the streets with his head thrown back, seeing everything, meeting everybody, as full of the latest gossip as he was of excitement about the pictorial quality of Chinese radicals or a line of Rimbaud’s” (qtd. in Moody 298). As the Barry quotation shows, for Pound “the latest gossip” is linked in one breath to his “excitement” over the most recent developments in modern art. His letters demonstrate the same seamless transition between personal and professional evaluations. To his mother in 1913 he wrote, for example: “Epstein is a great sculptor. I wish he would wash, but I believe Michel Angelo *never* did, so I suppose it is a part of the tradition” (Paige vi). To Harriet Monroe in the same year, he wrote: “Lawrence has brought out a vol. He is clever; I don’t

know whether to send in a review or not... Detestable person but needs watching" (17). In other letters, he includes such evaluations as: "Frost is in America, dull perhaps, but he has something in him" (51). "Aldington has his occasional concentrations, and for that reason it is always possible that he will do a fine thing" (49). "E.L. Masters... has some punch but writes a little too much" (51). "Fletcher is sputter, bright flash, sputter" (49). "Bill Wms. is *the* most bloody inarticulate animal that ever gargled. BUT it's better than Amy's bloody ten-cent repetitive gramophone, perfectly articulate" (131). Is this gossip or is it criticism? What's the difference? Such questions lie at the heart of this chapter.

One might be tempted to think, from quotations such as these, that Ezra Pound's literary evaluations were always negative. Yet when Pound was excited about someone—as he often was, for example, about Eliot, Joyce, and Lewis, his men of 1914—no one could rival his passion. In one letter to John Quinn in 1916, Pound uses up a whole paragraph pouring out his praise for Lewis's most recent drawings. "They are all over the room, and the thing is stupendous," he writes. "The vitality, the fullness of the man! Nobody knows it. My God, the stuff lies in a pile of dirt on the man's floor. Nobody has seen it. Nobody has *any* conception of the volume and energy and the variety" (Paige 73). What this letter so clearly demonstrates is not only Pound's appreciation for the work of his contemporaries, but also his desire to make their work known: to create an audience, a community of and for them. "Nobody knows it, nobody has seen it, nobody has any conception of it"—he marvels at this fact and sets himself to changing it. It is no coincidence that he addresses this letter to John Quinn, the lawyer and patron who possesses the means to fund Lewis's work and put these drawings before the public eye. Pound could barely finance his own ventures, much less his friends; instead, his power lay in his

enthusiasm for talking people up or down, for fostering connections between individual artists, and—most importantly—for establishing and managing their reputations.

Pound's epistolary statements are marked by the personal, familiar tone that characterizes gossip; his evaluations are intimate and profoundly revelatory of both his subject and his own set of values. The goal of this chapter is to analyze how Pound's unique brand of literary gossip revolutionized modern art, contributing to the modernist movement and also to the critical schools that would follow it. I will begin by examining the part Pound played in bringing *The Waste Land*—a poem that has come to represent the “modern experiment”—to life. I will then move into the emergence of Imagisme, illuminating the ways in which Pound capitalized on the tools and techniques of gossip to turn a “rumor” into a legitimate poetic institution. Finally, I will turn in my conclusion to the questions raised by my close readings of letters, reputations, creative movements, and schools of criticism. How did Pound publicize and disseminate his own personal standards of value? How did modernism emerge from Pound's epistolary chains of influence, and how might we as critics harness the power of creative networks today? What does criticism share with gossip? Perhaps most importantly, What does Pound's literary gossip reveal about the flow of information, the tension between the personal and the political, and the transformation of politics and community in modernity?

Men's vs. “Women's Talk”

One of the most famous and salient examples of Pound's impact on the making of modernism—as well as the determination of its legacy—was the editorial work he performed on T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Drafts of the manuscript show how Pound's edits transformed the poem “from a ‘sprawling chaos’ into something hard and powerfully disjunctive” (Koestenbaum 113). Eliot, who had been struggling with the draft for several months already, stopped over in

Paris in November of 1921 and showed an initial version to Pound. Later, once Eliot had revised the draft in Switzerland, he handed it over to Pound for more significant cuts and polish. In addition to excising certain portions of the poem, including an “anti-Semitic portrait of Bleistein and a misogynist portrait of a woman writer called Fresca,” Pound also committed himself to choosing the *mot juste* in places where he felt Eliot’s language lacked precision (Gordon 70).²⁵

Eliot appreciated Pound’s efforts and recognized his influence in his dedication of *The Waste Land* to “Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro*” (the better craftsman). True to form, Pound himself also recognized the significance of his impact. In a letter to Eliot in December 1921, Pound included “a series of comic verses, describing himself as midwife, and Eliot as mother” of the poem (Kostenbaum 33):

These are the poems of Eliot
By the Uranian Muse begot;
A Man their Mother was,
A Muse their Sire.

How did the printed Infancies result
From Nuptials thus doubly difficult?

If you must needs enquire
Know diligent Reader
That on each Occasion
Ezra performed the Caesarean Operation.

The reference to midwifery does not end here. In January 1922, Pound suggested a few more edits (including the advice that Eliot cut out the epigraph from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*) and then added: “Do as you like about my obstetric effort” (Paige 171). For my purposes, what is most compelling about Pound’s description of himself as “sage homme” who

²⁵For instance, Pound changed Eliot’s “When Lil’s husband was coming out of the Transport Corps” to “When Lil’s husband was demobbed”; he changed “abominable French” to “demotic French.” For further examples of his edits and his commentary, see Lyndall Gordon’s “The Composition of *The Waste Land*” and especially Wayne Kostenbaum’s “*The Waste Land*: T.S. Eliot’s and Ezra Pound’s Collaboration on Hysteria.”

“performed the caesarean Operation” on the “Poems of Eliot” is the connection between midwifery and gossip. In 17th-century England, we recall, “gossips” were those female acquaintances a woman invited to attend her at childbirth. The more experienced women offered practical advice and moral support in a space from which men were excluded. By positioning himself as “midwife” to Eliot’s poem, Pound annexes this decidedly female space and makes it his own. Although his identification with the midwife is intended to highlight the crucial role he played in bringing *The Waste Land* into the world, he also—whether consciously or not—reveals the site of gossip, like the birthing room, to be a productive space.

According to Joyce, *The Waste Land* “ended the idea of poetry for ladies.” For Pound, the final version of the poem represented “the justification of the ‘movement,’ of our modern experiment, since 1900” (qtd in Koestenbaum 113). The juxtaposition of these two quotations suggests that part of the impetus behind the “modern experiment” was the desire to masculinize poetry—and indeed Pound’s impact on *The Waste Land* represents just one instance of Pound’s more general appropriation of women’s space and “women’s talk.” Helen M. Dennis suggests that “Pound’s texts articulate a strenuous and at times exaggerated masculinity, and concomitantly, enunciate a range of profoundly traditional versions of the feminine.” She references Nicholls’s argument that “the ‘Men of 1914’ saw the work of their immediate precursors, such as the Decadents, as degenerate, as embodying the feminine,” and they responded by attempting “to reestablish a set of masculine values” in their own work. Ruthven, when describing Pound’s efforts to shift the general perception of writing from “mystique” to “technique,” also points out the gendered effects of this turn. “To represent poetry as technical experimentalism,” Ruthven observes, “... is to transform the reading of poetry from a ‘feminine’ encounter of sensibilities into a ‘masculine’ technology of communication” (112). Even more

specifically, Pound's insistence that there be a certain "hardness" in language and criticism is exemplified in the terms he used to describe successful poetry: "objective," "direct," "no slither." He dismisses the (feminine) sentimentalism of the Romantics and the (feminine) adornments of the Victorians in order to promote a poetry that is decidedly scientific in its reliance on (masculine) qualities such as clarity, compression, precision, and impersonality.

In this way, we see Pound contributing to what Koestenbaum labels the "male modernist propaganda" of the period (113). Although Pound did advocate for and work alongside a number of highly effective and intelligent female editors, he remained convinced that he could run their magazines better than they could. In 1915 he wrote to John Quinn that he wanted a review that was not only his own (a long-term goal that he often expressed but never realized) but also exclusively male. He had a hunch that "active America is getting fed up on a gynocracy" and wondered if he might found a journal with the banner "No woman shall be allowed to write for this magazine." He knew that "it would cause outcry, boycott, etc.," but "the ultimate gain... in vigour.—in everything—might be worth it." However, when he goes on to blame the "ills of the American magazines" on women, he describes them as "young women, old women (male and female)" (Materer 41, 53). Thus Pound reveals in this proposal not only his prioritization of masculine values ("vigour") but also his conviction that feminine prose is not limited to *actual* females, since the label "young women, old women" can be applied to both males and females. He appreciates poets such as H.D. and Marianne Moore for their "masculine" qualities of directness and precision even as he complains that Dora Marsden, for all her admirable qualities as an editor, writes "four pages of slosh on the forehead of every number."²⁶ Marsden's journal presents yet another instance of Pound appropriating women's space and women's speech: her

²⁶Pound even managed to disparage women in the midst of complimenting them. He tells Quinn in June 1918 that "Harriet is much less an old maid than most American editors." In October of 1919, he notes: "Nina Hamnett has greatly improved. Great persistence for a female."

distinctly feminist *The Freewoman* / *The New Freewoman* lost its gendered agenda when Pound elbowed his way onto the masthead and renamed the magazine *The Egoist*.

Wayne Koestenbaum's analysis of the pre-publication history of *The Waste Land* contributes to our understanding of this type of gendered modernism by exposing "the affinities between the discourse of high male modernism and the discourse of hysteria" (114). The claim is an unusual one for a number of reasons—one of the most obvious being the idea that a poem that "ends the idea of poetry for ladies" could actually be constructed out of the babbling, ruptured speech of the female hysteric. In Freud's treatment of hysteria, "female speech is both the illness and the cure: (disordered) talking is the sickness cured by talking" (Koestenbaum 114). The analyst "becomes a midwife who helps draw sense out of hysteria's 'narrow cleft.'"²⁷ Moreover, notes Koestenbaum, "[i]f the analyst is midwife, then the hysteric is a woman in symbolic labor, like Ann O., whose analysis terminated in hysterical pregnancy" (115). In the *Waste Land* scenario, Eliot writes a hysterical poem and then hands it over to Pound, his analyst, who makes sense of it and thereby cures Eliot. Pound's role as a midwife to the poem is thereby confirmed. His collaboration with Eliot also underscores his investment in and manipulation of "women's talk" for his own purposes—for Koestenbaum, that means the speech of the hysteric; for this chapter, it means the deliberate political maneuverings of the gossip. For all Pound's blustering against his female colleagues and the decidedly misogynistic statements in his letters, Pound recognized the power inherent in "women's talk" and did not hesitate to harness and direct that power toward his own ends.

²⁷To quote Freud: "The whole spatially-extended mass of psychogenic material is in this way drawn through a narrow cleft and thus arrives in consciousness cut up, as it were, into pieces or strips. It is the psychoanalyst's business to put these together once more into the organization which he presumes to have existed" (*Studies on Hysteria* 291).

In situating Pound within the gossip sphere and aligning his correspondence with women's talk, I am building upon previous scholarship that analyzes Pound's complicated relationships with women. In Lusty and Murphet's collection *Modernism and Masculinity*, Peter Nicholls quotes Marianne Moore's critique of Pound's representation of women as "older-fashioned than that of Siam and Abyssinia." Nicholls goes on to argue that Pound's misogyny was not only "thoroughly traditional," but "that it was also in a perfectly conventional way twinned with a sentimental 'feminolatry,' as Moore calls it" (235). Along similar lines, Rachel Blau DuPlessis reads Pound's muse in "Portrait d'une Femme" (1912) as a female figure who "inspires genius but cannot herself create" (393). "All in all," she writes:

Pound's poem is a mechanism in the service of one kind of male subjectivity—the active creation of a shallow but provocative female muse for the containment of historical New Woman effervescence and achievement.... Propounding this maleness is part of Pound's notable achievement during this period; it is probably one of his most culturally influential acts within the reception of modernism as well as its production (399-400).

Jayne Marek agrees that Pound's relationships with women in his life and his art have seriously impacted the way we understand the modernist era. Her chapter on Pound in *Women Editing Modernism* suggests that the focus on Pound in the scholarship of literary magazines has "distorted" our understanding of the field by minimizing the achievements of his female colleagues. "Most critics," she laments, "have either ignored the evidence of Pound's attitude toward women or have lumped it together with other evidence of Pound's irregularities and temper as an example of the eccentricities of genius" (176). Yet a number of scholars do succeed in engaging with Pound's treatment of women in a manner that allows for more nuance. When Peter Wilson quotes feminist theorists Hanscombe and Smyers in *Writing for their Lives*, he chooses a passage that seems to defend Pound: "Where he perceived talent," Hanscombe and Smyers admit, "he pursued and encouraged it and was, in addition, canny enough to know how

to manipulate the appropriate publishing vehicles so that women's work was not only fostered, but also printed" (170). "Pound thus presents us," Wilson concludes, "with the paradox of someone whose ideology is male-orientated achieving pro-feminist goals" (123).

Whereas Marek highlights Pound's misogynistic language as an example of his attempts to control women in the literary sphere, I analyze the "women's speech" *within* Pound's language in order to showcase the multilayered complexities of Pound's gender politics. By reading Pound's language *as gossip*, I underscore how, instead of rejecting "women's speech," Pound and his male colleagues recognized its power and its value and consequently appropriated it in their writing. This is not an argument that excuses Pound's misogyny, but rather one that exposes the nuance and complexity of his language and his position. In pointing out our gendered understanding of gossip, Dale Spender astutely observes:

It is not surprising to find that there are no terms for man talk that are equivalent to chatter, natter, prattle, nag, bitch, whine, and, of course, *gossip*, and I am not so naive as to assume that this is because men do not engage in these activities. It is because when they do it is called something different, something more flattering and more appropriate to their place in the world. This double standard is of great value in the maintenance of patriarchal order (qtd. in Tebbutt, 1).

One of the goals of this project is to reposition the definition of "gossip" in order to encompass the speech of men and women alike. If literary criticism is indeed "an aesthetic discourse which encodes a crypto-politics of reputation-mongering" (Ruthven 108), and if gossip is at its core a tool for managing our own and others' reputations, then where do we draw the line between gossip and criticism? Why is it more "appropriate" to call Pound's evaluative third-party statements criticism instead of gossip? By calling them gossip, might we in fact help to deconstruct the "patriarchal order" Spender invokes above?

The British evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, we recall, has suggested that language evolved precisely so that we could gossip: at its core, language helps us "to keep track

of what [our] friends and allies are doing” and provides us “with a device for influencing what people think about us” (173). Ezra Pound used his correspondence to persuade, cajole, demand, and instruct; certain that he was in the right, he was constantly trying to shape the opinions of other artists and critics. He was also working to “form and refine judgments about [others’] vices and virtues,” a quality that social psychologist Nicholas Emler attributes to gossip (133).

Through gossip, according to Emler, we learn to whom we can lend garden tools and expect to get them back, to whom we should turn for advice about buying a new house or a car, or who can be trusted to care for our children or support our political campaigns. What set Pound’s gossip apart was that the “vices and virtues” he focused on were artistic, which made his judgments the judgments of a critic. “Reputations,” Emler adds, “do not exist except in the conversations that people have about one another” (135). In the following sections, I examine the way in which Pound established the reputations of his favored artists and schools through the conversations he conducted in his correspondence. Interestingly, despite his complicated relationship with women—or, as I mentioned above, perhaps because of it—one of the very first reputations he made was that of a woman: H.D., *Imagiste*. And through her, he also made his own.

“the laconic speech of the Imagistes”

In October 1912, Pound wrote to Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, that he’d “had luck again” in finding innovative pieces for the magazine. Along with a selection of poems from his childhood friend (and one-time fiancée) H.D., Pound enclosed this note:

[I] am sending you some *modern* stuff by an American, I say modern, for it is in the laconic speech of the Imagistes, even if the subject is classic... This is the sort of stuff I can show here and in Paris without its being ridiculed. Objective—no slither; direct—no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won’t permit examination. It’s straight talk, straight as the Greek! And it was only by persistence that I got to see it at all (Paige 11).

On the surface, there is nothing extraordinary about this letter. It seems that Pound has simply discovered a new school of poetry—Imagisme—and has sent samples of that poetry to Monroe for publication. Yet the truth of the matter is that the Imagisme and the Imagistes did not exist until Pound brought them into being. He had first applied the label to Richard Aldington (without Aldington’s knowledge) a few months earlier; now, he perpetuated the new “movement” through H.D. In her memoir *End To Torment*, Hilda Dolittle remembered Pound’s invention of Imagisme as taking place in the tearoom of the British Museum. Years before, he had christened her “Dryad,” and here he was now renaming her “H.D.”

'But dryad,' (in the Museum tea room), 'this is poetry.' He slashed with a pencil. 'Cut this out, shorten this line. 'Hermes of the Ways' is a good title. I'll send this to Harriet Monroe of Poetry. Have you a copy? Yes? Then we can send this, or I'll type it when I get back. Will this do?' And he scrawled 'H.D. Imagiste' at the bottom of the page (18).

H.D. did not call herself by this title, nor did she identify with any particular movement. In this sense, writes Martin Kayman, Imagisme “is not a retrospective (diachronic) classification... It is rather a peculiarly modern phenomenon, a self-defining, self-producing movement, and as such its history has to be a *synchronic* history” (51). While Kayman’s point is an important one, the terms “self-defining” and “self-producing” are not entirely accurate, since the movement was defined and produced by Ezra Pound. The speed at which the word and movement spread is a testament to Pound’s initiative; in 1913, the San Francisco *Call* reported: “Just now we are enjoying a wonderful crop of artistic isms, of which at least one seems to be well larded with sound sense. This bears the uncompromising name ‘Imagisme,’ a small but evidently highly self-conscious literary ‘movement’ in England of which the redoubtable young expatriate, Ezra Pound, is a leader” (Hannah 216). A cursory search of library card catalogues and encyclopedia entries even today reveals that they still label H.D. an “imagist”—which proves the lasting impact of the reputation Pound invented and promoted through his letters and criticism.

Harriet Monroe quoted Pound as telling her after the fact that Imagisme “was started, not very seriously, chiefly to give H.D.’s five poems a hearing” (Kayman 52). Stanley Coffman calls the beginnings of the movement “a publicity stunt, which circumstances soon proved to have a value beyond its immediate purpose” (4). I would contend that Pound was highly aware of the value of the word that he coined and of the greater purpose of his “stunt”; although he certainly desired to see H.D.’s poems published, the reason he wanted them published in the first place was that they exemplified the qualities that he was himself pushing for in modern literature. The manufacture of “Imagisme” was a means of distancing himself from his own values. By pointing out that other poets were writing in the “modern” style and pretending as though a “group” had formed, he could make it seem as though others were talking about literature in the same way he was—and, most importantly, he could get readers and critics talking about *them*. By suggesting in his letter to Monroe, for example, that he needed “persistence” to see H.D.’s work, and that it is only through “luck” that he has the poems to send to her at all, he hints that the demand for Imagisme outstrips the supply, thereby exploiting the potential of a capitalist commodity market while also experimenting with the power of rumor to produce a new art form. In this case, Kayman argues, we should understand the concept of artistic “‘influence’ not as the interpretation or transmission of necessary, impersonal, or progressive forces, but rather as something which has to be *produced* within a market... This word [Imagisme], like any other trademark, stock, or currency, develops a value according to a process of production, distribution, and consumption” (51). As we shall see, it is Pound’s gossip that determines and manipulates this value.

One of the most interesting aspects of the initial appearance of Imagisme is that its production and reception relied on a specific poetic strategy: synecdoche. By signing Hilda

Doolittle's poem for her as "H.D., *Imagiste*," Pound manufactured an entire family of poets "*at the level of the signifier*: the word 'Imagiste' ... operates by means of implied totalisation of a synecdoche: a partial quality of a poem is named ('imagisti(ic)'), and this is inscribed in such a way ('Imagiste') as to imply another totality of an undefined plurality of writers with a common aesthetic" (Kayman 53). The movement emerged because it was *implied*, not because it was announced. Like any good gossip, Pound managed to say the most through what he left unsaid.²⁸ Moreover, as Ruthven points out, Pound's willingness to allow a part to speak for a whole extends not only to the fabrication of Imagisme but also to Pound's broader theory of literary criticism. "After redefining literature as poetry," writes Ruthven, "Pound reduced poetry metonymically to a few poets, each of whom could be represented metonymically by a few poems." Poetry becomes the "quintessence" of literature, and Imagisme becomes the "quintessence" of poetry (35). By selecting the part that will represent the whole, Pound establishes the canon he transmits to colleagues and mentees through his correspondence and his criticism.

While the method is poetic in its approach, it is also distinctly modern in its emphasis on efficiency. The essay *How To Read*, in which Pound describes his proper methodology for literary analysis, was intended to offer its audience "the minimum basis for a sound and liberal education in letters" for "men who haven't had time for systematized college courses" (*LE* 38). Incorporating quotes from Pound's own description of his system, Ruthven explains that the text moves "from writing as a technique to reading as a technology, ostensibly to enable 'low-brow' readers 'to read fewer [books] with greater result'" (36). Efficiency and economy were important to Pound, who presented himself as a scholar of world literature but who could not possibly have

²⁸Walter Winchell famously opined: "Gossip is the art of saying nothing in a way that leaves practically nothing unsaid."

had the time to acquire all the knowledge he claimed to possess. Instead, he selected intelligent shortcuts. He suggested, for instance, that one could learn everything important about poetic meter by spending “an odd half-hour or so with Bion, the troubadours, and French poetry between 1880 and 1910” (*SP* 298). In his letters to Iris Barry, one of the first students of the informal “Ezuversity,” he listed the authors who were and were not worth her time. In Latin “Catullus, Propertius, Horace and Ovid are the only people who matter,” he wrote to her. On the subject of English poetry, he suggested Chaucer while steering her clear of Byron and Wordsworth (Paige 86). Pound’s informal courses in comparative poetics “replicated the methods of *Imagisme* by substituting the well-read passage for the well-wrought fragment” (Ruthven 36). Here, too, the part stands in for the whole. One needn’t read *every* text; one only needed to read the *right* texts. Of course, having been determined by Pound himself, those texts come to represent a highly subjective, personal canon that would seem to counteract his insistence on “objectivity” and the hard “science” of good poetry.

Yet Pound saw no contradiction here because the qualities he recognized and appreciated in good poetry were the same qualities that every other intelligent reader ought to be able to recognize. His entire purpose was to promote those personal values to the general public. One of his methods for doing so, as we have seen, was to invent the supposed “school” of Imagisme surrounding the poetry of H.D., Aldington, and himself. Once he had manufactured this movement, he set about advertising it through the literary magazines—most explicitly in his “A Few Don’t’s by an Imagiste” and “*Imagisme*,” both published in 1913. The latter, “*Imagisme*,” is most relevant to my purposes here because the story of its publication demonstrates, once again, Pound’s attempts to manage the movement while making it seem as though other people were the ones promoting it. When Pound asked F.S. Flint to conduct an “interview” with him, he made

it look like interest was coming from outside the group even though he himself was pulling the strings from the inside. “Flint,” he wrote to Dorothy Shakespear in January 1913, “... is doing an intelligent article on me chiefly at my own dictation” (qtd in Ruthven, 69). The original title of the piece was “Les Imagistes: A Note and an Interview,” in which Flint claimed to have been “handed” the principles of Imagisme on a note from Pound himself. When Pound edited the article, however, his goal was to make it seem as though those principles did not belong to him, but to the school. One of the major revisions he made to Flint’s piece was to substitute the pronoun “they” for the “we” he had used initially in describing the work of this type of poetry. In this way, Pound transformed himself from a representative of the Imagistes to “an intermediary” (Ruthven 70) who was not propounding the principles, but only translating them, publicizing them, passing them along unchanged. Interestingly, the switch from “we” to “they” also makes the “interview” feel a lot like gossip: instead of hearing news firsthand, we’re hearing what somebody (Pound) said about somebody else (the imagined Imagistes). This piques our interest—as Pound knew it would.

Pound’s strategy worked, as he soon discovered, too well. Within a few years, Imagisme became “something of a fad” (Marsh 52). Amy Lowell, who had read of the movement and decided that she, too, was an Imagiste, expressed her interest in joining the school and then edged Pound out. The movement morphed into what he disparaged as “Amygism,” underscored by democratic principles of selection and inclusion that Pound simply could not stomach. “He wasn’t going to waste his time,” he told Amy, “pretending that ‘a certain number of people’ were his ‘critical and creative equals’” (qtd. in Moody 224). “Moreover, I should like the name ‘Imagisme’ to retain some sort of meaning,” he wrote to her in August 1914. “It stands, or I should like it to stand for hard light, clear edges. I can not trust any democratized committee to

maintain that standard” (Paige 38). The colleagues that he had judged Imagiste were, however, tired of allowing him control over their names and their art. In 1915, Flint wrote to Pound: “You had the energy, you had the talents... you might have been generalissimo in a compact onslaught: and you spoiled everything by some native incapacity for walking square with your fellows. You have not been a good comrade, voila!” (qtd. in Hannah, 201).

Pound, of course, had no interest in being “a good comrade” for its own sake. His whole purpose in forming creative-critical communities was to promote innovation and determine the future course of modern art. Indeed, it seemed that he minded losing the word he had coined more than the friends he had categorized with it. After Lowell published her anthology, *Some Imagist Poets*, Pound raged: “I don’t suppose any one will sue you for libel; it is too expensive. If your publishers ‘of good standing’ tried to advertise cement or soap in this manner they would certainly be sued” (Paige 44). Pound’s break with Imagisme and Imagisme’s break with him occurred simultaneously. Although he soon turned his energy and attention elsewhere—mainly to Lewis and Vorticism in London—the principles of the original Imagisme remained essential not only to his poetics, but to creative work and critical evaluations of modernism that would take place decades after the fact.

Community and cultural investment

Just as gossip plays a crucial role in community formation by establishing who is “in” and who is “out,” so too does Pound’s literary “reputation-mongering” serve to determine who is “in” and “out” of the literary scene. In London he quickly picked upon how important it was to make the right connections with the right people if one wanted one’s work to be read and reviewed. He became a well-established figure in London salons, attending Yeats’s Mondays and Hulme’s Thursdays while also holding court at his own Tuesdays. Although Pound’s London

hosts found his “apparently inexhaustible energy” and his classically “American drive” to be “tiresome” (Moody 69-70), he stimulated the community and was stimulated by it. He modernized Yeats, studied Ford Madox Hueffer’s theory of impressionism, and incorporated Hulme’s concept of the image into his later doctrine of Imagisme. Under the “tutelage” of Orage, founding editor of *The New Age*, Pound “transformed himself from the poet of ‘the sublime’ into one concerned... to expose and counter the economic causes of industrial strife and war” (Moody 160).

He dedicated himself to establishing connections between artists by talking them up to one another: persuading Hueffer that Yeats was worth his time, sending Richard Aldington to call on Amy Lowell, or trying to resolve a dispute between Wyndham Lewis and Jacob Epstein. His early years in London had convinced him that artists required a community in which they could inspire and be inspired, try out new forms and rhythms, and study the experiments of their peers. “If young men funk that sort of thing,” Pound wrote, referring to the formation of this kind of society, “I don’t see what resonance they can expect; it is string without sounding board” (qtd in Moody, 96). To put it another way, as he did in *The New Age*: “Nothing is more certain than that men of letters suffer from not meeting... men who really know whole systems of things which they themselves do not know” (qtd in McDonald, 15).

This quotation reveals Pound’s emphasis on the importance of literary education, a subject he returned to over and over again throughout the decades. In “Patria Mia,” he famously argued: “If it lie within your desire to promote the arts you must not only subsidize the man with work still in him, but you must gather such dynamic particles together; you must set them where they will interact, and stimulate each other” (*SP* 127). Although Pound’s proposed College of the Arts never physically materialized, his literary gossip in letters, essays, and reviews enabled him

to establish a virtual community beyond London and Paris. While the most famous of these is the “Ezuversity” he maintained while in Rapallo and St. Elizabeth’s, in his private and public writings he had created such a community decades earlier. As foreign correspondent for *Poetry*, he counseled Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson from across the Atlantic; when the poetry of Marianne Moore piqued his interest, he knew so little about her actual person that he wrote to ask her if she was Ethiopian. He did not meet James Joyce until 1920, after they had been corresponding for 6 years already. When all three of Pound’s “Men of 1914” did finally meet each other, they did so in Paris, at Pound’s insistence, even though Pound himself was not present. It didn’t matter to Pound that they might disagree—on the contrary, as he told Harriet Monroe, intelligent disagreement was the cornerstone of good criticism. There is “no use trying to unite people on critical basis, basis of common taste, or opinion,” he wrote to William Carlos Williams in regard to the *Bel Esprit* project. “[M]ust unite on the basis of common good will” (Paige 174). That basis was, for Pound, the production and promotion of modern art.

I have argued above that Pound’s use of gossip is nearly “textbook” in his promotion and management of artistic reputations through third-party conversations. In the previous section, I demonstrated how this technique worked in the case of Imagisme. Yet what I find compelling about Pound’s literary gossip is not only how he *capitalized* on this type of speech, but also how he *transformed* it by inverting its typical socio-political purpose. Social scientists tend to understand gossip as a conservative force that serves to “teach and enforce group norms”: in other words, we learn how to behave by hearing about how others are (mis)behaving (Ofra Nevo et al., 181) and we use gossip to impart social rules (Roy Baumeister et al.) Inherently conservative, gossip maintains order by marking out the boundaries between social groups and demarcating the behavior of insiders vs. outsiders. “Culture in general,” concludes Eric Foster,

“depends on the repetition of norms and mores both formally and informally to enforce conformity on members. Gossip serves this social function well” (770).

Yet Pound’s gossip serves the opposite function. Instead of maintaining the artistic norms of his forebears, Pound works ceaselessly to establish and disseminate the new rules of modern poetry. Typically gossip transmits the values of the community (public values) to the individual, who adopts them as his or her own (seemingly) private values. Pound’s “stratagem” for Flint’s article, in contrast, “was to pass off his personal views as those of a group of people of whom (with some justification, given the printed evidence) he could later claim to have been the leader” (Ruthven 70). Martin Kayman expresses a similar idea: “In this way, his personal values now appear as a supplement to or exemplification of a public movement, which is in fact effectively made up of his personal values” (59). By distancing himself from the production of the article and changing the pronouns from “we” to “they,” Pound made it seem as though “people” in general were talking about the movement—as opposed to the fact of the matter, which was that he was himself promoting a quasi-fictional school of poetry. Although the actual edits may feel small, there is certainly a sense in which Pound’s revisions to Flint’s article prefigure his changes to *The Waste Land*. Both Flint’s piece and Eliot’s poem profoundly shaped the modernist movement and its legacy, and in each case, our perception of the writer is filtered through Pound’s aesthetic values.

In short, then, Pound reverses the function of gossip by publicizing his personal literary values in poetry so widely that those values became central to how poets compose their work and how critics evaluate that work today. Yet how exactly did he achieve this? How did Pound’s conception of “worth” become the standard? Pound’s most effective tool in this respect was, I contend, his correspondence—since it was here that he “talked up” his chosen writers to others,

often explicitly stating his assessment of their “worth” using precisely that word. When he wrote to H.L. Mencken of T.S. Eliot in 1914, for example, Pound remarked: “I enclose a poem by the last intelligent man I’ve found—a young American, T.S. Eliot (you can write him direct, Merton College, Oxford). I think him *worth* watching—mind ‘not primitive.’” Two years later he repeated himself to Kate Buss, one of his frequent correspondents: “Do keep an eye out for Joyce and also for T.S. Eliot. They are *worth* attention” (Paige 40, 73; emphasis mine). Odd as it may seem, in 1922 Pound will go on to calculate Eliot’s worth as exactly 10 British pounds—about 50 American dollars—per year. This is the amount he pledges to provide annually to the *Bel Esprit* project, a foundation he invented so that Eliot could quit his day job. Pound urged others to join this contemporary Kickstarter, including Richard Aldington and William Carlos Williams.²⁹ Despite Pound’s best efforts, *Bel Esprit* came to naught—in part because he had trouble raising funds and in part because Eliot announced that he would prefer to keep his job at the bank. As Pound told John Quinn, he never saw *Bel Esprit* as a “pension” for artists, but rather an investment in them as he would “put it into a shoe factory if I wanted shoes.” “Better simile,” he adds: “into a shipping company, of say small pearl-fishing ships, some scheme where there was a great deal of risk but a chance of infinite profit” (Materer 213).

Once Pound determined the value of a particular artist or endeavor, his next step was to establish a community of insiders to appreciate and protect it. In his letters to his colleagues on the subject of *Bel Esprit*, Pound arranged a transatlantic network of supporters. His comments on Eliot blend personal and professional evaluations, insisting to his readers that Eliot the man was broken down and that Eliot the poet could not be left this way. To Margaret Anderson, Pound sent the update: “Mrs Eliot has just been in, says T.S.E. has done no work for weeks, that he

²⁹Ernest Hemingway also managed to raise some funds for the plan, but then (to share a little gossip of my own) he went out and “blew the cash at a racetrack” (*MentalFloss*).

returns from the bank, falls into a leaden slumber and remains there until bedtime.... However don't despair," he added with his typical dogged optimism. "[S]omething will get itself done about it" (Scott 78). In a separate letter to William Carlos Williams, Pound declared Eliot to be "at the last gasp. Has had one breakdown. We have got to do something at once. I have been on the job, am dead tired hammering this machine. Steps have been taken" (Paige 172). In this way *Bel Esprit* became yet another instance of Pound publicizing his personal values: since he believed that Eliot was worth his investment, he threw himself into the task of convincing other artists and patrons that they should be investing, too.³⁰ The production of modern art, Pound believed, relied on a community. Since there was, as yet, no audience clamoring for the work of Eliot, Pound, and their colleagues, Pound decided that it was up to him—through the power of rumor and reputation—to create it.

Gossip as criticism: it's personal

Pound's relationship with the idea of an audience (both idealized and real) was complicated. Although he didn't believe that an artist should be dependent upon the whims and tastes of the public, he remained committed to helping artists establish an audience if he thought their work was worth it. When Monroe tried to voice her objections to printing *Prufrock* in November of 1914, for example, Pound retorted: "No, most emphatically I will not ask Eliot to write down to any audience whatsoever... Neither will I send you Eliot's address in order that he may be insulted" (Paige 45). What this exchange so compellingly reveals is not Pound's disdain for the readers of *Poetry*, but rather his faith in them. His belief in the power of art to teach and transform its audience persisted intact, unshakeable, despite the lackluster reception he and his favored colleagues frequently received. He kept at it, lobbying on his behalf and theirs in his

³⁰As he explained to Kate Buss, this was simple economics: "the reader is a consumer" and good work is "a luxury; i.e. it can appeal only to a few people and they, if they want it, must pay for it." Furthermore, "as there is no aristocracy, one must form a combine of simple particulars to pay" (Paige 175).

letters and his essays for decades, because “the history of criticism had taught Pound that you can fool enough of the people enough of the time to enable a new way of writing to survive until its potential readership has been educated into appreciating it” (Ruthven 61). He had done exactly this with his own *A Lume Spento*, writing ghosted reviews such as the one that appeared in the London *Evening Standard*. “It pays to advertise,” he had written to his father in 1908. “What we want is *one big* hoorah of fore announcements, & *one more big* hoorah of reviews” (qtd. in Ruthven, 60). Thus we find that Pound is not at all averse to acquiring the attention (and the purchasing power) of a public readership. On the contrary: he actively seeks an audience even though he knows that he must be the one to train it to appreciate his work.

This is why Pound’s poetry can feel as didactic as his criticism: he used his poetry to teach people how to read it. As G. Singh observes, “It’s necessary to read Pound’s poetry to understand his criticism, and to read his criticism to understand his poetry” (viii). Pound fully embraced Coleridge’s conviction that “every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed: so has it been, so will it continue to be” (Wordsworth 951). Indeed, one of Pound’s most famous disagreements with Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, was over the magazine’s stance toward its audience. Monroe had chosen as her motto for the masthead Walt Whitman’s “To have great poets there must be great audiences too”—a line Pound later disparaged as “infamous.” “The artist is not dependent on his audience,” he insisted in the October/November 1914 issues of *Poetry*. “Can we have no great inventors with a great audience for inventors? Had Curie a great audience? Had Eherlich for has bacilli?” These scientific analogies reveal Pound’s continued efforts to make the composition and evaluation of poetry more objective by aligning literary and scientific precision and technique. By positioning literature as an “experiment,” Pound presents it “not for

experience but for inspection, and aspires to durability by getting itself talked about” (Ruthven 112-113). Readers and critics can, through analysis, decide whether or not the experiment has “succeeded.”

There would seem to be a paradox here. On the one hand, Pound is dismissing the idea that poets require “great audiences”; on the other hand, by positioning poetry in a way that *encourages* conversation, “inspection,” and “controversy” from its readers, he is promoting engagement with the very audience that he purports to reject. His ultimate goal is to get people—the “right” people—talking. The artist may not be dependent on his audience for his creative ideas, but if he has any interest in circulating those ideas then he *is* responsible for creating a community of readers skillful and thoughtful enough to engage with him. It is for this reason that Pound was forever pushing his way onto the mastheads of little magazines and for this reason, too, that he was so desperate to acquire a journal of his very own. Pound famously told Margaret Anderson that he desired an “‘official organ’ (vile phrase)” where “I and T.S. Eliot can appear once a month (or once an ‘issue’) and where James Joyce can appear when he likes, and where Wyndham Lewis can appear if he comes back from the war” (Scott 6). He needed, as he told his colleagues time and time again, to make himself and his fellow artists visible, to get enough sets of eyes on them that this kind of experimentation would begin to work its way into the public consciousness. What Pound liked about Anderson’s *Little Review* was that she prioritized her taste over the public’s. Indeed, it was at his suggestion that the motto over the masthead became “Making No Compromise With The Public Taste.”

Just as his poetry emphasized economy and efficiency, so too did Pound’s criticism come to rely on one-liners such his other motto for *The Little Review*: “the magazine that is read by those who write the others.” The emergence of this style, Ruthven observes, runs parallel to the

emergence and growth of tabloid journalism, “with its displacement of emphasis from time-consuming essays to eye-catching headlines.” If literature is, as Pound defines it in the *ABCs of Reading*, “news that stays news,” then “the function of criticism is to produce the headlines which will draw people’s attention to it” (Ruthven 115). Pound’s purpose, as we can see very clearly in a project like the short-lived journal *Blast*, was to surprise, attack, and cajole people into engaging with modernist art. “He wanted people to look at Gaudier-Brzeska’s sculpture and Lewis’s drawings, and read Joyce, Jules Romains and Eliot, rather than read about them,” writes G. Singh in *Ezra Pound as Critic*. “And his own essays—‘blasts’—and reviews were intended to influence or persuade people to do precisely that” (11). He wanted to use his own work to push people toward the work of others.

Another quality that Pound’s criticism shares with tabloids is an interest in people and personalities. He worked tirelessly to make his criticism *personal*—so much so that he refused to engage with writers he didn’t appreciate. When Eliot asked him to write on an artist he didn’t admire, he replied: “If the luminous reason of one’s criticism is that one shd. focus attention on what deserves it, a note by E.P. on Bridges wd. be a falsification of values” (Singh xi-xii). Instead, he chose to write about those contemporaries who were not only familiar to him, “but also most congenial to him—writers about whom and whose art he cared a great deal, thereby illustrating the validity of his own maxim: ‘You never know unless you happen personally to care’” (Singh xii). The “hallmark” of Pound’s criticism, as Singh will go on to argue, “is the way his strong character, personality, and convictions bear upon it, and determine its ethos.”

If Pound's criticism is personal, it is so, not only because his judgements are personal—and, as Leavis puts it, a judgement is either personal, or it is nothing; 'you cannot take over someone else's—but also because the qualities behind his personal judgements (sincerity, integrity and objectivity) are not only literary, but also moral qualities (153-4).

In the following section, I will examine in more detail the “morality” of Pound’s criticism. For now, I would like to focus on the notion that critical judgments are always, necessarily, personal.

We tend to think of both Pound and Eliot as forefathers of the New Criticism, a style of judgment that is objective, impersonal, nearly scientific. But Pound’s criticism feels less like science and more like gossip in the way it elides personal and professional evaluations of the absent third parties in question. “A.E. is a rank amateur,” he wrote for instance to Alice Corbin Henderson in 1913. “Anyhow I don’t think he has written anything for years. Good character god yes, but that only confuses the issue” (Nadel, *Letters*, 31). Or: “Rodker has done a few more entertaining poems. Rather to my surprise. I wonder if he will beat Aldington after all. Is it better to be silly than stupid?” (181). Or, complaining about the trouble that his critical work can cause for his friendships:

I am very much displeased with Richard, more displeased with Flint... There has been nothing but fuss since I first ventured to become more interested in Brzeska and Lewis than in certain jeune poetes. Of course R.'s marriage increased the difficulty of criticising either his work or H.D.'s to any advantage. Latterly he seems to me to be falling into his constitutional danger of words and sentimentalism (118).

“As for Amy, damn Amy,” he sighs, “I was a fool to let in that one poem... Amy will pass. Amy *is* rather annoying” (137). And finally, in the tone of a true gossip speaking in confidence: “I am afraid H.S. is flowing in weaker repetitions of her charming self. I don’t think I have said so, to many people. I don’t want it repeated” (199). For Pound, personal remarks on someone’s character were in fact indistinguishable from professional remarks on that person’s poetry. Since he believed that technique was a measure of sincerity and language represented a mode of vision, literary production and criticism were also a matter of personality, of morality.

In addition to his remarks on his fellow writers, one of the most consistent elements of Pound’s letters to Henderson is his running commentary regarding her co-editor, Harriet

Monroe.³¹ In May of 1916, he wrote: “Of course the plan damn unvarnished fact is that Harriet is a fool... The better the stuff I send in, by me or by anybody else, the more God damn worry, fuss, bother to get it printed” (Nadel, *Letters*, 137). Later on, his critique of Monroe will be the fact that she “*still* yearns for a parish gazette. Despite all we’ve both [Henderson and Pound] done for her education, elle est inattaquable. *BURN THIS DOCUMENT*” (138). Here, too, Pound’s insistence on confidentiality in his communications—communications that center on the criticism of an absent third party—makes us feel as though we are eavesdropping on a private conversation, one characterized by the intimacy, trust, and judgment generally associated with gossip. While other scholars have emphasized the misogyny in Pound’s remarks about Monroe, I would rather call attention to his appropriation of “women’s talk” for his own ends. When he inquires of Henderson in January of 1917 whether “Harriet is still grumped with me, or if there is any use [in] my trying sweet reasonableness at long range” (180), he is not only solidifying his bond with Henderson (by asking for her perspective and advice), but also trying to regain access to the literary conversation that gives him the space to lobby for his chosen artists. Pound’s irritation with Monroe may sound personal, but it grows out of his frustration with the obstruction of his ability to promote modern art. His trouble with Monroe is that she is not as quick to embrace the “modern” as he is; her taste runs more traditional. Both Pound’s personal criticism of his contemporaries and his professional criticism of literature share, I contend, the goal of stimulating readers and writers alike to “make” something “new.”

In all of Pound’s letters, personal evaluations of his colleagues—as “amateurs,” “silly,” “dishonest,” “fools,” with either “a quaint mind full of intelligence” (Eliot) or “the mushiest head in London” (Storer)—blend seamlessly with his professional evaluations of their work. In the

³¹Despite Pound’s tirades against her (both to her face and behind her back), Monroe continued to vouch for him as a poet whose astute evaluations of his friends and colleagues made him “the best critic living” (Moody, 215).

end, Pound's purpose in these letters is to shape the modern movement by getting certain artists into print and by keeping others out. He accomplishes this goal by taking charge of their reputations, talking them up and down to his correspondents, and influencing others to share his personal opinion. "Your not liking Joyce," he writes in 1917 to Henderson, his tone one of solemn disapproval, "is the most serious critical error you have made" (212). The fact that T.S. Eliot and Joyce have become the celebrities of modernism is due in no small part to Pound's advocacy on their behalf. In fact, I would go even further by suggesting that Pound is the reason why "Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity"—the title of Jonathan Goldman's work on the figure of the author in the early twentieth century. "Celebrity culture provided modernists with the methods of commodification and objectification that enabled them to generate this new form of subjectivity," Goldman observes. "By producing the self as an object valued in circulation and through its relation to other objects, these figures rely on the recognition of the audience for their identity" (16).

Pound used his correspondence and his reviews to "produce" his favored writers, to determine their value, to circulate their names and their work, and to establish their audience. He knew, as Ruthven remarks, "that you sell a product first by stimulating a desire for it and then supplying the demand" (61). While he worked to stimulate that desire for his colleagues, he also—of course—was making a name for himself as a critic and sage as well as a poet. At the beginning of his career he had written to his mother from London: "I am not yet a celebrity. But it is indisputable that several very well known people are interested in what I am doing" (Moody 83). By the end of his career, he will be more than famous: he will have become notorious.

Contingencies of value

Lawrence Rainey observes in “The Cultural Economy of Modernism” that Pound’s metaphor of “investment” in explaining *Bel Esprit* to John Quinn is “only partially applicable to literature: normally one’s return on a successful investment results in an increase in one’s wealth and property; but since literary property remains the author’s, investment could hardly characterize the process Pound wished to describe” (74). Pound is not one to misuse a metaphor, however, and I would argue that “investment” is indeed the *mot juste*. Pound’s investment is not in personal property but rather in cultural wealth as a whole. This is why he redirects funds rather than keeping them all for himself; this is why he tells Quinn that no artist needs more than \$2000 to survive. He declares that a patron who buys work from an artist who needs money is helping to create art, becoming a kind of artist himself; whereas a patron who buys work from an artist who is already wealthy or reputable becomes in effect nothing more than a consumer. Pound’s lack of interest in profit for its own sake will partially drive, as Peter Wilson suggests in his *Preface to Ezra Pound*, the poet’s later insistence on social credit and his conviction that economic reform would resolve the issues that ignited world war. “To use Poundian terms of reference,” writes Wilson, “the will to profit is a negation of the will to order, especially when that profit is made selling mass destruction” (112). In these final sections, I examine the elision between Pound’s aesthetic, economic, and political values especially in his notorious turn toward fascism. To pave the way, however, we must begin with his measure of aesthetic worth in poetry and criticism both.

What did Pound want from poetry? Above, I have discussed Pound’s efforts to make poetry “masculine” by stripping away the emotional excess of the Romantics and the Victorians. “It will be as much like granite as it can be,” he wrote.

[I]ts force will lie in its truth, its interpretive power (of course, poetic force does always rest there); I mean it will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither (“A Retrospect,” 1918).

Although he and Eliot wrote in free verse, both poets worked hard to demonstrate that—in Eliot’s famous words—“no *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job.” To Margaret Anderson in August 1917, Pound wrote: “In verse having no very marked or seductive cadence, no rhyme, no qualitative measure, the actual language must be fairly near to perfection” (Paige 113). Words such as “perfection” and “precision” encapsulate Pound’s poetics, as do the more formal titles (Imagisme, Vorticism, the ideogram) that he applied to it. According to Martin Kayman, “Pound pioneered a great many of the techniques which most of us now take for granted in modern poetry: free verse, juxtaposition, concision, direct presentation, the rejection of didacticism, the use of allusion and quotation, ‘imagisme,’ the ‘objective correlative,’ and techniques of ‘impersonality,’ among others (5). “In a Station of the Metro,” for instance, releases the image through the juxtaposition of dissimilar elements: the petals and the “apparition of these faces” and the “petals on a wet black bough.” The poem began with Pound’s experience in the Metro and ended over a year later with his distillation of that experience into nineteen syllables, exemplifying his emphasis on compression, concision, and the *mot juste*.

One way to understand the *Cantos*, scholars have pointed out, is as an accumulation, a string, of such Imagiste moments. Yeats labeled the poem a “portable British museum”; Kenner called it a “curriculum.” “Like Homer,” writes Kayman, “Pound sought to represent the maximum of human knowledge within his text—most of all to present the wisdom, as he saw it, of constitutionalism, economics and aesthetics within a demystified, poetic (objective) form, and thus to incite the reader into activating that wisdom” (111). However one categorizes the *Cantos*, it is clear that Pound intended the poem to constitute a kind of education. A thwarted professor to

the end, he wanted his readers to learn about culture, politics, history, and ethics in addition to learning about poetry. His poetry was not intended to simply to “be,” but to “communicate.” According to Pound, “Literature and the arts are the best means of inter-communication; the most condensed, the least likely to be vain argument,” and he admired Henry James because he believed that no other man “had laboured so hard to create a means of communication” (Singh 77). While the most evident goal of the *Cantos* is to communicate in their “swift juxtapositions of transnational images [...] the experience of modernity” (Beasley 662), the less explicit but equally important purpose of Pound’s epic is to impart to its readers an awareness of what the poetry of modernity should be. We have seen how, through his letters and criticism, Pound committed himself to establishing and managing the social networks that would culminate what we now call “modernism”; and now we find that his poetry, too, demonstrates what Hannah calls a “network aesthetic” (11). While Hannah reads this aesthetic into Pound’s shortest work, I see it even more clearly in his longest. By compelling readers to forge connections between disparate images and experiences, the *Cantos* teach us to see those powerful, invisible networks that constitute modernity and they also involve us in the work of transforming the old into the new.

In addition to training his readers in the work of poetry, Pound also trains them in the art of criticism. In this, too, he was not unaware of his influence. Already in 1925 he was writing to R.P. Blackmur: “There is also a point that has not been raised: i.e. whether I haven't outlined a new criticism or critical system. I don't propose to go back over my printed stuff, volumes, etc. and detach this. But there is material for an essay, or a Ph.D. thesis, or a volume” (qtd. in Singh, viii). This “new criticism or critical system” was grounded in a “series or set of measures, standards, voltmeters” that appear in all his work (*GK* 208). Even in the *Cantos*, notes Beasley, the comparisons Pound draws between seemingly disparate historical eras, geographies,

literatures, and political traditions also constitute a kind of measure: “nations, periods, governments, and individuals are measured against each other and against a Poundian standard that is of its time and place. Clearly, that standard changes over the course of the poem’s composition” (662). If such standards are implicit in Pound’s poetry, he makes them explicit in his personal correspondence and his professional publications. To Iris Barry, one of the first students of his unofficial correspondence course, Pound wrote long letters in 1916 categorizing which writers were worth her time and which were best avoided. “Chaucer has in him all that has ever got into English”; “Wordsworth is a dull sheep”; “Byron’s technique is rotten” (Paige 89-90). In these letters, Pound writes of his predecessors in the same tone of impatient dismissal with which he also describes many of his contemporaries. What Pound reveals in such statements, consequently, is his expansive sense of community. He is managing not only the network of artists living and working in his language and era, but also the network of all the writers who have come before him, and whose tradition he inherits. While he does not approach this panoply with the reverence of T.S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he seeks to establish his place in it and considers literature—or “news that stays news”—to be the means of communication between writers of the past, present, and future.

Just as he has no qualms about telling his correspondents whom and how to read, neither does he hesitate before instructing a more general audience on how to critique. As Singh points out, many of the values Pound emphasized in his poetry became values in his critical work, too. “Precision and clarity are not merely stylistic virtues,” Singh explains. “[T]hey measure the depth and intensity of awareness in a critic whose job it is to identify and discriminate the various kinds and degrees of awareness in others with greater precision, and to distinguish knowledge from not-knowledge” (16). A good critic, in Poundian terms, should not only be

clear and precise but also as thorough, efficient, and rigorous as the modern poet. To assist critics in developing this rigor, Pound organizes writers into six categories: 1) inventors; 2) masters; 3) diluters; 4) those who “do more or less good work in the more or less good style of a period” while incorporating some “slight personal flavor, some minor variant of a mode”; 5) writers of *Belles Lettres*; and 6) “the starters of crazes” (Singh 12-13). These categories become foundational to Pound’s own work and to his appraisals of the work of his fellow scholars. According to Pound, “If a man knows the facts about the first two categories, he can evaluate almost any unfamiliar book on first sight. I mean he can form a just estimate of its worth, and see how and where it belongs in this scheme” (*LE* 24). Once again we find ourselves confronting this matter of “worth” in art. For Pound—as we can see in his placement of “inventors” at the top rung in his critical ladder—what a piece of literature is “worth” is directly proportional to the inventiveness, the newness of its technique.

Although, as Kayman admits, it is probable “that in not one instance did Pound originate the technique or the critical value” that his acolytes have studied in his poetry and his criticism, “it was he who popularized and most consistently exemplified” those values and techniques and “provided them with a critical discourse” (5). The verbs “popularized” and “propagandized” effectively describe Pound’s approach. As we have seen in the cases of H.D. and T.S. Eliot, Pound pushed other writers to produce his ideal of modern poetry and then, once he was satisfied that those writers were properly trained in his method, he talked them up to other artists, potential editors, and patrons. He had learned early on that literary criticism “is an aesthetic discourse which encodes a crypto-politics of reputation mongering” (Ruthven 108), and he used this knowledge to establish measures of critical as well as poetic worth. In this way, just as in the case of Imagisme, Pound’s personal values became public values—the foundation for much of

the literary criticism of the 20th century—because of the way he promoted and circulated those ideas through gossip.

Thus, despite its seemingly objective criteria, we find that Pound's idea of value may be even more paradoxical than his concept of audience. Although he writes as though his standards are scientific in their objectivity and measurability, the fact remains that they are intensely personal. If they seem more objective for the poets and critics who came after Pound, it was simply because he was so successful in publicizing them. "There is opportunism and there is opportunism," wrote Pound in 1935, defining "the opportunism of the artist" as creation "out of the material present. The greater the artist, the more permanent his creation." In reference to this quotation, Kayman remarks: "In the case of Imagisme, the impact has been fairly 'permanent'—it has produced an influence—an intervention in demand. In this way, it has influenced *us* inasmuch as we are modernists... It is no wonder that we see [Pound's] writing as 'good poetry': he wrote well and influenced us" (Kayman 64). In other words, the "value" of modern poetry was produced through community, through conversation, through the disagreements that Pound claimed to be necessary to criticism.

In writing of the discourse surrounding artistic production, Ruthven adds that "the only people shortchanged by these practices were readers naïve enough to believe that criticism is produced by impartial experts" (63). Those who were not shortchanged understood the empowerment of such a discovery: artistic worth is not something handed down, but rather something produced through discussion, innovation, and collaboration. This idea of the collective determination of value is a concept that Barbara Herrnstein Smith examines in her *Contingencies of Value* (1988). "[W]hen we state the value of a literary work, we are usually not *only*... declaring its past or present value for *ourselves*," she writes, "but also estimating its

probable value for others” (13). For Smith, “evaluation is... always mingled with regards that stand aloof from the entire point: always compromised, impure, contingent” (1). Like Pound, she sees how the production and consumption of literature through acts such as “publishing, printing, purchasing, and preserving” are “implicit act[s] of evaluation,” even though we prefer to see them as set apart from (and less distinguished than) “real literary evaluation, the assessment of intrinsic worth” (3). Pound, too, understood that measures of “intrinsic worth” are inextricably bound up with the connections forged through social networks and the reputations managed through letters and reviews. “Merit,” for Pound:

was not something internal to poetry as opal is to rocks, self-evidently there to anybody who took the trouble to look. On the contrary, merit was in the eye of the beholder: it was the product, in other words, not of literary texts but of the discourse which circulates about them, which is literary criticism. To get hold of the means of production of that discourse—as a reviewer, *faute de mieux*, but preferably as an editor or publisher—was a more urgent task therefore than writing any number of poems whose merits would never be noticed until a revolution in critical discourse had been achieved (Ruthven 42).

By calling this discourse “literary gossip,” I intend to underscore to the ways in which criticism is personal, creative, and contingent—not only in Pound’s day, but also in our own.

As I demonstrated earlier, Pound not only appropriated the tools and technique of gossip, but he also transformed them. Whereas gossip has tended to serve the conservative social function of transferring the norms of the group in and through its individual members, Pound disseminated his individual standards for literature and criticism with such insistence and conviction that they become the standards of the group. Pound’s gossip, consequently, served a progressive, revolutionary function rather than a conservative one. By imparting new values and measures of worth to his colleagues and his contemporaries, he stimulated the kind of innovation that drew disparate individuals into artistic communities and propelled the movement that became modernism. According to Moody, Pound had realized in London “that ‘a renaissance is a

thing made—a thing made by conscious propaganda.” To this end, the social gatherings and weekly dinners that he organized for his fellow artists “were a conscious effort to keep up the communications which are the lifeblood of a civilization” (300). His literary gossip was not intended to keep artistic outliers in line, but to encourage new ideas and circulate them throughout the community. In *Learning to Be Modern*, Gail McDonald writes that according to the terms of Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz’s analysis of campus cultures, “Pound would be classified as a ‘rebel,’ a type she sees emerging at the beginning of the 20th century. Opposed to the dominant fraternity culture, which mirrored the conventions of the privileged class, rebels were drawn by their dissatisfaction to the movements associated with modernism” (15). Thus we find that although Pound’s later turn toward Fascism seems to imply a kind of virulent reactionism, at many points throughout his career he also proved himself to be a classic “rebel”: a progressive thinker, poet, and teacher.

It was Pound’s rebellious, subversive stance toward art and the establishment that inspired the poets of the 1950s and 1960s who followed in his footsteps. Christopher Beach’s *ABC of Influence* examines this paradox, exploring “how the most radically experimental poetic writing in twentieth-century America could have derived from a poetics that reflects a fascist ideology” (5). According to Beach, “It was Pound’s idiosyncratic, iconoclastic, and interactive sense of tradition... that appealed to postwar American poets such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan.” They saw in Pound “an alternative model of literary Modernism to what they considered the more rigid and hierarchical set of values and expectations represented by Eliot and the New Criticism,” and they felt “inhibited by the restrictive value judgments made by critics within the academy” (18-19). Pound’s poetry was innovative, engaging, demanding, and unpredictable. He wanted to rework the tradition, to “make it new,” rather than humbly accepting

a predetermined place in it. He moves from Imagisme to Vorticism to Confucianism, and at each step of the way he transforms theoretical fragments of the old into something modern, something distinctly suited for the concerns of readers and writers alike in the first decades of the twentieth century.

This is why the “Poundian standard” changed over the course of the *Cantos*, as Beasley has written; moreover, perhaps this is why his values seem to undergo such a fascinating, terrifying transformation over the years leading up to World War II. His crusade against convention, his appreciation for innovative uses of the classical tradition, and his dissatisfaction with the place of the poet in American society led him, in a number of letters preceding his 1933 audience with Mussolini, to offer his services as cultural director to Il Duce. According to Beach, the experimental poets of the 1950s and 1960s liked the fact that Pound had such a strong political stance—no matter what it was (25). Pound’s turn to Fascism, I would like to suggest in this final section, is also a matter of value—of mistaken value, or value misplaced.

Aesthetics, politics, and economics

It would be irresponsible to write a full chapter on Pound without addressing, at least briefly, the turn from aesthetics to economics in his work and the fascism and anti-Semitism that cost him what was left of his reputation. In March of 1948, when the Bollingen Prize for Poetry was announced, *The New York Times* carried the headline: “Pound, in Mental Clinic, Wins Prize for Poetry Penned in Treason Cell.” To the bitter end, it seemed, Pound was determined to “make news” through literature, his work inspiring journalists to write headlines even more sensational than those he penned in little magazines.³² A few months later, in June, Harvard

³²As Evans (Luther H. Evans, the Librarian of Congress at the time of the prize) later observed, “The award possessed that bizarre quality that makes news.” The Editor of the *Saturday Review* said of the two Hillyer pieces: “Of course, we just printed the Hillyer articles and the editorial to start a controversy. It was a great success. We thought it would give us three exciting issues but it went on for six” (McGuire).

Professor Robert Hillyer published two articles in the *Times*' Saturday Review of Literature calling the Cantos "the vehicle of contempt for America, [of] Fascism, anti-Semitism, and... ruthless mockery of our Christian war dead." The articles caught the attention of members of Congress who demanded to know how the Library of Congress, as a representative of the United States Government, could have awarded such a prestigious prize to such a traitorous individual. "Should we encourage the activities in literature of moral lepers?" asked one congressman. Another wondered: "Must we not be equally diligent to investigate the infiltration of Fascist ideas especially in so august an institution as the Library of Congress?" (McGuire). Although Pound kept the prize, the final resolution passed in August prohibited the Library of Congress, as an arm of the government, from handing out any future awards. The controversy died down,³³ but the matter of Pound's poetry has "stayed news" insofar as readers and scholars continue to debate today how much weight we ought to give the personality (and politics) of the poet when we are considering his poems.

One major reason why it is difficult to separate Pound's life from his poetry is because Pound himself saw the two as inextricably intertwined. His criticism of poetry had never been far from his criticism of other elements of life itself. "Hence the importance," writes Ruthven, citing Pound, of 'cleaning up... the WORD' and putting an end to 'the befouling of terminology'" (116-117). The *mot juste* was also a means of "cleaning up" the ills of society. This is why Pound can call the *mot juste*, even as early as 1922, a matter of "public utility. We are governed by words, the laws are graven words, and literature is the sole means of keeping these words living and accurate" (LE 409). The *mot juste* is a measure of the truth and sincerity of the poet and a measure of the clarity of his vision—and that vision is necessarily moral and ethical,

³³In 1999, Pound was barred from the Poets' Corner in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York because of his fascist and anti-Semitic positions before, during, and after WWII.

because it represents the way that he sees the world and imagines his place in society. Thus, according to Singh:

...technical or aesthetic criticism is only one of many aspects... of what constitutes the business of a critic. One of the manifestations of significance in criticism is the way moral criteria merge with technical considerations, as they do in Pound's own case. For instance, he defines technique as the test of a writer's 'sincerity,' genius as 'an inevitable swiftness and rightness in a given field...Hence, whether he discussed his critical terminology or his notion of culture, Pound's attitude was essentially that of one who is, like Matthew Arnold, a critic of literature as well as a critic of the values of contemporary civilization (17-18).

Following Pound's example, the language poets of the 1950s and 1960s also "explored the idea of the 'perfectibility' of language: the notion that an intensified and attentive 'sincerity' in the use of words can function as a critique of the misuse of language in society, a misuse directly related to the other problems that society may face" (Beasley 23). The question remains, of course, what exactly Pound saw in Fascism that to him seemed in line with his own values and goals for literature and society. How did he see Fascism as a kind of *mot juste* when it so clearly represented a "misuse," an abuse of an entire people and of the Western ideals of civilization that Pound had engaged with for so many years in his poetry?

Hugh Kenner, who mostly avoids the issue of Pound's fascist, anti-Semitic politics, eventually admits near the end of *The Pound Era* that "a man can grow committed to incompatible things." For Kenner, Pound's fascism "is continuous with his interest in the Chung Yung: in the belief that a ruler of sufficient sensibility, sufficiently steady will, could catalyze a whole people's *senso morale*" (457). For Paul Morrison, Pound's attraction to fascism was a result of the system's reliance on aesthetics and representation, or what Walter Benjamin called "the introduction of aesthetics into political life." "Pound's economics," Morrison explains, "never progressed beyond a concern with issues of monetary distribution and representation, the 'poetics' of money, and the 'poetics' became entangled in anti-Semitism, the topological fantasy

of a Jewish conspiracy” (9). He appreciated the narrative of fascism more than the reality of it, and he was willing to disregard the truth of the system in order to cling to the promise of its fiction. He convinced himself that Mussolini’s government would bring about a new renaissance, the modern equivalent of the *quattrocento*, when “the highest culture and modern science functions at a maximum” (Moody 142). In an interview with Francesco Monotti in 1931, Pound declared that his greatest interest in the world was “civilization, the high peaks of culture. Italy has twice civilized Europe... Each time a strong, live energy is unleashed in Italy, a new renaissance comes forth” (qtd in Redman, 76). As Tim Redman points out, Pound desired above all else to be at the center of culture, at the vortex of creativity and innovation—and to him, Mussolini represented the future of Italy and the arts. Pound was also deeply disappointed with Western capitalism and the social injustices of liberalism, particularly with what he saw as the American government’s prioritizing of banks over citizens. “He was caught up in the contradictions of a time,” writes Moody, “when a Fascist dictator cared more for the welfare of his people than the governments of the capitalist democracies did for theirs” (136).

As odd as Pound’s sudden turn to economic policy may seem, the core of his concern remained what it had always been: his desire to promote the arts. To the current *Poetry* editor Morton Dauwen Zabel, Pound wrote in 1934: “Contemporary economics goes over my desk NOW just as the Joyce, Lewis, Eliot etc/ went over it in 1917” (qtd. in Moody, 144). For modern literature to flourish, the economic situation needed to change. As Pound himself wondered in his 1933 article “Murder by Capital”: “What drives, or what can drive a man interested almost exclusively in the arts, into social theory or into a study of the ‘gross material aspects’ of the present?” His answer? “I have blood lust because of what I have seen done to, and attempted against, the arts in my time.” Since he believed that the “unjust distribution of credit at the heart

of the American capitalist system” had done great damage to the arts, he was looking to support a leader who promised change.

He chose Mussolini because he saw the man as a genius, an artist—and so he identified with him. Mussolini seemed to be “like himself an artist, a maker, only an artist able not only to conceive an enlightened social order but actually to will it into existence” (Moody 138). Indeed, one of the major strategies of and difficulties with his treatise *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* is Pound’s fusion of political and aesthetic criteria, emphasizing Mussolini’s civic actions as works of art. Not only did this move allow Pound to overlook Mussolini’s injustices or contradictions as the inconsistencies of an artist, but it also—more importantly—conferred upon Pound the mantle of political authority.

Who possibly was in a better position to judge the work of a fellow artist than Pound, one of the preeminent critics of this century? Thus, by a neat shift of ground, Pound became a political authority. This shift of ground allowed him to occupy two worlds of differing values; it also eased Pound’s identification with his hero, Mussolini (Redman 118).

Redman’s reference here to “two worlds of differing values” underscores the extent to which the profound errors in Pound’s judgment—a judgment which, when it came to literature and criticism, others had always found to be so unerring—were a consequence of his shift in spheres of value. His mixing of aesthetic and political spheres, adds Redman, “continues as Pound concludes that Mussolini has exquisite taste, both in poetry and pottery, and that men of taste, such as himself, know politics” (118). It didn’t hurt, of course, that Mussolini had thrilled Pound during their meeting by calling his poetry “*divertente*” (amusing).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Pound’s strategy for improving politics had a great deal in common with his strategy for promoting modern art—through his correspondence. Just as Pound’s solution to the problem of uninspired artistic creation was to form communities through which a new set of standards could be established and disseminated, so too did he believe the

solution to the economics and social ills of America would come when “a sufficiently active segment of the public” could be “persuaded to combine and compel its elected delegates to act decently in an even moderately intelligent manner.” Pound’s “political program in a nutshell,” according to Redman, begins with “cooperation, consensus, and communication among a small group of intelligent men” who form “committees of correspondence, writing to each other to air their ideas and reach agreement” (113). Pound wrote thousands of letters during this era, and instructed his correspondents to correspond also with each other. After having learned the “politics” of literary campaigning, Pound hoped to turn his flair for gossip and reputation-mongering to the actual political sphere. In politics, however, he was less successful than he had been in the arts. As Moody points out, there is the obvious dissonance between Pound’s demand for decency and intelligence in politics with the hateful ignorance that led him to vilify an entire race of people; no less paradoxical was his alignment of Mussolini’s government with the original intentions of the American constitution. By misplacing his aesthetic values in the political sphere, he hurtled headlong not only into fascism but also anti-Semitism. When he eventually apologized for the latter, he dismissed it as a “suburban prejudice”; he did not seem to recognize it for the “massive political, ethical, and human failing” that it was (Morrison 59).

What, then, are we to make of Pound today? Two months ago I presented a version of this chapter to the Ezra Pound Society, which turned out to be a room of white male professors emeriti who—on that particular day, in any case—were more interested in quoting Pound’s *Cantos* aloud than they were in engaging critically with his work. To me, the lack of rigorous discourse surrounding Pound seemed to demonstrate the persistence of his unfavorable reputation in the academy and the resulting hesitance of younger scholars to deal seriously with his work. One can understand why, given Pound’s position as a fascist, racist, and a

misogynist—among his other issues. In the preface to his three-volume biography of Pound, Moody labels the poet a “flawed idealist,” and while in one sense this phrase seems to sugarcoat Pound’s sins, in another it seems exactly right. To some, the lines in Canto CXV, where Pound writes of “men seeking good, / doing evil,” have come to represent an implicit acknowledgment of the error of his ways. He was forever an optimist: he believed in the work of his contemporaries, just as he believed that Americans had a better chance of recovering their “earlier and better heritage,” the promise of the founding fathers in the Constitution, by confronting head-on the challenges to our system reflected in fascism and communism (Redman 110). He confused aesthetic and political spheres because of his conviction that art had the power to effect change; he wanted poetry to make things “happen” (Morrison 19). And perhaps most importantly for those of us continuing to engage with Pound’s work today, he believed that “criticism...is written in the hope of better things” (letter to Felix Schelling, 1922).

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CONCLUSION

But what a book, [Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein] both agreed, would be the real story of Hemingway, not those he writes but the confessions of the real Ernest Hemingway.
– *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

“I’ve written all the facts about Gertrude [Stein] so they’ll be on tap if anything happens to me.”
– *Hemingway to the editor of Esquire, 1935*

In November 2015, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* hit the top of the sales charts on France Amazon and the French retail chain FNAC. In the wake of the recent terrorist attacks on Paris, the French turned for solace and support to this American text, this standard of transatlantic modernism whose title translates as *Paris est une fête*: Paris is a celebration. David Ducreux of Editions Gallimard told the news channel France 24 that the translated title is symbolic, an act of resistance, in that it is saying “‘Paris is alive’... It describes Hemingway’s Paris during the 1920s, when people were out on terraces, drinking glasses of wine and talking. It’s very close to how the youth of Paris live today.” A professor of American literature at the University of Lausanne told the same news channel that, on the contrary, the book does not describe how people live today but paints an “ideal version of Paris.” “It’s a book that’s predicated on nostalgia, that’s predicated on a world that’s already gone... I think this is exactly what people are looking for” (Holman).

Whether *A Moveable Feast* depicts Paris as it is or as it was remains an issue for debate. The more compelling aspect of this news report is the realization that Hemingway’s memoir, written years after the fact and decidedly romanticized, has become so deeply embedded in our cultural memory of the time and place it describes that Parisians now embrace it as the

archetypal representation of their city. And Hemingway's memoir is, like most other modernist reminiscences of that era, a work of gossip. He spends many pages describing neither himself nor the city but his colleagues: the conversation of Gertrude Stein, the stench of Ford Madox Ford, the turbulent marriage of F. Scott Fitzgerald. His fourth wife Mary, in typing the manuscript, "wondered how it could be considered autobiographical, given how much attention is devoted to depicting the character and habits of other people" (DiBattista 175). While biographical details may not, per se, constitute gossip, I contend that it is the manner in which Hemingway describes his friends and colleagues—the allusions, the secrecy, the gaps and omissions—that pushes his writing over the line. As Maria DiBattista suggests, Hemingway's mingling of biography and autobiography, memoir and gossip should come as no surprise to those readers familiar with his work and personality. His "idea of reflection," she writes, "does not entail placidly regarding himself in the mirror, but actively confronting himself in the light—often the glare—of how others see and respond to him" (175). His sense of self, we discover in *A Moveable Feast*, is decidedly social.

In their introduction to *Modernism and Autobiography*, Maria DiBattista and Emily Wittman suggest that the modernist autobiography took unusual forms because the modernists were interrogating the very concepts that the genre takes for granted: what a "life" means, what constitutes the "self." Hemingway expresses this trouble over the nature of identity and personhood in the very first pages of *A Moveable Feast*, where he addresses himself and the reader in the second person before switching suddenly in the next paragraph to the first.

All of the sadness of the city came suddenly with the first cold rains of winter, and there were no more tops to the high white houses as you walked but only the wet blackness of the street and the closed doors of the small shops... and the hotel where Verlaine had died where you had a room on the top floor where you worked.

It was either six or eight flights up to the top floor and it was very cold and I knew how much it would cost for a bundle of small twigs... So I went to the far side of the street to look up at the roof in the rain and see if any chimneys were going, and how the smoke blew (16).

The switch between the second and first person, from addressee to addresser, from object to subject, sets the tone for the memoir to follow. Hemingway will write of himself through other people; he will, like Henry James, approach consciousness as a set of “channels” linking individuals to one another rather than as a self-contained, insular psychology. As DiBattista observes, “The alternating perspectives produced by the sudden shifts from first to second person is [sic] amplified in the interpersonal structure of the memoir, which unfolds as a series of encounters, conversations, and one notorious overheard exchange with writers and friends against whom he measured his development as a writer and as a man” (175). This “interpersonal structure,” much like gossip itself, unsettles the idea of a solitary, easily definable self.

Like other texts explored in this dissertation, Hemingway’s memoir incorporates gossip into both its content and its form. The gossipy content is perhaps more noticeable: Hemingway portrays Fitzgerald’s drinking problem (he labels it a “sickness”) and Zelda’s jealousy (he calls her “insane”); he also writes about Ford Madox Ford’s difficulties in getting a divorce, Gertrude Stein’s relationship with Alice Toklas, Wyndham Lewis’s “nasty” habits, and Ernest Walsh’s attempts to “con” everyone. Hemingway remarks, too, on the third-party discussions of the artists around him. Sylvia Beach, we read, had pretty legs and loved to gossip; Gertrude Stein “talked, mostly, and she told me about modern pictures and about painters—more about them as people than as painters—and she talked about her work” (26). Stein’s focus on painters as personalities rather than artists heralds the emergence of the new celebrity culture. Indeed, the manner in which her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* participates in and contributes to that culture would become the root of its success. Hemingway’s most memorable piece of gossip

about Stein, however, is the conversation he overhears between Stein and Toklas;³⁴ and perhaps his transcription of it is his way of striking back at Stein for Alice's report in *The Autobiography*:

Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson are very funny on the subject of Hemingway. The last time that Sherwood was in Paris they often talked about him. Hemingway had been formed by the two of them and they were both a little proud and a little ashamed of the work of their minds. . . . And then they both agreed that they have a weakness for Hemingway because he is such a good pupil. He is a rotten pupil, I protested. You don't understand, they both said, it is so flattering to have a pupil who does it without understanding it, in other words he takes training and anybody who takes training is a favorite pupil. They both admit it to be a weakness (204).

This kind of gossip in Stein's memoir—the trash-talking, the inside scoop on famous personalities such as Hemingway—is a major part of why the book became so popular. The gossip in Hemingway's memoir is part of why his became so popular, as well.

Even more important than the gossip in the *content* of *A Moveable Feast*, however, is the gossip in its *form*. Hemingway's memoir proceeds, as does most of his prose, by allusions, omissions, vague references to mysteries and secrecies. We are reminded of Patricia Spacks's definition of gossip as a “certain atmosphere . . . of intimacy, of gusto, often of surprise and revelation” (30). Hemingway creates this atmosphere through what he leaves out, which he calls his theory of omission. “[Y]ou could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood,” he notes in the memoir itself (71). He invokes this atmosphere of “intimacy” and “gusto” in his conversations with Hadley in particular. The line “We looked at each other and laughed and then she said one of the secret things” (186), for example; or “I was not sad at all when I got home to the rue Cardinal Lemoine and told my newly acquired knowledge to my wife and we were happy

³⁴“Then Miss Stein's voice came pleading and begging, saying, ‘Don't, pussy. Don't. Don't, please don't. I'll do anything, pussy, but please don't do it. Please don't. Please don't, pussy.’ I swallowed the drink and put the glass down on the table and started for the door. . . . ‘I have to go,’ I said and tried not to hear any more as I left but it was still going on and the only way I could not hear it was to be gone” (*A Moveable Feast* 93).

in the night with our own knowledge we already had and with other new knowledge we had acquired in the mountains” (30). Like all good gossip, these passages are centered on sex—and yet we readers do not know “the secret things” the couple says to one another or what constitutes the “new knowledge” they had acquired on their mountain holiday.

These omissions do not only occur with Hadley. At one point, when Gertrude Stein is explaining to young Hemingway the difference between male and female homosexuality, he says: “I see. But what about so and so?” The use of “so and so” stands out because Hemingway uses specific names so freely elsewhere. He has no compunction about telling us that Fitzgerald worries over the size of his penis, but here Hemingway withholds the name of the woman in question. The conversation continues:

“She’s vicious,” Miss Stein said. “She’s truly vicious, so she can never be happy except with new people. She corrupts people.”

“I understand.”

“You’re sure you understand?” (30).

The question might well be put to the reader. “You’re sure you understand?” And the answer is must always be no, not quite; we are listening at the door, but some of the key words have been deliberately exchanged for allusion (at best) or silence (at worst). One of the “juiciest” bits of the memoir would be the details about Hemingway’s affair with Pauline Pfeiffer and the dissolution of his marriage with young Hadley, but the narrator only drops ominous hints of it. “The bulldozing of three people’s hearts to destroy one happiness and build another and the love and the good work and all that came out of it is not part of this book. I wrote it and left it out” (123), he declares. In a section that was in fact left out of the first edition of the text, he adds: “In writing there are many secrets too” (222). This sense of intrigue, expectation, and shared—if only partial—understanding emerges out of the text’s aestheticization of gossip.

While Hemingway's memoir has not previously been analyzed as gossip, another modernist (auto)biography—Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*—has. According to Kassi Cowles, in this text Stein “manufactures intimacy by mimicking the rhetoric of gossip, by giving Alice an insider's perspective” even though she “ultimately exposes the autobiographical intimacy by revealing very little about her interior world” (3). Alice's autobiography is, of course, an autobiography of Stein written by her from the perspective of Alice. In his review of the book in *The New Republic*, Edmund Wilson called it an “imaginative projection” of how Stein's life looks to Alice. Thus, he writes, the *Autobiography* “has something of the character and charm of a novel—a novel of which the subject is the life which Miss Stein and Miss Toklas have made together in Paris, the salon over which they have presided, the whole complex of ideas and events of which they became the center” (246). He concludes that the book reads less like the memoirs of Margot Asquith or of Isadora Duncan, but rather like the reader's “recollection of one of the households of Jane Austen.” Austen was, as I noted in the first chapter on Henry James, not only a writer who helped popularize free indirect discourse, but also a writer for whom gossip, hearsay, and speculation become crucial elements of plots centered, as they are, on the inner workings of society.

Technically, Stein's *Autobiography* is not written in the free indirect style because Alice narrates to us from a first-person point of view. Yet Stein muddles the boundary between first and third person in the very premise of the book. The text is more accessible than Stein's others, some critics suggest, because Alice's voice has mingled with Stein's and tempered it. In this sense, we might say that Stein's prose expresses the same “assemblage” of subjects and voices that Deleuze identifies in indirect discourse.³⁵ Alice's “conversational tone,” which Cowles

³⁵“Indirect discourse is not explained by the distinction between subjects; rather, it is the assemblage, as it freely appears in this discourse, that explains all the voices present within a single voice” (*Plateaus* 80).

points to as part of the reason for the book's success, "mimics the oral ritual of gossip in that Stein replicates how gossip sounds when one is repeating second-hand information, and how it looks by portraying Alice sitting with other women discussing the personal lives of other people" (8-9). With Fernande, Picasso's model and mistress, Alice talks about other artists; with Gertrude Stein (a few paragraphs later), she talks about Picasso and Fernande. Alice's famous line about knowing only "three first class geniuses" in her life—Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and Alfred Whitehead—is compelling precisely because of the fusion of Gertrude's voice with hers. Is Alice calling Gertrude a genius, or is that Gertrude's label for herself, as a means of self-promotion? Thus we find that in the *Autobiography*, as in *The Ambassadors*, gossip becomes more than a matter of content: it also becomes embedded as a formal principle in the very voice and style of the text. The *Autobiography*, in essence, reports Stein's gossip *about herself*—and the result is her successful self-creation as a celebrity.

Although this dissertation has dealt with instances of gossip outside the realm of celebrity news and scandal, I would be remiss if I did not touch upon it at all—particularly since, as Andrew Goldman puts it, *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity* (2011). In his book, Goldman argues that the "signature styles of modernism and celebrity produce similar forms of cultural value and together strive to reaffirm the centrality of the individual within mass society" (2). This thesis resonates with my reading of modernist gossip as a means of establishing smaller, more intimate communities within an increasingly impersonal and metropolitan world. It is no coincidence that modernist literature emerged at the same time as celebrity gossip, nor that modernist literature—as I have shown—incorporates elements of the new gossip journalism in its content and its form. Modernism, gossip, and the concept of "celebrity" are all reactions to crises of self and society, identity and community, privacy and publicity in modernity. The sheer

speed with which figures such as Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway could acquire fame and stardom was a phenomenon new and distinctive to the twentieth century. In “Literary Modernism in the Age of Celebrity,” Timothy Galow points to the emergence of literary sections and supplements in national newspapers and magazines, author interviews, book tours, promotional appearances, and public lectures as elements that enabled authors to engage with their readers and mediated readers’ experiences of the text (314). Stein’s publishers, Harcourt, placed ads for *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in every literary supplement, assuring readers not only that the text would explain how modern literature came to be, but also that it would do so in an accessible, readable way.

Stein was, in fact, so successful in advertising herself through her memoir that people became fascinated by *her*—not her writing. When she traveled throughout the United States for her lecture tour in 1934, newspapers “tracked her movements” in order to report on “her clothes, her demeanor, and her effect on audiences” (Galow 319). And if Stein’s fame was great, how much more tremendous was Hemingway’s—he who, “alone of his generation enjoyed the double distinction of being a respected novelist and a celebrity” (Raeburn 1)? John Raeburn begins his book about Hemingway-as-celebrity (*Fame Became of Him*, 1984) with an anecdote about a photoquiz in *Look* magazine that appeared in the 1950s. Readers were given a set of photographs of various personal “trademarks” and told to identify the celebrity from them. “With a single exception,” Raeburn writes, “all fifteen photographs were of political or show business personalities presumably famous to *Look* readers. The exception was Ernest Hemingway, whose trademark was a curly white beard” (1). According to Raeburn, Hemingway’s fame emerged early because of the personality (carefully constructed) that shone through his numerous nonfiction pieces. He became “the darling of the mass media” because he was “a vigorous and

colorful character who, as Morley Callaghan remarked, ‘made men want to talk about him,’ and he was willing to make public his private life, thus providing a ready-made personality to be turned to account” (10). While Raeburn’s book seems to be grounded simply in his curiosity over how this literary celebrity came to be, cultural critic Daniel Boorstin remarks upon the same qualities with open disdain. In 1962 Boorstin labeled Hemingway the “Douglas Fairbanks” of American literature: a victim of the “star-system,” known not for his work but for his “well-knownness” (Del Gizzo 7).

If Hemingway had long enjoyed his fame by the time he sat down to write *A Moveable Feast*, the book—published posthumously—catapulted him from celebrity status to mythic. This transition is, I contend, tied up with gossip. As Melanie Tebbutt explains in her cultural history *Women’s Talk*, the repetition characteristic of gossip reflects “a speculative tendency whereby added detail and interpretations of behavior gave some subjects a larger than life quality,” as their characters and reputations became “exaggerated by continual re-telling” (5). Interestingly, this is Raeburn’s hypothesis about the origins of Hemingway’s “legendary” status: his nonfictional material served to define his public personality because of his “skillful repetition” (10) of his opinions and his exploits. “Mythic qualities,” Tebbutt observes, “also developed in the exaggeration of small experiences which could become ‘representations’ of large meaning” (5). In *A Moveable Feast*, this effect occurs time and again: the narrator’s walks through the streets of Paris, the conversations with other literary elites in sidewalk cafes, the meditations on writing and writing well. The narrator’s declaration of his “happiness” and his repeated description of his love for young Hadley and hers for him punctuate so many sections of the text that they become motifs. This is the repetition that moves the memoir toward myth. Through this

technique, Hemingway mythologizes the American modernist community between the wars, his first marriage, his writing process, and—of course—the city of Paris itself.

Both *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *A Moveable Feast* rely, moreover, on an oral aesthetic. Although the Hemingway who narrates the memoir claims that Stein does not understand “what I was trying to do about conversation” (35), several scholars have remarked upon the influence of Stein in Hemingway’s work. “It is indeed true, as one reads this book,” writes Edmund Wilson in a review of *The Autobiography* for *The New Republic*, “one is more forcibly struck than ever by Hemingway’s debt to Gertrude Stein.”³⁶ Wilson suggests that Hemingway “has been influenced by her conversational as well as by her literary style” and then adds (with a nod and a wink, it would seem): “I hardly dare suggest that Gertrude Stein’s literary style may in its turn have been affected by the conversations of Hemingway’s characters” (246). In both memoirs, however, the conversational style *becomes* the literary style: gossip becomes so deeply embedded in the narrative that conversation and literature cannot be divided. In his study of the friendship between Stein and Hemingway, Lyle Larsen shows how it was not *only* the colloquialism that Hemingway learned from Stein but also her “mode of cryptic references and ironic repetitions” (44).³⁷ In other words, he picked up the manner in which she transformed conversation into gossip—which, as Stein proved, was the kind of writing that would always sell well.

If both writers embed gossip in their memoirs, they each do so to different effect. For Cowles, Stein’s incorporation of gossip “engages with the myth of the ‘male solitary genius’” in

³⁶In his review, Wilson also remarks upon Stein’s bias, comparing her—as the ‘ruler of a salon’—to Proust’s Mme. Verdurin. “You get the impression that when her protégés go elsewhere or cease to need her,” he observes, “she can no longer believe in them quite so strongly” (Wilson 247).

³⁷Larsen adds: “Those who recognized the similarities in the two styles noted also that, unlike Stein, Hemingway actually had something to write about” (44).

its insistence (through Alice) on her own genius. “She creates an exaggerated divide between wives and geniuses only to collapse both constructions by means of a narrative that parodies both the lofty male intellectual and the frivolous female gossip” (4). Hemingway, on the contrary, is not interested in collapsing this divide but in sharpening it. Through gossip, he sets himself up as the “lofty male intellectual” second to none. According to Craig Monk, “Hemingway’s autobiography is uncharitable to almost all those Americans with whom he spent time in Paris, as its author seeks to deny the influence of both mentors and friends” (17-18). Monk argues that it was not nostalgia that motivated the memoir, but “a desire to set the record straight” (140). He also cites Hemingway’s statement to *Esquire* editor Arnold Gingrich in 1934: “I’ve written all the facts about Gertrude [Stein] so they’ll be on tap if anything happens to me” (139). Gossip here sounds like a weapon: a way to strike back at those contemporaries who claimed to have created him, who refused to recognize his genius as superior to theirs.

He described the text, in fact, as “biography by *remate*”: a term that implies battle and triumph, that “calls upon the destructive as well as the life-conserving instincts of the artist eager for all there was and is to be had from life” (DiBattista 175). *Remate*, from the Spanish *rematar*, means “to rekill.” According to Suzanne del Gizzo, “Mary [Hemingway] is right to identify the word as a jai alai term, but traditionally *remate* is used to refer to any type of ‘kill shot,’ a shot so forceful or perfectly placed that it cannot be returned... Mary’s interpretation... misses the essence of the word, which is ‘to finish’ conclusively and ‘to end’ absolutely” (121). How is it, we might well ask, that a memoir designed to destroy his colleagues through gossip, to “end absolutely” the allegedly rich and brilliant era of the American expatriates in Paris, has become not only such a popular representation of the city to Americans when it was written but also so beloved by French citizens today?

This question cuts to the heart of the myth of modernism. What is that myth, and why does it last? Hemingway's gossip has not succeeded in killing off his colleagues, but rather in complicating them, in adding yet another dimension to (our imagination of) them. His autobiography has become part of a network of modernist memoirs that seek to capture that elusive era, to ensnare it, to say for certain what it was and what it meant. In the introduction to his *Autobiography*, William Carlos Williams "wondered whether readers would even be interested in such texts, comparing literary life stories to 'rock candy,' while 'sweet-toothed' audiences might prefer 'something richer and not so hard on the teeth'" (Monk 14). It seems that audiences, however, much preferred the memoir to the poetry, the novels. In *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*, Albert Stone suggests that twentieth-century readers gravitated toward modernist memoirs because the genre helped them "in bypassing the usual high-cultural institutions" (2). The memoir enabled them, in other words, to understand modernism without having to engage directly with modernist texts whose reputations for complexity and obscurity far preceded them. Like the gossip of Walter Winchell, then, the gossip of modernist memoirs was democratizing: it brought high culture a little bit lower. It elevated the status of figures such as Hemingway and Stein while also making them, paradoxically, more accessible. Gossip of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries will continue this trend, though it will be put to a different end. "STARS," proclaims the text above *US Weekly*'s candid photographs of celebrities at the grocery store, the gas station, the playground. "THEY'RE JUST LIKE US."

As the magazine suggests through its use of "us," gossip continues to play a crucial role in community formation. And yet in the era of the Internet and of social media, with the proliferation of online journals and blogs, it has once again been transformed: in some ways it has become as impersonal, as indifferent, as the journalism it once purported to replace. While

the physical communities formed by modernist gossip were as fleeting and transitory as Baudelaire's idea of modernity itself,³⁸ their impact on culture and scholarship remains. The gossip that made modernism, that created new communities and promoted modern and modernist values, continues to circulate through literature and criticism, fortifying in our collective cultural imagination the glittering mythology of American expatriates in Paris.

³⁸"Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable" ("The Painter of Modern Life", 1859).

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