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Radclyffe Hall

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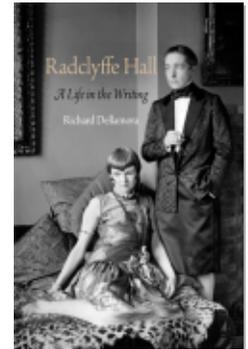
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PREFACE

Since the 1970s, the memory of Radclyffe Hall has depended for the most part upon one novel and its place in her work as an activist on behalf of the social rights of women with sexual and emotional ties to other women. The effects of near exclusive focus on *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and related court cases has been to impose upon Hall a biographical trajectory in which the single overriding feature of her life is her emergence as an early leader in the struggle for gay and lesbian rights. Hall herself, however, rejected this view and attempted in subsequent writing to recapture the less specialized readership of her earlier fiction. My interest is to consider the factors in relation to which this particular trajectory arose. In recent years, the development of the field of queer theory has made possible a view of Hall that gives due emphasis to three concerns that primarily engaged her: namely, female same-sex desire, engenderment, and spirituality.

A study of the five short books of poetry with which she began her literary career indicates that her signature from the start carried with it the affirmation of sexual and emotional ties between women. For Hall, this impulse was married to an equally strong desire to define herself as an artist and to mark out the contours of her personal life, directly and indirectly, in her published and unpublished poetry, fiction, essays, and lectures. Equally, all the metaphysical turns in Hall's life are related to her ties with female partners or lovers: namely, her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1912;¹ the six years she devoted to psychical research following the death of her first long-term partner, Mabel Veronica Batten; the adherence to Spiritualism implicit in the years of séances with Mrs. Gladys Osborne

Leonard, a prominent British medium; the theosophical narrative structure of *A Saturday Life* (1925); and the desire for interpersonal fusion that characterizes the letters to Evguenia Souline in the final decade. In this context, the traditional view of the primary significance of Hall's sexual interests may appear to be confirmed. It remains the case, however, that whether one begins with Hall's desire for other women or with her concern with cross gender or with mystical states, each leads to the others.

Hall was a charismatic figure with a complex affective and sexual life. This reality, combined with her courting of scandal and the exclusive attention directed by critics to *The Well of Loneliness*, accounts for the fact that almost all of the books published about her have taken the form of biography or biographical memoir. Hall became a celebrity as part of the enterprise of developing a lesbian public culture in the early twentieth century, but this apparently straightforward statement masks complexities. For instance, I know of no instance where Hall uses the word *lesbian* to designate a member of a particular sexual minority. Rather, she seems to have written at almost the last possible moment in the twentieth century in which the public affirmation of sexual and emotional ties between women could be made without using that word. Hall uses three other terms instead, each drawn from a different history in the development of discourses about female same-sex desire. In the course of this book, the reader will find Hall's interest in desire between women frequently characterized in terms of Sapphic culture, derived from French Aestheticism, as that culture came to exist in male and female lives and writing of the late nineteenth century in France and England. Equally important is the highly developed Sapphic culture—complete with rituals, a sacramental life, mythography, sacred texts, heroes, and martyrs—that Natalie Barney built around herself in a high-profile experiment in Paris after 1900. In the fiction of the 1920s, Hall participated in and reported on this Parisian scene. By this means, she joined Barney's venture; but, as I have mentioned, from the early years of the new century, Hall was already conducting her own experiments in Sapphic culture.

Second, Hall associated herself with modern sexual science in its efforts to define what later came to be called the lesbian subject. Well versed in popular accounts of Freud,² she chose in her writing to use the more established terminology of sexual inversion. While this choice may seem to suggest that Hall lagged in familiarity with modern psychology, Freud's oedipal account of female-female sexual desire in the 1920s did not definitively

separate itself from sexological discourse.³ Moreover, the language of female sexual inversion, which characterized female-female sexual desire as “masculine,” offered the only scientific terminology available for exploring the topic of cross gender.⁴ The female invert, in Hall’s telling, was less a modern “lesbian” than a crossgendered subject. As a result, *The Well of Loneliness* has become an important way marker for contemporary theorists of transgendered and what in the LGBT community are referred to as stone-butcht identities.⁵

Third, as Ruth Vanita and others have observed, there is a long tradition in which Marian and Christic references signal both female-female and crossgendered female-female desire. In recent years, Frederick S. Roden, Ellis Hanson, and other writers have made important contributions to the analysis of this discourse.⁶ All three modes of address—Sapphic, sexological, and Catholic—contributed to articulating a complex understanding of sexual and emotional ties between women. And all three characterize Hall’s approach at specific moments.

As author and individual, Hall’s life was an exercise in new ways of being in the world. Unfortunately, the genre of biography is not well suited to experiment. Biographies, at least marketable ones, depend upon novelistic narratives, well-defined characters, and familiar emotions and moral views. The ideological effect of biographies is to reinforce these views by repeating them. Facts and situations may be novel but not the ideas, affects, and emotions with which they are presented. As a result, it has been necessary to write this book *against* the genre of Hall biography. On occasion, I take explicit exception to how the rules of the genre operate in a particular biography. Nonetheless, because Hall’s experiment is one in life *and* writing, I am in debt to the writers of her biographies, especially to Michael Baker, whose work is often paraphrased in later biographies, and Sally Cline, whose 1997 biography for the first time locates Hall’s start as a writer within the context of an accomplished and adventurous group of female artists, Sapphists, and feminists.

Cline makes clear the collaborative character of Hall’s art from the outset. Collaboration too is not well suited to conventional biography. Biographies of writers usually focus on one or at most two individuals. Moreover, Hall and her second long-term partner, Una Troubridge, invested in the ideology of singular artistic genius. Despite the apparent contradiction, however, without Troubridge, Hall is unlikely to have produced the chain of literary successes that she enjoyed in the 1920s. Moreover,

Troubridge shares responsibility for the outspoken activism of *The Well of Loneliness*. Hall's output depended intimately upon Batten, Troubridge, and a later lover, Evguenia Souline, plus additional abettors, such as Barney and Colette. Strongly individualistic herself, Hall yearned for partnership and community, desires that drove her intellectually and emotionally to question conventional notions of selfhood.

In the most recent biography, Diana Souhami has added the important discovery that Hall was very likely dyslexic, a disability that poses challenges to those who choose to write on her in future. In part for this reason and in part because of parental neglect, Hall's formal education was limited. Admitted to King's College, London, she spent little time there.⁷ Hall was not an intellectual and did not have an intellectual's interest in ideas and the language in which they are expressed. But she had a keen interest in human psychology, particularly in the boundaries of the self: between human and nonhuman, between conscious and unconscious, between I and the other. She explored this interest by means of the speculative psychologies available to her, including psychoanalysis. In entertaining vernacular modes of speculative and religious belief, Hall was less interested in arriving at dogmatic conviction than in finding popularly accessible ways of overcoming the limits of the individual ego, particularly as posited in English eighteenth-century empiricist psychology and political economy. In her life and in her writing, Hall continually returns to the task of exploring selfhood in other terms than those of ego-centered calculation. Her experience as a crossgendered subject contributed to this interest as did her attraction to mysticism. Crossgendered existence and mystical experience are both phenomena that depend upon a shattering of the self. The attempt to recuperate such extremity within the routines of conventional "life and writings" biography contradicts the inevitable discontinuities and contradictions entailed in such ways of being.

Current commentators on Hall tend to deplore her conservative politics, and, at times, her views were deplorable, though for the most part they were typical of the social circles in which she moved. The frequently reactionary ideology of political conservatism in England and the United States since the late 1970s, moreover, has tended to block awareness of progressive tendencies within conservatism. Hall's critique of the market economy, her repeated explorations of isolated communities of working- or lower-class inhabitants, her participation in the pastoral turn in modern English poetic and musical culture, her interest in queer affinities between

different orders of organic and inorganic existence, all register a critical response to modernity. While critical, however, Hall remained a modern, not a reactionary. For example, in choosing to define female same-sex desire in *The Well of Loneliness* in terms of the sexological concept of sexual inversion, she attempted to base her polemic in scientific modernism. Likewise, she accepted the key axioms of Freudian thought: the power of unconscious motivation in human life; the unconscious play of symbolic action in dreams and other aspects of everyday experience; the mechanisms of repression, sublimation, and desublimation in subjectivity and culture; the erotic bases of human motives; and the primary function of incestuous desire within subject-formation. Both Hall and Freud also believed that the mind-body relation is internalized to the bodily ego. Within limits, Hall accepted even Freud's insistence on the Oedipus complex as the basis of human psychic development. What she disagreed with was his decision to use the male Oedipus complex as the basis from which to theorize about female sexuality. And she rejected his insistence on psychoanalysis as the only valid mode of speculative psychology. Rather, Hall could be persuaded by Freudian concepts without relinquishing ones derived from Roman Catholic practice and from her experience of Theosophy, Spiritualism, and psychical research.

Given the limits of biography as genre, how is one to approach it? I have done so in three ways. First, at times I have pointed out obvious shortcomings. Second, I have focused on complex situations and symbolic relations, often in unpublished and incomplete texts. For example, the scene of classroom instruction in *Michael West* that I discuss in the Introduction brings together the sensation and affect of shame in relation to the difficulties that Hall experienced in writing and reading as a result of her dyslexia plus the attendant gaze of a desired female other, whose acceptance and encouragement are necessary if the anxieties generated within the scene are to be surmounted. The incident brings together a complex of elements that Hall reprises later in both autobiographical and fictional contexts. In Hall, writing and desire are codependent. Similarly, the climax of this unfinished novel, in which the young male protagonist, who stands in for young Hall, simultaneously experiences ecstasy, acceptance as a lover, and transfiguration as a figure of exquisite, crucifical sacrifice, likewise brings together elements in a recurring complex. Third, I examine the ways in which Hall's novels continually play with combinations of biographical, autobiographical, and fictive material as part of their appeal to their original readers.

In the Introduction, I consider how Hall's incomplete drafts of an autobiographical essay graphically demonstrate that the failure of mother love in her early experience left her without a necessary genealogical basis for writing herself into time and space. In Chapter 1, I discuss how Hall's poetry explores various modes of sexual and emotional interaction between women. This effort is situated in poems of the English countryside, neo-Hellenistic pastoral, and, in *The Forgotten Island* (1915), an imitation of Sappho. In the poetry, Hall writes as both a modern and an antimodern, a feminist and an aesthete and a decadent, a follower of Pan and Dionysus and a Christian believer. One of her most important points of reference exists in the aestheticist, homophile, and antimodernist poetry of A. E. Housman. Even more significant is A. C. Swinburne, a founder of Aestheticism and the Decadence in England. By her own account, it is through Swinburne's imitations of Sappho in his early poetry that Hall accessed Sapphic tradition. Swinburne is equally important in shaping the modernity of her work. In "Ode to Swinburne" (1909), she affirms a carefully considered, coherent statement of Swinburne's late Victorian secular humanism. The poem demonstrates that, despite the fact that Hall was baptized as a Roman Catholic shortly thereafter, her poetry is written from a humanist stance. The final section of the chapter shifts attention to Hall's spectacular if unanticipated success as the author of a lyric, "The Blind Ploughman." The poem, in the voice of a male agricultural laborer, combines religious faith with moral earnestness and a capacity for visionary experience. Set to music, "The Blind Ploughman" became an anthem of popular patriotic and religious sentiment during World War I. Its impact demonstrated to Hall her connection with cultivated British middle-class taste.

After Batten's death in 1916 following a stroke, Hall turned to psychical research for a period of six years in search of an objective means of proving the survival of individual personality after death. The result is a long account of her researches that appeared in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* in 1919. In preparing the manuscript, Hall both gained a collaborator in Batten's cousin, Troubridge, and learned how to research and write a long piece of prose narrative. In Chapter 2, I analyze Hall's account of her sittings with Mrs. Leonard. Hall's experience illustrates how the technology of mediumship operated at the time of World War I so as to enable the subject in mourning to come to terms with loss by incorporating the beloved object through a particular kind of physical enactment

proper to the séance. The sessions reassured her of Batten's continuing existence and love as well as of her approval of Troubridge as Hall's new partner. There is reason to doubt, however, whether the sittings enabled Hall to come to terms with her responsibility for the estrangement that existed between the two women at the time of Batten's fatal stroke.

The psychical research marks an important turn in Hall's engagement with the creation of a public lesbian culture since both the essay and the public lectures on which it was based converted the Sapphic triangle in which Hall was involved into publicity. The combination of personal, even private, experience with the public performance of sensational material leads to Chapter 3, an account of how Hall achieved notoriety in the English mass media by filing a suit for slander against a founding member of the Society who, on the basis of the publication of her research, had accused her of being "a grossly immoral woman."⁸

Chapter 4 deals with *The Unlit Lamp* (1924), the first novel completed for publication by Hall but the second to appear in print. Possibly Hall's best work, it focuses on psychological and social blocks to sexual and emotional ties between women that existed in the years between 1870 and 1920. On the psychological side is the unresolved incestuous tension of the protagonist, Joan Ogden's, relationship with her mother. On the social side, Hall takes aim at the late Victorian institution of friendship between well-educated single women. Hall is particularly skeptical of the rule of celibacy that attended love between women in female same-sex institutions, such as the newly founded colleges for women at Cambridge University.⁹ In both emphases on female relationships, Hall's novel provides illustrations of what was missing from Freud's contemporaneous effort to explain female (homo)sexuality.

Chapter 5 focuses on *The Forge* (1924), Hall's first published novel. It has a double protagonist in a married couple: Hilary Brent, a young, independently wealthy husband suffering from writer's block, and his wife, Susan, who has chosen not to pursue her early promise as a painter. Readers who, directly or indirectly, were aware of Hall and Troubridge's life together in London early in the decade had no difficulty in noting resemblances between the real and the fictional pairs. Indeed, the autobiographical linkage was part of the appeal of the novel. The novel further capitalized on Hall and Troubridge's familiarity with Sapphic high and low culture in Paris in the mid-1920s. In this respect, *The Forge* is the novel by Hall that engages most directly with the creation of a cosmopolitan lesbian

public culture. With the publication of this novel, Hall began building a double readership composed of Sapphic readers and others, middle class and mainly female.

In *A Saturday Life* (1925), Hall is preoccupied with the psychological and social challenges faced by individual women in integrating the desire to find fulfilling adult work with traditional middle-class gender roles. An experiment in gender performativity, the novel draws the reader's attention to the question of whether sexual and gendered self-fashioning results from choice or from psychic compulsion. Based on correspondence that Hall received from her readers, it appears that Frances Reide, the novel's stable pivot, enjoyed great appeal to both sets of Hall's readers, while Sidonia Shore, the attractive, mercurial, and boyish young female protagonist, provided a way to explore the construction of gender in new ways. Framed in terms of theosophical mythmaking, the outline of Shore's life suggests that gender-formation is unconsciously driven, including the extent to which masculinity forms a component within it. As usual, female masculinity is pertinent as is the possibility of sexual and emotional intimacy between women, though, for both Shore and Reide, the opportunity remains unrealized as it had for Jane Ogden and Susan Brent in the two previous novels. Nonetheless, and drawing upon Troubridge's unpublished autobiographical essays, Hall emphasizes the multiplicity of Sidonia's selves and the self-consciousness of her performance of female gender, both with regard to her choice of marriage and childbirth at the end of the novel and in her persistent, albeit short-lived, artistic enthusiasms.

Hall's next three novels are very different. Long, serious works, with harrowing endings and strongly naturalist in character, all three are also explicitly religious, indeed Roman Catholic. Their protagonists are shaped along Christological and, in the case of *The Well of Loneliness*, Marian lines. Chapter 7 begins with a general discussion of the place of Catholicism in Hall's thinking and ends with a discussion of psychological extremity in the final pages of *The Well of Loneliness*. Catholicism offered a more intellectually and emotionally developed framework in which Hall could articulate her intuitions about the porous boundaries that she believed to exist between nonhuman and human existence, individual and intersubjective experience, and the consciousness of the living and the dead. Previously, she had expressed her sense of these connections in terms of psychical research, Spiritualism, and Theosophy; but these formations did not permit her to

address the more abstract philosophical and theological question of theodicy, that is, why and how God, if there is a God, permits the existence of evil in individual and social existence. For Hall, this question was entangled with her awareness of the seemingly gratuitous suffering of subjects of same-sex desire. Writing in the psychoanalytically attuned cultural environment of England in the 1920s, moreover, she also perceived the problem to be lodged in the psychological structure of the nuclear family and, in particular, in destructive aspects of mother-daughter relations. Hall, Batten, and Troubridge were converts to Roman Catholicism. As women involved in sexual relationships with other women, they stood in anomalous relation to the orthodox teaching of the Catholic Church, which condemns all sexual activity outside marriage. In choosing to be baptized as a Roman Catholic while in effect living with Batten, Hall chose to enter the Church as a witness to the sacramental character of love between women. The pair intended in this way to contribute to the Church Militant by force of example.

The central portion of the chapter concentrates on *Adam's Breed* (1926), the first of the religious novels. Although in form a bildungsroman tracing the life of its male protagonist, Gian-Luca, the novel offers something of a cultural anthropology of the Roman Catholic, working-class Italian immigrant colony in Soho in which he is born and raised. As one might expect from a writer who came to Catholicism from an English Protestant background, Hall perceives the religious practice of Gian-Luca's family and neighbors to be credulous, superstitious, and highly materialistic. Moreover, she shows how the moralizing character of day-to-day existence in a tightly knit Catholic community provides ample opportunity for the self-righteous policing of other people's behavior. Hall's sense of the thoughtlessness, ignorance, and indeed blind moral cruelty of self-preening members of the laity was intensified by her experience while traveling in Italy in the 1920s with Troubridge, who had relatives there. Hall uses the Italian section of the novel to demonstrate the extent to which rural Italians made perverse use of their religion to excuse everyday acts of sadism toward pets, farmyard animals, and outsiders, such as Gian-Luca. But Hall's is an insider's criticism. She frames her strictures in terms of Catholic notions of blasphemy, infidelity, and idolatry. Finally, the portrayal of Gian-Luca himself as a heroic, self-sacrificial figure draws on Catholic feeling and belief, supplemented late in the novel with theosophical hints that the young

Anglo-Italian may be a latter-day materialization of a Self of which the historical Christ is another exponent.

The commercial and critical success of *Adam's Breed* established Hall's reputation as a serious novelist. Taking advantage of her new position, Hall moved quickly in her next novel to address the question of the psychological and social position of subjects of same-sex desire. Although she chose to do so within the genre of the social problem novel, in the final section of Chapter 7, I consider how the novel also builds upon and in a sense repeats the structure of *Adam's Breed* by converting Stephen Gordon, the gendercrossing novelist and protagonist of *The Well of Loneliness*, into another figure of self-sacrificing love modeled upon both Christ and, in this case, his mother, Mary.

Chapter 8 takes a secular perspective in focusing on *The Well of Loneliness* as an activist text. In this respect, the key question that arises is that of the spatial and temporal forms of dissident existence. In other words, what social forms might the expression of male and female same-sex desire appropriately take? Hall answers by emphasizing the need to develop institutions of same-sex marriage. This demand for legal and other changes became a focus for attacks upon the novel during the trials of its publisher on charges of obscenity. If Hall's position offended moral and religious conservatives, it also offended sexually experimental bohemians, to whom it seemed both outdated and irrelevant. Hall's stance, however, was neither idiosyncratic nor out of touch since the question of the durability of same-sex pairings was a live topic in both private and public discourse of the 1920s and 1930s.

The final portion of the chapter considers the recently published private contract of marriage that Natalie Barney wrote in 1918 for herself and her lifelong lover, Elisabeth de Gramont, Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre. In the face of the affairs with other women that both had already embarked upon and that might engage them in future, Barney wrote: "Since the danger of affairs is ever present and impossible to foresee, one will just have to bring the other back, neither out of revenge, nor to limit the other, but because the union demands it. . . . No other union shall be so strong as this union, nor another joining so tender—nor relationship so lasting."¹⁰ In the mid-1930s, Noël Coward put the same argument in the mouth of a newlywed speaking to his wife in *Shadow Play*, in which Coward starred opposite Gertrude Lawrence: "If I'm bad or foolish or unkind, or even unfaithful—just remember this, because this is what really matters—this lovely understanding of each

other—it may be a jumping-off place for many future journeys—but however long the journey one’s got to come back some time.”¹¹

In “Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself,” a short story drafted in 1926 before Hall began writing *The Well of Loneliness* but not published until afterward, Hall develops a relational model of crossgendered identity, that is, one in which the masculine woman is understood to be unable fully to come into her double engenderment until she is recognized and passionately loved as such by a womanly woman. Chapter 9 explores both concepts in the context of an allegory of sexual becoming, part realist fiction, part theosophical fantasy.

Chapter 10 focuses on “The Rest Cure—1932,” one of the most highly reflexive of Hall’s fictions. In this story, Hall’s self-conscious analysis of the failure of the “I” as an avatar of selfhood prompts her to re-engage with the Buddhist-influenced pantheism of her friend, May Sinclair, an important experimenter in modernist fiction, a pioneering feminist philosopher, and a pre-World War I proponent of psychoanalysis. In “The Rest Cure—1932,” Charles Duffell, an English industrialist, experiences a breakdown following the loss of his firm after the stock-market crash of 1929. A catastrophic rupture in the experience to which his family, citizenship, gender, and status had sentenced him drives him—like Miss Ogilvy—to a rural retreat. Unable to surmount the limits of the ego even in fantasy, however, he regresses to a primitive state of gender dysphoria, which results in his incarceration in a mental institution. Duffell’s success is limited to refusing the options afforded him. Unlike Miss Ogilvy’s ecstatic fantasy of integrated dual gender, Duffell’s access to mystical experience is confined for the most part in the *via negativa*.

Because of the sexual indeterminacy of feminine women, the sexual-inversion model remains highly unstable. Moreover, for Hall, crossgendered existence did not necessarily imply homosexual object choice. In her final published novel, *The Sixth Beatitude*, Hall fashions a protagonist in Hannah Bullen, a virile young woman who is strongly attracted to males. In Chapter 11, I consider this novel along with two other sets of material: the draft manuscripts of *Emblem Hurlstone*, an incomplete novel undertaken by Hall in the first months of her absorption in Souline; and the letters to Souline, not published until 1997, which were to be a major pre-occupation for Hall from 1934 until her death in 1943. In addition to offering a self-conscious exploration of the meaning of Sapphic desire, the letters provide a reflexive commentary on both novels as well as on Hall’s general

understanding of the play of biography, autobiography, and fiction in writing.

In “The Rest Cure—1932” as in other stories and novels beginning with *Adam’s Breed*, Hall offered not solutions but invitations to extremity, couched in harsh circumstances. In the letters and fiction of her late autobiographical writing, she lived similarly but with an ever-renewed commitment to the passional self and with a mystic’s openness to the human and natural environments to which she bore witness. Hall did so in the form of an open series of meditations on the continual reentwining of the polarities of gendered experience.