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Radclyffe Hall

Richard Dellamora

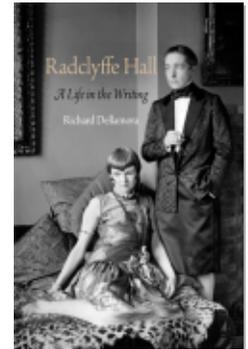
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INTRODUCTION

Writing Radclyffe Hall Writing

The position of social and economic privilege occupied by Hall and Troubridge, their Tory sympathies, Roman Catholicism, and eugenicist views are not factors calculated to endear them to members of contemporary lesbian and queer counterpublics.¹ In recent years, Hall's self-identification as a masculine woman drew even more criticism. To some second-generation feminists, Hall was felt to have misled generations of young women into believing that, if they desired sexual intimacy with other women, then they must be psychically male. In 1975, for example, Jane Rule, complaining about the reputation of *The Well of Loneliness* as "the Lesbian bible," quoted two leading young lesbian feminists who argued that "unfortunately, to the uninitiated the book perpetuated the myth of the Lesbian as a pseudomale, and many young women . . . emulated the heroine, Stephen Gordon."² Hall and her novel were regarded as a source of contagion, polluting female difference with masculine traits, style, affects, and emotion.

The view of Hall as a "pseudomale" is the most damning allegation that lesbian feminists laid against her. Hall, however, did not view herself as male nor did she desire to be one. Rather, from an early age she understood herself to be gendered as a masculine female. This sense, based in what Freud refers to as "the bodily ego,"³ makes her queer in the sense that, as Jay Prosser has reminded readers, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes as her point of departure in *Tendencies* (1993): "Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word 'queer' itself means

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across—it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*.²⁴ Using the term in this sense, I will frequently refer to desire in Hall as queer even though it is more often referred to as lesbian. In his discussion, Prosser further associates the sense of crossing with the term *transgender* (22). Queer existence is premised on bodily and psychic unease with fixed gender identification. Queers always exist athwart their assigned gender identities. Such crossing is crucial both to Hall's sense of self and to her writing. The development of transgender discourse in the writing of Prosser and others in recent years has enabled a less defensive, more accurate awareness of Hall's sense of embodied selfhood. She has found favor among dyke and butch readers as well as among transgendered and transsexual subjects, who find in Stephen Gordon's struggles a mirror of their own.

The vicissitudes of Hall's reception testify to one of the strengths of her writing, namely, its enticement of the reader to take part in a play of identification and counter-identification with the author and characters that depends on the actively crossgendered character of Hall's writing.⁵ Hall did not think of female masculinity as a ticket to male privilege, nor did she think of it as a state of being. Rather, she thought of it as an action, at once intransitive, transitive, and self-reflexive. Her uncanny capacity to inhabit gender-crossing gender positions complicates the tendency of her work, particularly in *The Well of Loneliness*, to invest in the concept of sexual inversion.

Activists lend themselves as hostages to posterity. Powerful mutual identifications exist between them and those on whose behalf they venture to speak. As a result, the lives of activists are expected to conform to the goals and ideology of movement politics. It is expected that leaders will conform to the ways of life of those who identify as members of a particular minority. However, the lives of activists often look very different lived forward rather than backward from the destinations at which they eventually arrive. Individuals are crossing points of many interests, conditions, motives, and desires, conscious and unconscious. As Benjamin Harshav remarks, "In principle, it would be more appropriate to see the individual [and her writing] as an open semantic field through which various tendencies crisscross: some of them are involuntary and some [s]he herself embraced and helped formulate, some become dominant and others merely hover in the field of consciousness. . . . Individuals, even highly articulate ones, are often undecided on various matters, inconsistent, compromising

between opposite ideas, changing their position with time.”⁶ Individuals’ interests and views may take very different forms at different times, and this fact was particularly so for members of a number of emergent groups at the turn of the twentieth century. Harshav has in mind the Central and Eastern European Jews who founded and led the Zionist movement. For this generation of Jews newly emerging into civil society, many choices in life and thought were possible; hence he emphasizes the highly experimental character of their lives.

In Western Europe, a similar process occurred among those called homosexual. Simultaneously with the emergence of male and female homosexuality as a serious topic in medical literature, subjects of same-sex desire who began to think of their desires as linked with social and cultural typology entered a period of individual and social inventiveness.⁷ Oscar Wilde, for example, became involved in the 1890s with young men at Oxford University who were engaged in what they referred to as “the Cause.”⁸ Although Wilde did not define himself as an activist on their behalf, he encouraged their talent and ambition and entered into friendships, collaborations, and, at times, sexual intimacies with them. In his professional life, he increasingly found himself fashioning the persona of a sexually nonconformist theatrical celebrity. Wilde’s self-fashioning was in itself a form of activism that drew upon a developing tradition in the private and public lives of such actresses as the American Charlotte Cushman and the Jewish Parisian Sarah Bernhardt.⁹ It is as though, having met and admired Bernhardt, Wilde decided to open a London shop of the Paris firm with himself in a double role as playwright and star.¹⁰ In the circle of Natalie Barney in Paris, a similar process unfolded. Hall fashioned herself along comparable lines. The emphasis here is on personal, cultural, and social innovation.

Cultures of sexual dissidence come into existence in multiple discursive contexts. It would be a mistake to consider turn-of-the-century sexual politics exclusively in relation to attempts to reform criminal law or to challenge bias within the developing social sciences. Christianity, especially forms of Catholicism, provided a rich resource for imagining sexual difference. Whether individuals retained, converted to, or abandoned traditional religious beliefs, same-sex desire was often articulated within Catholic rhetoric. For example, Charles Ives, the leader of “the Cause” at Oxford and later, transferred to his own autobiographical narrative the terms of Incarnational devotion, ecstasis, self-mortification, martyrdom, and even crucifixion associated with the life of Christ.¹¹ Hall, who found her way to

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Roman Catholicism under the guidance of a female partner, at times merged her identity with that of the historical figure of Christ. Gender and sexuality studies have much to gain from exploring the structuring of the subjectivity of subjects of same-sex desire in heterodox religious terms.¹²

The turn to Catholicism in Hall registers her recoil from the definition of the individual as a subject of rational calculation. This shift characterizes her as a modernist. In the words of Cathy Gere, “When we turn to the history of the human sciences . . . , a consensus seems to have emerged that modernism denotes a distinctive and often self-conscious sense of generational crisis, beginning around 1870 and persisting until just before the Second World War. This was distinguished, above all, by a profound loss of confidence in the Enlightenment legacy of rationalism.”¹³ While Hall’s concern is less with reason than with the ideology of acquisitive individualism, she, like many other late Victorian and early twentieth-century writers, including many women, sought ways to express her awareness that personal existence is not limited to individual consciousness or even to human consciousness. For Hall, spirituality and sexuality both needed to find a place within a wider, more diffused sense of conscious and unconscious experience. The crossgendered experience of her fictional protagonists figures as one aspect within this larger challenge to the limits of species-centric thinking.

Hall’s life was shaped as much by the ambition to become a novelist as by the desire to improve the condition of subjects of female same-sex desire. Her activist and literary concerns came mutually to reinforce one another. In turn, the desire to become an author may have had less to do in the first instance with a talent for writing than with a desire for distinction. To a young woman of means but little intellectual culture and limited education, the writing of popular fiction may have seemed, as it had for English-speaking women in the nineteenth century, to offer the most likely chance of success. In a self-reinforcing loop, moreover, for Hall the desire for literary distinction was fed by the myth of queer exceptionalism—that is, by the view expressed by Ives, John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, and the Sapphic circle in Paris, among others, that the modern homosexual enjoyed a privileged insight into the human condition as a result of being double gendered.

Hall looked to writing to justify her continuing existence. If one wishes to consider Hall as an author, one needs to consider not only the range of her published fiction but the unpublished work as well. When one does so, one begins to see her less as an author than as a writer and, indeed, as a

writer for whom writing was a necessary but perilous task, hence the title of this book. Hall continually attempted to write her way to a secure sense of selfhood. For the protagonists of a number of her novels, moreover, becoming paradoxically requires an undoing of the self and along with it the objects of everyday existence. Because Hall has most often figured as the author of a single novel, books about her tend to define her more in biographical than in literary terms. Including Troubridge's memoir, five of the six books devoted to Hall are biographies. The narrative of her complicated love life—the early sexual experimentation, followed by an extended relationship with Mabel Batten; the second long relationship, with Una Troubridge as partner and literary collaborator; and the *ménage à trois* with Troubridge and Evguenia Souline during the final decade—are more familiar to readers of the biographies than are her literary works. This history poses a challenge to anyone attempting a new book: how can one possibly structure it in ways that will not already be predetermined by the novelistic narratives of the biographies, with their familiar cast of characters and the banal moral inferences that they invite?¹⁴

In addition, in her fiction, Hall continually invokes the genres of memoir, biography, and autobiography. The engagement of her fiction with these genres constitutes the self-reflexive aspect of her work. This sort of self-consciousness, moreover, was already codified as a standard feature of realist fiction at the time she wrote. As Philippe Lejeune, a leading theorist of autobiography, observes, one of the main features linking nineteenth-century with modernist writing is the emphasis on the autobiographical character of the novel, a tendency exacerbated in Hall's case by her preference for the subgenre of the *bildungsroman*. Lejeune characterizes the genre of autobiography in terms of an "autobiographical pact," in which the author assures her reader of "the identity of the proper name shared by author, narrator, and protagonist."¹⁵ Autobiography proper, however, was an impossible genre for Hall. She recoiled from writing a text in which she coincides with her signature—a signature, by the way, that frequently changes in her early writing, sloping at times to the left, at times to the right.¹⁶ In writing autobiographically, she adopts the fictional genres of the novel and the short story. But, as we shall see, she often experiences difficulty in accepting the normal operation of the author-function—that is, the representation and self-representation of the writer of a text as being its authoritative source and the guarantor of whatever truth it may have to communicate.

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Lejeune further distinguishes autobiography from the genre of autobiographical fiction in terms of what he refers to as “the phantasmatic pact.” In this genre, it is the reader who is responsible for affirming that the characterization of the fictional protagonist “makes . . . accessible . . . the personal, individual, intimate truth of the author.”¹⁷ As the phrase indicates, this approach frankly acknowledges the phantasmatic relation between reader, protagonist, and author since the genre functions successfully only if the reader is convinced that her imaginary projection of an identification between author and protagonist is correct. At the same time, the reader is structurally positioned so as to be invited to identify herself with the place of the signature of the author, which, in autobiography proper, attests to the authenticity of the genre. In Hall’s autobiographical fiction, it is the reader who establishes the authenticity of Hall’s representation.

Since the leading protagonists of Hall’s novels usually occupy a cross-gendered subject position as masculine women or feminine men, the phantasmatic subject-position of the reader becomes yet more variable as herself, as author-function, and as crossgendered subject. This overdetermined position works in a number of different directions: on the one hand, it provides a necessary support for Hall in her roles as celebrity and author-function. But the position can also threaten fictional protagonists and the reader with a vertiginous sense of loss of selfhood as occurs in the final pages of *The Well of Loneliness*. This last effect has in turn a strong ideological basis in Hall since, like other female writers of the late Victorian and early modernist periods, such as Michael Field, Vernon Lee, May Sinclair, and Virginia Woolf, Hall believed the ego to be permeable to alterity. Through her religious beliefs, mysticism, and interest in both vernacular and scientific psychology, Hall sought means to explore selfhood beyond the limits of individual subjectivity. The dissolution of the self that awaits her protagonists at the end of a number of her novels further complicates the pressing sense in Hall’s work of the double identification of author and reader with these same figures.

As a member of the culture of Sapphic celebrity in the 1920s, Hall repeatedly references not only herself in her fiction but her partner and her social circles in Paris and London as well.¹⁸ The deliberate play with autobiographical reference in her writing constitutes it as partly a personal archive. I have usually drawn upon this aspect of her writing as a source of revealing discrepancies vis-à-vis the facts as these can be ascertained in the biographies and archives. Recognizing the fiction to be an autobiographical

archive may help one understand Hall's response to the situation of being a masculine woman who affirms desire between women by entering the public sphere. Likewise, when one turns to unpublished writing by Hall in public archives, one can see Hall at work *before* she assumes the position of author-function. This material enables one to bring to bear a dimension of personal development that Harshav, for all his flexibility, ignores: namely, the play of the unconscious in the formation of conscious life. Hall's unpublished manuscripts permit one to see her not as an author but in the process of personal and aesthetic becoming that we call writing. *Radclyffe Hall, A Life in the Writing* is in part an archival study that considers how Hall writes her way toward and at times halts painfully short of the author-function.

After publication of *The Well*, Hall found herself to be the author of a sensational novel, widely read outside of England, and notorious as a result of the 1928 obscenity trials. This situation had a double effect. On the one hand, Hall and her partner found themselves withdrawing from café society in London, from friends and acquaintances, into a self-imposed exile abroad that became increasingly extended in the period of economic depression and growing political instability of the 1930s. On the other hand, Hall entered into a voluminous correspondence prompted by the novel. And there were frequent invitations to speak as a writer respected for exercising freedom of speech and claiming tolerance for subjects of same-sex desire. The unfinished drafts of some of these lectures still exist. At times, Hall's grasp of who her potential listeners are seems to slip from her in the course of writing—so that the text finally breaks off as an utterance by and to oneself that is both interminable and incapable of public delivery.

One of these incomplete essays, "Forebears and Infancy," exists in draft in a number of different manuscripts at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Hall begins the first draft of what she refers to as this "autobiography" by speaking in her function as the author of *The Well of Loneliness*. She assures her listeners that those who think that *The Well* is "my own life story" will be disappointed. Negating both the sense of autobiographical intimacy she creates in the novel as well as the chronological line of the essay, she remarks that she did not spend her youth "in a gracious house of Georgian red brick" nor did she have parents like Stephen's.¹⁹ She then proceeds to attempt to establish her genealogy as author. En route, she encounters a major obstacle, in

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relation to her mother, which eventually brings the essay to an abrupt halt. In the third and most-finished version of the essay, she contrasts Stephen's childhood to her own. "Let me begin by saying at once that my home was entirely unsatisfactory; it had neither dignity nor repose, and, moreover, was deplorably lacking in beauty."²⁰

In recent years, subjects of same-sex desire have been dissociated from what Lee Edelman refers to as the "reproductive futurism" of heterosexual chronology.²¹ I refer to this form of narrative as genealogical time: namely, the familiar familial narrative of origin, progeny, planning for old age, legacy, and inheritance that Edelman identifies with heterosexual temporality. In the incomplete drafts of this essay, Hall struggles unsuccessfully to fashion a genealogy of her own existence. Her inability to do so bespeaks both an unassuaged sense of exclusion from heterosexual (read human) temporality and the consequent conscious revolt that she associates with the authorship of *The Well of Loneliness*.²² As the prosecution of the publisher of *The Well* indicates, in publishing the novel, Hall succeeded in literally exploding the continuity of conventional genealogy. Comparing her action with that of her father as a young man when he left his hometown and then returned, to the shame of *his* father, as an actor in a touring company, Hall remarks: "My father had suddenly torpedoed the ark, as a witty American woman said of me when I wrote *The Well of Loneliness*, and naturally an explosion followed" (Version 3).

In leaving incomplete this autobiographical essay, Hall indicates her inability to devise a new genealogy of sexual dissidence, whose effect would be successfully to locate her in time and place. Unable to establish a loving connection with her mother as point of origin, Hall recognizes herself to exist outside the realm of the human. She literalizes this maternal threat to her existence in Version 3, where she claims that her mother deliberately attempted to miscarry her. At the time of her birth, Hall experienced a near miss, precipitated, in her telling, by her eagerness to escape the emotional turmoil of her parents' continual fights: "As for me, I rushed headlong into the world several hours before my advent was expected. The nurse had gone out to get something from the chemist, my father was out and so was the Doctor; but fortunately the nurse returned just in time to sever the navel cord, so all was well, my mother survived and I lived to write *The Well of Loneliness* and to find myself standing in the police court."²³

Earlier I spoke of Hall as economically and socially privileged. This description, however, leaves out of account the social isolation in which she grew up. As Hall reports, again in Version 3, her American mother quickly estranged her new husband's family. Divorcing him shortly after her daughter's birth and having won both custody of her daughter and a handsome allowance, Hall's mother subsequently refused to permit Hall to have anything to do with her paternal relations. In effect, Hall was raised in England as an exile. The essay functions as an effort to repair this estrangement. The Georgian house that Stephen Gordon is forced to quit by his mother in *The Well of Loneliness* is the metaphorical equivalent of the upper-middle-class paternal genealogy of which Hall's mother deprived her daughter. The self-styled bomb thrower and criminal defendant—identified in the very telling with the artistic and bohemian revolt of her father—experienced lifelong regret over this exclusion from an English Eden. The fact that Hall later chose American cousins met while traveling in the United States to be among her first lovers and long-lasting friends is one sign of how atypical she found her situation in England to be. Hall also reports that she had an older stepsister, Florence, by her mother's first marriage, who died shortly after birth. This brief reference suggests a possible reason for the rejection of Hall by her mother, who may have found in her second daughter an inauthentic substitute for the one already lost. In this respect, Hall's childhood tomboyishness may have expressed tacit rejection of her mother's devotion to a lost domestic futurity. In the essay, however, her mother's narcissism serves as the primary reason for her emotional neglect and physical abuse of her surviving daughter: "Always my mother, violent and brainless, a fool but a terribly cruel fool, a terribly crafty and cruel fool, for whom life had early become a mirror in which she saw only her own reflection" (Version 3).

Hall's earliest and most important relation was a failed one. Her mother did not love her. In the person of Michael West, an early fictional persona, Hall hints that the rejection was mutual: as early as his fifth year, we are told, Michael "did not love his mother, of this he was quite certain."²⁴ The threat posed to autobiography by a failed primary relationship, however, does not reside only in mutual estrangement between mother and child. Writing to the point at which she must begin speaking of her mother, in the earlier drafts Hall finds herself unable to do so. Instead, she swerves into imaginary idealizations of the mother she never knew. Hall is aware of

the unconsciously driven character of this turn. She writes: “Some devilish, and possibly misplaced sense of humour, makes me want to write my ideal of a mother . . .” (Version 1). The breaking off of the draft at this point suggests that if her mother’s behavior poses a major obstacle to Hall in fashioning a genealogy, the obsessive need to project an imaginary opposite can be equally devastating.

The difficulty continues even when Hall discusses her maternal grandmother, who provided the unconditional love that Hall would have liked to receive from her mother. Hall describes her grandmother Diehl as embodying the ideal of motherhood: “To her I owe all the tenderness that was ever given me in my childhood, what she lacked in brains she made up for in heart. On her ample and unfailingly welcoming bosom, I would many a time lay my troubled head while she called me foolish, endearing names—Suggie-plum, for example, which I turned into Tuggie; to her I was Tuggie to the day of her death. She never understood me, of course,²⁵ but she loved me” (Version 3). In Hall’s experience, however, a primary love relationship was liable to be compromised by its opposite. In any event, grandmother Diehl, dominated by her daughter, failed to protect Hall from maternal abuse. “The influence of my mother was so potent that it held my grandmother perpetually in chains; she who so firmly believed in God, and in prayer, and in me, her beloved grandchild, could yet never free herself from those chains.”²⁶

As I mentioned, the first draft of the essay breaks off at the point where Hall’s mother is introduced. This version is more complete and more consecutively written than Version 2, “Anticedance [*sic*] & Infancy,” which repeats the same material, less well, in fragmentary fashion. This attempt begins as Version 3 does with the fourth commandment: “Thou shalt honour thy father and thy mother,” followed immediately by Hall’s assertion that she is unable to do so through no fault of her own. To begin in this way is to acknowledge that the autobiographical project itself is unrealizable. In Version 2, Hall finds herself again drawing a portrait of her fantasized maternal ideal, this time sentimentally portrayed in old age and so forth. And once again, the essay can’t move past the impossible task of describing Hall’s relation with her actual mother. In the incoherent attempt at a second start, a further reason for this blockage is disclosed. Suddenly, Hall finds herself thinking about herself as a sexually queer subject and imagining the consequences for her mother of recognizing this fact about her daughter. In a new paragraph, surrounded by blank space, Hall asks:

Does she know me for what I am? I wonder. If she does she must often be bewildered, must be at a loss to understand—
for

But
and they two

In Version 3, Hall focuses on the genealogy of her father's side of the family. If it is impossible to trace a female genealogy, perhaps it will be possible to trace an oedipal one, although, as I mentioned earlier, because she scarcely knew her father and was not permitted ever to meet her paternal grandparents, the effort lacks a basis in relational experience. Hall identifies her work with her great-grandfather John Hall's medical practice: "He became a healer of bodies, not of souls"; in her poetry and fiction, Hall attended to both.²⁷ Likewise, Hall identifies with her grandfather, a highly successful medical specialist in the town of Torquay. "My grandfather was a man of strong emotions, I am practically certain of this if his portrait, which is in my possession, was a faithful likeness. The face in the portrait is sensitive and marked by much mental suffering." Hall was particularly struck by his inability to overcome the grief occasioned by the death of his youngest stepdaughter.

Hall scarcely knew her father. But he had shown his love by making her the heir to his fortune, while protecting her capital from the depredations of her mother and stepfather, Alberto Visetti, a music teacher with a roving eye. In her good-looking, rebellious, charming, and highly sexed father, Hall found much to admire and much that reminded her of herself. Out of his traits, she fashioned a bohemian, decadent, even degenerate genealogy for herself. Both alienated themselves from their families: "Alas," she writes, "that it should have been my father and I who were destined to subject . . . [the members of his extended family] to the first breath of scandal." Hall associates with herself her father's idleness and wildness as a young man, his abilities as a horseman, his love of hunting, his sexual and romantic entanglements with women, his interest in the arts, his abilities as a composer and songwriter, his success as a dog breeder, his affinity with animals, even possibly his skill at conjuring. Hall also felt an affinity with her father's loneliness, depression, and inability to sustain intimate relationships. As she found also in her own experience, "my father must have been a man of vast discontents during the latter part of his life. He was never content with any one place for long, especially if he was in it." When Hall published

her first novel, she dropped Marguerite, her baptismal name, and adopted Radclyffe, her father's first name as well as the first half of his hyphenated surname. On the Radclyffe side, she also crossed paternal with female genealogy, associating herself by means of an inherited portrait with a woman named Sarah Radclyffe.

Version 3 of the essay ends with Hall's change of first name: "My mother had me christened Marguerite; she could not have chosen a more inappropriate name, I detest it, and kindly note that I have dropped it." Beginning with a fated revolt against the decalogue and ending with a revolt against *both* her mother and her Christian name, Hall outlines a genealogy of revolt that honors the wayward example of her father's life. Hall observes that, like herself, he was the victim of parental injustice. In an instance that mirrors hers mother's rejection of Hall after the death of her infant sister, Hall's grandfather became estranged from his son after the death of a step-daughter on whom he doted. Hall's grandfather plunged his household into an unending state of mourning, against which Hall's father eventually rebelled. As a result, Radclyffe was cast out of the family for a time in the 1870s, according to Hall "the most hypocritical age in our history." Selecting the daughter of a fisherman for "his mistress," he provoked a local scandal, then compounded the offense after leaving home by returning to town as an actor in the role of Charles Surface.²⁸ His father was angered to find that his son had arranged to have photographs of himself placed in the windows of local stationers' shops.

To this point, I have emphasized Hall's frustration over her inability to live within genealogical time as well as the difficulty she found in developing a sense of living in time and place consistent with her awareness of herself as a gender-crossing woman whose sexual and emotional life focused on other women. Sexologists took the view that female same-sex attraction was congenital and therefore, although a statistical anomaly, by no means unnatural. On this basis, they called for tolerance of male and female homosexuality. Within the authoritative discourses of religion, the law, and medicine, this structure of belief best suited Hall's purpose. Nonetheless, the exclusion of Hall from the ideological construction of heterosexual genealogy posed continuing difficulties for her.

During the 1920s, it was commonplace to refer to love between women as "sterile." Compton Mackenzie, for example, routinely uses this word in referring to the Sapphic lovers whom he mocks in *Extraordinary Women* (1928). In *The Well of Loneliness*, Stephen Gordon repeatedly refers to

herself as sterile. When, in the second half of the novel, she finally finds in Mary Llewellyn a woman who loves her passionately, Stephen maneuvers her into marrying a male friend since Stephen cannot offer Mary marriage, a respectable home, a place in society, and children. Again, genealogy is bound up with a maternally defined origin, present, and future.

It is important to bear in mind that Hall was well aware that Sapphic lovers were not inevitably doomed to be caught within this maternity-centered double bind. In one of the most important passages in the novel, Stephen's best friend, Valérie Seymour, urges Stephen to continue her relationship with Mary. Like Natalie Barney, Seymour argues that women with emotional and sexual ties with other women need to build their own institutions and modes of interpersonal relationship. Against the backdrop of Hall's continuing difficulties in imagining queer temporalities and spaces, the effort by such artists and intellectuals in France between 1900 and 1930 as Barney, Renée Vivien, Romaine Brooks, Colette, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, and Suzy Solidor to create a Sapphic mythology, models of individual and collective heroism, new modes of intersubjectivity, and both avant-garde and commercial modes of cultural expression take on even greater importance.²⁹ The heroic tendency in Sapphic culture in the early twentieth century was a requisite counter to the institutional negation of the lives and desires of female subjects of same-sex desire.

If Hall was troubled by her exclusion from genealogy defined in terms of maternal origins, she was also troubled by a sense of outlawed status in relation to the printed word.³⁰ Hall's difficulty with the symbolic order involved not only the legal suppression of the publication and sale of *The Well of Loneliness* in England. She had long been engaged in a more basic struggle regarding access to and mastery of the English language. In the most recent biography of Hall, published in 1999, Diana Souhami discloses for the first time that Hall was dyslexic.³¹ The term *dyslexia* was coined in 1887 by Rudolf Berlin. An important article on the disorder appeared in the *British Medical Journal* in 1896, but the most significant British researcher of the condition was James Hinshelwood, a British ophthalmologist, who in the 1890s and early 1900s published a series of articles in medical journals describing similar cases of word blindness, which he defined as "a congenital defect occurring in children with otherwise normal and undamaged brains characterised by a difficulty in learning to read."³²

Batten and Troubridge were aware of Hall's difficulties in reading and writing; but none of the three seems to have connected this weakness with a physical condition—despite the fact that in 1917 Hinshelwood published a book, *Congenital Word Blindness*, in which Hall could have found her own situation described. The opportunity recurred in the 1920s as a result of the work of the American neurologist Samuel T. Orton, who pioneered the study and remediation of this reading disability. Had Hall and her partners been familiar with this research, it is possible that she would have inferred a connection between being dyslexic and her potential as an artist—just as she did in connection with being crossgendered.³³

In Hall's unpublished manuscripts, there are two extended passages in which she discloses the shame that she experienced in the schoolroom. In yet another draft of "Forebears and Intimacy," she revisits a recurring scene of trauma in her childhood. The passage is heavily scored, and Hall crosses out wording in which she lays the blame for her shortcomings on her own moral failings:

In those days I entirely lacked concentration ~~I was not a good student being careless and lazy~~, also my spelling would put me shame, and greatly irritate the [word crossed out] professors—one of them in particular made a point of reading out ~~a~~ my mistakes in class: "Now I wonder what this word can be . . . [,]" he would drawl, & then he would spell it letter by letter as I had ~~spell~~ spelled it—a terrible moment. Nor has my spelling improved to this day—I spell badly at all times, but when in the thoughts of ~~inspiration it becomes~~ inspiration [inclusion of this word is indicated by a row of dots penciled underneath the cancelled word] I spell so oddly [insert from facing page] that I cannot always read my own script and must try to help myself out by the context ~~odd that I cannot always decide myself, when~~ {additional words crossed out} re-reading what {words} I was {trying} meaning to write ~~and must carefully study the context.~~³⁴

In fictional form in her early, unpublished autobiographical novel, *Michael West*, Hall returns to the same site.³⁵ This fictional recasting is of special significance for the way in which it suggests how the shaming that resulted from the condition entered into the psychic structure of Hall's sexuality. Hall was to find passage by way of love out of the blockages imposed both

X That cannot always read my own script
X and must try to make help myself out by
the context

X X already to my father I was 3 years old
Dad's I suddenly come paid for full time, Jan.!

2. "Forebears and Infancy." Holograph ms., untitled. Radclyffe Hall collection, 22.5. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas. (Version 2)

^{spelled}
spelt it - a terrible moment. Had had my spelling
improved to this day - I spell badly at all times,
but then in the throes of inspiration it becomes
so odd that I cannot ~~always~~ ^{often} decide myself, then,
that word I was trying ~~to write~~ ^{to write}!
re-reading, to that word I was ⁱⁿ ~~going~~ ^{moment} to write and
must carefully study the context.

^{Walt Whitman}
From Leipzig I went on to Germany, and
finished my education in Dresden. There was
much to be said for the Germany of those days -
but all that is too long for my limited space,
 suffice it to say that I was ^{so} happy and so foolish,
and so given to Schwärmerei as were most of my
fellow students. So much ~~then~~ ^{was there} for my education;
as for degrees I had ~~none~~ ^{none at all} never took any.

When and under what circumstances did I
begin my writing? I am told by my mother that
at three years old I suddenly composed the following
poem: "No wonder the birdies love you,

No wonder the butterflies hover near,
No wonder the roses ^{spring} ~~hang~~ above you,
No wonder the birdies love you, dear!"

by the failure of matrilineal genealogy and her difficulties with the written and printed word.

When it comes time for young Michael to enter “Miss Pelham’s select day-school,”³⁶ he is at first enraptured. At Whiteleys, his nurse helps him choose pencil boxes, pencils, a penknife, a satchel, penholders, and an eraser for school. He is also outfitted with clothes and new shoes. Michael’s excitement with his new gear shows how, for Hall, the attraction to the appurtenances of writing was both markedly physical and associated as well with the male sex, masculine dress, and a masculine rite of passage. It is significant too that the mediator of Michael’s exchange is not his mother but rather another significant female other, his nurse.

Michael’s first day at school results in a traumatic scene that at the same time suggests a way out of the dilemma posed by his disability. In the room where new students are to be tested for placement, Michael takes a place next to a young girl named Daisy, to whom he is immediately attracted. When Michael is tested orally for reading and other skills, he fails miserably. Miss Pelham then asks a four-year-old to read. “Michell who was very backward in reading listened to his performance in wonder.” The young reader, however, finds himself unable to identify the word spelled “B-O-S-O-M.” Michael also fails to do so. Daisy, however, provides the correct answer. Interestingly, the word that Michael does not know is a genteel signifier of a female sexual body part. Daisy’s familiarity with the word suggests her access not only to a female knowledge but to a *jouissance* that Michael will later come to associate with the women with whom he falls in love. Daisy signifies both the source of and the bridge to this pleasure.

The passage continues:

One by one the children read aloud, Michel sweated with terror as his turn drew nearer. & when ~~it~~ at last it came ~~at last~~ he forgot even the little he already knew. ~~Painfully,~~ & Slowly, in an agony he faltered and hesitated. Even simple words presented insurmountable difficulties. He was terribly conscious of Daisey’s ~~curious~~ inquisitive eyes ~~fixed on him,~~ ~~with an amused~~ there was amusement in their scrutiny. He lost his place, found it & began all over again—only to become still more deeply involved in a tangle of indecipherable ~~words~~ sentences.

“Dear dear” murmured Miss Pelham in a shocked voice. “Why you cant read at all Michell I’m afraid—try this simple reader please—now then begin[.]”

“The Cat and the mouse ran round the house ~~faltered~~ ~~Michell~~—go on please thats ~~better~~ a little better.”

Michell spelt out the foolish words in a swelter of shame and misery. The other pupils ~~eyed~~ ~~each~~ looked at [each] other with smiles & nudges—Michell could just see them out of the corner of an eye. His heart was beating painfully, tears dimmed his sight—but he remembered that at school ~~apparently~~ one apparently did not cry—so he struggled on ~~manfully~~ as best he could[.]

It came to an end at last—and now it was Daisys turn ~~had~~. She glanced at Michell as who should say “This is the way in which *I* do it.” And proceeded to read aloud in a calm—unruffled voice—She read well for a child of ~~seven~~ 7, & she knew it.

“Very nicely done” remarked Miss Pelham approvingly.—“excellent.”

Daisy preened. ~~You~~

“You never learned to read I suppose” she whispered in Michells ear”

Michell shook his head miserably—he turned a beseeching eye on Daisy—it was a humble eye, & Daisys heart was touched.

“You’ll soon learn” she murmured under her breath[.] “Its as easy as nothing at all. You’ll see if it isn’t.”

But Michell was dispondant—he felt ~~humiliated in Daisys ey~~ that he had dropped ~~miles~~ fathoms in ~~Daisys~~ her estimation.³⁷

To this scene of instruction, Daisy adds a third element, namely, a young girl who witnesses the scene and to whom Michael is immediately drawn. In this way, Michael’s shaming is eroticized. At the same time, the female figure acquires a redemptive charge: her acceptance of Michael over the course of the year enables him to overcome the debilitating effects of that first day. “Michells school days became less distressing as ~~time~~ the weeks went on. He learnt quickly—making up for lost time with ~~marvelous~~ great rapidity. Daisy too had ceased to be distant and superior. She liked Michell, she championed him.”³⁸ Michael soon catches up, later moves on to St. Paul’s School, and is destined for Oxford.

In the passages considered here, Hall links writing with masculinity and a conventionally coded masculine ability to draw support from a desirable female. The work of reading and writing is envisaged as possible with the practical support of a loving female partner—a pairing that Hall herself

accomplished with Batten and Troubridge. Hall's career as a writer of fiction contributes to the extensive rewriting of the mid-Victorian script according to which the success of the professional man of letters was seen as dependent upon his ability to fashion a successful bourgeois marriage.³⁹ Failure of belief in this model characterizes the work of late Victorian and early twentieth-century writers, such as Walter Pater, Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, May Sinclair, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence. All of these writers, however, retain a belief in the necessary linkage between writing, relationship, and desire. Hall's contribution is to emphasize elements of cross gender and female same-sex desire.

At the outset, I mentioned economic, political, gendered, and sexed terms in which Hall and Troubridge can be read. The reading of character in terms of these typologies, however, leaves invisible the dynamic processes in which psyche and world interact. As Hall's inability to write herself into history in the autobiographical essays suggests, ontological categories were a difficult matter where she was concerned.⁴⁰ And the passages from *Michael West* indicate how not only narrative but the very access to language, read and written, stood in Hall's way. Nonetheless, it will be evident to many readers that the story I have told could easily be recast in familiar psychoanalytical terms: namely, of Hall's difficulty in overcoming a pre-oedipal bond of love and hate with her mother, a difficulty that impeded her in proceeding to the oedipal phase, whether that be understood in terms of arriving at heterosexual sexuation, in Sedgwick's term, or a good-enough mastery of the symbolic order. However, to read Hall in these terms would be to rob her of the significance that is unique to the person and project that she named "Radclyffe Hall." Second, to do so could be to fall into the slur, often lodged by psychoanalysts against female subjects of same-sex desire, that their affective and sexual choices signify a failure to achieve a normal oedipal development.⁴¹

Hall emerged as a writer simultaneously with the vogue in England of the work of Sigmund Freud.⁴² She was familiar with the leading concepts associated with his name. To subsume her experience within Freudian theory, however, would be to ignore the challenges that her work poses to Freud's thinking about both female sexuality and gender nonconformity. The exploration of female sexuality in Hall's fiction needs to be read as tacitly contesting the views of Freud and Ernest Jones, the leading proponent of Freudian psychoanalysis in England. As I argue in Chapter

4, it was in the 1920s that male and female psychoanalysts first seriously dealt with the question of the character of female sexuality, which both men approached through the topic of female homosexuality. Their efforts, however, suffer from a primary liability in being modeled on Freud's theory of the male Oedipus complex. Freud's theory of psychic development is unisexual, in the first instance male and with subsequent awkward adaptations in light of female anatomy and subjectivity. The addition by Ruth Mack Brunswick, Melanie Klein, and others of a theorization of a pre-oedipal psychical phase complicates this situation without overcoming the original limitation.⁴³ Since Hall's best and most psychoanalytic study of female psychology in *The Unlit Lamp* (1924) is contemporaneous with efforts within psychoanalysis to theorize about female sexuality, the best way to think of her approach is as a parallel, responsive, and critical set of reflections in relation to widespread contemporary interest in this subject.

A model of childhood development that Freud suggested before he theorized the Oedipus complex is more apropos of Hall's thinking in *Michael West* than is Freud's later approach. In a passage from his unpublished *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1885), which he sent in draft to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud imagines a young child's first contact with another young child. Freud refers to this other as the *Nebenmensch*, "an unusual German word meaning something like 'the next-man' or 'adjoining-person.'" ⁴⁴ Freud is interested in how this young stranger is converted into a neighbor. The subject experiences the meeting first as one of somatic identification with a similar other, based on memories of the subject's own embodiment. Simultaneously, however, the subject perceives the other *as* other, as not being a part of the subject itself. Kenneth Reinhard has observed that it is in this encounter with a child from outside the home that the subject first becomes able to overcome its psychic identification with its primary caregiver(s) sufficiently to recognize another that has an existence like but independent of its own. This encounter marks a momentous moment in the development of human intersubjectivity. Freud further regards it as opening the possibility of recognizing actuality, of becoming capable, in Freud's formulation, of learning (*erkennen*).⁴⁵

Working independently of this unpublished material, in *Michael West*, Hall imagines an experience in which a child becomes what Reinhard calls "the subject of cognition" by recognizing the existence of another whose crucial characteristic is that it exists outside of the maternal dyad or the

nuclear triad (Reinhard, 26, 29). More expressly than Freud, she also recognizes that a scene of this sort is a love scene, albeit not sexualized. Since Hall loves other women and the character Michael functions in part as the protagonist of a fictional autobiography, his first real other is a girl. As Hall's surrogate, moreover, Michael is a boy-girl. The composite figure, Michael/Hall stands yet again in an illicit relation to the world of masculine-identified reading and writing. His/her desire for access to that world is marked both by strong masculine identification and by shame at his/her inadequate mastery of literacy. The relation with Daisy as the other has a competitive aspect that is necessary if Daisy is to help Michael overcome what the reader recognizes to be an undiagnosed disability. Finally, by cross-gendering Michael and turning the young girl whom he desires into an authoritative source of book learning, Hall as feminist exposes the lie of the view that the work of cognition belongs to boys and men.

Hall further recognizes that love between a crossgendered woman and another female can help the subject overcome a debilitating inability to individuate from one's mother. Here it is important to point out that Hall is not thinking of the normal identification of mother and child of either sex in a pre-oedipal phase. In the novel, Michael experiences an intensified sense of psychic vulnerability, imposed by the predatory narcissism of his mother. Daisy plays the role of the stranger whose advent opens for Michael the possibility of recovery. At the same time, and this is a point on which Freud and Hall are at one, both recognize that first love in childhood can open a world to the child beyond the constraints of the love-hate tensions of the nuclear family. For Hall, this opening, despite Michael's literal gendering, is not into a paternal or phallic symbolic order but rather into one not structured in terms of the conventional gender binary. In this early rendition of crossgendered existence, the gender coding of literacy is perceived to be not intrinsic but cultural.

The opening to the world that Hall envisages in love between Michael and Daisy remains precarious. Family drama again impinges, this time insofar as Daisy was a pet name given to Hall by her father on his rare visits.⁴⁶ Giving this name to the first schoolmate with whom Michael falls in love casts an oedipal shadow over the passage—as though Hall imagines Michael's love-object by reflecting something that her father had found desirable in herself as a youngster. Hall's experience with her loving grandmother suggests another danger implicit in this first love. Hall ends one of her autobiographical accounts by observing how her grandmother, unable

to protect her from her mother's abusive behavior, betrayed that love. In so doing, the beloved grandmother collapses back into the hateful mother. Implicit in *Michael West* is the danger that Michael will recoil from Daisy on the basis of some failure of sympathy, real or imagined, on her part. In this way, Daisy could be transformed from an actual point of contact with the outside world into a screen onto which internalized bad relations can be projected.

Hall signals this possibility within the novel. The scene of instruction cited above is not the first time that a Daisy turns up in *Michael West*. In chapter 2, on Michael's daily visits with his nurse to Kensington Gardens, he is not permitted to play with children of another class for fear that he may contract "infectious diseases" from them.⁴⁷ The lonely boy retaliates by inventing a playmate of his own, named Daisy, whom he uses as a pretext to engage in naughty, that is, normal, unrepressed child's behavior. When his nurse and mother insist that he admit that Daisy does not exist, he refuses to do so. As a result, he receives the first of many whippings at the hands of his mother. "Daisy," then, has a prior existence in the novel as a purely imaginary other. The fact that Hall gives the same name to the first girl with whom Michael falls in love indicates Hall's awareness that here too actuality could give way to fantasy. However, her choice of this name for Michael's love-object suggests that in some circumstances projective fantasy may in actuality be surmounted.

Hall betrayed all three of the women with whom she became most intimate. This fact suggests that, as in her autobiographical account of her loving grandmother, at some level Hall was liable to find a woman's loving commitment to her bound to fail. Disappointed by her grandmother's inability to protect her, Hall may have spurned other love objects in anticipation of such failure. In this way too, Hall may have continued in unregulated fashion to play out anger against her mother. Freud's account of one's first love-object outside the nuclear triad posits this possibility.⁴⁸ But the step that he takes toward a theory of the *Nebenmensch* suggests something else as well—namely, the possibility that love of one's first significant other outside the family may enable not only cognition but in particular an ability to recognize a world of others, so to speak, as autonomous yet comparable with oneself. Hall took the step from loving other women in her personal life to advocating for the civil and social rights of female subjects of same-sex desire across lines of class, outlook, and nationality. There is no necessary or automatic link between

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these two kinds of commitment. Love may be transient or it may be constrained within the dyad. But Hall's scene of instruction proposes a way of thinking an originary scene of love outside the family that takes into account both unconventional engenderment and female same-sex desire. She imagines ways that enlarge and enable one's engagement with the world, including the possibility of moving toward love of those who might otherwise remain unrecognizable.