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Radclyffe Hall

Richard Dellamora

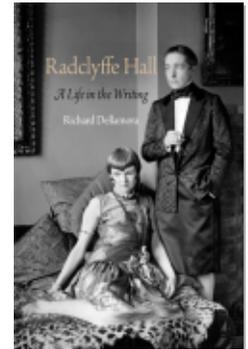
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Paris and the Culture of Auto/biography in *The Forge*

Biographies deal in myths of origin. In her memoir of Hall, Troubridge reports that the germ of *The Unlit Lamp* occurred to Hall while the two, on vacation at the Lynton Cottage Hotel in North Devon, noticed an elderly woman with her middle-aged “maiden daughter” under circumstances similar to the ones in which a young female couple notice Joan Ogden near the end of the novel.¹ Similarly, biographies of Radclyffe Hall have a single story to tell about the origin of *The Forge* (1924), her first published novel. In 1922, Hall was working to place the manuscript of *The Unlit Lamp*. Editors admired the text but doubted its commercial possibilities. It was suggested that the book might be easier to market were Hall to precede it with a successful attempt at a comic novel.² Hall complied, quickly producing the manuscript of *The Forge*, a novel whose story might easily provide material for a drawing-room comedy of the sort that W. Somerset Maugham was writing in the mid-1920s.

As a commercial property, *The Forge* traffics in features of Hall and Troubridge’s highly publicized lives together, which it gently mocks in the form of the ménage of Hilary and Susan Brent plus their adorable but naughty dachshund, Sieglinde.³ Many readers of the novel’s first printing

knew Hall and Troubridge either as friends or as friends of friends. Whether they noticed the partial anagrams of Hall's surname and Una's forename in those of Hilary and Susan, respectively, these readers would have recognized pressure points in the lives of each that Hall touches upon in the novel. Like Hall, Hilary is struggling to complete his first novel. Like Troubridge, Susan is caught between her responsibilities as the wife of a would-be writer, the luxurious lifestyle that he affords her, and her own unrealized artistic ambitions.

The Forge presented itself to its first readers as a piece of auto/biographical fiction full of references, both substantive and circumstantial, to the life of its author and her partner. Even those who did not know more personal details would have recognized the parallel between the actual and the fictional couple in such items as Hall and Troubridge's standing in the world of prize show dogs.⁴ In presenting a partnership between two women under the fictional guise of marriage between a man and a woman, moreover, Hall signaled, as she does more directly in *The Unlit Lamp*, her interest in a crossgendered protagonist. This identification registers on the title page, where Hall drops Marguerite, the forename that she used as author of her books of poetry, and signs herself as "Radclyffe Hall" instead, appropriating her father's first name as her own at the same time that the name's feminine ending signals its bearer's sex. The dedication of the novel, "To UNA with love," signals its role as an anniversary gift, albeit an unusual one, ending as the novel does with Susan chained to her husband and despairing of her art. The particular gender inflection of the couple's relationship also is not obscure. For example, in its coverage of the novel, *People* "took the opportunity (alongside appropriate photographs) to regale its readers with [Hall's] preference for male dress, confiding that she had boasted she did not possess a single frock in her wardrobe" (Baker, 164).

Hall was a pioneer in both crossgendered and lesbian culture insofar as her experience of gender and same-sex partnering provided an example to others. She was also aware of how after World War I a range of new possibilities was opening for female subjects of same-sex desire on a scale scarcely imaginable previously. Her willingness to act on this realization lends her project a democratic character that her in other ways conservative politics does not negate. Moreover, she recognized that as a newly public arrangement the institution of female marriage, including the roles of husband and wife, means and must mean something different for female partners.

At the start, I said that biographers are committed to myths of origin. But the occasion of an act is not its cause, and a cause without an occasion will not be actualized. To seek the causes or better the motives of *The Forge*, one needs to look further. Writing the novel enabled Hall to help map the variety of modern lesbian existence as it crosses with Bohemian and male homosexual manners in the 1920s. Here the experience of Hall and Troubridge in Paris was crucial. In their first decade together, the pair became familiar with the Sapphic culture that had developed there since the turn of the century. Dissident female artists in this environment took a number of different stances regarding the question of female virility. Likewise, they asked themselves how crossgendered experience could be registered in artistically innovative ways. Cross gender was also highly visible in Parisian dance halls and cabaret performance by both male and female artists, not least Barquette, the young female impersonator, high-wire performer, and trapeze artist from the United States.⁵

In Paris the couple knew Colette, a friend of Natalie Clifford Barney and Romaine Brooks, a wealthy American expatriate painter. Another wealthy expatriate American and author, Barney is best known for the salon that she convened for many years at her home on the Rue Jacob.⁶ Colette's first marriage ended after she embarked on a highly publicized affair with another married woman. In the aftermath, Colette for a time supported herself as a music-hall performer, occasionally in crossdress.⁷ Although she later made a successful marriage to a much younger man, her continuing interest in desire between women animates perhaps her best-known work, *The Pure and the Impure*, a series of reflections on the variable character of sexual desire.

Work by women in Barney's circle continually plays with biographical and autobiographical reference. In this vein, Colette refers to her erotically knowing first-person narrator as "Colette." As with Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* (1928), Colette's book engages in an implicit dialogue with Hall and Troubridge both as a celebrity couple and more particularly with Hall's account of sexual inversion in *The Well of Loneliness*.⁸ Begun in 1930, *The Pure and the Impure* began appearing in part publication in a journal in 1931 but was abruptly terminated by the editor in mid-sentence in the fourth installment. Written in the first person as the voice of "Colette," the chapters offer a series of reflections on the incompatibility of love with desire. Many are written in the form of dialogues between "Colette" and

strangers or well-known friends or acquaintances, the identities of whom are lightly masked.

In *The Pure and the Impure*, Colette deliberately resists approaching dissident desire through the lens of modern psychology. Instead she writes in the French tradition of a lover's discourse. At times, she appears to ground desire in a naturalized view of the two sexes. For the narrator of *The Pure and the Impure*, love between women almost always finds itself at a loss in the face of "the supreme deprivation" of a man's "dazzling difference," by which Colette appears to mean his penis (118). Despite subordinating sex between women to sex between a man and a woman, however, Colette shows greater interest in the former. Moreover, in Colette, women—including her autobiographical persona—can be women with a difference. The narrator describes herself as a psychic hermaphrodite with a "masculine streak" (63) that undercuts her occasional efforts to masquerade as a conventional woman: "I am alluding to a genuine mental hermaphroditism which burdens certain highly complex human beings. . . . I happened to be making a particular effort at the time to rid myself of this ambiguity, along with all its flaws and privileges, and to offer them up, still warm, at the feet of a certain man to whom I offered a healthy and quite female body and its perhaps fallacious vocation of servant. But as for the man, he was not taken in, he had detected the masculine streak in my character by some trait of mine I could not identify, and, though tempted, had fled" (62–63).

In *The Pure and the Impure*, Colette suggests something of the variety of female-female desire in Paris. And although she stops short of exploring sexual ties between working-class women, there is no sense that the typologies she explores exhaust the possibilities. Colette associates female gender-crossing with her experience in Paris at the turn of the century. There, "looking as much as possible like a bad boy," she met members of an exclusive coterie of financially independent, politically conservative, socially discreet, gender-crossing aristocratic women. The set—outmoded by 1930—associated their mode of living with a specific politics: namely, the assertion of the right to "personal freedom" (70). Colette notices that the lovers of these women often were either from theater and the music hall or from the servant or other working classes, "rather rude young creatures, insinuating and grasping. Not surprising, this, for these ladies in male attire had, by birth and from infancy, a taste for below-stairs accomplices and comrades in-livery" (73).

In the chapter on Renée Vivien (Pauline Mary Tarn), a young lover whom Barney greatly cherished, Colette describes another type: the turn-of-the-century female “dandy-aesthete,” to use Whitney Chadwick’s phrase.⁹ Vivien, who died a virtual suicide in 1909, was an English heiress who expatriated to Paris, where she modeled herself on the young French decadent, rebel, and poet Arthur Rimbaud. Vivien’s female-female erotic poetry is steeped in the tradition of modern male French verse, whose scandalous representations of Sapphic love are suffused with frustrated desire. Paradigmatic in this tradition are the lesbian poems of Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*. In “Damned Women,” he invokes:

Virgins, demons, monsters, martyrs, all
 great spirits scornful of reality,
 saints and satyrs in search of the infinite,
 racked with sobs or loud in ecstasy,

You whom my soul has followed to your hell,
 Sisters! I love you as I pity you
 for your bleak sorrows, for your unslaked thirsts,
 and for the love that gorges your great hearts!¹⁰

Nineteenth-century French male modernist Sapphism set the tone for Anglophone explorations of female-female desire in poetry and the visual arts; witness, for example, a painting such as Brooks’s *Weeping Venus*, described in detail by Hall in *The Forge*. From a Parisian perspective, already in the first decade of the new century this Anglophone adaptation of French tradition had become *démodé*. Colette says of her friend Vivien’s poetry: “Renée’s work inhabits a region of elevated melancholy, in which the *amies*, the female couple, daydream and weep as often as they embrace. Admirably acquainted with our language, broken to the strict rules of French meter, Renée Vivien betrays her foreignness—that is to say, her assimilation of French masterworks relatively late in life—by exuding her Baudelaireism in the years 1900–9, which was rather late for us” (96).

Colette explores other styles too: for example, that of the aging, bisexual, French Jewish actress Amalia X and her extroverted, crossdressing rival for women’s attention, Lucienne de——. Distancing herself from masculine-style women, Amalia X contends that feminine-style female subjects of same-sex desire can build happy relationships, a view of which “Colette” is



5. Romaine Brooks. *La Venus triste* (*The Weeping Venus*), 1916–17. Musée Sainte-Croix, Poitiers, France. Collection, Musées de la Ville de Poitiers et de la Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest. Photograph, all rights reserved, Musées de la Ville de Poitiers, Christian Vignaud.

skeptical. Amalia tells her: “A couple of women can live together a long time and be happy. But if one of the two women lets herself behave in the slightest like what I call a pseudo-man, then . . .” “Then the couple becomes unhappy?” “Not necessarily unhappy, but sad. . . .” “You see, when a woman remains a woman, she is a complete human being. She lacks nothing, even insofar as her *amie* is concerned. But if she ever gets it into her head [as occurred to Lucienne] to try to be a man, then she’s grotesque” (107).¹¹

Colette has to turn from contemporary Paris to another time and place in order to find examples of enduring sexual and emotional relationships between women free of any trace of masculinity. In the single chapter that does not deal with people she knows, Colette reviews the eighteenth-century journal of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby, the legendary Ladies of Llangollen. Hall and Troubridge, more likely the latter, drew Colette’s attention to this work.¹² In evoking the pair’s “sentimental refuge” (115) in Wales, Colette offers a brilliant analysis of female romantic friendship (whether with a sexual component or not), which she describes

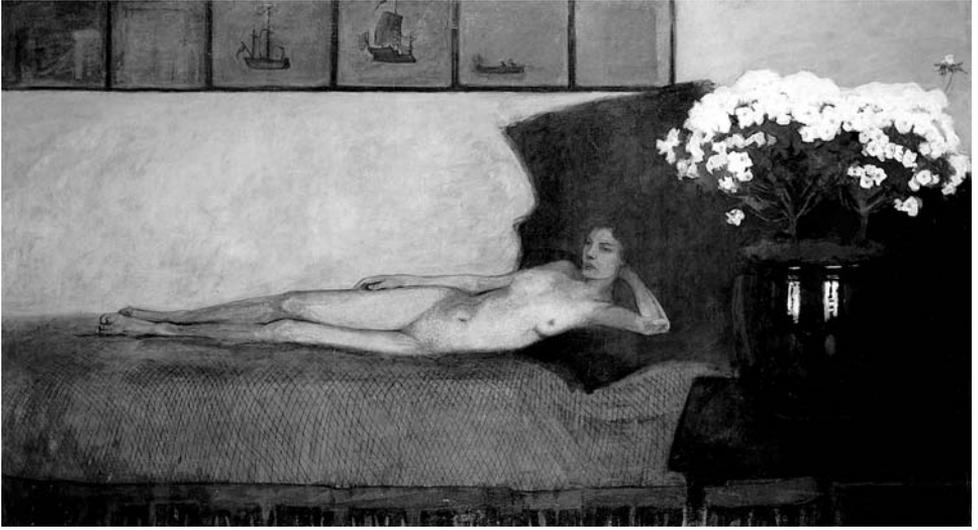
in terms of the attraction of like to like, a characterization that would be carried forward fifty years later in lesbian-feminist efforts to recapture such ties, most notably in Lillian Faderman's classic study, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981).

Brooks figures prominently in the novel in the guise of the modernist painter Venetia Ford, who assumes a seductive role as Susan's artistic mentor. Ford and her work are ringers for Brooks and her paintings. Here biography and autobiography figure differently from what I have thus far described. Hall and Troubridge knew Brooks at the peak of her reputation in both Paris and London during the early 1920s. The knowingness about the expatriate American painter that Hall parades in *The Forge* accrues social and cultural capital to Hall while contributing to the work of mapping that I refer to above. Like Hall, the daughter of a disturbed, self-absorbed, and socially ambitious American woman, Brooks in her painting and photography materialized new possibilities for women with sexual and emotional ties to other women. This aspect of her work was widely recognized at the time.

The introduction of Venetia into the novel complicates its sexual politics, including the auto/biographical politics of Hall's de facto marriage. Since Troubridge and Brooks were also correspondents in the early 1920s and Brooks painted a well-known portrait of her in the year of publication of the novel (see Figure 10), there is also an element of triangulated personal rivalry. Given Hall's highly competitive attitude toward sexual (and here artistic) alter egos, Susan's resistance to Venetia's sexual overtures affords Hall a fictive triumph over Brooks as potential rival for Troubridge's desire, attention, and respect. In addition, Venetia's presence signals a much more specific and complex engagement on Hall's part with a cosmopolitan contemporary culture of female sexual dissidence than the Hilary-Susan narrative would otherwise permit.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Ford/Brooks played a major role in articulating new modes of female sexual dissidence in aesthetic, upper-middle, and upper-class Euro-American culture.¹³ In her first solo exhibition at the prestigious Galeries Durand-Ruel in Paris in 1910, Brooks exhibited *Azalées Blanches* (*White Azaleas*), a large-scale painting of a female nude that challenged male conventions in the treatment of this subject.

In contrast to the ample curves of Francisco de Goya's *Naked Maja* (ca. 1799–1800) and Édouard Manet's modernizing revision of the female nude



6. Romaine Brooks. *Azalées Blanches* (*White Azaleas*), 1910. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the artist.

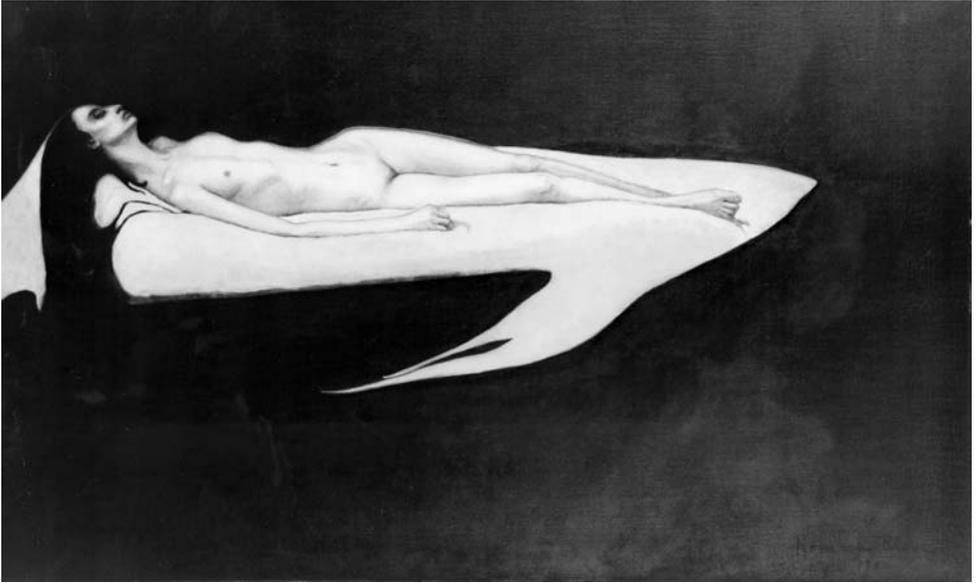
in *Olympia* (1863), Brooks's painting directs erotic attention toward a small-breasted, linear, and angular female body. Brooks, moreover, retains signs of adult female sexuality usually suppressed in high-art renditions of this subject. She writes: "I grasped every occasion no matter how small to assert my independence of views. I refused to accept slavish traditions in art, and, though aware it would shock, I insisted on marking the sex-triangles of all my female nude figures. The traditional depilatory effect shocked me, and I discarded it altogether."¹⁴

Manet had displaced the subject of the female nude from the usual mythological setting to the interior of a contemporary Parisian brothel, from which the figure gazes directly outward toward the viewer. In contrast, Brooks paints her model with a reserved gaze, directed aside, her head cast in non-naturalistic shadow as it lies propped against a large pillow that functions primarily as an abstract shape. The abstracting and reserving gestures make clear that this body belongs to its bearer, not to someone who can pay for it. At the same time, the subordination of the nude within the tonal range and the formal patterning chosen by the artist demonstrate that the most important presence here is that of the organizing talent. As Joe

Lucchesi observes, it is evident as well that the model was painted within Brooks's own domestic space (77). From the start of her career, Brooks was well known for her approach to interior design, exemplified in the interior of her apartment, which emphasized the blacks, grays, and muted hues that the dandy-aesthete James McNeill Whistler, her fellow expatriate American artist, preferred (Chadwick, 17). The Japanese prints on the wall behind the sofa pay homage to Whistler's use of similar motifs and tonality in his waterscape prints, drawings, and paintings. In male painting, portraits of the female nude within a brothel or the artist's studio suggested sexual access and control on the part of the painter. Female nudes, not to mention erotically charged ones, were not associated with painting by women or with female painters' studios (Lucchesi, 76). Accordingly, in its simultaneous claims to artistic modernity on the one hand and female physicality on the other hand, Brooks's painting blazons forth what Chadwick has described as a new aesthetic of "lesbian spectatorship" (21).

The nudes that Brooks painted following this work further signified the experimental personal relations that she and other members of Barney's circle embarked upon. Shortly after painting *White Azaleas*, for example, Brooks began affairs with the Italian dandy, aesthete, and poet Gabriele d'Annunzio and the Russian-Jewish dancer and actor Ida Rubinstein. Given d'Annunzio's interest in Rubinstein, the relation quickly triangulated, though, according to Brooks at least, Rubinstein did not succumb to the poet.¹⁵ Personal experimentation, moreover, refracted back into and through art since both Brooks and Rubinstein adapted d'Annunzio's vision of the great artist as an exile of the spirit, calumniated by mere mortals. In 1911, d'Annunzio produced in Paris a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, with a score by Debussy and with Rubinstein cross-dressed in the title role. D'Annunzio's Catholic religiosity is clearly anthropological, with Sebastian cast in the role of Adonis, the mythological figure who recalls beautiful young men (and women) sacrificed in rites of spring within archaic cultures.¹⁶ One source of the lesbian archetype of the sacrificial artist that one finds in the auto/biography and artistic productions of Brooks, Hall, and Troubridge exists in this particular crossing of personal trajectories in the years before and after World War I.¹⁷

Rubinstein posed for two allegorical nude subjects painted by Brooks in 1911 and 1912, *Le Trajet* (*The Crossing*) and *Femme avec des fleurs* (*Spring*). These works further associate both painter and model with Decadence in the mode of the expressly female Symbolist and decadent aesthetic of René



7. Romaine Brooks. *Le Trajet (The Crossing)*, c. 1911. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the artist.

Vivien. This melancholic strain within an aesthetic characterized by female-female desire was implicitly religious, focusing on the need to escape from a hampering social and embodied existence. In Vivien, the tendency functions as both symptom and motive of her anorexia and attraction toward an early death.¹⁸ In its self-conscious gynocentrism, however, Vivien's work participates in the utopian tendency within the Decadence, in her case projecting the creation of a new, exclusively female society.¹⁹ Within the context of the Brooks-Rubinstein-d'Annunzio triangle, such images indicate the women's effort to carry d'Annunzio's masculist ideal of solitary genius into new gender and social territory. It should be kept in mind, however, that as the figure Adonis-Sebastian-Rubinstein-d'Annunzio suggests, for both the women and the Italian poet, aesthetic exceptionalism connoted androgyny or psychic hermaphrodeity. D'Annunzio, for example, distinguished between Brooks and his many other female lovers. "You're not," he said, "a woman" (Secrest, 244). But she was not a man either.

During her relationship with Rubinstein, Brooks began a yet more innovative series of private works in photographs of her lover taken in Brooks's

studio, possibly in a single session sometime between 1911 and 1912 (Lucchesi, 80).²⁰ Rubinstein is an active participant, gradually removing her clothes in the face of the camera until she is clothed only in a headband and high, white, laced-up boots (Lucchesi, 81). Brooks photographed herself with portions of the allegorical portraits for which Rubinstein posed in the background.

In a later allegorical painting of Rubinstein, *La Venus triste* (*The Weeping Venus*) (1916–17), painted after their sexual relationship had ended, Brooks emphasizes the losses that she associates with intimacy between women. However, as in the heroic portrait of Rubinstein as a Red Cross nurse that Brooks painted in the opening year of World War I and that eventually won her membership in the French Legion of Honor, the self-abandonment suggested by this work pertains as well to the destruction of European culture, including its Aestheticist and Decadent legacy, in the war.

Whether out of this world a new and better one will emerge remains a major unanswered question within Brooks's aesthetic. In the self-portrait and in other works beginning with the 1914 portrait of Rubinstein, Brooks, in Chadwick's view, entered a new phase of her work, in which she elaborates an aesthetic based on female social, economic, intellectual, and sexual independence. Chadwick isolates two tendencies in these images of "heroic femininity" (14). First are images of women warriors, which eventually coalesce in a figure of the female Amazon, most memorably in *Miss Natalie Barney*, "L'Amazone," Brooks's 1920 portrait of her friend and lover. The others are portraits of "the crossed-dressed androgynous woman" (31), such as the pianist Renata Borgatti and Elisabeth de Gramont, Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre, Brooks's successful rival for Barney's affection (Breeskin, 86).

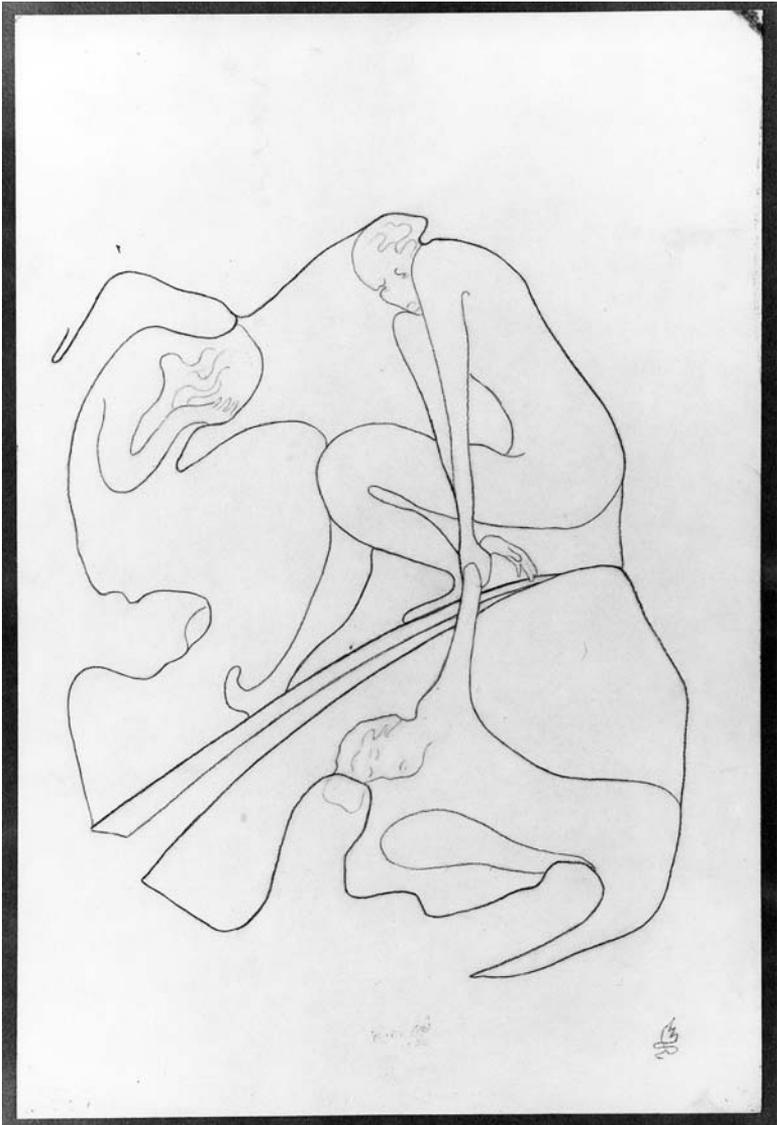
Brooks's move away from portraiture in favor of pencil and paper in her surreal automatic drawings of the early 1930s indicates both the will to follow inspiration wherever it might lead as well as the relinquishing of public ambitions for her art. Nonetheless, a drawing such as *Breaking Apart* (1930–31), with its three figures that suggest variously a sexual triangle, a psychic splitting, and/or the break-up of a couple, evokes in a new way emotions invested in Brooks's paintings earlier. Beneath the comic surface of Hall's novel as well, one senses high psychic stakes and the stirrings of new erotic and social relations in the postwar period.

Book 1 of *The Forge* focuses on Hilary and Susan's comic misadventures as owners of a large home in rural Devon. The incidents parallel Hall and



8. Romaine Brooks. *La France Croisée (The Cross of France)*, 1914. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the artist.

Una's experiences at Chip Chase, the home that Hall purchased for their use outside London in 1919. The couple follow in the footsteps of Hall and Troubridge when they tire of the country and move to a home in central London that proves too small.²¹ Dissatisfied with the new house and bored with the smart set that they cultivate after returning to the city, in Book 2,



9. Romaine Brooks. *Casse en Deux (Breaking Apart)*. 1930–34. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the artist.

Hilary and Susan decide to travel abroad. An extended stay in Paris permits Hall to begin to explore the sexual variety of life there. As often occurs in silent films of the 1920s, an extended cabaret scene permits a break away from the story toward vagaries of desire that more truly represent the interests of the author or filmmaker. In chapter 6, Victor Lumsden, an episcene older friend of Hilary, takes the couple to a fancy dress gala at the Bal Bullier. There, along with other gorgeous birds, what in the 1950s would be called a butch-femme couple enters the novel. Looking at the dance floor from a box in a balcony above, the Brents take in the scene: “Two women passed, dancing together. One of them wore the clothes of a Paris workman, corduroy trousers, and jacket and soft, peaked cap. Around her heavy, handsome throat she had knotted a red bandana. Her partner, a little wisp of a creature, grew tired and they stopped a moment to rest. Then, linking arms, they wandered off in the direction of the garden” (94).²² Sitting in the next box, Susan notices a striking-looking Venetia Ford.

After being introduced, Susan and Hilary pay a visit to Venetia’s studio that shocks Susan out of the torpor of her comfortable if confining bourgeois existence. The discovery that Venetia is the owner of a painting that Susan made in her student days brings back to life her ambition to do serious work. Simultaneously, she becomes aware of her discontent with playing the role of “Hilary’s wife” (102). Following a parallel course, though, significantly, without an erotic spur for his restlessness, in Book 3, Hilary first attempts—unsuccessfully—to resume writing his novel, then decides that he needs to be free of domestic ties. At the end of Book 3, he and Susan discover that they share a similar sense of the need to free themselves from their life together. Hilary leaves England for Canada, and Susan leases a studio in Chelsea only to find that a studio of one’s own does not an artist make.

The beginning of Book 4 finds Venetia in London, in part presumably to catch up with her new English protégé. Susan has admired Venetia from afar since her student days: “So that was Venetia Ford, the strange, erratic, brilliant genius of whom she had heard so much in the old days at the Slade.” Grace Hill, “a fellow-student of hers, had known Venetia Ford in Paris, and the girl had fallen under the spell of this woman’s charm, as did most people whom she admitted to her intimacy” (95). Susan has also been long aware that such intimacy tends to be sexual: “The girl had told her of innumerable and very ruthless love affairs, on which it was said that Venetia

fed her genius" (96). When Venetia invites Susan into the elaborate boudoir of her London flat, the sexual implication is obvious. And when Venetia is inspired to begin painting, Susan is enlisted to help her find a studio. Once Venetia is ensconced, the seduction proceeds—through the paintbrush.

Venetia grants Susan what she permits few others: namely, the freedom of her studio while she is painting from a female model, presumably nude. Susan registers the scene: "Venetia was like a thing possessed, but all her movements were quiet. You felt the possession rather than saw it, it seemed to permeate the atmosphere. She worked with incredible swiftness and strength, there was never a stroke too much. Wherever her brush met her canvas the effect she desired was produced. No one spoke, the room was intensely still. Sometimes a brush clicked against the palette, the model sighed gently once or twice, but otherwise there was silence. In the midst of this silence Susan slipped away. She did not want to wait for the inevitable moment when Venetia would lay down her palette, she wanted to retain this first impression in all its splendid virility" (229). Susan returns home, then attacks one of her own uncompleted works, "dahlias, a turbulent mass of colour. Quietly and deliberately she picked up a knife and cut the canvas to pieces" (229).

This action is important in Hall's analysis of Susan/Una. Replaying the moment near the end of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when Dorian uses a knife in an attempt to cut to pieces Basil Hallward's youthful portrait of him, Susan engages in a metaphoric act of *felo-de-se*. Her failure to remain true to the vocation of artist is figured by ambiguous reference to phallic objects: the apparently "good" phallus of the genius, Ford's, rampant Sapphism and virile paintbrush versus the "bad" phallus of Susan's knife, directed with self-disgust against Susan and her half-hearted artistic project. The juxtaposition of the visit to Ford's studio with Susan's behavior in her own suggests a parallel, at once like and unlike, between Freud's notion of the female masculinity complex²³ and what might be called a "virility" complex: a violent sense of inferiority directed by a talented, attractive young woman against herself because she has failed to develop her own virility, both sexually and artistically. In Hall's portrayal, a failed female virility can take the deformed shape of a masculine aggression whose prime object is oneself.²⁴

The destructive impact of Susan's exposure to the full force of Venetia's genius is interrupted by a *deus ex machina* in the shape of a letter from Hilary informing Susan that he has decided to return home and wants to

see her. Regaining her identification of self with Woman—that is, with her husband’s idea of woman, Susan permits herself to be drawn back into her marriage. When Hilary tells Susan that he has been unable to be unfaithful while apart from her, Susan, as Hall puts it, listens “and smiled a little. But her face wore the large and tolerant expression that belongs to the givers of life” (242). Does this phrase suggest that Susan will attempt to lend meaning to her troubled married existence by becoming a mother? The identification of Susan with a naturalizing, even Darwinizing, definition of woman is by no means merely Hilary’s. It is undersigned by the narrative voice, which says, Susan “stared at him helplessly. She was not Susan Brent, she was just plain and primitive woman. The stark femininity of all the ages looked out of her eyes into his at that moment” (239). This narrative voice might well be that of the author herself since it was a commonplace of both sexological and psychoanalytic thinking of the day that female sexual inverts were drawn to the sort of women who, if sufficiently attractive, would be desired by heterosexual men. As for what attracts Susan/Una, the description of Venetia’s painterly attack specifies that it is a female artist’s “virility.”

Book 4 is the final and most significant as well as the most tantalizing and unfulfilled book of the novel. In addition to its exploration of female virility, Book 4 is also the one place in Hall’s published work where she addresses the challenges posed for her by a self-consciously modernist aesthetic. Ford engages Susan in an extended discussion of the character of modern art. When critics today speak of lesbian Modernism, they usually have in mind the self-consciously experimental writing of such artists as two other expatriate American women in Paris in the 1920s, Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein. Brooks’s Modernism was of an older kind, based in the nineteenth-century modernity of Manet, Whistler, and Edgar Degas, the last of whom died in 1917. As I mention above, however, Brooks’s later Surrealist work indicates that she was prepared to innovate beyond the limits of her allegorical and portrait paintings. When Susan and Venetia meet in London in the final book of the novel, Hall takes the opportunity to explore Brooks’s modernist aesthetic, which, it turns out, is surprisingly similar to that of Virginia Woolf. Although Susan, sans Hilary, is now free to paint, her work proves to be, as Venetia bluntly observes, “utterly dead” (216). Susan feels that the reason is a failure of self-expression, but Venetia counters that true art is impersonal, by which she means, as Woolf does, that it escapes the limits of its maker’s biography and concerns. For example, in a diary entry of 1920 in which Woolf moves with great excitement

toward the idea of writing her next novel in the mode of subjective narration known as indirect free discourse, she poses a question to herself. Can she write in a way that will “provide a wall for the book from oneself” without limiting point of view in the novel to that of a single character, an approach that Woolf finds, “as in Joyce and Richardson, narrowing and restricting”?²⁵

For Venetia as for Woolf, impersonal does not mean objective or external. What is objectionable about self-expression in art is egoistic projection, not the consciousness of the artist. Venetia calls this consciousness “spirit,” although it might also be termed *idea* as that term is understood within philosophical idealism: namely, the notion that human cognition is always based on the perception and understanding of reality as it is experienced within the mind of a particular individual. In Venetia’s words, “It is not the subject of a picture that counts, it’s the spirit of the subject that you must paint; and to find the spirit even in a blade of grass one must look with one’s entire spirit. Art is the most exacting lover in the world, you can’t give too much of yourself. If you don’t find fulfilment in painting your flowers you musn’t blame the flowers, blame Susan. You’re not really wholeheartedly in love with your art, you can’t rise to complete self-abnegation” (216). This view of Brooks/Venetia has a theosophical tenor. Within theosophical thinking, ego, including gender identity and the particularity of individual objects, partakes of an ongoing vitality that exists independently of the mutable forms in which it is glimpsed. Artistic genius is the power of second sight that perceives this sustaining life. Absorption in oneself, another, or material things creates an insuperable obstacle in the path of the would-be artist. The reason for Susan’s failure springs from the fact that, as Venetia says, “your allegiance is divided” (217).

For Woolf, the effort to achieve artistic impersonality implied the need to create a new kind of novel, which would no longer be tied to tracking the development of a single protagonist. Hall rarely speaks of Woolf, but *The Forge* refers implicitly to Woolf’s experimental fiction, *Jacob’s Room*, published a year before Hall wrote her own novel. At the outset, it looks as though *Jacob’s Room* will be a bildungsroman, the life story of Jacob Flanders, a young boy to whom we are introduced in the opening chapter. Woolf, however, deliberately disassembles this familiar novelistic form. The Jacob drawn by the novel is never looked at from the inside. As the narrator observes at one piercing moment, “Why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why

indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him. Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love.”²⁶ After Jacob leaves university and moves to London, his personal and working life becomes passive, fragmentary, and aimless. In the meantime, the narrator often leaves Jacob for long stretches as she explores the subjectivities of other Londoners, some of them not even mentioned by name and many of whom Jacob never meets. In its form, the novel plays with the idea that there is no limit or necessity as to which subjectivities a given work of fiction will explore.

In a telling moment within *The Forge*, Hall explores the notion of a novel without action, character, or even protagonist. She does so ironically through the difficulties that Hilary experiences in making the novel he is writing come right.

The hero, a strong but sensitive man, was also intensely modern; his mentality, complicated by post-war conditions, was contradictory at times. But these very contradictions had originally been intended to bring out the author’s skill. Hilary had decided to soar into fame on the strength of this one great character. Recently, however, the hero had struck, and now he refused to be strong; the worst of it was that he was not weak either, he was merely nothing at all. When flogged by his angry creator he lost all semblance of mental balance, and became such an incomprehensible hysteric that to reason with him was impossible. “I ought to dig him out of the book and send him to be psycho-analysed!” thought Hilary, with a flash of bitter humour.

The heroine, who had begun life superbly as a deep-breasted, calm and statuesque woman, was showing a distressing inclination to be Susanish on every occasion. Minor characters either refused to fit in or struggled to usurp too much space. In fact, everyone and everything connected with the book appeared to be enleagued against him. (184–85)

Frustrated by his artistic “sterility,” Hilary sets the novel aside.

Hall also flirts with the style of indirect free discourse that Woolf was moving toward. The most significant instance of this approach occurs at the end of Book 2, chapter 6, when Susan returns from the evening at the Bal Bullier. Realizing that her identity has been reduced to the role of wife, Susan regrets having lost contact with Grace Hill and the ambitions they shared while at art school. From this moment, the novel shifts; and—as

occurs with the wife in Hilary's ultimately discarded manuscript—Susan becomes the center of interest. As in Woolf's and Hilary's novels, things seem to have a difficult time happening in *The Forge*. It could even be described as a novel in which nothing happens. Obviously bored and frustrated in their marriage and with no work to sustain them, Hilary and Susan are left in much the same position at the end of the novel as at its start. Nor does the knowledge that they consciously decide to stay together make much difference. The same pressures that led to their initial break-up continue to exist.

At the same time, Hall steps back from the ontological and epistemological radicalism of Woolf's novel. For example, Woolf emphasizes the fact that attempts to communicate in language rarely express what is on our minds, what we really feel, or what we really need and wish to communicate. She especially uses personal correspondence to make this point, beginning with a letter that Jacob's mother, a recent widow, is writing to her closest friend, a married man, on the opening page of the novel. In contrast, Hall uses letters twice to shift the course of the novel abruptly. Book 2, and with it the Brents' European tour, is brought to an end when Annie Paget, their house sitter, writes to report that Sieglinde has given birth to puppies after a hitherto unsuspected encounter with a neighbor's pet. And in the penultimate chapter of the novel, Susan's attention switches from Venetia to Hilary when he writes to say that "I have changed very much" (233) and appoints a time to see her.

In a novel focusing on a marriage gone "flat and stale"²⁷ between two attractive persons in their thirties, adultery is likely to appear on the menu. In *The Forge*, it is the wife, Susan, who comes closest to the act. Such a choice was topical at the time. For example, Maugham's successful West End play of 1926, *The Constant Wife*, focuses on a wronged wife's decision to invert the sexual double standard associated with conventional middle-class propriety. Constance Middleton, the wife of the title, avenges herself upon her unfaithful husband first by going to work to secure her financial self-sufficiency. Then, turning her new economic independence into the ground of a claim to "sexual independence" (84), she leaves to spend six weeks in Italy with a friend who has been in love with her for many years. Faced with the situation, her husband is forced either to accommodate his wife's decision or to lose both Constance and the comforts of home.

Adultery, however, is significant in its absence from Hall's novel. Hall substitutes Sieglinde's misdoings for erotic errancy on the part of her owners. By evading predictable infidelities, Hall is able to affirm marriage—even

though the novel is about the impossibility of monogamy. She does so by means of the redundant maxim enunciated at the end of the novel: ties bind us, but life is impossible without them. Hence we agree to continue in relationships that hinder us from achieving our potential as individuals while simultaneously leaving us sexually unfulfilled. Hall's metaphors of human bondage are repeated both in Maugham and in Colette, whose erotic ethic shapes, while being to a degree betrayed, in Hall's novel. *The Forge*, which echoes the title of Colette's novel *L'Entrave* [The Shackle] (1913) focuses on "Colette's abiding questions: Is there love without complete submission and loss of identity? Is freedom really worth the loneliness that pays for it?"²⁸ Colette's central insight is the temporary character of love and its incompatibility with desire: hence the title of *The Pure and the Impure*. While love may be pure, it is continually sacrificed to what in one place she calls "the Inexorable" and in another, "the senses" (24, 25). Colette characterizes love as "the pure and burning space that unites, better than the bonds of flesh, two perfect lovers" (28). This unity, however, yields to the desire for sexual mastery.

In one particular, Hall parts company with Colette. Colette sees love as an illusion subverted by desire; Hall sees it as an inescapable psychological reality. As Hilary says,

Susan, of all the chains in the world the heaviest chain is love; it's so heavy that it almost breaks our hearts, and yet it's the easiest to carry. And because of that it's something deceptive, and we think it isn't there, we go away shouting out loud that we're free; but we've not gone far before we feel its weight, feel its intolerable tug. That's why I'm here, that's what happened to me, the chain grew taut and cut into me. The only way is to keep very close together, a slack chain doesn't hurt so much. . . .

I couldn't get rid of you. I'd left your bodily presence behind, but I'd taken the thought of you with me. I couldn't finish my blessed book, I shall never try to finish it now. (241)

In this presentation, love is desexualized, and desire for the other is psychologized as personal dependence. The shift permits Hall to acknowledge the inescapability, for her, of intimacy between women while relegating to silence the ways in which desire exceeds the bonds of the couple.

Earlier in the book, Hall's description of *The Weeping Venus* indicates her identification of this condition with that of Woman—though by the end of the passage the figure has become crossgendered. Susan sees in the painting “not only the grief of a goddess, but the aching, poignant, exhausting grief of Woman throughout the ages” (106).

The Venus lay on a sombre couch with a moonlit sky as background. One arm was flung above her head, the other dropped at her side. Susan got the impression of a body languid with too much pleasure, emaciated by too much suffering. Tears fell from under the closed eyelids, and the face seemed to hold the sorrows of all the world. The flesh of the limbs was luminously white; but Susan felt as she looked again that the glow did not come from the moonlight alone, but from something within the figure itself, something hidden, secret, and eternal. In spite of its subject, this picture was holy, and bore a strange likeness of holy things. Had Venetia Ford intended that her “Weeping Venus” should suggest a Pietà? (107)

The paragraph channels into English middlebrow literary culture the insight of Natalie Barney, who in her poem on the same painting, writes,

Laid out as dead in moonlight shroud
 Beneath a derelict of cloud:
 A double wreckage safe from flight,
 High-caged as grief, in prisoned night—
 Unseeing eyes whose clustering tears
 Tell the pure crystal of her years.—
 No crown of thorns, no wounded side,
 Yet as the God-man crucified,
 Her body expiates the sin
 That love and life with her begin!²⁹

In her memoir of Hall, Troubridge eagerly lists details of *The Forge* that have correlatives in the couple's life.³⁰ But she suppresses major matters. For example, the crisis in Hilary and Susan's marriage registers with a new resonance when one learns, not from Troubridge but from her biographer, that Hall and Troubridge nearly broke up while living at Chip Chase.³¹ The novel also hints at other complexities. For one thing, Hilary's inability to

be unfaithful may comment on Hall's situation during these years. When with Batten, Hall had rebelled against monogamy. And in the 1930s, she would entangle herself, Troubridge, and a younger woman in a triangle that continued until Hall's death in 1943. But in the 1920s, Hall's unresolved guilt over the circumstances of Batten's death seems to have frozen her wandering libido, an effect reinforced by Troubridge's watchful eye.

While Hall may have been bound to Troubridge by love in 1924, she was also chained by the fact that she could not write without her. In the novel, Hall portrays Susan as unable and unwilling to give Hilary the practical assistance and moral support that he needs to write. In the memoir, Troubridge presents the reverse. Although she draws no explicit connection between *The Forge* and her account of her literary collaboration with Hall, Troubridge's extended discussion of this topic immediately follows her remarks on *The Forge*.³² These pages provide an extended account of her part in Hall's writing. And while the full extent of that contribution never comes quite clear, it is evident that it was highly active. This reality was difficult for the two women to conceptualize since it contradicted their ideology, drawn in part from Brooks and d'Annunzio, of artistic genius as a solitary enterprise, albeit one sustained by occasional sexual liaisons.

Hall recognized that literary collaboration did not suffice to meet Troubridge's artistic and professional needs. Susan's anxiety over having failed to develop her potential as an artist and her guilt about having abandoned her artistic ambitions speak to Hall's sense of Troubridge's similar situation. Likewise, Susan's willingness to be absorbed by Venetia's "genius" repeats Troubridge's lifelong pattern of preferring to play satellite to a partner whose public role she could absorb herself into: first, her husband's position in the British Navy; subsequently, Hall's work as a writer and activist; and, after Hall's death, the remarkable talent and eventual international career of the young Italian bass Nicola Rossi-Lemeni (Baker, 355). Unlike Susan, however, Troubridge found other outlets. For example, she became one of Colette's best translators.³³

These observations suggest how *The Forge* makes sense within the life itinerary of Hall and Troubridge. They also confirm the role that Philippe Lejeune, the theorist of autobiography, sees as that of the reader of autobiographical fiction. According to Lejeune, the view commonly expressed by writers that the novel is truer than autobiography is based on the assumption that fiction is in fact autobiographical: "The reader is thus invited to read novels not only as *fictions* referring to a truth of 'human nature,' but

also as revealing *phantasms* of the individual.”³⁴ Lejeune calls this relation “the phantasmatic pact” between reader, author, and fictional protagonist. In this chapter, I have augmented a reading of this sort with a cultural one. While *The Forge* may have been undertaken to meet the needs of a publisher, Hall took the opportunity to offer in it the fullest example she was to provide of her participation in the lesbian- and/or woman-centered culture that she found in the persons and work of such artists as Barney, Brooks, and Colette. In *The Forge*, auto/biographical fiction works as culture, opening English readers to the gynocentric project going forward in Paris and claiming space for a new mode of female writing.