The early twentieth century was keenly interested in sound and the voice, as well as visual culture. This is true not only of poetry and prose, which the literary category of modernism characterized in this moment as experimental in tone, narration, and rhyming, but in film, which became increasingly preoccupied with recording technologies. Although several talking pictures of the era lay claim to the revolutionary status of the first sound movie, and critics have largely exploded the myth, perpetuated in later films such as the 1952 *Singin' in the Rain*, of sound as a sudden and cataclysmic industry event, the 1927 Warner Brothers picture *The Jazz Singer* is generally regarded as the film that revolutionized sound. Although attempts had been made before to synchronize dialogue and music with film projection, *The Jazz Singer* made it big by featuring Al Jolson, one of the era’s most popular vaudeville acts, as the protagonist of the film’s title. Today *The Jazz Singer* seems remarkable for the way it places the voice at the center of the film as its subject and fetishized object. Throughout the movie, viewers are shown the protagonist singing, enjoying himself singing, and inviting audiences both inside the film and in the larger public to enjoy the spectacle of his enjoyment.

In one memorable and symbolically resonant scene, Jackie Rabinowitz—the jazz singer of the film’s title—reunites with his mother for the first time since running away as a teenager, recreating his act for her, replete with frenetic stage patter and hammy, highly stylized crooning, in their little front parlor. The film is mostly silent, so Jackie’s songs are situated in this silence as a huge pleasure for movie audiences, and this song is no exception. In the middle of the song, however, he stops singing to deliver a chatty monologue where he promises her the pleasures she has only dreamed of having:

Do you like that Mama? Well I’m glad of it. I’d rather please you than anybody I know of. Will you give me something? Shut your eyes. [He
kisses her.] And I’ll give it back to you some day, you see if I don’t. Mama darling, if I’m a success in this show, we’re gonna move from here. Oh yes. We’re gonna move up to the Bronx. A lot of nice green grass up there, and a whole lot of people you know. The Ginsbergs, and the Guttenbergs, and the Goldbergs, oh, a whole lotta Bergs, I don’t know ‘em all. And you know what else, Mama? I’m gonna buy you a nice black silk dress, Mama, you’ll see. Mrs. Friedman, the butcher’s wife, she’ll be jealous of you, yes she will, you see if she isn’t. And I’m gonna get you a nice pink dress that’ll go with your brown eyes. Whaddya mean no? Who’s tellin’ ya? Yes, you’ll wear pink or else! Or else you’ll wear pink! And darlin’, I’m gonna take you to Coney Island! And we’ll ride the Shoot-the-shoot, and the Dark Mill. Ever been in the dark mill? Well, with me it’s all right—I’ll kiss you and hug you, you’ll feel like it!

Film critics have remarked on the “manically gabby” quality of Jolson’s speech in this scene. His torrent of words creates the sensation of sound bursting into the movies, as if the silents—and the late Victorian and Edwardian culture of silent films—had repressed it. The notion of sound as the end of repression, holding back, or doing without, works on the larger level of *The Jazz Singer*, which uses both the voice and the look to offer audiences the fantasy of fulfillment beyond what their lives have afforded. The pleasure that Jackie’s speech produces in his mother and in the film audiences watching her is equated in the film with the pleasure of sound, and the pleasure of sound in turn becomes associated with other kinds of pleasure: with looking, eating, wealth, travel, being seen, spirituality, sexual flirtation, and pre-oedipal happiness.

The previous chapter discussed Lacan’s notion of “seeing one’s self seeing one’s self” as a late modernist rereading of Freud’s work on narcissism, one that reads the pleasure of self-conscious pleasure as perverse. More specifically, I argued that this pleasure is perverse because if the attempt to elude the gaze deflects the threat of castration, then it also signals a queer refusal of the normative gender and sexuality castration is supposed to encourage and enforce. In this chapter, I want to explore the psychoanalytic suggestion that the Voice, like the Gaze, also organizes desire perversely in modernism’s queer portraits, and that the self-conscious pose of staging one’s self hearing one’s self talking is analogous in many early twentieth-century texts to the insistence on “seeing one’s self seeing one’s self,” a self-consciousness whose pleasure is organized along group lines rather than solipsistic ones. Like the self-conscious self-observation of seeing one’s self seeing one’s self, the
emphasis in texts to staging one’s self hearing one’s self chatter can also be seen as a strategy that helps speakers refuse inscription in sexual difference; adopt a non-normative, deviant position in relation to the normative and castrating demands of the look; and invest objects with subject-constituting powers. Like the portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which seems to be the likeness of a “real” person but which is really about all the people who together look at the sitter being looked at, songs and poems can seem to reflect something individual about “real” characters, but they can also emphasize the circulation of the pleasure of performance among multiple listeners, listeners who enjoy the enjoyment of the speaker. Indeed, the presence or imagined presence of an audience of spectators can actually create the effect of the performer “hearing” himself being heard—a pleasurable instance where self-consciousness produces the group that is its best audience.

As many modernist-era literary texts suggest, there is some connection between pleasure in talking and pleasure in looking, and an even greater pleasure to be had in taking this pleasure in looking and talking, staging it, and using its status as a performance to impersonate a character talking back. Such impersonation can be read as a joke, as someone “doing” an exaggerated version of themselves, but the pose struck in such impersonation emphasizes the agency and dignity of the performer. Staging one’s self as a character in this way tacitly acknowledges what Susan Sontag termed “Being-as-Playing-a-Role.” A drag queen or a gay man camping it up makes it clear at any given moment that they are aware that they are a stereotype, but that they are going to self-consciously “do” the stereotype they embody nevertheless. Such self-consciousness can emphasize the performer’s autonomy, his informed resistance to the notion of sincerity and personal essence, and his awareness of the difference between the respectable role he is supposed to occupy and the pleasurably queer one he chooses instead.

His chief rebellion, of course, is his circulation of this pleasure he takes in his own performance. The psychoanalytic system sketched out by Lacan insists that the voice and the gaze are two of the most important lost objects cut away from us by our socialization as gendered beings. Their loss is important insofar as it forces us to know ourselves through various separations, as separate from the others who see and talk to us. Even more important, however, is the way the Gaze and the Voice mobilize desire by reminding us of their loss to us in this separation, functioning as what Ellie Ragland calls “lure objects” that “never deliver the satisfaction implicit in them, but only titillate.” Kaja Silverman reminds us that when thinking about the function of sound in
film, it is useful to remember Lacan’s emphasis on “the discoursing voice as the agent of symbolic castration” rather than as the sign of presence for which it is often mistaken in film theory. Slavoj Zizek argues that this voice terrifies us because it is disembodied and placeless, “a spectral voice which floats freely in a mysterious intermediate domain and thereby acquires the horrifying dimension of omnipresence and omnipotence, the voice of an invisible master.” A voice that owns its own pleasure might very well refuse this loss, this castration, this sexual difference, by insisting on its own sufficiency, or at least by staging this sufficiency as a circulating social alternative to the grim unpleasure of sexual difference.

In *The Jazz Singer*, Jackie provides pleasure with his voice, and he takes pleasure in providing pleasure as well. Like many a nonstop chatterer, he clearly loves hearing himself talk. Jolson’s highly stylized performance here both reflects and produces his self-consciousness; he clearly knows he is in a movie, and he conveys that he knows we know he knows. As such, he plays Jackie as a character who knows he is in a movie, creating the framed portrait of a person doing portraiture that circulates the look—and here, the voice—in a dynamic exchange between artists and audiences. His energetic hamminess resonates because he so clearly, so self-consciously enjoys producing it. He widens his eyes, raises his eyebrows, leers, and smiles even when his mother is looking down, playing to the larger gaze of the film’s spectators even as he recreates the fiction of his stage show for her. The more he performs singing, the more he enjoys performing singing. Indeed, one of the most striking things about this scene is that the site of pleasurable appreciation is Jackie rather than his mother; she is never more than sweetly, shyly encouraging, while he is all exuberance. His banter, too, is theatrical rather than intimate, delivered to her in the form of stage patter during his own two-chord piano accompaniment, both of their bodies facing front, as if delivering lines to a seated audience. His pleasure in his own performance is the pleasure of the performance itself, and the film audience takes pleasure in him on his cue, rather than that of his “real” audience in the form of his mother. This kind of pleasure is the pleasure of the child, unshared and unsanctioned for the most part by the parents. More than his jazz singing, Jackie’s modernity is signified by his pleasure in jazz singing, and in the pleasure he seems to take from having his pleasure watched, heard, and appreciated by others.

But this very modern pleasure is also a perverse pleasure. Talking in *The Jazz Singer* and elsewhere is often excessive, obsessive, fetishistic, self-absorbed, anxious. Like Jackie, modernist culture takes great plea-
sure in talking for its own sake. Michel Foucault has famously postu-
lated that the “putting into discourse of sex” has from the sixteenth cen-
tury onward “been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement”
resulting in the “dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sex-
ualities.” The 1902 definition of logorrhea that the OED gives is sug-
gestive of both symptom and style: “Excessive volubility accompanying
some forms of mental illness; also gen., an excessive flow of words, pro-
lixity.” Psychoanalysis in this era constructs the talking cure as a kind of
logorrhea, or as talk having a logorrheic logic, in that its volubility is
produced as a symptom, or in search of it, or both. So, too, the literary
modernism that emerges in reaction to the middlebrow, sexually
respectable Victorian culture that precedes it is a stream of prattle, an
internal monologue that echoes everywhere, a virtuoso performance of
words upon words.

Michael North suggests that “linguistic imitation and racial mas-
queraade” allow transatlantic modernist writers to “play at self-fash-
ioning,” pointing out that in The Jazz Singer, “Jazz means freedom to
Jackie Rabinowitz partly because it is fast and rhythmically unre-
strained but also because it is not ancestrally his.” North is dealing
specifically with dialect, rather than volubility, and draws a sharp con-
trast between the white writers it enables and the African American
poets who experience dialect as an insulting and enslaving appropri-
ation. Unlike dialect, however, logorrheic modernism does not limit self-
fashioning and the pleasure of perversity to white writers. When
Langston Hughes’s Madam in the “Madam” poems has a talking jag,
self-fashioning combines with a critique of racial, economic, gender, and
sexual oppression to bring Madam out on top as a woman of strength,
character, and humor. The obsessive racial stereotyping of Gertrude
Stein’s gossipy narrator in “Melanctha”; the guilty yet defiant self-
reflexive verbosity of Molly Bloom in James Joyce’s “Penelope” chapter
of Ulysses; the alcoholic rantings of Matthew O’Connor in Djuna
Barnes’s Nightwood; the restless peregrinations of narrative attention in
Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway; the anxious, prattling self-ironies of
Prufrock in T. S. Eliot’s “The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; the exu-
berant and inventive showing-off of Cole Porter’s song lyrics; the
campy riffs and queeny one-upmanship of Langston Hughes’s Madam
in “Madam to You”—all are structured stylistically through the self-con-
scious pleasure of the talker enjoying hearing herself talk. Like Jackie
the jazz singer, who sings and jokes for both real and imagined audi-
ences, logorrheic modernism watches itself talking, takes great pleasure
in its own performance, and suggests the perversity of this pleasure by
insisting that it circulate as the spectacle of its own pleasure, already framed for an audience constructed as an in-crowd of participants. The pleasure of the talker taking pleasure in herself, and the audience taking pleasure in this pleasure, is then circulated as the foremost pleasure of art.

Hearing one’s self being heard, like seeing one’s self seeing one’s self, embraces self-consciousness as a strategy and pose. The subject does not merely fall for himself talking, like the narcissist falls for himself in the glass, but rather falls for himself being fallen for by others, and then falls for the entire spectacle. His ideal is not just his own image, or his own sound, but an aestheticized metanarcissism, the idea of himself falling for himself, his sound, his performance. This pleasure celebrates the critical distance between him and his image, or his vocal performance, while embracing the idea of the image, or song being sung, as a libidinal lure. This embrace of self-conscious narcissism as a pose attributes agency to self-consciousness.

The logic of this follows as something like: “Because I am conscious of my narcissism as a pose, I control it, and thus, I also believe I can control my being-looked-at-ness, as I myself control the way I look at myself. Similarly, if I enjoy my manipulation of that other lost object, the voice, so much so that my enjoyment of my voice becomes one of the effects of my voice that I also control, then I make the voice, rather than am being made by it, or rather, by its loss.” This self-consciousness taken up as agency neutralizes castration by dramatizing its terms but rendering them harmless, traumatic to nobody. Instead, the trauma becomes a pleasure, an irony, a sarcastic read of the normal that twists it back on itself, making a shared pleasure out of this twisting and this perversity, a pleasure that invites its audience to share in it, a pleasure that creates a queer social world insofar as those who get the joke circulate this pleasure between them, as readers and audiences.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, one of the best and earliest examples of this style of perverse agency, of logorrhea as pleasurably self-conscious self-expression in modernism, appears in the spectacle of Lord Henry’s talent for making pretty speeches in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Returning for a moment to this extremely influential representation of a narrative voice framed as one enjoying himself enjoying his own talking, one sees the prototype of the modernist-era voice whose elaborations are part of the spectacle of self-consciousness as an artistic performance for its own sake: “The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her
wine-stained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a Bacchante over the 
hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober” (43). 
Remember that like his author, Lord Henry responds to being looked at 
with talking, producing rhetorical style as a thing in itself, for its own 
sake. This artistry takes place in the field of desire that is also the field 
of vision: “He felt that the eyes of Dorian Gray were fixed on him” (43), 
the narrator informs us. His “extraordinary improvisation” (43) under 
the eyes of Dorian Gray is no less wonderful than the language of the 
narrator under the eyes of his readers, a narrator whose images of Lord 
Henry’s speech appropriate that speech and transform it into rhetorical 
excess.

The link between the pleasure of this kind of logorrheic agency in 
Dorian Gray and its perverse refusal of the normative terms of castration 
can also be found later on in The Jazz Singer, when Jackie’s father, whose 
presence as castrating father and religious cantor evokes both the Gaze 
and the Voice, stops the action and the sound of the film when he enters 
the room during Jackie’s singing at the piano. Cantor Rabinowitz first 
interposes himself between Jackie and his mother by entering the room 
behind them in such a way that the perspective of the frame makes him 
appear to stand between them. Then, recognizing that Jackie is singing 
jazz songs to his adoring mother, he commands them both to “Stop!” 
The father’s command insists that Jackie stop singing, to be sure, but 
most importantly, it insists that both Jackie and his mother need to stop 
their mutual pleasure, here rendered as a kind of infantile mother-son 
bond, in Jackie enjoying himself enjoying himself.

Jackie’s pleasurable patter in this scene, which I quoted earlier at 
length, suggests how self-consciousness deployed as a mode of queer 
personal style functions as a gesture or series of gestures employed to 
distract, divert, and even mock the ubiquitous gaze. Oscar Wilde’s 
writing sets up a template for how queer desire can circulate perversely, 
organized around the literal focal point of a portrait, or the metaphorical 
structure of literary portraiture. In Wilde’s portraits, queer desire oper-
ates like narcissism in that seeing one’s self seeing one’s self organizes 
desire and looking in a self-reflexive circuit; however, his perverse por-
traiture differs from psychoanalytic accounts of narcissism in that it also 
requires the participation of an inside group of attuned gazers, or 
readers, who are constituted as a group subject by the circuit of looking 
that portraits seem to invite. In The Jazz Singer, jazz singing becomes 
Jackie’s style, his perverse pleasure, and his non-normative identifica-
tion, causing the rift between him and his father, as well as becoming an 
epithet his father uses against him: “you, you jazz singer!” Jackie’s
mother is his audience in the film, but Jackie turns his face more directly toward the live theater audiences when he sings, inviting them to share not only his mother’s pleasure but also his pleasure in her pleasure, and in his own.

Moreover, while Jackie’s decision to sing for secular audiences as a vaudeville performer rather than in the temple as a cantor like his forefathers is the ostensible cause of his exile from home, and Jackie’s exile from home and triumphant return is the typical American success story, his expulsion also mirrors that of gay, lesbian, and transgender teenagers, as well as unwed pregnant daughters, when their libidinal pleasure conflicts with parental ideals of conventional heterosexuality. Jackie’s pleasure in his voice is shameful to his father; Jackie’s girlfriends in the film are fairly unconvincing romances; and Jackie even confesses to one of them that his career is more important to him than love. Jackie’s libidinal bond with his mother and the vehemence of his father’s intervention further strengthen the impression that he has chosen some other kind of pleasure than that of conventional heterosexuality. Finally, the shame surrounding Jackie’s exile is marked by the removal of his boyhood portrait from the front parlor, a removal that his mother pretends was caused by the picture’s fall, but which audiences know is a result of Jackie’s fall into jazz singing.

The emergence of the voice, and of talking style, as an object of modernist aesthetics occurs at the very moment talking emerges as both symptom and cure in psychoanalysis, suggesting its status as both pleasure and containment of pleasure. As the origins of the talking cure in a fin-de-siècle psychoanalysis concerned with female hysteria suggest, the chattering personality who suffers from repression is understood as feminine, and talking acts as her sexual and intellectual outlet, marking her illness while serving as the cure. Talking also becomes synonymous with both femininity and feminization. Beginning with Breuer’s patient “Anna O.,” who named the relief she felt after confessing her symptoms her “talking cure,” psychoanalysis came to rely on talking as a method for uncovering secrets, traumas, dreams, and fantasies. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge saw the talking cure between the wars as one specifically aimed toward sexually thwarted women: “To be encouraged by a doctor,” they write, “to talk about oneself in the most prattling detail, and to be listened to with serious interest, was a new and grand experience, especially for moneyed and lonely women who had had ‘nervous breakdowns.’” Their condescending dismissal of both psychoanalysis and the women who flocked to it records, however skeptically, how the exteriorized interiority of talking produces a kind of pleasure, in this
case, a perverse pleasure linked to the expression of feminine emotional excess. Jackie’s talking in *The Jazz Singer* feminizes him, as his bond with his mother feminizes him, but his exuberant style pushes back as well, taking up talking with a powerful gusto that makes it his. He occupies talk as he occupies blackface—as a performer performing self-consciously, reminding his audience at all times of the masks of style as style—as surface, persona, affectation, artifice. This self-consciousness gives form to his patter, a form that suggests intention and masculine agency even as his exuberant talk suggests the feminine formlessness of logorrhea. Jackie puts on chatter as he puts on blackface—to be modern, to be hybrid, to foreground style, to celebrate theatrical self-fashioning. Logorrhea allows him to be, in short, queerly modern.

**DANDIES IN HIDING**

Although *The Jazz Singer* made history in 1927, the patter of its main character was cultivated years before by Jolson on the vaudeville circuit. Indeed, the logorrheic voice whose self-deprecating patter has for nearly a century been seen as best characterizing the disaffected inertia of the moderns is that belonging to T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock. “The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was written just before the Great War, and there is perhaps no better example in modernism of how the pleasure of hearing yourself hearing yourself creates a particular style of ironic narcissism and thwarted masculinity than in the mournful chatter of this most despairing of dandies. The central character and speaker of the poem claims to fear the shallow insincerities of style, yet he stages his own absurdity, and the self-conscious enjoyment of his own voice, with disarming candor. “Let us go then, you and I,” he begins, relishing redundancy. The “you” immediately stages an audience that stands for larger audiences, as Jackie’s mother does in *The Jazz Singer*. This allows the speaker a theatricality, an awareness of himself talking to an audience, by staging that audience within the poem itself. His perception of other voices, especially those of women, threatens to overwhelm him, eliciting a stream of chatter from him as a kind of counterattack. We know from him, but only from him, that the city at dusk buzzes with the “muttering” of sexual discourse, of illicit encounters in “one-night cheap hotels,” a discourse that speaks less of love than the end of love, like one lover badgering another in a quarrel in a “tedious argument / Of insidious intent.” The speaker remains firmly in control, however, by insisting his voice be the one that distracts and redirects the looks and
voices aimed at him with the self-parody of a childlike rhyme: “Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’ / Let us go and make our visit.” Like Joan Riviere’s masquerade of femininity, where the woman speaker makes self-deprecating jokes in order not to be judged by men as too masculine, the speaker in Prufrock affects self-irony in order not to seem to be trying too hard, or be judged as unmanly, unstylish, or dull. This archness characterizes the speaker’s style in the poem, serving not as his personality, but as a mask of personality that deflects and manages the eyes and voices that scrutinize and interrogate him at every turn.

At the same time, the muttering voices and measuring eyes in the first few lines of the poem suggest the speaker’s chatter, as well as irony, as a kind of compensation or defense produced in the conflict between an interiority where he feels safe and an exterior world of heterosexual demands. This is the kind of conflict produced by the scrutiny of being looked at and assaulted by voices, an assault Prufrock genders as female. The speaker’s “room” is full of women talking: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” The discourse of women concerning Michelangelo, as well as the idea of Michelangelo, provides a key to why the difference between inside and outside might produce so much Prufrockian talk. The notion of artistic sublimation that Michelangelo should represent, with its seamless transformation of unacceptable sexual impulses into artistic achievement and scientific inquiry, is resisted by the homosexual aesthetic of a Michelangeloesque sculptural style, replete with muscular nudes, that does not so much transform his homosexual impulses into art as serve to express and idealize homoerotic desire. The presence of such idealized male bodies, as well as the achievement such art represents, in this case only emphasizes the impotence and inconsequence of Prufrock’s speaker, whose life is merely full of words: “works and days of hands / That lift and drop a question on your plate.” Too taken up with “a hundred indecisions” to act or create, the speaker retreats into talking, style, and fashion as his forms of expression, “My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin.” This feminine and effeminate art, however masculinized by understatement, only dooms him to further scrutiny: “[They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’].” Prufrock’s reverse dandyism, where he goes out into the world dressed as conservatively as possible in order to make a fashion statement that is not a fashion statement, can’t help but draw an unfavorable comparison with Oscar Wilde, that greatest of dandies, dead just ten years when “Prufrock” was being
written.\(^{12}\) Any art the speaker undertakes, even dress, dooms him to an inadequate approximation of the style of great artists of the past, many if not most of whom seem to have been homosexual, and far surpass him in both genius and sex appeal.

The speaker’s solution is to resort to the style of saying things, to speaking rather than comportment or bodily display. He finds refuge in the ability to ironically gloss his own descriptions, a disturbing habit that takes on ominous weight through repetition as the poem progresses. Faced with being scrutinized and dismissed by talking women, he talks back, launching his own stream of prattle. His talking becomes heroic because it is fated to fail, a futile effort that still speaks in spite of the certainty of this failure. From this countertalk in the face of the annihilation of his voice issues a subject defended by style from the talk of others:

Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean! (99–104)

Note the rhetorical pleasure of repetition in the two “Afters,” and the aesthetic daring of “sprinkled streets” in a sentence whose spoken quality is emphasized in the frustrated outburst of the last sentence. Despite the impossibility of communication, of being understood or understanding others, one can still say pretty things prettily. The “After . . . After” denotes a pleasure in oratory, and a consciousness of the effect of speaking, or sounding as if one is speaking. The attempt at poetry, even in its failure, is conscious of an audience, the “you” of “you and I” is presumably still listening. Nor does the impossibility of being understood preclude talking, or complaining: “I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each” the speaker mourns, “I do not think that they will sing to me.” Instead of waiting not to be sung to, the voice appropriates the singing itself. Is it Prufrock, or the mermaids, or both, that speaks the lines “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown”\(^{(128–30)}\)? For suddenly there is a “we,” not a “you and I” between whom can be measured the ironic distance of self-consciousness, but a voice whose desire makes it ever more sure of its own incantatory power. In its siren song, the brio of this voice, its pleasure in
itself, shows its hand. With a lilting rhythm like the movement of waves, the ironic, self-conscious voice of the speaker becomes one with the voices of the sapphic mermaids, who only sing “each to each” and prefer to “linger” around other “sea-girls.” In this perverse and pleasurable moment, the moment Barthes views as necessary if the prattling text is to transcend its own frigidity “quite apart from bliss,” readers become something more than mere address. The voice gives way to a queer interpenetration, relaxing the bounds of inside and outside. Without transparency, it says exactly what it means, but instead of foreclosing what it dares not hope for, it dares for once to desire something beautiful, and it lures us toward itself as the very fulfillment of that desire, that beauty.

TOPS AND BOTTOMS

Much of the queer humor found in the songs of Cole Porter resides in the arch relation of a speaker to traditional expressions of sentiment. While sometimes restrained to the point of pathos, as in “Begin the Beguine,” Porter’s lyrics are more often voluminous, chatty, and exuberant outpourings of American colloquial speech, replete with double entendres masked by an assumption of bright-eyed naïveté. Typical is this assertion of tongue-tied taciturnity from “You’re the Top”:

At words poetic I’m so pathetic
That I always have found it best
Instead of getting ‘em off my chest,
To let ‘em rest—unexpressed.

Despite this pose of incoherence, one that seems to emphasize the sincere value of real feeling over the more suspect sophistication implied by glib eloquence, what follows this prelude is one of Porter’s campiest and most playful of songs, an exuberant invention fueled by the pure joy of combining unlikely sets of objects together by rhyming:

You’re the top! you’re the Colosseum,
You’re the top! you’re the Louvre Museum,
You’re the melody from a symphony by Strauss,
You’re a Bendel bonnet,
A Shakespeare Sonnet,
You’re Mickey Mouse!
The invention of images uses its end-rhymes to reach even further: after insisting that “you” are not only the “Nile,” the “Tow’r of Pisa,” and even the famous “smile” on the “Mona Lisa,” the speaker concludes: “I’m a worthless check, a total wreck, a flop! / But if baby I’m the bottom, / You’re the top!”

What is exhilarating about this highwire display of ever-wilder idealization is its vast archive of superlative images, images that range from the strictest standards of artistic excellence—Shakespeare, the Mona Lisa—and architectural wonders—the Coliseum and the Louvre—to Mickey Mouse. The disparate associations get ever more random as the song progresses: “You’re the National Gallery, you’re Garbo’s salary, you’re cellophane!” is one breathless assertion. The jumble of high and low culture, of the extraordinarily varied but artistically and technologically wonderful elements of modern life all stitched together by the play of language, results in a song that enjoys its own efforts at tribute, its own ability to snatch rhyming objects from the vocabulary of everyday life and whirl them into a kind of juggling, off-the-cuff virtuoso performance of sheer inventive genius. The randomness of the objects assures the effect of spontaneity—these are too popular, too much a “man on the street”’s idea of nifty stuff, to be carefully thought out, weighed, taxonomized. Acquainted with the existence of “a rose,” or “inferno’s Dante,” the speaker has no qualms about equating these with “the nose, on the great Durante”—an equivalence that only a person who did not really understand the importance of Dante could make.

Or is it? The pose of innocence, of gee whiz exuberance, allows the speaker to get away with the sarcasm of the conclusion “But if baby I’m the bottom, / You’re the top!” Whether the speaker has really constituted the object of her admiration as the top can only be believed if one buys her guileless pose and reads her tribute as sincere. In the 1934 Broadway musical *Anything Goes* where this song appears, its caustic sarcasm is hard to miss. Indeed, the sly suggestion of sadomasochism that seems to be contained in these lines, of dominant and submissive sexual roles, is one any contemporary listener familiar with queer sexual culture finds hard to miss. While it is not at all clear whether “top” and “bottom” had any meaning for homosexuals in the 1930s that resembles the dominant/submissive associations one automatically makes now, “top” has for several centuries carried the sense of surpassing and besting a rival or opponent, at least according to the *OED*, and so it is not such a stretch to infer that “top” and “bottom” in Porter’s time might suggest the sexual roles now familiar to queer and deviant sexual
communities. Certainly an arch consciousness like Porter’s would have appreciated the humor of simultaneously asserting the hypothetical necessity of the bottom—”But if baby I’m the bottom”—in order that the top position can exist.

In other words, even if “bottom” and “top” do not mean what we think they might mean, even if you do not know Porter was a homosexual, even if you are not familiar with Anything Goes, with its title song that ventriloquizes moral censure while exulting in moral decadence (“When every night / The set that’s smart / Is intruding on nudist parties / In studios”), and which also featured the liminally gendered Ethel Merman belting tunes preoccupied with alcohol and cocaine, and even if you do not know other Cole Porter songs like “Love for Sale,” the exuberant chattiness of “You’re the Top” still evokes a queer aesthetic. It does this with its double entendres; its arch adoption of a guileless, normative heterosexual innocence around codes of sexual perversity; and its logorrhea, its sheer enjoyment of its own rhetorical virtuosity, its shameless rhymes, and its campy sarcasm, all of which combine to form a song that is all about the joy of style—its cleverness and wit, its invention, its outrageous juxtaposition of high and low culture, its self-conscious posing, its delight in its own performance of artistic personality.

QUEER DECOYS

Radclyffe Hall explicitly links the logorrheic artistic personality back to Wildean dandyism, effeminacy, and homosexuality in her 1928 lesbian novel The Well of Loneliness, but it does so in the interest of a queer ethics that surpasses the pleasures of style for style’s sake. One of the most important characters in the novel, a gay man named Jonathan Brockett based on the real-life Noel Coward, befriends the novel’s lesbian protagonist Stephen Gordon, convinces her to move to Paris, and introduces her to Natalie Barney, thinly disguised in the novel as the salonnière Valerie Seymour. Brockett is the only character in the story to speak at length, and in this rather dignified novel, his speech stands out—as he does—like a sore thumb. Brockett’s chattiness, however, not only is his signature style, but it performs a queer ethics of care as well, creating community through his dramatization of queer identity for other gay men and lesbians. In this portrait—arguably the most overt literary portrait of male homosexuality since the Wilde trials thirty-three years earlier—Brockett’s camp style reveals itself as a dynamic social
ethic, one that solicits the gaze and acts as a decoy in the service of a larger good:

And now he was launched on a torrent of gossip about people of whom Stephen had never even heard: “Pat’s been deserted—have you heard that, darling? Do you think she’ll take the veil or cocaine or something? One never quite knows what may happen next with such an emotional temperament, does one? Arabella’s skipped off to the Lido with Jane Grigg. The Grigg’s just come into pots and pots of money, so I hope they’ll be deliriously happy and silly while it lasts—I mean the money. . . . Oh, and have you heard about Rachel Morris? They say . . .” He flowed on and on like a brook in spring flood, while Valerie yawned and looked bored, making monosyllabic answers.

Speaking style signals one’s relation to inversion in *The Well*; here Brockett’s flow of words signals his verbose effeminacy, in contrast with Stephen’s and Valerie’s more masculine taciturnity. But Brockett’s urgent style of speaking is also both stylish and anxious, making a style out of anxiety and suggesting the anguish at the root of his verbal proficiency. He is eager to have interactions go smoothly, and he willingly plays the queeny buffoon in order to draw ridicule to himself and thus make everyone else comfortable by comparison. No one has to feel embarrassed for him since he preemptively solicits the attention he is bound to draw anyway, then plays with that attention in such a way as to assert his control over its censure and his contempt for it.

The narrator seems often not to understand the strategy of Brockett’s style, and alternates between shuddering at his effeminacy and conceding his good intentions:

And Stephen as she sat there and smoked in silence, thought grimly: “This is all being said because of me. Brockett wants to let me see that he knows what I am, and he wants to let Valerie Seymour know too—I suppose this is making me welcome.” She hardly knew whether to feel outraged or relieved that here, at least, was no need for pretences. (247)

Stephen rejects his mannerisms as abnormal, unnatural, and an affront to masculinity, yet Stephen’s ambivalent response to these mannerisms is also the way the text tracks her journey to queer acceptance and solidarity. Brockett’s words—and the words of other gay men who confront Stephen in the text—force her to reconsider the ways in which she participates in her own silencing, as well as in the silencing of
others. His perverse affectation reveals Stephen to herself through her reaction to both his abnormality and his kindness, showing both the difference and distance between comportment and character, and the queer ethics of allowing them to collapse into each other as part of a social project of engendering uneasiness with the conventions and values of normativity. The ambivalence that Brockett plants in Stephen’s conventional opinions bears fruit later in the novel when she is confronted by a drug addict who demands that she see him and recognize their kinship. In a seedy underworld bar frequented by drug dealers and addicts, homosexual men, lesbians, alcoholics, prostitutes, defrocked priests, and other social outcasts, she is forced to shift alliances, or at least to see the necessity of doing so:

He bent forward, this youth, until his face was almost on a level with Stephen’s—a grey, drug-marred face with a mouth that trembled incessantly.

“Ma soeur,” he whispered.

For a moment she wanted to strike that face with her naked fist, to obliterate it. Then all of a sudden she perceived the eyes and the memory came of a hapless creature, distracted, bleeding from bursting lungs, hopelessly pursued, glancing this way, then that, as though looking for something, some refuge, some hope—and the thought: “It’s looking for God who made it.”

Stephen shivered and stared at her tightly clenched hands; the nails whitened her flesh. ”Mon frère,” she muttered. (394)

Brockett’s self-conscious chatter now characterizes the monologue inside Stephen’s head, but this time the words are hers. Internalizing his run-on style, she internalizes his message of ethical affiliation, admitting her kinship with the people she habitually despises. This kinship makes her suffer a kind of crucifixion—the “nails” she drives into her palms—but it also makes her less primitive, dark, and sexual according to the racial schematic of the novel, as it “whiten[s] her flesh.” The ambivalence produced by Brockett’s logorrhea thus forces Stephen’s unconscious to become more present and exposes the ideological underpinnings of her culture in such a way as to reveal them as unacceptable, if not to Stephen, then to the readers of The Well who might easily identify such attitudes as the chief source of Stephen’s sexual and gender misery.

Jonathan Brockett assumes the persona of the chattering sissy in order to make others feel comfortable by drawing negative attention to
himself, and this assumption of hypervisibility performs the function of
decoy or scapegoat. But hypervisibility can also assume a majestic digni-
ity, a dignity far grander than the humility of Christian martyrs Hall’s
text offers to extend to self-sacrificing homosexuals. The homosexual
transvestite doctor Matthew O’Connor in Djuna Barnes’s 1936 Night-
wood, arguably the most famous queer logorrheac in modernism, is also
the most diva-esque, a persona that approaches camp in his tawdry exces-
siveness, but whose misery works against reading with any mea-
sure of ironic distance. Matthew’s talking hijacks the novel halfway
through and only reluctantly gives up control at the end of Nightwood,
when the narrative wrenches itself away from him to follow the tragic
lesbians Robin Vote and Nora Flood once more. Like Jonathan Brockett,
Matthew produces discourse with an ethics, though in his case it is for
the opposite purpose. His weariness with talking expresses cynicism
over the ability of talking to do anything, and by extension, modernism
and modernist style become useless. No one really hears what he is
saying, although they all want to listen to him, or at least observe his
performance as a curiosity and an entertainment:

People had begun to whisper and the waiters moved closer, watching.
The ex-priest was smiling to himself, but O’Connor did not seem to see
or hear anything but his own heart. “Some people,” he said, “take off
head-first into any body of water and six glasses later someone in Haar-
lem gets typhoid from drinking their misery. God, take my hand and get
me up out of this great argument—the more you go against your nature,
the more you will know of it—hear me, Heaven! I’ve done and been
everything that I didn’t want to be or do—Lord, put the light out—so I
stand here, beaten up and mauled and weeping, knowing I am not what
I thought I was, a good man doing wrong, but the wrong man doing
nothing much, and I wouldn’t be telling you about it if I weren’t talking
to myself. I talk too much because I have been made miserable by what
you are keeping hushed.”

The text makes O’Connor a babbling hysteric whose talking stages
his identity as the symptom of his culture’s hypocrisy and repression.
His words have no rhetorical situation, no audience or purpose or
argument (he says), but are meant to flood the space between secrecy
and truth. He is merely confessional, though he does name names as
well, a highly annoying trait, mostly because we get the point of his
character right away, though the novel allows him to go on and on and
on. His Yellow Book rhetoric, so like the Wildean language found in that
aesthetic manifesto, resonates with hopelessness and drunken self-pity. Why does the text render him as such a spectacle of Cassandra-like impotence, as a talker worth watching but not hearing?

As the last gasp of a queerly logorrheic modernism, O’Connor’s exhaustion undercuts the polymorphous playfulness of the best modernist monologues, lacking the gentleness with which even Prufrock cuts his habit of ironic self-distancing. But this exhaustion stands in relation to his belligerent insistence on his own presence, on his own existence and right to existence. The spectacle of O’Connor is crucial to his presence, his character, and the way all the novel becomes his portrait, and his portrait condenses all the novel. O’Connor’s parable of the water emphasizes how related everyone everywhere is to each other. How is it that you think you are not me? he asks. As readers recoil, perhaps, from the harshness of his language and the tiresomeness of his drunken dogmatism, they also encounter this voice that rebukes their impulse to turn away. This voice that will not be silenced, the voice that he claims contains all the repression of his society, finally creates its own dignity in indignity through nothing more than testimony, confrontation, and the stubborn refusal to be discreet. Logorrhea here refuses any curb as complicit with the silencing impulses of sexual respectability, though it also recognizes the complicity of talking with social control:

I’ve given my destiny away by garrulity, like ninety per cent of everybody else—for, no matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man’s potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar. Is it my fault that my only fireside is the outhouse? And that I can never hang my muffler, mittens and Bannybrook umbrella on anything better than a bit of tin boarding as high as my eyes, having to be brave, no matter what, to keep the mascara from running away? (91)

Here is also the outhouse aesthetic of Gide and Genet, the locus of social marginality rendered spatially as the place where lost and prohibited sensual and sexual experiences can be recovered and indulged. This place is only available to O’Connor in talk, where he spins out the connections between his domestic and domesticated yearnings at the same time as their very articulation marks them as impossibly queer. To give one’s destiny away is here both to make it impossible for one’s self to have it, yet at the same time make it possible for another, someone listening or reading, who hears about it and imagines it for herself as an alternative to sexual convention, enclosure, and silence.
MADAM TALKS BACK

My name is Johnson—
Madam Alberta K.
The Madam stands for business.
I’m smart that way.¹⁵

So speaks the sassy persona of Langston Hughes’s “Madam” poems, Alberta K. Johnson, who proves herself a much more effective rhetorician than Barnes’s Matthew O’Connor. Madam is a striking character, one Arnold Rampersad calls “an instantly recognizable Harlem type despite her memorable individuality.”¹⁶ She is also a powerful older woman, a Madam rather than a Miss, whose own voice delights her and whose character clearly fascinated the black gay poet who invented her in 1943 and used her in at least eighteen of his poems.¹⁷ Madam also tells her life story to the interlocutors who confront her and question her status and dignity by invoking institutions and bourgeois normativity. Her persecutors demand her life story and her rent, question her phone bill, her status as a citizen, and her religious salvation. At every turn she is asked to account for herself. Her position as the subject of involuntary interrogation does not, however, produce the kind of confession that fixes or pathologizes her. Instead, her response is always to turn the question back upon whoever attempts to scrutinize her and find her wanting. Unlike O’Connor, who wears his social abjection as a proud badge of misery, Madam talks back by riffing off the accusations or normative demands her interrogators use to question her, building her own argument to counter theirs by using wordplay—rhyme, double entendres, repetition, sarcasm, and sometimes outright opposition.

This wordplay helps her build a haughty, powerfully feminine identity, and is at the same time an expression of that identity, one that refuses to take advantage of heterosexual privilege, refuses to give up her dignity even in the face of love, refuses to be humiliated by bill collectors, and turns the tables on those who try to make her feel powerless by sarcastically interrogating the terms other people use to characterize the demands they make on her pride and her resources. In “Madam’s Past History” she tells the story of losing a hairdressing business in the Depression, losing a barbecue stand because of an unscrupulous boyfriend, and being told that in spite of her financial hardship she could not qualify for the WPA because she had an insurance policy. Instead of folding, however, she harnesses her self-respect and proudly declares herself to be a woman of both substance and stature:
I said,
DON’T WORRY ‘BOUT ME!
Just like the song,
You WPA folks take care of yourself—
And I’ll get along.

I do cooking,
Day’s work, too!
Alberta K. Johnson—
Madam to you. (18–26)

This persona builds from her insistence on her own independence and worth, an insistence that seems to rise out of the rhyming assertions of her argument: “Just like the song . . . I’ll get along!” When she caps her speech by naming herself as a lady—“Madam to you”—it is the culmination of all of the good qualities of survival she knows make her too powerful to be beaten down, either by hard times, men, or the government. “Madam” is a self who turns suffering into strength, and she demonstrates that strength as something powerful enough to reconfigure language, words, and other people’s misguided notions of her. Her incantatory, bluesy speeches enjoy their own inventiveness even as they demonstrate her power and worth as a resourceful and creative woman, as well as an artist of words.

Indeed, Alberta often shows that being a woman, being strong, and being an artist are all interrelated for her. In “Madam and the Phone Bill” she tries to convince the phone company that she shouldn’t have to pay the bill for a romantic relationship that is now long over:

You say I O.K. ed
LONG DISTANCE?
O.K. ed it when?
My goodness, Central,
That was then!

I’m mad and disgusted
With that Negro now.
I don’t pay no REVERSED
CHARGES nohow. (1–9)
Madam’s argument imagines a corporate America—a Central—that forgives phone bills according to its interest in facilitating relationships that do not fail. Madam’s utopian desire for a corporate state system that would not make you pay for phone calls to a former lover ironically underscores how the system remains indifferent to love and to lovers of all kinds.

In “Madam and the Rent Man” Alberta confronts the rental agent’s demand for money with a litany of complaints that crescendos to a full-blown tenant’s bill of rights:

I said, Listen,
Before I’d pay
I’d go to Hades
And rot away!

The sink is broke,
The water don’t run,
And you ain’t done a thing
You promised to’ve done.

Back window’s cracked,
Kitchen floor squeaks,
There’s rats in the cellar,
And the attic leaks. (7–18)

She takes his demand and adds her own list of demands, drafting a social contract where nobody gets what they want until everybody gets what they want. Every word she uses to make a rhyme seems to add power to her complaint, and her pleasure in the growing conviction of her position finds its triumph when the agent addresses her as “Madam”:

He said, Madam,
It’s not up to me.
I’m just the agent,
Don’t you see? (19–22)

For him “Madam” is a generic term, one he uses to try to coerce her. He emphasizes her generic identity—she is just Madam so-and-so to him—
and his own benign status as an employee without accountability in an attempt to get her to agree to an alienated transaction. But Madam Alberta is only fueled by the pleasure of her own inventive haughtiness by his address, which she takes as a recognition of her authority as “Madam”:

I said, Naturally,  
You pass the buck.  
If it’s money you want  
You’re out of luck.

He said, Madam,  
I ain’t pleased!  
I said, Neither am I.

So we agrees! (23–30)

What is remarkable about Madam’s speech is both her enormous confidence in the righteousness of her position and the litany that seems to gather strength from its own inventive power as her complaint builds. When the rental agent addresses her finally as “Madam” in a vain attempt to convince her that his displeasure matters, she turns his meaning around to agree with hers and ends by asserting her “I.” Unmoved and unbowed, she wins the argument by pointing out their common ground, not only in agreeing to disagree, but insofar as neither of them agrees with the positions of the absent landlord who exploits them both. Madam, however, actively resists, while the rental agent passively “pass[es] the buck.” The agent proves to be no agent at all, but by finding a point of common agreement between herself and the agent, dramatizing the unfairness of the landlord’s demand for rent, drafting a bill of rights where landlords only get paid when they take good care of their tenants, and insisting on her own power to represent herself with eloquence, dignity, and inventiveness, Madam offers him a point of agreement upon which resistance to the system might be possible, and community might be formed between people of seemingly disparate interests.

I have tried to suggest that logorrheic modernism talks back by dramatizing the seeming pathology and social inconsequentiality of the
abnormal, effeminate chatterer. Stream-of-consciousness narration that becomes streaming talk not only ventriloquizes the manic anxiety of the modern era while insisting on the right of queer characters to speak, but also talks back with chatter, prattle, gossip, mimicry, haughtiness, and a self-consciously theatrical stage patter that dramatizes abnormality, anxiety, effeminacy, and queerness. Logorrheic modernism takes up the weapons of a stagey, dignified femininity that refuses to back down or relinquish the scolding, inventive, punning, rapping, protean powers of language. Mobilizing character and peculiarity, it insists on particularity and queerness, but particularity in the context of oppression, social injustice, particularity that cannot take refuge in individualism—the privileges of Stephen’s aristocracy, or the benign compliance of Madam’s rent man—but speaks as a queer act of participation in language, and insists on a larger and more just social world.
Romaine Brooks (1874–1970). © Copyright. Una, Lady Troubridge. Oil on canvas, 1924. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, U.S.A. Brooks’s portrait of Radclyffe Hall’s lover Una Troubridge with their dogs was viewed by many as bordering on caricature, but Troubridge’s monocle also emphasizes the sitter’s gaze back out at the artist and spectators. Photo credit: Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC / Art Resource, NY