

“False as Eden”: Constituting the Female Subject in Time

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This essay examines the retrospective gaze of two Australian feminist intellectuals, focusing on the rhetorical operations by which the personal and public lives of women are rendered interchangeable, as are their embodied subjectivities and their literary work. The discussion concentrates on the slippage between these designated categories of identity to speculate on the ways women often come to embody the discourses of feminism in and of themselves. To this end, I will first identify and examine a complex of related tropes by which the category of the female intellectual celebrity has been constituted since the early twentieth century, deploying the person and persona of Gertrude Stein as a paradigmatic case in point. I will then consider these operations in a specifically Australian context, namely in relation to the recent publications by two Australian feminist intellectuals, Sylvia Lawson and Germaine Greer—Lawson’s *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia* (2002) and Greer’s *The Boy* (2003).

The salience of these two texts to the essay’s broader examination of the figuration of women in the public sphere resides in their particular points of connection and severance around the historical and mythic temporalities of celebrity feminism. Both can be read as staging a return to an Ur-moment of second-wave feminism, a moment that is presented reflexively as constitutive of individual and collective female subjectivity. It is in this return to origins that Lawson’s and Greer’s texts offer a clarifying optic on the processes of constituting a contemporary public female subjectivity, characterised both by a distinctive form of mobility and proliferative creativity and by questions regarding the authenticity of the subject—what is the relation between her public and private life? This very same list of attributes is often cited as proper to the operations of fame itself. Many recent

studies of celebrity culture have noted the particular mobility of fame, including David Marshall's observation that fame "moves readily and easily between the domains of the public and the private for public consumption" (para. 21). So, too, commentators of the nature of celebrity culture often focus on the female star as metonymic of the operations of fame, and there are numerous empirical studies that focus on the particular relation of young girls to the celebrity aspects of popular culture (see, for example, Susan Hopkins). Others note the preoccupation with the "authenticity" of celebrities in their self-impersonations for public consumption (for example, Tregoning; Turner 4; and Turner, Bonner and Marshall 20). However, these studies do not focus on the feminine operations of fame itself, so that questions of mobility, proliferation and authenticity may appear proper to the operations of celebrity alone. This paper deploys many of the insights of celebrity studies but illustrates the necessity of gender as a crucial component in considering fame's proliferative operations. For the performative nature of the feminine is similarly mobile and generative, as theorists of female performance and performativity have repeatedly insisted.¹ The focus here, then, is on the chiasmic reflexivity inherent in the term *feminist celebrity*, and the aim is to identify the particular operations of this category, which is distinctively mobile and productive, if also potentially perilous to the subject caught in the cycle of its proliferating creativity.

This reading of these texts is informed by the paradigms of creativity and modernity in Australian literature, whereby, for example, the celebrated status of the 1890s has been repeatedly invoked at subsequent times of cultural constitution and reconstitution and accorded the role of a primal scene of literary origin and originality. Just as the 1890s represent a key moment of national consciousness at the threshold of Australian modernity, so too, it can be argued, the 1970s represent a key moment of feminist consciousness, of preternatural creativity by women and a new relation of women to modernity/postmodernity. The seeming compulsion to return to this site—understandably mystifying to younger women—can thus be read as acting out a return to creative possibility that is invested in this historical juncture by the generation of its participants. We may speculate that the historical moment of 1970s feminism will assume, at a later date, a mythic or monumental status independent of those directly involved. At this juncture, however, we are witness to these women's direct engagements with the past and are invited to assess the ways that the issues of that time have transformed over the course of these women's lives in view of lived experience and the perspective of hindsight. Concomitantly, we are encouraged to assess the efficacy of 1970s feminism as it has shaped the patterns of women's lives since that time. This reciprocity of ideology and lived experience constructs a particular and telling gendered relation between personal and public spheres in which the body remains problematically centre-stage.

Within the domain of public experience in the twentieth century, women have been at the vanguard of celebrity authorship. Most famously, Jacqueline Susann exploited, indeed invented, the category of the talk-show celebrity author to promote her first novel *Valley of the Dolls* (1966), which went on to become the biggest selling novel of the twentieth century. Significantly, in relation to this discussion, Susann pushed the novel's status as a *roman à clef*, a text that blurs the lines between fact and fiction in its account of celebrity culture. However, arguably, the first celebrity woman author was not the queen of “pink trash”—as *Valley* has been more recently categorised—but the avant-garde intellectual author, Gertrude Stein. In an overdetermined moment of modernity in the history of women intellectuals, the publication of Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933 catapulted Stein to fame, making her one of the first—if not the very first—Anglophone woman writer to achieve the status of a modern celebrity. Not one to leave much unwritten, Stein records the full force of the dilemma of this position with her own characteristic gift for contradiction: she was paralysed by the fame and came to relish it. Stein's celebrity status occurred relatively late in her life—she was 59 years old in 1933 when the *Autobiography* was published—and it also precipitated her first long experience of writer's block. As a consequence of the rapturous reception of the *Autobiography*, Stein was invited to give lecture tours of the United States and later Britain, and embarked on her first visit home to the United States since her departure in 1904. The lectures were routinely sold out well in advance and Stein was recognised on the streets, as her image had preceded her person, confirming the equation of visibility with accomplishment in the age of celebrity. Her fame was such that Carl van Vechten wrote to her that she was “on every tongue like Greta Garbo” (qtd. in Curnutt 293).² And so, Stein, the avant-garde writer, self-fashioned as a Roman emperor, is cast as being as famous as the Queen of Hollywood.

Van Vechten's invocation of Garbo is most apt here, for 1933 also saw the release of Garbo's most famous film, *Queen Christina* and, as Kate Lilley has so eloquently argued, the actress constructs two bodies in this role: Christina, Queen of Sweden, and Garbo, Queen of Hollywood, a mobility and traversal facilitated by the transvestic, transitive role of the Queen and, indeed, of Garbo herself. Van Vechten's assertion of the shared celebrity status of Greta and Gertrude creates another doubling, most evidently between two of the most famous lesbians of their era, whose allure resided in their various practices of mystique and opacity and in their determined self-containment. It also marks a meeting between the movement towards and away from the public eye: as Garbo seeks to move from fame to obscurity (“I want to be alone”), Stein enters the stage of American fame from the remoteness of avant-garde Paris. Finally, it marks them both as quintessentially and equally representative of the Modern, for, in their respective roles as Queen

Christina and the author of the *Autobiography*, each defines a moment in modernity. Garbo links a transvestite queen of the early modern period with twentieth-century modernity, and Stein's *Autobiography* records and constructs the twentieth-century European avant-garde and sketches a way for women to "become modern."³

The stage of Stein's embodied transmission of her work is the lecture hall, and she records this experience in great detail in her 1936 collection *Narration*, where she writes:

If you are reading what you are lecturing then you have a half in one of any two directions, you have been recognizing what you are reading from what you did recognize as being written while you were writing. (qtd. in Curnutt 301)

For Stein the experience of celebrity was contrary to the practice of writing because it created an irreconcilable difference between the self as subject and object. This dilemma is loaded with heavy irony in Stein's case, considering that it is created by the success of the *Autobiography*, a text that so famously complicates subject/object relations by Gertrude's veiling of her role as writer via the subterfuge of Alice's authorship.

This dilemma of public and private life may be common to writers in the public sphere, especially since the increased expectations of authors in relation to public readings, attendance at festivals, and book promotions since the 1980s. However, it has a particular application to women, as the similarities between Garbo and Stein indicates, for women are already classified as natural performers (whether that designation derives from Friedrich Nietzsche or the psychoanalytic theorization of Joan Riviere) and, hence, like the dual body of every performing actor, women's bodies are easily bifurcated. Significantly, this duality may occur along lines of opposition or complementarity, and may just as easily switch from one relation to the other at any moment. We witnessed a proliferation of these shifting dualities in the context of Australian gendered representation with the remarketing of *Puberty Blues* in 2002, including the virtual (televisual) reunion of its authors, Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey. At one time self-styled as the twin-like "Salami Sisters," who morphed into veritable adversaries, the two were brought together by television twenty years later in an image of resigned juxtaposition. An inverted form of this relation was set up in the republication of the book, with its two prefaces by Kylie Minogue and Germaine Greer. Ostensibly, Minogue and Greer are opposites in every way—in terms of physicality, generation, sphere and register of work—and these differences are underscored by their very different readings of the novel: Minogue centres on the reminiscence of her own reading of *Puberty Blues*, while Greer appraises the text as social commentary. However, this relation of opposition switches easily into one of reflexivity or similarity: both

women are Australian expatriates, indeed Melburnians, living in England, and both are international celebrities, which is why their prefaces are included in the new edition.

The performative role played by women in the public arena, together with the habit of reading women as being too different from and/or too similar to each other, places sharp focus on the ways they negotiate and change within the paradigm of reflexivity, none less so than the relation between past and present selves. (Indeed Stein's fame on the publication of the *Autobiography* relates to her revisiting a much earlier self, in that the text focuses on Stein's early years in Paris.) And so the question of women intellectuals re-engaging with the past, via discourses of politics, philosophy and art, will be bound up in very distinctive ways in the interconnections between the personal and public concerns. In one sense this is unremarkable, given that one of the key moments in question is the 1970s, which espoused the truism of the personal as political and foregrounded the discourses of power played out on women's bodies. Yet, the embodiment I want to investigate is related to, but distinct from, these political insights in that it focuses on the patterns of splitting and re-alignment between the past and present selves, and between the present text and the literary corpus of the past.

Germaine Greer's 1999 polemic *The Whole Woman* is her self-proclaimed sequel to *The Female Eunuch*, published in 1970, although Greer has published many books in the intervening period that also deal with the subject of women, human rights and representation. Her major publication preceding *The Whole Woman* was *The Change* in 1991, which dealt with women, menopause and ageing. *The Whole Woman* disrupts the chronological trajectory of Greer's output and instead stages a return to 1970. She does this, she maintains, against her preference: "This sequel to *The Female Eunuch* is the book I said I would never write" (1). She has been compelled to write it, however, because of what she perceives as the failure of second-wave feminism, which has lead women to "sett[e] for equality," and has assisted in creating "billions of losers for a handful of winners." Consequently, she argues, it is "time to get angry again" (3).⁴

The sequel is a genre of self-impersonation, as memorably noted by the playwright John Gay in the Introduction to *Polly* (1729), the sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, where the Poet confesses that all sequels are a "kind of absurdity" and suspects he "shall hardly be pardon'd for imitating myself" (xiii). The sequel is also an anxious genre, since it seeks to recapture an earlier success or re-address a captured audience. Certainly Greer's sequel, *The Whole Woman*, marks Greer's return to the polemical mode of *The Female Eunuch*, a similarity taken up in critical reviews of the book.

Greer's recent publication *The Boy* (2003) courts controversy by the paedophilic overtones of its title. It is, in fact, a highly conventional study of the Adonis/Endymion figure in art, and those seeking to be shocked will have to be content with images of Titian and Van Dyke. Indeed, Jenny Dilski's review of *The Boy* in the *London Review of Books* muses on the lengths to which Greer will go to elicit an impassioned response from the critical public (9). Greer's contribution to the appraisal and appreciation of this figure in art is her insistence on the rights of women to enjoy the sight of the young male body—particularly ageing women, such as she is. As such, it is a study that raises questions of intergenerational relationships as these cross the divides of gender. Published by noted art publishers Thames and Hudson, the biographical notes on Greer do not list her publications on art, such as *The Obstacle Race* (1979), but only *The Female Eunuch* and *The Whole Woman*. This selection constructs a direct trajectory from *The Female Eunuch* to *The Boy*, and in so doing invites a sequential reading of these three texts, thereby locating *The Boy* at the point beyond the sequel, though on the same course, and moving across genre into visual art history.

A reading of *The Boy* as a form of transgressive return to *The Female Eunuch* is supported by the overdetermination of youth in *The Boy*, made explicit in the final chapter, "The Female Gaze." Here, Greer attempts to account for the appeal of more contemporary figures of the Adonis figure, including Jim Morrison (The Doors) and Robert Plant (Led Zeppelin). These "young" men are figures from Greer's own youth (directly, as she makes clear), and their presence here dates and personalises the temporality of desire. It would be banal to read this self-interpolation as only nostalgia for past loves, though this may indeed be the case at one level. Rather, I would suggest, the boy is a figure of Greer's own becoming, the eternal boy of Greek statuary who conventionally represents pure potential and youthful beauty, the cynosure who captures the gaze of men and women alike as they marvel at the spectacle of youth itself. In a metaphoric sense the body of the boy here can be seen to be Greer's early literary corpus, the relation of the older woman to the body of pure potential at the brink of an inaugural recognition of sexual energy is Greer gazing at her younger self.

This reading is predicated on, indeed only possible through, an understanding of Greer's embodied self-reflexivity, the ways she has presented an embodied discourse and has embodied her own discourse. In this way, she resembles Stein in her powerful sense of her own embodiment, temporarily shaken by the advent of fame and the splitting of the two sides of her self-reflexivity. We can see, too, a similar chiasmic operation in the cross-over between all terms of the double splitting; that is, past and present selves of these public figures alternately merge with and separate out from past and present texts. This movement constructs a subject/ob-

ject collision and the past self or the past text is routinely objectified by the present. In the case of Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and *The Boy*, this complex of inter-relations is underscored by the central argument of gendered objectification presented in each text. For *The Boy* is an explicitly objectifying text, one in which the boy object is apprehended by the female subject, just as *The Female Eunuch* critiqued the ways in which women are routinely objectified within Western culture.

Greer's desire to return to the site of Ur-modernity, a moment of inaugural self-constitution, is further underscored in the final chapter of *The Boy*, when she lays claim to a lineage of female collectors and connoisseurs, whose selections indicate a clear interest in the figure of the beautiful boy. Principal in this list is Queen Christina, the transvestite Queen of Sweden of the early modern period, immortalised by Garbo in the 1933 film, thereby connecting the early modern period with twentieth-century modernity and figuring both via a form of the self-reflexive becoming of woman (223–24). This self-reflexive capacity enables transitions across time and gender, whether these are figured on the large scale of history, across a personal chronology, or, as in the instance of both Greer and Garbo, within and by the imbrication of both periodisations.

Ideas of women's self-reflexivity are taken up to different effect in the title essay of Sylvia Lawson's award-winning collection, *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia*, which deals explicitly with matters of women's everyday life over decades, including their intellectual and political activities, as well as celebrity feminists and generational difference. Lawson repeats Beauvoir's insistence that women must not look to any form of external relationship to realize an identity—to become a whole woman. Not being one to "settle for equality," Beauvoir wrote to her lover, Nelson Algren: "I am awfully greedy. I want everything from life, I want to be a woman and man" (qtd. in Lawson 145). If we read this essay alongside its titular companion, "How Raymond Williams Died in Australia," the specifics of a feminine relation to history and memory are made even more clear, including the body of its subject. The piece on Williams focuses on the coincidence of Williams' death and the Australian Bicentennial in 1988, and speculates on the irony that it is precisely Williams' analysis that is needed to disentangle the "fraudulent" rhetoric and anxious energy that fuelled this event. As such, the Williams essay is firmly located within the discourses of history and the eulogy or *festschrift*.

The essay on "How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia" is located in very different territory. Lawson constructs a particular and anatomized corporeal history that is murky and inconsistent, and that juxtaposes productive vectors of thought and activity with loose ends and unfinished business. Central to this process is the reading group of women revisiting or encountering Beauvoir's texts

around the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Second Sex* in 1999. The women's reading group recalls accounts of the consciousness-raising groups run by women in the 1970s, and the association is hardly accidental. However, Lawson avoids the charge of anachronism that this might otherwise prompt by the intricacy of connections she weaves across public and private lives, across friendships, political activism, and the reality of intellectual effect and influence. And in all this she stresses the necessity for women in particular to organize time to take stock, especially in the absence of other fora.

In this complex map of interconnections, personal and public lives are also fused, sometimes to great frustration. Lawson writes that the discussion group falters on the matter of Beauvoir's life and her work:

So, incorrigibly, people read for psycho-biography, posthumous psychoanalysis; they read to know why she and Sartre didn't have children of the flesh, to know about her bisexuality, her relations with father, mother, sister, and with all and each of Sartre's other girlfriends, even to consider whether Sartre himself wasn't some kind of mother figure. One student would insist that the whole Beauvoirian oeuvre amounted to a prolonged meditation of death, and that those lethally robbing works *A Very Easy Death* and *Adieux* . . . were special acts of symbolic murder.

Such fascinations couldn't be annulled. Because of them, Simone de Beauvoir was still a problem, a set of problems, a magnet. (136)

And so, as the essay title suggests, the reconsideration, indeed recuperation of Beauvoir's Australian legacy is necessarily written on and around the body of Simone de Beauvoir itself. Part of the difference between the style of the two essays and the processes of representation is due to the activity of women reading modern women and marvelling at how these women fashion original lives. It is also due to the bifurcation of the woman's body in celebrity: the celebrity actor may insist on her difference from a fictional role, but the feminist intellectual is expected to align her public and private selves, the body of her work with that of her sexualized person. Ironically, then, given the portrayal of women as natural performers, the two bodies of the feminist intellectual are viewed with the expectation of authenticity.

Lawson's essay—the whole book, in fact, but this essay is the focus here—proposes a model for reading otherwise, a model creatively derived from Beauvoir's texts. One of the most powerful of these strategies is the quality of temporal perspective, a capacity given in captured images where the past is emotionally present but the past self is objectified by the subjectivity of the present. Beauvoir writes: "We [herself and Sartre] put our trust in the world and in ourselves, we were wrong about everything." And so Lawson writes:

We too were wrong. Upward mobility prevailed; full employment underpinned a climate of illusion. With student days, we'd left behind our own spells of menial work in factories and cafes, and we talked as though everyone else could just as easily have moved on. Ritually we detested R. G. Menzies and derided royalty; but in what we might now call our global imaginary, Australia was still related mainly to Britain and the United States, with our own region a set of blurred shapes on the horizon. From far back now I see us in a distant patch of sunlight, walled and gated, false as Eden. (156–57)

Lawson's metaphor here, "false as Eden," so redolent of Australian dilemmas around myths of origin, undoes the mythology of origin as surely as it captures an historically situated moment of consciousness.

Integral to the relationship between present subjectivity and the objectified self of the past is the understanding of inter-subjective identity—also a legacy of women modernists—of a collectively- and socially-situated self that is a fragment of the picture. Such an understanding is political in that individualism gives way to diversity and contradiction, and Lawson's essay systematically catalogues pioneering women intellectuals from the 1950s and includes a multiplicity of voices and registers across generations. Such an approach may remove the burden of embodied representation from individual women—an irony given the celebrity status of the intellectual woman it memorializes and animates. This recognition of the potential limitations of embodied feminism is not to reprove the operations of celebrity intellectualism—obviously this essay is itself caught up in the magnetism of these women—but an attempt to think through the intersections of discourse and representation by which they hold purchase in the cultural imaginary. This essay has identified certain particularities in the operations of interconnection between women's lives and writing that are productive in and by this difference. Perhaps it may also work to unsettle the impossible alignment between the various components of embodied writing by women in the public sphere.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche asks: "Reflect on the whole history of women: do they not have to be first and foremost and above all actresses?" In her famous 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade," Joan Riviere asserts that all womanliness is a performance constructed in and by the circuit of castration anxiety. Judith Butler takes up and animadverts Riviere's

- essay in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (50–54).
- 2 I am indebted to Kate Livett for directing me to Kirk Curnutt's essay.
 - 3 The term "become modern" is taken from the title of Carolyn Burke's biography of the modernist writer Mina Loy, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*.
 - 4 This view is echoed by another second-wave feminist, Anne Summers, in her preface to the 2002 edition of *Damned Whores and God's Police*, originally published in 1975, when she asks: "Does the success of a few individual women herald changes for all? That is the question for the future" (viii).

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