

Cultural Studies of
the United States
Alan Trachtenberg, editor

MILES ORVELL

The Real Thing

IMITATION AND
AUTHENTICITY IN
AMERICAN CULTURE,
1880 - 1940

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To Gabriella

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1989

T W O

A Hieroglyphic

World

The Furnishing of Identity

in Victorian Culture

Writing with the privileged hindsight of 1920, Edith Wharton provided the key to an understanding of late nineteenth-century manners when she remarked in *The Age of Innocence* on the “elaborate system of mystification” that formed the social ritual of bourgeois society. “In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs.”¹ And one could take Wharton’s observation one step farther: the hieroglyphic world of the American middle and upper classes during the decades following the Civil War encompassed the whole fabric of social communication, including the material objects that furnished the individual with his or her visible identity. So dense is the system of decorative signs in the period that one might easily think that the most characteristic expression of the Victorian mind was *matter in all* its shapes and sizes, textures, surfaces, and substances. In this chapter I want to look first at the structural and aesthetic properties of this hieroglyphic world, which is the material foundation of the late nineteenth-century culture of imitation; and I want then to explore its moral and spiritual significance, using evidence from popular culture and also from works of fiction that more self-consciously and complexly treat the moral and spiritual ramifications of the artificial world of the consumer. For however disparate the evidence—from the Sears catalogue to Henry James—the culture as a whole reveals an interconnectedness, at the heart of which is the central importance of *things* as signs.

The American passion for consumer goods was part of a larger pattern of growing consumption in Western industrial cultures gener-

ally, beginning in the eighteenth century and becoming more and more institutionalized by the middle of the nineteenth century. At the center of the web of consumption—especially for the growing urban population—were the department stores, their majestic interiors, modeled on palaces and temples and cathedrals, giving to the act of buying a grand and sacred character. Like the more sporadic and more spectacular world trade expositions, they were conceived as expressions of high national purpose, sharing with the official fairs a similar ethical, practical, and aesthetic orientation. Thus, when Siegel-Cooper installed in its New York store a copy of the Daniel Chester French statue, *Republic*, from the 1893 Chicago Exposition, and when John Wanamaker installed in his Philadelphia store the great eagle from the 1903 St. Louis World’s Fair, these were merely crowning manifestations of a longstanding continuity between our officially certified national purpose and merchandising.² Looking back in 1900 on the 1876 Centennial, Wanamaker spoke of it as opening “a new vision to the people of the United States. It was the cornerstone upon which manufacturers everywhere rebuilt their businesses to new fabrics, new fashions and more courageous undertakings. . . . The continuing outgrowth of that exhibition has revolutionized the methods of almost every class of mercantile business in the United States.”³

But the expositions and stores existed not merely to be venerated, but most emphatically to be patronized. In order for the economy to function properly, old inhibitions to spending—a reverence for the virtues of frugality and restraint—had to be cleared away: desire had to be created and legitimized.⁴ This goal the stores accomplished through a variety of techniques—accommodating services, lowered prices, comfortable surroundings; above all they accomplished the virtual reconditioning of the American consumer through the appeal of newly attractive store windows and advertisements, which encouraged him or her to reason not the need, but simply to buy. (There is a nice congruity in the fact that L. Frank Baum, the author of the quintessential tale of desire and self-transformation, *The Wizard of Oz* [1900], was also the founder and editor of an early trade journal for window decorators, *The Shop Window*.)⁵ The success of this effort is registered in the growth of the economy itself, but also, more vividly, in the various depictions—graphic and literary—that dramatize the state of desire.

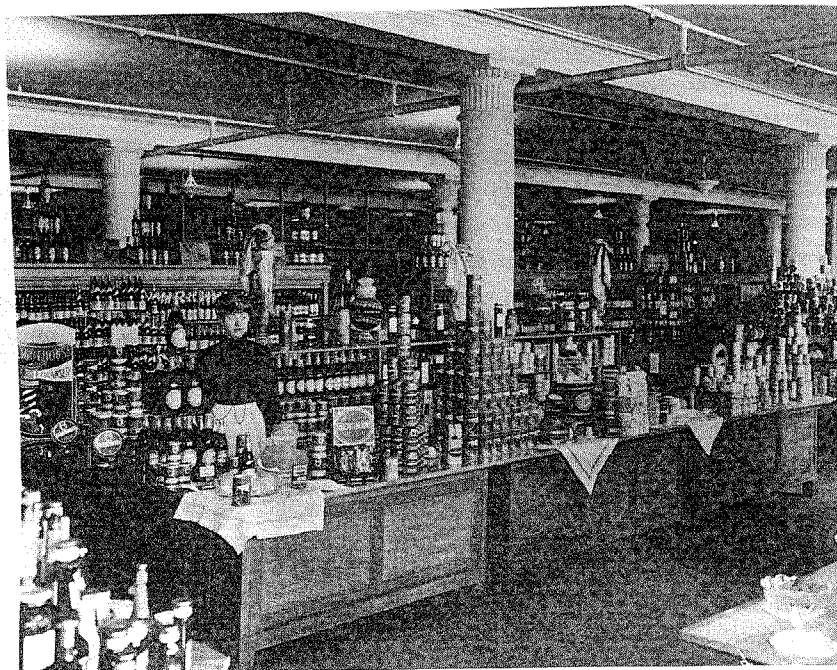
Perhaps none excelled Theodore Dreiser in dramatizing the nuances of this emotion so central to the consumer's emotional economy. Early stories—echoing journalistic illustrations—describe the longing of the individual outside, on the street, looking at the department store windows and the homes of the comfortable;⁶ but it is Sister Carrie who occupies the central place in this gallery of unfulfilled desire, and Dreiser's depiction of her initiation into the mystery of the department store bears the mark of an archetype in American experience: "[she] passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, stationery, and jewelry. Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attractions. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used—nothing which she did not long to own."⁷ The psychology of the passage is acute, especially in the last sentence, where use and desire, reason and need, interfuse. By the end of the novel, Sister Carrie has gained success and its material rewards, but Dreiser's insight into the conditioning of desire is to show us a Carrie who is, at the end, still restless and haunted, even in her comfort.

Essential to the legitimizing of desire on a mass scale was the inculcation of a belief that, first of all, there was *enough* for everyone, that in fact there was *more than* enough, that indeed there was *so much* that it must be very natural, very easy, and almost a God-given right, to own things. Supporting this belief was an aesthetic of abundance that is visible virtually everywhere one looks in the material culture of Victorian America, the result of an industrial capacity that could indeed supply a seemingly limitless supply of things. From 1873 to 1898, as Ray Ginger has observed, the capacities of production were in excess of the market's capacity to absorb goods, and overproduction was widespread—an excess capacity to "mill flour, to make watches, to manufacture stoves."⁸ This excess capacity shows up in the marketplace in several different ways, as more and more goods come before the consumer. For one, there is a shift from the relatively random assortment of things in the general store to the vast expansion in the variety of goods available in the department store. Moreover, one-of-a-kind items in the general store are found in multiples in the larger department stores. And, in the department store,

goods are carefully subdivided according to kind and variety, as things are seen, inevitably, as members of larger categories.

In fact, the abundance of products in the marketplace created the necessity, embraced enthusiastically, of imposing system and order on a scale previously unknown. (One sees this tendency not only in the realm of practical aesthetics and business, but in the sciences and social sciences too, encompassing everything from Mendeleyev's periodic table of the chemical elements, to Melville Dewey's decimal system, which itself was probably modeled on the classification scheme used at the Philadelphia Centennial.)⁹ Every product had its place in the visible scheme of display, and also in an invisible structure of inventory, bookkeeping, and warehousing. The ordering of things in the department store was of course a practical matter, a way of facilitating sales, but there was also the more playful display featured on occasion at fairs and exhibitions, in which goods were massed to form huger versions of themselves that mightily signified the strength of their numbers. Polyisomorphs, we might call such structures—a fifty-foot high obelisk of olive oil bottles in the shape of an olive bottle, a monster cheese weighing 22,000 pounds, a giant tower of beer bottles.

The Victorian expression of abundance, along with its concomitant rage for order, are nowhere more evident than in the busy pages of the mail-order catalogue, which came of age in the 1880s and 1890s. For those displaced from the metropolis, unable to enjoy the street theater of the store windows, the sales catalogue—from Sears or Montgomery Ward, especially—served as a surrogate for the three-dimensional display, offering the advantage, besides, of being amenable to solitary contemplation and unencumbered dreaming.¹⁰ Virtually anything was available through the catalogues—anything one might want to put in a house, on a house, or around it, including the house itself.¹¹ While the department store display case was crowded with the actual objects on sale, massed together to show their virtue, the pages of the catalogue were filled to capacity with images of discrete things, classified by kinds, each image standing for a potentially infinite storehouse of actual goods. The catalogue was crowded as well with page after page of densely set type, a text that flowed in and around the objects like a wash of reassuring sales talk, the whole looking like the patterned wallpaper of the period, bound in book form. The catalogues were known as "wish-books"—inviting as they



Food counter in R. H. Macy's Department Store, Herald Square, 1902,
photograph by Joseph Byron
(Courtesy of Museum of the City of New York)

were—and the wish was finally tempered only by the price of the article itself: according to its price was the thing known and assigned its ontological space in the universe of the catalogue. Thus of a dozen varieties of chairs or lamps or harnesses or bonnets or suspenders or rings, each item was marked at finely graduated prices. By thus codifying the world of things, the merchant was implying two principles: that material things had their qualities and classes, just as did people; and that the goods they were selling were fairly priced. (That is, you got what you paid for.)

The excess capacity that distinguished the marketplace was visible as well in the home, which was the linchpin in the late nineteenth-century consumer culture. A main focus of Victorian aesthetic effort, the home expressed the abundance of energy that was basic to

MONTGOMERY WARD & CO.'S CATALOGUE No. 57.

600 Parlor Furniture—Continued.

Divans.

Chairs—Continued.

Students' Chairs.

Lounges.

72009 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

| | H. | E. | F. | G. | H. | K. | L. |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Suit | \$11.10 | \$11.50 | \$11.75 | \$12.35 | \$13.00 | \$13.00 | \$14.00 |
| Arm chair | \$6.40 | 6.70 | 6.85 | 6.90 | 7.05 | 7.10 | 7.30 |
| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72010 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

| | H. | E. | F. | G. | H. | K. | L. |
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| Suit | \$11.10 | \$11.50 | \$11.75 | \$12.35 | \$13.00 | \$13.00 | \$14.00 |
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| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72011 Arm chair, walnut, oak or imitation mahogany, handsomely engraved, polished, spring seat and back. Weight, 80 pounds.

| | H. | E. | F. | G. | H. | K. | L. |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Suit | \$11.10 | \$11.50 | \$11.75 | \$12.35 | \$13.00 | \$13.00 | \$14.00 |
| Arm chair | \$6.40 | 6.70 | 6.85 | 6.90 | 7.05 | 7.10 | 7.30 |
| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72012 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
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| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
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72013 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
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| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
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72014 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72015 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Suit | \$11.10 | \$11.50 | \$11.75 | \$12.35 | \$13.00 | \$13.00 | \$14.00 |
| Arm chair | \$6.40 | 6.70 | 6.85 | 6.90 | 7.05 | 7.10 | 7.30 |
| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72016 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
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72017 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72018 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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| Suit | \$11.10 | \$11.50 | \$11.75 | \$12.35 | \$13.00 | \$13.00 | \$14.00 |
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| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72019 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72020 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Suit | \$11.10 | \$11.50 | \$11.75 | \$12.35 | \$13.00 | \$13.00 | \$14.00 |
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| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
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72021 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72022 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72023 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
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72024 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

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|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
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| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72025 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

| | H. | E. | F. | G. | H. | K. | L. |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Suit | \$11.10 | \$11.50 | \$11.75 | \$12.35 | \$13.00 | \$13.00 | \$14.00 |
| Arm chair | \$6.40 | 6.70 | 6.85 | 6.90 | 7.05 | 7.10 | 7.30 |
| Rockers | \$6.70 | 6.85 | 7.20 | 7.30 | 7.60 | 8.25 | 8.35 |
| Divan | \$7.00 | 8.35 | 8.50 | 9.80 | 9.65 | 10.45 | 11.10 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |
| Parlor | \$4.10 | 4.25 | 4.55 | 4.75 | 4.80 | 5.40 | 5.55 |

72026 Parlor suit, well made of solid oak, richly hand carved and highly polished. Spring seats and edges; top of back and front of seats are buttoned tufted. Is very large and comfortable. Weight 210 pounds. Good value. Extra heavy and solid stock used in this suit.

| | H. | E. | F. | G. | H. | K. | L. |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Suit | \$11.10 | \$11.50 | \$11.75 | \$12.35 | \$13.00 | \$13.00 | \$14.00 |
| Arm chair | \$6.40 | 6.70 | 6.85 | 6.90 | 7.05 | 7.10 | |

the Victorian conception of healthy functioning and that was visible in countless other ways: interminable novels, gargantuan, multi-course meals, lavishly styled dresses, luxuriating drapes, high ceilings, bursting families, and shelves stuffed with bibelots. In the home, it has often been observed, was refuge from the commercial whirlwind, and there the family could preserve its sense of autonomy. There a man was still his own master, even if his stature in the workplace was shrinking; and there woman had a key role in managing the domestic economy, a role that was becoming increasingly honored and spiritualized.¹² It was as if, in the words of Donald Lowe, "the private space of the family could compensate for the estrangement in the public world."¹³ (Even Whitman, who more characteristically exhorted the American to take to the open road, wrote that "it is in some sense true that a man is not a whole and complete man unless he *owns* a house and the ground it stands on.")¹⁴ Despite the efforts of reformers throughout the nineteenth century to encourage more practical communal living arrangements, the privacy of the home remained sacrosanct.¹⁵

The home was the center of the moral and spiritual universe, "an unfailing barrier against vice, immorality, and bad habits," as Andrew Jackson Downing wrote in 1850.¹⁶ And the vision of progress, of an egalitarian culture of homeowners, came together in a middle-class ethic that elevated the worker to the status of independent homeowner as well, as Henry Ward Beecher enunciated with clear conviction in his July 4 oration in 1876:

[T]he average American household is wiser, there is more material for thought, for comfort, for home love, to-day, in the ordinary workman's house, than there was a hundred years ago in one of a hundred rich men's mansions and buildings. . . . The laborer ought to be ashamed of himself—or to find fault with Providence that stinted him when he was endowed—who in 20 years does not own the ground on which his house stands, and that, too, an unmortgaged house; who has not in that house provided carpets for the rooms, who has not his China plates, who has not his chromos, who has not some picture or portrait hanging upon the walls, who has not some books nestling on the shelf, who has not there a household he can call his home, the sweetest place upon the earth. This is not the picture of some future



*Interior of Mrs. Leoni's residence, 1894, photograph by Joseph Byron
(Courtesy of Museum of the City of New York)*

time, but the picture of to-day, a picture of the homes of the workingmen of America.¹⁷

Beecher, one of the most popular orators of his time, was sketching a picture that was already reinforced by the popular Currier and Ives chromos that featured happy homesteads and warm interiors. The only obstacle to the realization of these dreams of domestic bliss was the simple lack of money.¹⁸ But even that obstacle eventually became less of a problem with the advent of the five-and-dime stores, which Dreiser praised, in 1911, as "a truly beautiful, artistic, humanitarian thing," bringing the "stock of overproduction" within the "range of the poor," and thereby democratizing the fulfillment of desire.¹⁹

The aesthetic character of the home offered in many ways a sharp contrast to the nineteenth-century workplace, a contrast between a "flat prosaic atmosphere," as Mario Praz has written, and the sur-

roundings of comfort and leisure, "which must propitiate [the worker's] dreams and illusions."²⁰ Yet swings of fashion—from the ornate but relatively restrained furnishings of the mid-century to the cluttered eclecticism of the 1880s and then to a somewhat more simplified, chastened expression in the 1890s—make generalization about Victorian domestic style somewhat hazardous.²¹ Let me nevertheless take as a norm of middle-class style what Kenneth Ames has called the "commercial aesthetic," a picturesque eclecticism that mixes "Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, and wholly invented." Turned out by the large manufacturers of Grand Rapids, these eclectic designs pervaded the households of America, giving substance to Beecher's July 4th vision of a prosperous republic.²² Ironically, however, it was anything but a republican style; rather, it was essentially imitative of vaguely aristocratic modes—highly decorated surfaces, dramatic curves, allusions to traditional European high styles. Looking for status, middle-class Americans tried to reproduce in their homes the trappings of a generic aristocracy, objects rich in narrative signs suggesting allegorical fantasy and far-off places—leaves, claw feet, embellished figures.²³

But I am not so much interested in the pieces themselves as in the way they were ordered and given meaning within the Victorian environment. And one characteristic that remains more or less constant throughout the period (as compared with the notably different style of the early twentieth century, at least), is the quality of abundance we have noted as a key feature of the marketplace. From the advent of machine production in the 1840s to the end of the century, the middle-class aesthetic featured a densely decorative style, an interior stuffed with things, whether it was the display of bric-a-brac on the shelf, or the pillows on the divan, or the jumble of photographs popping out of the album, or the pages of the homemade scrapbook.

These interiors are visible in the many photographic records of the time, and they are reflected as well in the literature of the period, as in this concentrated and detailed description from William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, a *locus classicus* for the type. Howells's main characters, the Marches, have been looking for a furnished apartment, and they come upon this specimen, done up by Mrs. Grosvenor Green.

[W]herever you might have turned round she had put a gimcrack so that you would knock it over if you did turn. . . . At every door

hung a portière from large rings on a brass rod; every shelf and dressing-case and mantel was littered with gimcracks, and the corners of the tiny rooms were curtained off, and behind these portières swarmed more gimcracks. The front of the upright piano had what March called a short-skirted portière on it, and the top was covered with vases, with dragon candlesticks and with Jap fans, which also expanded themselves bat-wise on the walls between the etchings and the watercolors. The floors were covered with filling, and then rugs and then skins; the easy-chairs all had tidies, Armenian and Turkish and Persian; the lounges and sofas had embroidered cushions hidden under tidies . . . There was a superabundance of clocks.²⁴

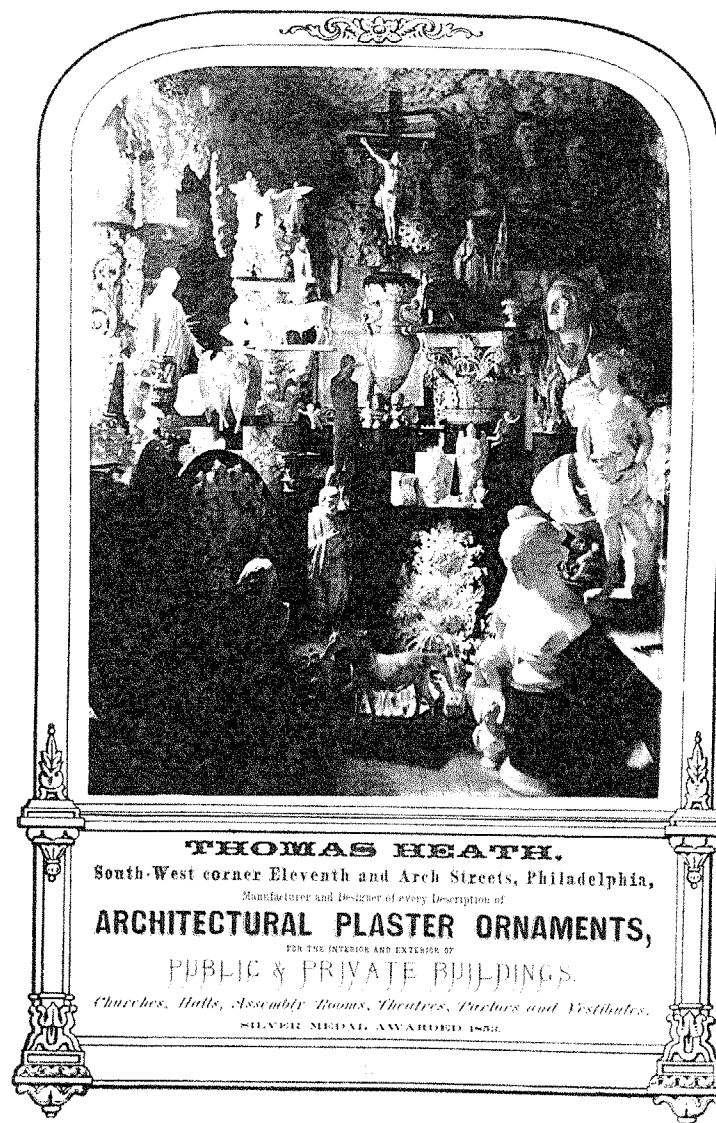
And so on. Mrs. Green has the appropriate mix of objets d'art and mass-produced objects, the whole adding up to a case study of material fetishism no less interesting for being a furnished apartment designed for renting; for Howells has evidently strived to express a kind of typical ideal of the period's taste for excess.²⁵ And the point of Mrs. Green's effort is that more is more; it is not the individual thing that matters, but the volume of things. Howells's satire captures what is most characteristic in the material culture of the Victorian period—its love of abundance, of numberless bibelots, of illusions of receding space and hidden corners—along with its love of artifice, of replication. And that latter point suggests the second major principle of the Victorian material aesthetic that I want to explore: the aesthetic of imitation.

At every level of society individuals sought an elevation of status through the purchase and display of goods whose appearance counted for more than their substance. The result was a factitious world in which the sham thing was proudly promoted by the manufacturer, and easily accepted by the consumer, as a valid substitute for authenticity. At the bottom of this aesthetic was the machine. Though scholars of the decorative arts may have overestimated the degree to which the machine was used in the production of household goods, in general it lowered the cost of labor and made possible the production of less expensive objects designed in the approximate style of higher-priced, hand-made goods, but with relatively less ornamentation and simpler lines.²⁶ For the consumer this meant not only an abundance of objects available, but a variety of styles and ornamentation that

gave to the middle class a new vocabulary of expression based on the language of the upper classes.²⁷ Thus *the imitation* became the foundation of middle-class culture, exemplifying, as Jean Baudrillard would say, the inevitable tendency of technology to substitute the fabricated world for the natural one.²⁸

Of course imitation materials were in use in America long before the industrial revolution. During the Colonial period, for example, canvas floor coverings were painted in black and white alternating squares to resemble marble tiles, while wooden stairs were often painted in swirling marble patterns; in fact, cheaper wood furniture was not infrequently painted in grain-like patterns—at all levels of society—as much for the sheer pleasure in decoration as to elevate the status of the object. Still what was in occasional evidence before the nineteenth century becomes the core of consumer society after the mid-1800s, pervading both houses and furniture. Trade catalogues from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries unabashedly proclaimed the excellence of their ersatz fabrications: linoleum (invented in 1863) patterned to look like marble, wood parquet, carpet, and mosaic; hollow concrete blocks cast in metal molds and made to resemble stone (1912); asbestos shingles that “harmonize with the natural surroundings” and are “as durable as stone,” to name just a few.²⁹

For the consumer seeking the proper signs in this hieroglyphic world, guides were essential, and two of the most trusted were the Beecher sisters—Catharine and Harriet, sisters of Henry Ward Beecher—who offered counsel on a wide range of topics relating to household economy.³⁰ In their books, as well as in the many others on the market, the essential paradox of consumerism flourished: encouraged to believe he or she lived in a world of unfettered personal expression, the consumer in reality was a member of a strictly rule-governed society. Page after page promulgated the canons of good taste, advising the reader on the best combinations of rugs, furniture, and accessories, all the while affirming the individualism of the homemaker. As one writer put it, in a volume published to coincide with the 1893 Chicago fair, “The Japanese-Eastlake-Morris-Cook influence has made women think for themselves, and moved the more cultivated and self-reliant among them to act upon the principle that their home is as individual a possession as their wardrobe, and may as honestly express their personal taste and convictions.”³¹ Some in-



*Architectural plaster ornaments, manufactured by Thomas Heath, Philadelphia, trade advertisement
(Courtesy of Library Company of Philadelphia)*

dividuality there surely was in household expression, but the language available to the consumer constituted a collective vocabulary of ready-made forms and conventions. In this sense, as Mario Praz has written, "furniture reveals the spirit of an age" perhaps even more than the other arts.³²

What was the spirit of the age thus revealed? A terrific drive upward, with the *appearance* of elevated status serving just as well, almost, as the real thing. The clamor for such signs grew so great that by 1885 one furniture company felt free to admit that its products were copies, but that they were otherwise equivalent to originals: "The renewal of old fashions has not only brought the genuine pieces out of their obscurity, but the demand being much greater than could be supplied by the real thing, has led to the making of copies . . . Mssrs. Sypher & Co. produce copies of these old pieces which are in every way as handsome and as well made as the originals."³³ And many of the domestic economy manuals during the post-Civil War period advised using cheap materials in place of more expensive ones; with unblushing egalitarianism, they would proclaim that "cheap luxury is easily obtained" through "elegant imitations" of the high French style in various materials.³⁴ (All of this was made even easier after the invention of installment buying in the late nineteenth century.)

Of course there were critics of such practices, the most influential of whom was the landscape architect A. J. Downing, who, as early as 1850, had made the authenticity of the house a point of virtue, insisting on "truth" in all aspects of home design—use of materials, suiting of design to setting, and above all in the matching of house-type and scale to the buyer's social class. Thus there are farmhouses, cottages, and—at the upper end—villas, and it is a "foolish ambition," Downing warned, to "build cottages and wish to make them appear like villas." Standing on a belief in the fixity of social class that the American was eager to overturn, Downing asserted that it is "false in taste as for a person of simple and frank character to lay aside his simplicity and frankness to assume the cultivation and polish of a man of the world."³⁵

The consumer's risk in such efforts of advancement was that the engine of instant elevation could mightily backfire. Abraham Cahan records in *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) how his main character, Levinsky, has been wandering through the Ghetto of the Lower East

Side of the 1890s and comes across a mother and two children who have been evicted for non-payment of rent and who are on the sidewalk watching their pile of furniture: "What puzzled me," David remembers, "was the nature of the furniture. For in my birthplace chairs and a couch like those I now saw on the sidewalk would be a sign of prosperity."³⁶ And Dreiser, who had earlier taken the aspirations of a Sister Carrie so seriously, in his later years wrote a little satire called *The Fine Furniture*, about a woman, Opal, who is married to a logger and who insists on squandering their money to purchase a set of furniture wholly inappropriate to their geographical and social milieu; in order to keep the newly arrived pieces clean the whole logging camp society must be excluded from their house, and even the woman's husband must eat in a shed. When the couple is finally ostracized by the community for their "superiority," they put the fine furniture in storage and move away.³⁷

As these fictions suggest, the consumer lived in a world where dream and desire were continually cultivated, often at his or her peril. For it was also a world where *caveat emptor* served as the rock-hard reality principle. A variety of evidence attests to the fact that the ancient tradition of slightly deceptive trading had reached something close to an art in the American nineteenth century, not least of which is the widespread appearance in fiction and popular humor of the archetypal figure of the confidence man, who elicits a typically mixed response in literature as in life—horror at the immorality of his chicanery and admiration for the skill with which he carries off the trick. How closely these figures were intertwined with common experience is suggested in David Crockett's description of Job Snelling, a Massachusetts peddler, who "bragged of having made some useful discoveries, the most profitable of which was the art of converting mahogany sawdust into cayenne pepper, which he said was a profitable and safe business; for the people have been so long accustomed to having dust thrown in their eyes, that there wasn't much danger of being found out."³⁸ And Mark Twain recalled, in *Life on the Mississippi*, overhearing a conversation between two salesmen (or "scoundrels," as Twain calls them) who try to top one another in boasting of their respective facsimile products, oleomargarine and cottonseed "olive" oil: "Maybe you'll butter everybody's bread pretty soon, but we'll cottonseed his salad for him from the Gulf to Canada, and that's a dead certain thing."³⁹

That the earlier nineteenth-century practices continued throughout the century is evident from an advertisement that Macy's felt impelled to place in the *New York Herald* in 1875: "Every article sold in this establishment is guaranteed to be what is represented. Any article sold from this establishment not suiting, or not being what it is guaranteed, will be exchanged or the money refunded."⁴⁰ Despite the possible ambiguity in phrasing ("guaranteed to be what is represented?"), Macy's was reassuring its customers of its good faith. And it was not uncommon for advertisers to warn that others' products were "base imitations," with some going so far as to offer rewards for the arrest of persons selling such frauds.⁴¹

The masterpiece in this genre of resourceful advertising was the Sears catalogue, whose genius it was to carry honest representation almost to the point of fraud, while still maintaining the good will and trust of the consumer. Stories of hoaxes played on the customer would naturally be circulated by local rural merchants who wanted to discourage their own customers from dealing with mail-order firms; but Sears actually did engage in some shady if imaginative practices in its early days, such as advertising a complete set of furniture for \$1—leaving to the consumer the discernment of the word "miniature" in minuscule type. And these practices of limited deception continued into the twentieth century, with catalogue pages advertising "Our Genuine Pisani Stradivarius Model Violin" (for \$45), or cameras that looked exactly like Kodaks and were manufactured in a factory pictured on the page and blazoned "Rochester." Only the the very attentive customer might see that the camera was made in Rochester, Minnesota, and not in George Eastman's New York town.⁴² (It seems not inconceivable that Sears established his camera factory in the homonymous Minnesota town in order to profit from the confusion in the first place.)

The consumer might even himself be recruited into the game of misrepresentation, as in the ad for a "Trainmen's Special" watch, which says exactly what it is, but isn't exactly what it seems: "This is a cheap trading watch, made to look like the most expensive 23 jeweled, adjusted railway watch made . . . it is stamped '23 jewels, adjusted' . . . It is essentially a trading watch. We have sold thousands of these movements to auctioneers, horse traders and other traders, peddlers, jewelers, publishers and scheme houses for premiums, etc. for while we sell it for just what it is, in interior construction a plain 7

jeweled American movement, it has all the appearance of a movement that you would pay \$25.00 or more for." Such an ad functions almost like a play within a play, legitimating the principal fiction ("trust us") by allowing the consumer a glimpse at a world outside the catalogue, where the buyer must beware. If the consumer wanted to enter more actively into the game of trust, hoax, and pratfall, he might purchase, for 19 cents, "the smallest Kinematograph in the world." Look through the eyepiece at the dancing girl, invite your friends to do so, and "as soon as a small knob is turned a small spray of water is released and shot into the operator's eye."⁴³ As Melville had demonstrated so brilliantly in *The Confidence Man*, where trust was shadowed by doubt, where no rugs were glued to the floor, all things were possible; but if a buyer got stuck with a \$5 watch instead of a \$25 one, or a shot of water in the eye, he could of course pass on the experience to the next trusting stranger. Being on the winning end of such transactions was yet another way of elevating one's status in a democracy, where all were equally vulnerable.

Stepping back from these examples of trading practice to look more generally at the Victorian interior, one might almost say that Burton Benedict's observation about world's fairs during this period is true as well of the whole panoply of consumer culture, from the home to the department store—that in such places "man is totally in control and synthetic nature is preferred to the real thing."⁴⁴ But we should be wary of condescending to this culture of replications, for it is hard to know where nature ends and technics begin in man's making of things.⁴⁵ And indeed it was often precisely the purpose of the Victorians to confuse the realms of artifice and nature as part of an overall aesthetic in which the imitation became a central category, not merely endured, but exulted in.

Thus the middle-class environment typically indulged in fanciful representations and theatrical juxtapositions: of paper flowers with real flowers, of wax or marble fruit with real fruit. In the display of such household artifacts—the small objects made affordable to a prospering society—one sees repeatedly a reveling in the artifice of materials and a love of playing true against false, natural against artificial. Such clashes were part of a shared popular aesthetic that worked by confusing and delighting the senses and incidentally paying homage to the transformations of the artisan. One can see the

reasoning behind the love of such juxtapositions in the advice offered by the Beechers to the homemaker interested in ornamenting a room with pictures: try German ivy. "Slips of this will start without roots in bottles of water. Slide the bottle behind the picture, and the ivy will seem to come from fairyland, and hang its verdure in all manner of pretty curves around the picture. It may then be trained to travel toward other ivy, and thus aid in forming a green cornice along the ceiling. We have seen some rooms that had an ivy cornice around the whole, giving the air of a leafy bower."⁴⁶

The Victorian habit of mixing nature and art also had its antecedents in the eighteenth-century taste for complexly patterned collages comprising a variety of things real and artificial—hair, wax, mica flakes, shells, stamps, dried flowers, paper twisted into rolls. But the nineteenth-century taste was more fantastic, more exuberant, at times an exhibition of technological prowess, at other times a sheer delight in the metaphysics of substance and the ventriloquism of objects that could be made to speak with unexpected voices. Thus, iron furniture might be shaped into twigs and branches, horns and antlers mounted in a mirror frame; wardrobes might turn into bedsteads, and bedsteads into tables and chairs.⁴⁷ To the American followers of Eastlake, "purpose is always to be declared—there is to be no disposing of a bed by day in the wardrobe or the lounge-box: the bed is a bed, and the wardrobe a wardrobe unmistakably."⁴⁸ But popular taste ran against such admonitions.

There is a classic summation of that popular taste—its love of decorative artifice—in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, where he offers the definitive catalogue of the mid-century "House Beautiful," with its fake Corinthian columns outside and its plaster fruit, wax flowers, and artificial Napoleons inside. But consider the similar description of the Grangerford parlor in *Huckleberry Finn* (Chapter 17) which, because it connects revealingly with Twain's more general view of American society in the book, is worth a longer look. Huck describes the scene:

There was a clock on the middle of the mantelpiece, with a picture of a town painted on the bottom half of the glass front, and a round place in the middle of it for the sun, and you could see the pendulum swinging behind it. . . . Well, there was a big outlandish parrot on each side of the clock, made out of something like chalk and painted up gaudy. By one of the parrots was a cat made

of crockery, and a crockery dog by the other; and when you pressed down on them they squeaked but didn't open their mouths nor look different nor interested. They squeaked through underneath. There was a couple of big wild-turkey-wing fans spread out behind those things. On the table in the middle of the room was a kind of lovely crockery basket that had apples and oranges and peaches and grapes piled up in it, which was much redder and yellower and prettier than real ones is, but they warn't real because you could see where pieces had got chipped off and showed the white chalk, or whatever it was, underneath.

Huck's deadpan description seems to leave nothing out, turning the whole parlor into a ticking, chiming, squeaking still-life menagerie, an environment that represents well the Victorian taste for illusion and mimesis.

The scene functions as well as a kind of emblem of the larger themes in the book as a whole. For the Grangerford parlor, with its disguises and ambiguities, is a microcosm of the entire world of charades and hoaxes and masquerades and schemes through which Huck must navigate. In fact, one might say that Twain's work, generally, with its frequent preoccupation with doubles, with false identities and look-alikes, is in many ways the fictional counterpart of the aesthetic of replication that governs the Victorian household, and a clue to Twain's immense popularity may lie in his resonance with such basic habits of perception. For Twain's is a world in which outer signs mean more than inner quality, in which one could gain immense wealth and status overnight by selling the signs of wealth and status to an anxiously aspiring middle class. In such a world the domestic aesthetic of artifice and replication mirrors the larger social sphere where newcomers must constantly be evaluated.

Twain's critique of the household—and of the larger world of which it is a microcosm—has enough good humor in it to pass cunningly into the popular currency. A more conservative and satiric treatment of similar issues can be found in Frank Norris's early novel, *Vandover and the Brute* (1895), which extends matters of decoration into a more serious social and moral critique of a society that is symptomatically deranged. For Norris sets up, within two adjoining chapters, a contrast between the family homes of two young women, Ida Wade and Turner Ravis. Ida's father is a self-made merchant whose business is carpet cleaning; her mother, of an artistic turn, gives lessons

in "painting on china and velvet." In contrast, Turner's family is "one of the best" in the city: they are "old-fashioned," they have family traditions and customs, they go to the right schools and belong to the right clubs.

The two houses tell the same stories, as Norris implicitly decodes each detail in building his description: the Wades's house is decorated with "meaningless" millwork, sports two Corinthian pillars with iron capitals "painted to imitate the wood of the house, which in its turn was painted to imitate stone." Inside, the parlor features a cheap piano, a carpet and sofa, an Alaskan "grass basket" filled with photographs, an inverted sewer-pipe filled with cattails tied with a ribbon; a "huge easel of imitation brass" holds a large crayon enlargement of a baby photograph, draped (as is everything else in the room) with yellow cloth; an unwound clock stands in an artist's palette, above which is a photogravure of a lion looking at the spectator. "In front of the picture were real iron bars, with real straw tucked in behind them." Opposed to Ida Wade's house of illusions, of artifice playing against nature, is Turner Ravis's house, about which Norris tells us just enough to make plain the difference: the pictures on the Ravis walls were "oil paintings of steel engravings and genuine old-fashioned chromos, beyond price to-day. Their furniture and ornaments were of the preceding generation, solid, conservative. They were not chosen with reference to any one style, nor all bought at the same time. Each separate piece had an individuality of its own. The Ravises kept their old things," etc.⁴⁹ And of course the two young women reflect their homes: Turner Ravis is a model of order and self-discipline, decorous and reliable; Ida Wade is fun-loving, adventuresome, and unfortunately all too susceptible to Vandover's brutish advances. (She ends a suicide.) Norris's pointed tale reveals the degree to which decorative style could be used as a code for character, and the degree to which it could presumably shape character in a society based on such hieroglyphic signs.

Learning to tell the true from the false, the lie from the truth, learning trust and mistrust, was part of an acculturation process that shows up again and again in nineteenth-century culture, from the "operational aesthetics" of P. T. Barnum, with its hoaxes and hybrids (and we recall that Twain's favorite book was Barnum's autobiography), to the serious literature of Poe, Melville, and James.⁵⁰ In the hieroglyphic universe of nineteenth-century America, confidence

men, lifelike portraits, purloined letters that are invisible because too obvious—all abound; and the characteristic stories of the period are filled with plots of mistaken identity, disguise, detection, and discovery.

Underlying middle-class Victorian taste lay an imitation of American upper-class taste; and underlying American upper-class taste lay an imitation of European traditions—the hierarchical designs of the royal courts, with their heavily ornate surfaces, their swirling forms, their aristocratic connotations.⁵¹ Indeed one cannot talk adequately about reproductions and replicas, about the meaning of things in general for Americans, without talking about the aesthetic and social and moral meaning of Europe. Despite our growing mastery in things industrial and technological, the dominant assumption was that we were still vassals to Europe in the arts.

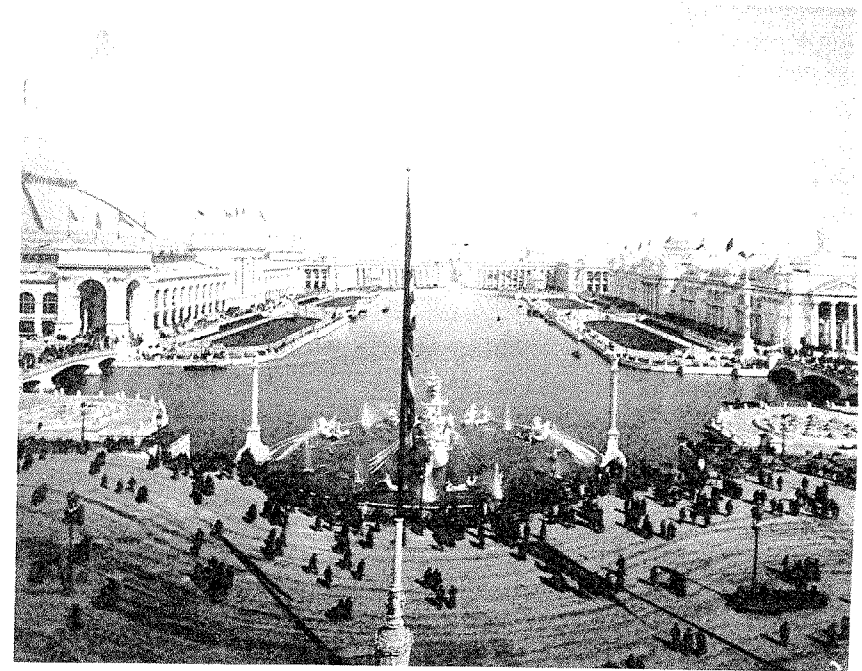
Thus the Centennial, for example, was seen as an occasion to "soften manners and counteract the now unmitigated exercise and influence of mere industrialism," by supplying examples of the decorative arts from abroad that would replace the "common, pretentious and ugly objects of our everyday life."⁵² Twenty-five years earlier, at the London Crystal Palace, an American observer remarked proudly on the simplicity of American goods; lacking the costly excesses of the aristocratic European nations, Americans produced "articles of utility and comfort, and for the advantage of the middling classes, who are the great producers of the world, as distinguished from the nobility and gentry"; with the improvement of manufacturing processes, the mimicking of elite European designs soon became widespread.⁵³ And by the 1893 Chicago Exposition, whole rooms were featured in the various European pavilions, providing tangible and coherent models for American taste.

The architecture of the Chicago Exposition itself was the most emphatic statement of where elite values lay at the end of the century: with its huge palatial structures festooned with statues and decorative embellishments, the whole looked like a fantasy of Imperial Rome, if not a three-dimensional stage set out of Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire*. The White City (so called because of the color of the chief building material, staff, which was selected for its speed of construction and ease of destruction) became a national symbol of America's coming of age on the world scene, a dreamed self-image of

might and power interpreted to the populace by an illustrious team of Eastern architects. It might also be read as a sign of America's continued rivalry with, and consequent submission to, European standards; this in effect was the view of Louis Sullivan, who contributed one of the few consciously "American" designs and would later say that the Columbian Exposition had set back American architecture for generations. Meanwhile, Europeans who came to Chicago looking for something distinctly American were disappointed to find a facsimile of Europe and turned instead to downtown Chicago, with its modern office buildings, as a more authentic expression of the American spirit.

The exposition at Chicago was symptomatic of a shift that had taken place since the Centennial in America's orientation toward Europe and the past. Until approximately the 1890s, for example, the emulation of European architectural models consisted of relatively free adaptations, eclectic designs, such as the Queen Anne, which at best modulated into a distinctively American shingle style.⁵⁴ During the last decades of the century, however, the excesses of Victorian eclecticism became purified in two different ways, as Richard Guy Wilson has pointed out. On the one hand there was the effort toward simplification, derived from Ruskin and Morris, and which would develop into the functionalism of the Arts and Crafts movement. (This will be examined in more detail in a later chapter.) On the other hand was the "scientific eclecticism" of McKim, Mead, and White, and of Van Brunt, with their scorn of unscientific heterogeneity and their striving for a kind of archeological purity and accuracy of design.⁵⁵ It was out of the latter impulse that the Columbian Exposition itself was built.

Symptomatic of the orientation to Europe, and of the new emphasis on simplification, was the influential volume, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), written by Edith Wharton in collaboration with the architect Ogden Codman, and in which the virtues of the Italian Renaissance were celebrated. Wharton and Codman argue for a harmony of architecture and decoration based on simplicity and proportion, a reaction against the excesses of Victorian taste.⁵⁶ The success of Grand Rapids in providing eclectically styled furniture for the middle-class market was, of course, what was wrong with America, from the elitist viewpoint of Wharton and Codman. Addressing their counsel to an upper-class (or would-be upper-class) audience, the two



*Basin and Court of Honor, looking East from the Grand Plaza,
Chicago World's Fair of 1893*

*(Courtesy of Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library,
Columbia University)*

wove the language of social distinctions into their judgments and warnings: they decried, for example, the "vulgarity of the pinchbeck article flooding our shops and overflowing upon our sidewalks." (They might almost be talking about the immigrants of the Lower East Side themselves.) And elsewhere: "vulgarity is always noisier than good breeding," and one should therefore not mix good pieces with bad. If all of this encouraged the middle-class reader to believe that he or she could actually learn to "pass" as a social aristocrat, one had to remember that the game was risky; fine discrimination and money were essential, for mere imitation of one's social betters, by the use of cheaply manufactured parlor furniture in "pseudo-Georgian or pseudo-Empire," was offensive to good taste.⁵⁷

Lacking the necessary resources, however, the middle class would

have to settle for the European derivatives that were the staple of the marketplace; only the very rich could be free of Grand Rapids and could go back to the presumed source of Culture—the Continent. As Baudrillard says, for the self-made man, the “authentic” European object supplies the signature of his paternity; “l’authenticité vient toujours du Père: c’est lui la source de la valeur.”⁵⁸ The first preference of the traveler, on his rapacious tour of Europe, would be to bring back an original chunk of Culture—vase, painting, table, statue, rare book; failing that, one could patronize American artists who would supply one with hand-made artifacts, exact reproductions of the real European thing.⁵⁹ This is the sort scorned by Robert Herrick, in his novel *The Common Lot* (1904), in the person of a widow who collects furnishings for her new house, “Forest Manor”: she is “the modern barbarian type that admires hungrily and ravishes greedily from the treasure house of the Old World what it can get.”⁶⁰

Perhaps the archetype in this category was the wealthy Bostonian, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and her grip on the imagination must still have been strong in 1926 when Lewis Mumford excoriated her in his *The Golden Day*. Gardner, like so many other millionaires at the end of the nineteenth century, was trying to answer the question of the moment, which was, as historian Hugh Dalziel Duncan put it, “no longer one of how to let people know that one was rich, but of indicating to one’s peers that one knew how to be rich ‘in style.’”⁶¹ The official doctrine of genteel culture, fostered by Harvard’s Charles Eliot Norton, among others, held that art was a civilizing, spiritual force, that it would counteract the materialism of America’s business culture, that it would take one from “the world of matter to that of spirit,” as Helen Horowitz has put it.⁶² And the locus of style, civilization, and culture became the Italian Renaissance, which, through the writings of Pater, Symonds, and Burckhardt, was the subject of new interest.⁶³

But of course it took immense wealth to counteract the abuses of vulgar materialism. And though an E. L. Godkin might argue in *Scribner’s* that the wealthy in America should construct public monuments and buildings instead of grand private houses, those at the apex of the social pyramid tended to demonstrate their love of beauty and their spiritual greatness by a correspondingly great display of wealth along European lines, with the Italian palaces of the Medici serving as their favorite models.⁶⁴ Thus their mansions were filled

with period rooms, evidence of a desire to create, in the midst of a commercial society where fortunes were based on coal, railroads, and iron, a fantasy of aristocratic status.⁶⁵ To make that fantasy credible was the challenge. First, an object had to *look* costly, and *be* costly. (A spoon designed to look like silver but actually made of baser metal, as Veblen observed, falls markedly in our estimation of its worth when we discover its “false” nature.) Second, it had to evince the good taste of the owner. (Wharton and Codman: “To the art-lover, as distinguished from the collector, uniqueness *per-se* can give no value to an *inartistic* object.”)⁶⁶

The novelist Frank Norris corroborates this point exactly in his novel, *The Pit*, when he shows us the self-made millionaire Jadwin, at the height of his fortune, vaunting his art gallery to his friend Gretry. After parting some heavy curtains, the two enter Jadwin’s theatrical two-story high gallery. “It was shaped like a rotunda, and topped with a vast airy dome of coloured glass. Here and there about the room were glass cabinets full of bibelots, ivory statuettes, old snuff boxes, fans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The walls themselves were covered with a multitude of pictures, oils, water-colors, with one or two pastels.” After examining the room the mightily impressed Gretry murmurs, “This certainly is the real thing, J. I suppose, now, it all represents a pretty big pot of money.”⁶⁷ Precisely! (As Tocqueville had observed early in the nineteenth century, “in the confusion of all ranks everyone hopes to appear what he is not.”)⁶⁸ Jadwin’s demonstration is climaxed by his setting in place a perforated roll of music and thus “playing” the overture from *Carmen* on his mechanical organ.

One of the most acute dissections of this tendency of the aspiring American to worship at the shrines of European material culture comes in a short story by D. H. Lawrence called simply, “Things,” in which the lines between idealism and materialism, between the aesthetic and the industrial components of American civilization, and between America and Europe, are all sharply and satirically drawn. Earlier, in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), Lawrence had lambasted American tourists in Europe, who exclaim over the cupolas at Saint Mark’s, “‘Don’t you think [they] are like the loveliest *turnips* upside down; you know’—as if the beautiful things of Europe were just having their guts pulled out by these American admirers.”⁶⁹ In “Things” he gives these tourists a name and a history: the Mel-

villes, who start from New England and wind up, at last, in Cleveland. And although the story takes place in the first decades of the twentieth century it caps a tradition of American infatuation with Europe that flourished in the late nineteenth century.

Lawrence's Melvilles are "idealists" (aptly named) who, before the War, seek the beautiful life in Europe, nourishing their inner souls with the beautiful "things" they collect on their travels, all the while scorning Europeans as themselves "materialistic." "Of course they [the Melvilles] did not buy the things for the things' sakes, but for the sake of 'beauty,'" Lawrence writes. But the glow fades from their things after a year or two, and they shuttle back and forth between Europe and America until Erasmus Melville finally is forced (on account of pinched funds) to accept a job at a midwestern university. With resignation at first, but afterwards with great joy, the Melvilles, surrounded by their things—"Bologna cupboard, Venice bookshelves, Ravenna bishop's chair, Louis-Quinze side-tables"—become cultural celebrities, showing off in their "best European manner." Living with the contrived superiority of European aristocrats, surrounded by their fine things, the Melvilles proclaim, "we prefer America." Amidst the furnaces of Cleveland, "with red and white-hot cascades of gushing metal, and tiny gnomes of men, and terrific noises, gigantic," Erasmus says to his wife, "Say what you like, Valerie, this is the biggest thing the modern world has to show."⁷⁰

Lawrence's compact satire makes its point craftily: in the twentieth century, all that is left of the epic quest of American idealism—suggested by his naming the couple after the great New England searcher after ultimate truths, ultimately disillusioned—is the quest of materialism and the drive toward social superiority. In Cleveland the contradictions of American society flourish, and the American wants it both ways: the industrial might, the vulgar strength of his factories; and the refinement of European "culture." But he cannot have it both ways without giving up some essential vitality. It was a point Lawrence had made more explicitly in *The New Republic* in 1920. "It is an insult to life itself to be *too* abject, *too* prostrate before Milan Cathedral or a Ghirlandajo," he wrote in "America, Listen to Your Own." "Let Americans turn to America, and to that very America which has been rejected and almost annihilated. Do they want to draw sustenance for the future? They will never draw it from the lovely monuments of our European past. These have an almost fatal narcotic, dream-luxurious effect upon the soul. America must turn

again to catch the spirit of her own dark, aboriginal continent."⁷¹ It was a point Whitman had made before, and that some others were making in the early twentieth century. But it was not what most Americans wanted to hear, or could understand. For genteel America, the fascination with Europe was at the heart of the struggle for identity. And the greatest anatomist of that struggle, writing in the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, was Henry James, who defined the nuances of the theme from every angle.

We do not normally think of James in the context of the growing consumer economy of the late nineteenth century, but the question of ownership is a key one in his work throughout his career, and his fiction offers a powerful critique of the upper end of the consumer world.⁷² Two of James's fullest treatments of the relationships between people and things are *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Spoils of Poynton*, and I want to consider them in some detail here, for they offer a psychological investigation of ownership that brings us inside the mentality of consumption and thus warrants a closer look.

The primary characters in *Portrait*—Isabel, Osmond, and Ralph—are all Americans, transplanted to the arena of self-discovery and culture, Europe, where the question turned over again and again is, as Madame Merle (another American) puts it in a conversation with Isabel, "What shall we call our 'self'?" James is taking the great preoccupation of Whitman and transforming it into the vocabulary of a consumer culture in which ownership—of things, of people—is a major part of the definition. Madame Merle has the famous passage:

When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive!

James wants us to be somewhat skeptical of Madame Merle's "bold analysis of the human personality," as he archly calls it, partly as a way of setting us up for Isabel's quite contrary opinion, which will set in motion the drama of the story: "I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; every thing's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one."⁷³ Isabel here announces a freedom of the self that is idealistic in the extreme, a self that would have no material hindrances, a self that would claim a freedom to expand and fulfill itself without restraint; and it is precisely James's contrivance to lure such a self into a relationship that seems at first to fulfill that idealism but that ends in a blank confrontation with the firm barriers set up by the magnetic Osmond.

For Osmond is the person for whom things are the whole of self-definition, and Isabel herself becomes a crucial possession. Isabel's marriage is based, for her part, on a fatal misreading of Osmond's character: "His pictures, his medallions and tapestries were interesting; but after a while Isabel felt the owner much more so, and independently of them, thickly as they seemed to overhang him." It is a misreading because in the case of Osmond the showy accumulation of minor treasures is, Isabel eventually realizes, the whole of his substance. For his part, Osmond sees Isabel as "a silver plate, not an earthen one," silver because he could then "tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring." For Osmond the language of love is imbued with the imagery of replication: Isabel is to be a "reproduction" of himself, but of a special kind; he does not want, in his wife, to "see his thought reproduced literally—that made it look stale and stupid; he preferred it to be freshened in the reproduction even as 'words' by music."⁷⁴

Isabel may not be completely suffocated by Osmond's sterility, but her sense of oppressive limits, of barriers to the expression of the self, could not be greater than at the end of the *Portrait*, when she decides to stay with her husband. She has inevitably become a part of Osmond's "cluster of appurtenances," a part of his expressive shell, to use Madame Merle's phrase, as Osmond is a part of Isabel's. The drama of *Portrait of a Lady* thus flows out of the meaning of ownership and mistaken appearances, and in ways that are not at first apparent, perhaps, James's novel connects with a society in which buy-

ing and selling, collecting and displaying objects, have become a central preoccupation and a governing metaphor.

In *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), written more than a decade after *Portrait*, things are even more explicitly a part of James's subject, or rather, not the things themselves, but the passions they excite. For *Spoils* is about avidity, "that most modern of our current passions," as James calls it in his preface, "the fierce appetite for the upholsterer's and joiner's and brazier's work, the chairs and tables, the cabinets and presses, the material odds and ends, of the more laboring ages."⁷⁵

The novel actually depicts two different worlds of things, and at first glance they are poles apart: on one side is Mrs. Gereth's collection at Poynton (the "spoils" of the title), an assemblage of objects whose perfection, we must assume, makes them worth fighting for. These are the things—paintings, furniture, bibelots—that in an age of mass production are the relics of the romantically imagined artisan. On the other side is the world of the Brigstocks, which, according to Mrs. Gereth at least, is of "an ugliness fundamental and systematic, the result of the abnormal nature of the Brigstocks, from whose composition the principle of taste had been extravagantly omitted . . . they had smothered [their house] with trumpery ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and buncy draperies, with gimcracks that might have been keepsakes for maid-servants and nondescript conveniences that might have been prizes for the blind." In the bedrooms are souvenirs "from some centennial or other Exhibition."⁷⁶ The contrast with Poynton could not be clearer; and yet, both Mrs. Gereth's world of taste and the Brigstocks's house of vulgarity evince a similar set of values: in both worlds, things have been richly treasured and avidly saved. And the drama really centers less on the conflict between taste and vulgarity than on the passion for things more generally.

Three women constitute the epicenters of the book: Mrs. Gereth, whose present business is to find a suitable candidate for her son Owen's hand and hence the trusted management of Poynton; Fleda Vetch, whom Mrs. Gereth has settled on as her choice; and Mona Brigstock, who wants Owen and all his appurtenances, and whom, because of her vulgarity, Mrs. Gereth abhors. Fleda's own background is petit bourgeois, but she can move from that world to the world of the Gereths because of her fine intelligence and sensibility, and because she is an artist. (How good an artist remains undemon-

strated; she has spent a year in France studying with impressionist painters.) Moreover, her intermediary status, between Gereths and Brigstocks, seems indicated by her father's character: like everyone else in the novel, he is a collector, with a taste that seems less than Gereth and more than Brigstock. He likes old things, flea market treasures—"brandy-flasks and matchboxes, old calendars and hand-books"—and he prides himself, James tells us with deadpan irony, on "having a taste for fine things which his children had unfortunately not inherited."⁷⁷

James is not, in *The Spoils*, interested in the old things themselves, but in things as a religion, and that is the very phrase Mrs. Gereth uses in telling Fleda about the history of her accumulations: "Yes . . . there are things in the house that we almost starved for!" For the Gereths evidently lacked means at first, and their treasures were gained through self-sacrifice: "They were our religion, they were our life, they were us! and they're only *me*—except that they're also *you*, thank God, a little, you dear!"⁷⁸ Mrs. Gereth's eagerness to give up her treasures, provided they are to the right person, sharply qualifies her own avidity, and moves our understanding to a new level: it is not the mere possession of things that fuels Mrs. Gereth's resistance to Mona Brigstock, but her sense that under Mona's hands the things would be desecrated because not appreciated, and that her own life, so bound up with the accumulated things, would consequently be destroyed. "It was the need to be faithful to a trust and loyal to an idea."⁷⁹ Mona, for her part, cares nothing for the things themselves; she has no appreciation of their worth and insists on owning them only because she wants everything coming to her with Owen.

And Mona does gain the objects legally and materially at the end, but only briefly: for the book ends with a fire that destroys everything at Poynton. But the spoils had already been "dematerialized" before the fire: the action of the novel is, in a sense, the process whereby their true value comes more and more, for Fleda and Mrs. Gereth, at least, to reside in their personal and symbolic meaning, and not their physical embodiment. And James's final ironic disposal of the property, out of everyone's hands, comes like a burning judgment on Mona's cupidity. Yet whatever the material value of the spoils had been, James has supplied midway through the book a judgment upon the *things* that comes back to us in retrospect: Fleda had found it impossible to work at Poynton. "No active art could flourish there but a Buddhistic contemplation."⁸⁰ The spoils are death to the imagination.

There are no Americans in *The Spoils of Poynton*, and it may be for that reason that James can stand back from the battles and give to his tale a distance and irony that make all of the characters part of a unified comedy of jealousies and disasters. And by excluding the international theme, James was able to focus more purely on the moral dimensions of his story. But his exploration of the ways that matter can grip the spirit, and his demonstration of a transcending of that state, make it clearly relevant to American culture, and like many of James's novels, it was initially serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*. At a time when the possession of European art treasures and bric-a-brac was considered the mark of social and spiritual distinction to the American, James's short novel has the force of a complex *Vanitas*, a *memento mori*.

Again and again, around the turn of the century, as the saturation of *things* reached the limit of containing space, the social and spiritual grace afforded by material objects was put to the question. And Nietzsche's observation on the European bourgeoisie would apply to America as well: "Men of the seventies and eighties . . . were filled with a devouring hunger for reality, but they had the misfortune to confuse this with matter—which is but the hollow and deceptive wrapping of it. Thus they lived perpetually in a wretched, padded, puffed-out world of cotton-wool, cardboard, and tissue-paper."⁸¹ The actual stripping of that stuffed world to its functional bare bones would await the modernist movements of the twentieth century; but the same "hunger for reality" noted by Nietzsche can be seen in America as a note of dissidence within the general chorus of contentment, a feeling that something, amid the spendors of Victorian materialism, had been left out.

Disenchantment took many forms, but the one most relevant in the present context is the curious ambivalence toward the grand idea of progress itself, with all its material trappings. Here and there, within the novels and popular culture of the period one sees, against the main current of material advancement and the growth of cities and factories, a significant reverse current of nostalgia, carrying the individual backward to a simpler time.

A detailed and explicit challenge to the dominant ethos can be found, for example, at the center of Henry Blake Fuller's novel, *With the Procession* (1895), which poses the question, What is the ultimate value of change, of upward mobility, of material things? Fuller's cri-

tique of progress comes through most clearly in a scene featuring Mrs. Bates, an arriviste Chicago aristocrat whose motto, "Keep up with the procession," supplies the book's title; Mrs. Bates lives surrounded by royal splendor, Baroque magnificence, but her connection with her possessions is at best tenuous. She has in fact no real use for them except as part of a stage setting to impress her visitors. The secret behind the show is revealed to one guest—the book's heroine—who summarizes her discoveries, following Mrs. Bates's tour of the ostentatious house: "she doesn't get any music out of her piano, she doesn't get any reading out of her books; she doesn't even get any sleep out of her bed."⁸² (It is used to lay hats and coats on.) Mrs. Bates's genuine emotional center is a private room reached through a secret passage, a place redolent of her past, with its comfortable and homely middle-class furnishings—an old, cracked mahogany bureau, a shabby writing desk, a threadbare carpet, an old piano, well-worn books, and so forth.⁸³ Fuller gives us, in this depiction of Mrs. Bates's inner sanctum, an embodiment of her nostalgia, the "backstage" glimpse behind the facades of conspicuous consumption.

The backward pull that the novelist was depicting was also being reflected in the popular culture, where stories of rural manners and characters, literary marmalade, were consumed avidly by the urban reader along with popular Currier and Ives chromos of country customs and domestic rural scenes. (The urban population between 1880 and 1900 was doubling.) And, as Lewis Mumford observed, with the dying away of traditional folk forms during the late nineteenth century, a scholarly and elite audience began its acts of archival re-possession, savoring the "authenticity" of ballads and stories that were rooted in the preindustrial past.⁸⁴ The same taste for the past showed up in the new interest in antique furniture which began around the same time, fostered by leaders of the household art movement.⁸⁵ And, most revealing of all, the rise to success and national prominence began to carry with it a ritualistic public tribute to one's humble origins: the interviews with the famous, for example, which were drawn from *Success* magazine and collected in a 1903 volume called *Little Visits with Great Americans*, are filled with memories of rural boyhood, of poverty and raw beginnings.⁸⁶

It was as if the middle-class American were trying to hold onto his "real" self amidst the rapid changes of society. The pervasiveness of nostalgia, whether in genre paintings of blacksmiths, still-life images

of old and worn things, or recollections of life on an earlier Mississippi, was a way of habituating men to the present, of retaining a sense of proportion and scale, of human stature, during a period when the individual's capacity to assimilate change was being pushed to the limit. The culture of consumption was making it possible for the American to jump several rungs in the social ladder in a single generation, in a process that would only accelerate into the twentieth century; but it was also generating a sense of the "real" self as a remnant one left behind, and that too would remain a consistent feature of American experience, a part of the national mythos, extending into the twentieth century.

That sense of movement forward against a current of nostalgia finds its classic expression twenty-five years after the generation of Fuller in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby personifies the immense longing that is a part of the dream and that finds its partial fulfillment (as with Dreiser's *Carrie*) in the showy appearance of things. As an epitome of the consumer culture, Fitzgerald offers us the scene with Nick and Daisy, on a tour of Gatsby's mansion, when the self-made man stops to show them his shirts. One by one he throws them onto the table, "shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray." Of course we sense the incongruity between thing and feeling in these shirts: they are symbols of achievement, sacred objects removed from an ark, and they make evident the sublimity of Gatsby's power of self-elevation (he had started with only his rules of self-discipline) and the pathos of his need to manifest that power.

Yet Gatsby surprises us by his indifference to the actual things themselves. His real desire is to recapture a dream of desire that is based on repossession of Daisy. His longing is nostalgic, seeking to regain the distance that is the premise of the romantic glow. Again, *Carrie* comes to mind, with her rocking daydreams; but *Carrie*, though an earlier creation, is in some ways a figure more contemporaneous with our own time; her desires are vaguer and less satiable than Gatsby's; she is a precursor of a rootless, pathological mass consumption society.⁸⁷ Gatsby, the grander, more romantic figure, is connected by Fitzgerald to the aboriginal American urge to settle the wilderness of a new continent: moving forward, he is simultaneously "borne back ceaselessly into the past."

When Gatsby's father comes for his son's funeral, he brings with

him, in addition to a childhood copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, a photograph Gatsby had sent him of his mansion on West Egg, which he shows admiringly to Nick. "He had shown it so often that I think it was more real to him now than the house itself."⁸⁸ Fitzgerald's sentence reverberates. The house is, of course, an apt symbol of Gatsby's dream; and so is the photograph itself, for it represents a moment fixed in time past and lifted into the realm of permanence. That it might seem "more real" to the father than the house itself seems also uncannily right, and captures the son's similar sense of a more intense reality attending an object seen at a distance.

What has made *The Great Gatsby* so central a text for American culture is its powerful and tragic embodiment of the dilemma at the core of the hieroglyphic world: to possess one's fortune in a society in love with representations may be, in the end, to possess merely the signs and images of aspiration. To furnish one's identity in such a world may be, at last, to furnish pictures for an album of photographs.

T H R E E

Photography and the Artifice of Realism

While the typical middle-class home in the late nineteenth century was becoming the center of material consumption, furnished with outward displays of the soul's spiritual and commercial status, it was also becoming the center of another, related form of consumption: what could not be owned outright, given limitations of space, time, and money, could be encompassed by a surrogate ownership in which photographic images brought a vast cyclopedia of world culture and symbols into the eye of the parlor, making the American a connoisseur of replicated experience.¹ The camera was arguably influencing the character of American culture as much as any other single technology, and thus the way photography was practiced and the way people thought about the medium are necessarily significant aspects of the whole culture. The photograph took many forms in the home, from the stereograph card, which had established itself in America as a popular entertainment by 1860, to the print hung on the wall as decoration, and, in the last decade of the century, the printed portfolio album. Into the parlor thus came an extraordinary gallery of sights: the great art works from European museums and the homespun sculptures of the Rogers groups; architectural views of the city, industrial scenes, railroad trains, and bridges, along with the old mill stream and other rural vistas; there were mountains and deserts, pyramids and local court houses, miniatures and staged tableaux.

By 1900 vicarious experience had become a major commodity in the American marketplace and the habit of surrogates had grown strong and indelible in American life, preparing the ground for the mass market visual narratives that were to come in the twentieth century in the form of movies and television. Within twenty years of the invention of photography in 1839 it became a commonplace to



Residence of Thomas Donaldson, Philadelphia, late 19th century
(Courtesy of Library Company of Philadelphia)

speak of the practical advantages and pleasures of “touring” without having to leave home: “With a pile of pictures by their side, which cost almost nothing,” even the humblest Americans “can make the European tour of celebrated places, and not leave the warm precincts of their own firesides,” *Scientific American* wrote on June 2, 1860. In the next decade, photographs of scenery and archeological remains, especially, were being promoted as worthy household decoration, and the delights of vicarious experience were frankly acknowledged. (“It is pleasant to lean back in one’s chair and be transported to distant countries at a glance.”)² And with the advancement of printing technology later in the century, a “portfolio of national photography,” *Camera Mosaics*, could be introduced to the reader as an “extension of picture galleries” surpassing “all the treasures of art in Rome and Florence and Paris and Dresden, and the feast is spread by the sitting-room window or under the fireside lamp.”³

But few claims for the mimetic capacity of photography could surpass the one made in 1894 by James William Buel, in advertising his record of the Chicago Exposition. When Buel announced his plan to publish *The Magic City: Portfolio of the Chicago World’s Fair*, a series of consecutive weekly numbers consisting of sixteen to twenty photographs, he billed it as a “permanent re-opening of the Grand Columbian Exposition.” “In some respects,” he claimed, “this splendid portfolio is better and more to be desired than an actual visit to the Exposition, for through the magic agency of photography the scenes are transferred in marvelous beauty and permanent form to the printed pages, while the accompanying historical descriptions make plain and clear myriads of intricate and wonderful things, many of which were not comprehended by those who saw them.”⁴ Putting aside the slight exaggeration typical of such notices, there is still something daring and prophetic in Buel’s pitch, almost a metaphysical challenge to our common sense: the photograph is “better” than the real thing.

The photograph was part and parcel of a middle-class culture that accepted replications of every sort—from furnishings and architecture to fine art prints—as the natural advantage of living in an advanced, technological world. In reducing the world to proportions that could be taken in at a glance, in holding it still long enough to let us look closely, photography opened up a whole new world to consciousness. This new imagination is most evident in the writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who himself had a strong influence on the reception of the camera, not only through his published essays in *The Atlantic* during the 1860s but through his design for a cheaply produced stereoscope, the rights to which he gave away freely so as to encourage the popular enjoyment of photography. In Holmes—the Boston Brahmin who was both physician and novelist—we see the literary and scientific intelligence of the Victorian era at full play with photography, fascinated by both the optical and the aesthetic possibilities of image-making. He inspects the self-portraits of friends and correspondents, entranced by the revelations of character to be read in the furnishings of their homes; he revels in the scientific uses to which the stopped motion of the image lends itself—a new way to understand walking, for example; he holds up, to the view of one eye, one half a stereo card, while with the other eye he looks at the scene originally stereographed, and discovers a perfect match between re-

ality and image; he takes his readers on a tour of American and European scenes (beginning of course with Niagara Falls); he notes the accidents recorded by the image, the traces of authenticity—clotheslines, marks on a drumhead, fragments of London street signs—that will sensitize generations of artists to the power of the detail in literary and visual description.

Yet while one side of Holmes's mind is thus entranced by the literal, descriptive power of the camera, its ability to make us appreciate the concrete thingness of reality, to "duplicate" the world before us, another side of his imagination responds to a rather different quality of the stereograph, its capacity to transport us, away from the literal, into a kind of "dream-like exaltation of the faculties," one that leaves the body behind.⁵ And it is not only the viewer who is thus disembodied, it is the image itself, which is separated, in the stereographic process, from its concrete, original substance. In a famous passage in "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph" Holmes writes with speculative abandon on the possible future of photography: "*Form is henceforth divorced from matter.* In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please. We must, perhaps, sacrifice some luxury in the loss of color; but form and light and shade are the great things, and even color can be added, and perhaps by and by may be got direct from Nature."⁶ The passage has at times been taken more seriously than it was intended—Holmes's wit is often on the edge of whimsy—yet it does sound a prophetic note. For in speaking thus of photography as "this greatest of human triumphs over earthly conditions, the divorce of form and substance,"⁷ Holmes is not only (as has been noted) assimilating photography to the nineteenth century's characteristic view of technology as an aggressive conquest of natural constraints, a triumph of man's will over earth's resistance; he is also talking about technology as a process whereby what is produced and sold is, increasingly, an image, an appearance, a look, a constellation of imagined attributes, rather than the strictly utilitarian object. Holmes's whimsical look forward to a Borgesian "enormous collection of forms" such that "they will have to be classified and arranged in vast libraries, as books are now" has of course materialized, along with our contemporary truism that, as William Ivins put it in concluding his

Prints and Visual Communication, "at any given moment the accepted report of an event is of greater importance than the event, for what we think about and act upon is the symbolic report and not the concrete event itself."⁸

Holmes thus offers a first paradoxical experience of the camera: an appreciation of its ability to direct our close attention to "the real thing" and of its simultaneous capacity to estrange us from ourselves and from reality, to compel our entrance into the aesthetic world of the image. Our contemporary conception of photography is in many ways narrower than Holmes's, shaped as it has been by our predilection for "straight photography," which we think of as an "honest" use of the medium. Thus, looking at the nineteenth century, we have tended to find antecedents and exemplars for our own time—the great descriptive photographers of the Western landscape and of the geological expeditions, the documentary photographers of the city, the makers of unvarnished portraits, the journalistic artists of the Civil War, the scientific students of motion.⁹ Our conservative taste can hardly prepare us for the discovery that the Victorians, in their own fascination with the new medium, luxuriated in the many diverse forms it might take, one moment celebrating its capacity for a seemingly literal imitation of reality and the next its use as a vehicle for fantasy and illusion. An early work on the stereoscope, for example, affirms that through the camera "truth itself will be embalmed and history cease to be fabulous"; yet a later chapter, on photographic amusements, speaks without any sense of contradiction of creating "spirit" photographs and of recreating historical scenes in costume. And these conjunctions remain in the literature of the period.¹⁰ We have put off to one side the practitioners of illusion, of staged tableaux, of table-top photography, relegating them to a minor facet of the popular interest in photography, peripheral to the medium's destiny as a realistic form, a medium of truth and revelation.

Yet the nineteenth century's practice of photography was founded on an understanding of the medium as an illusion, and the realism of Victorian photography is properly understood as an "artificial realism," in which the image offers the viewer a representation of reality, a typification, a conscious simulacrum—though a simulacrum that elicited a willing suspension of disbelief. The view of nineteenth-century photography that I am presenting here builds on A. D. Coleman's formulation of the "directorial mode" to describe works in

which the photographer manipulates the subject in front of the camera, as opposed to works of straight photography, in which the implicit claim is that the image is a record of untouched reality.¹¹ Coleman posits as well an intermediate category, wherein the photographer stands ready to seize a moment from the flux of time, thus blending his subjective sensibility with the "facts" of nature, but this mode depends on a technology of instant photography that was largely beyond the nineteenth-century photographer. All three strategies do overlap, as Coleman explains, but where his concern is with tracing the distinctions among the practices, as background to an understanding of the self-conscious directorial mode of the twentieth century, my own effort is to stress the core assumptions *shared* by virtually all practitioners of late nineteenth-century genres, whether artistic, documentary, or portrait.

The history of photography, it might be said, is the history of the countless efforts to overcome the *limitations* of the medium, to expand upon what a representation of reality might be. And to examine the nature of photography during this period is, in large measure, to expose the varieties of artifice designed to enhance the power of the representation. The photographic print is by nature inherently limited as a representation of reality by virtue of its reduced size, its flatness, and its limited angle of vision—the window the lens affords on the world. In fact, there were efforts to overcome each of these limitations. I have already mentioned the stereograph, with its fraternally twinned images that could immerse the viewer in the full three-dimensional depth of the scene, eliminating the flatness of two-dimensional representation; stereographs also enlarged the field of vision so that, as Holmes observed, the object appeared not as a miniature, but as life-size. But the stereograph of course required a special viewing mechanism; for the more traditional flat picture format, viewed with the unaided eye, other means were employed to overcome the reduction of image size. Thus the commercial galleries commonly featured life-size enlargements of portraits, which might be hand colored to enhance the illusion of the image, and could thereby compete with the painted portrait. With the painted landscape the photographer was less able to compete; at great pains, mammoth plates—some over 17" by 20"—were carried into mountainous landscapes in order to render a sharper, more detailed image

than was possible with an enlargement of an ordinary negative plate. But the results, while impressive, could not compare with the more dramatic effects and much grander sizes of the landscape painter.

Meanwhile, the limitation of viewing angle was overcome through the development of panoramic photography. The technique here was to combine several plates into a single larger whole to produce a sweeping vista—of city or wilderness—that was supposed to evoke the experience of actually being in a landscape; one of the most ambitious of such hybrids of realism and artifice was an 1888 publication called *Panorama of the Hudson, Showing Both Sides of the River from New York to Albany*, "the first photo-panorama of any river ever published . . . one hundred and fifty miles of continuous scenery accurately represented from eight hundred consecutive photographs." Though the river width varies from a half mile to four miles, the pictured river remains uniform. With each photo showing both sides (printed so as to blend in the water), the reader is required repeatedly to turn the book upside down to get the opposing bank right side up; the technique produces some awkward perspectives when bridges must be photographed, but there is no problem showing boats—they have been drawn in—and virtually every page shows at least one such vessel floating on the water.¹² Such panoramas obviously required a considerable suspension of disbelief: the viewer accepted the book-apparatus as a kind of model, an artificial construction made out of "real" pictures.¹³

But the problem with all such efforts to stretch the physical limitations of the two-dimensional photographic print was that they inevitably intruded upon the viewer's ability to become immersed in the world of the image. The form overwhelmed the content, calling attention to the very artificiality of the medium that the format was designed to overcome. More successful in creating the illusion of reality were photographs that accepted the framed window and focused instead on the dramatization of the image within the frame. The photograph here allied itself with a theatrical event, or with pictorial representation, as if the photographic rectangle were a proscenium arch or a framed canvas. An extreme example of such work is that of the popular theatrical photographer Napoleon Sarony, whose reputation was based on his representations of actors and actresses in their most famous roles, complete with props. In a photograph that makes the pictorial analogy explicit, Sarony recreated the popular painting by



William Notman, "Exhausted," from Cariboo Hunting Series, ca. 1866
 (Courtesy of Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum,
 McGill University, Montreal)

Adolph William Bouguereau, *The Captive* (1891), which was itself, as Ben L. Bassham points out, based on a model of photographic realism.¹⁴ In Sarony's look-alike photograph, *The Butterfly*, a young girl with angel's wings sits naked on a stone balcony, holding a butterfly aloft in one hand. Sarony's literal representation of an imaginary conception is clearly intended as a tour de force, but what detracts from the illusion is the palpably artificial look of the "stone" balcony—an obvious studio prop.

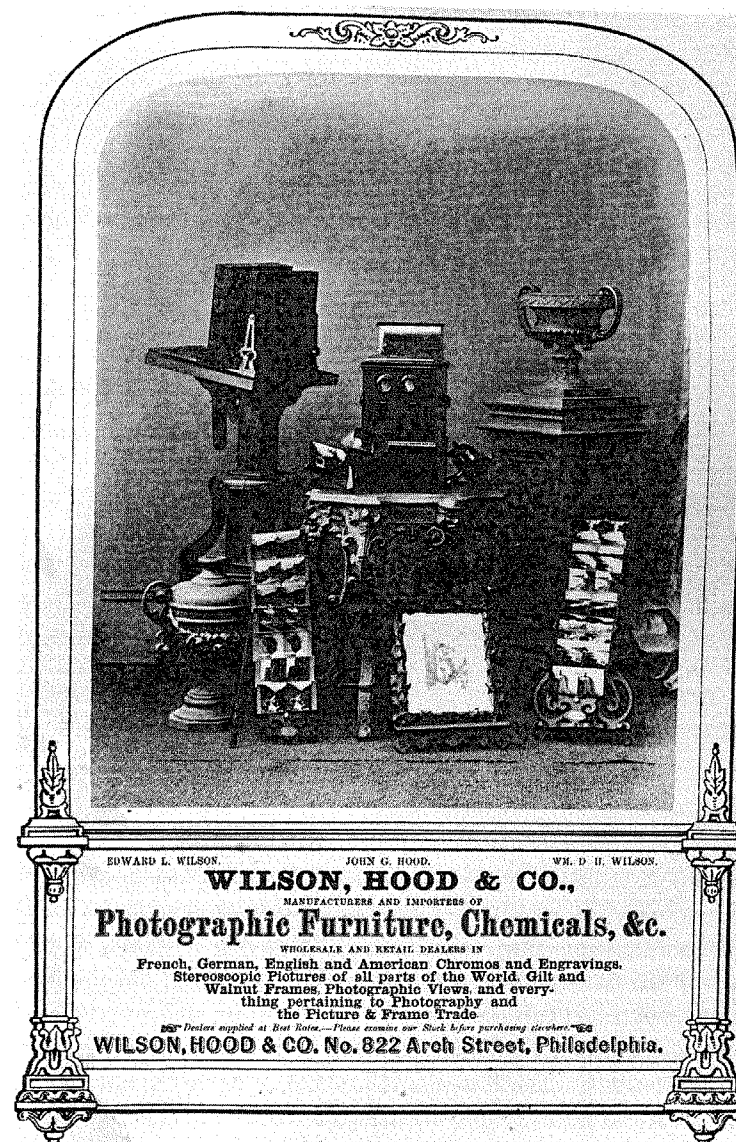
Still, Sarony's extreme example points to a major tendency within Victorian art photography: the synthesis of the extremes of artifice and mimesis, a synthesis based on a typological realism in which the approximation of the image to reality was viewed as a triumph of technology and art over the inherent limitations of the medium. In the 1860s, for example, the famous Montreal photographer, William Notman, published a series of photographs depicting a caribou hunt, including shots taken in a snowy, nighttime landscape. These were technically "impossible" outdoor shots, each separate scene depicting a distinct phase of the hunt—going out in the snow, becoming exhausted in a snow storm, arriving at camp, shooting the animals, sitting around the campfire, among others. Notman's caribou sequence was enthusiastically reviewed by the *Philadelphia Photographer* in May of 1866, and the terms of the discussion move us closer to an understanding of how the photographic community conceived of the relationship between camera image and reality. The writer—probably the editor, Edward Wilson—was ecstatic about the effects achieved, admitting, for example, that he could only guess how the storm was created, "but that the artist has given us a remarkable photograph of a snowstorm without snow, we cannot deny." And he concludes his detailed discussion, "No pains or expense have been spared to secure these results, and we have never seen anything more successful and true to nature, without being wholly nature itself. Oh! what a future is there for photography!"¹⁵ "True to nature, without being wholly nature itself." Here we are near the heart of the Victorian photographic aesthetic; by examining the theory and practice of the Englishman Henry Peach Robinson, we can come yet closer to an understanding of the nature of photographic representation during this period.

Robinson is now known primarily for a few combination prints that appear regularly in standard histories of photography, where he is

treated typically as an important though aberrant figure who proselytized on behalf of the sensational (in its day) but now vaguely disreputable aesthetic of pictorial photography. Yet Robinson is, I would argue, not peripheral to an understanding of nineteenth-century photography, but quite central to it. With the publication of his textbook *Pictorial Effect in Photography* (1869), which went through four editions in America by 1897, Robinson became among the most influential of writers on photography in the latter part of the century.¹⁶

Robinson generally treats photographic compositional principles as similar to those in painting, but with certain differences to be observed—a respect for probability, for example—because photography is a more literal medium. Yet what is most interesting about his principles is how he draws the line between a merely “factual” representation and a more “artistic” one. On the one hand, Robinson advises against the purely fantastic—cherubs or mermaids—claiming that “photographs of what it is evident to our senses cannot visibly exist should never be attempted.” Yet, on the other hand, the bare presentation of facts alone constitutes an excess of literalism, a “tyranny of the lens.”¹⁷ The photographer should be free to construct an image using studio accessories such as artificial logs covered with ivy, tufts of grass, painted backdrops, etc.; he might also pose his models to represent some particular dramatic moment, and he might add together different elements from two or more negatives to create what was called a combination print.¹⁸

Thus at the core of Robinson’s practice was the careful balancing of mimesis and artifice to achieve a kind of general truth that evoked an aesthetic frisson as the observer caught on to the process. The peculiar refinement of Robinson’s aesthetic has not been observed sufficiently; yet it is consistent from the early *Pictorial Effect* to the later *Elements of a Pictorial Photograph*. As he says in the earlier book, “A great deal can be done and beautiful pictures made, by the mixture of the real and artificial in a picture. It is not the fact of reality that is required, but the truth of imitation that constitutes a veracious picture. Cultivated minds do not require to believe that they are deceived, and that they look on actual nature, when they behold a pictorial representation of it.”¹⁹ And Robinson reminds us, using Ruskinian principles, that we prefer a marble figure to a waxwork: the former does not try to look like what it is not. Similarly, Robinson says in his later work, “We must know that it is a deception before we



*Photographic furniture, chemicals, etc., Wilson, Hood and Co.,
Philadelphia, trade advertisement
(Courtesy of Library Company of Philadelphia)*



Henry Peach Robinson, study for a composition picture, 1860
(Courtesy of Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin)

can enjoy it; it must be a gentle surprise, and not a delusion.”²⁰ We have been condescending to pictorialist photography for so long that we have forgotten that sophisticated viewers, at least, were well aware of the staging and in fact savored precisely the ontological ambiguity of the resulting image.

Robinson may have pushed pictorial effect to the brink of aestheticism. As generally understood and practiced, however, Robinson’s notion of pictorial photography defines a kind of “artificial realism” that was shared by a wide variety of photographic strategists. The Philadelphian Marcus A. Root, for example, whose book, *The Camera and the Pencil* (1864), preceded Robinson’s volume by several years, had earlier enunciated principles that would anticipate Robinson’s balancing of mimesis and artifice: “Although strictly obliged to imitate reality, the photographer may, nevertheless, sometimes unite the ele-

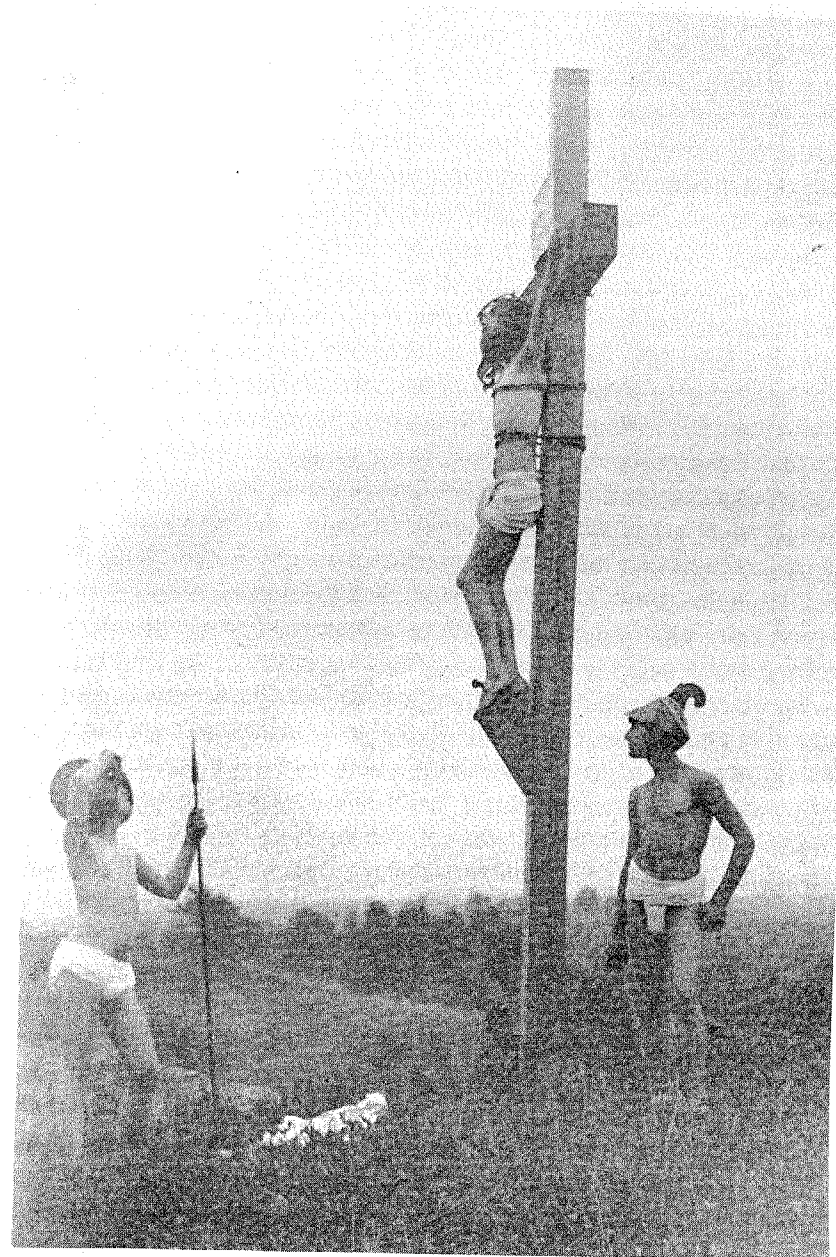
ments of the scene he would represent. He may, in fact, *compose* the scene he wishes to reproduce, by choosing the personages; giving them costumes, . . .”²¹ (Root would give temporal license to the photographer as well, calling for the reproduction of the pageant of history “with the vividness of living reality.”)²² Even the great daguerreotypist Albert Southworth (who is regarded as a master of literalism) stated while in a retrospective mood, “the artist, even in photography, must go beyond discovery and the knowledge of facts; he must create and invent truths and produce new developments of facts. . . . Nature is not all to be represented as it is, but as it ought to be, and possibly have been.”²³ And we find this flexibility again at the end of the century in articles appearing in the principal American photography journals. John Bartlett, for example, writing in the *American Journal of Photography*, argues that the photograph must be intensely realistic; yet despite this seeming expansion of the pictorialist sphere to encompass a grittier realism, Bartlett’s own strategy remains embedded in a studio vocabulary and an avoidance of the “commonplace” (that is, literal record): his subjects are carefully positioned amidst artificial backgrounds in a manner recalling Robinson.²⁴

The practice of photography during the late nineteenth century was raising questions about the nature of truth that would only gradually become fully articulated. If, at the center of the problem was the degree to which the camera—a mechanical instrument—could deliver a picture of reality that was truthful, the real issue was of course buried in the question itself: what was a “truthful” picture of reality? Was truth to be found in literal exactitude or in artistic generalization? The pictorialist compromise was to place the answer somewhere in between the extremes, and to develop a practice that understood the photographic representation to be a *type* of reality. The practice of using human models, for instance, itself transformed the question of what was “truthful” to the question of what was “convincing.” The photograph based on a model is not a proposition in the form “This is an X”; rather it becomes a statement in the form, “This is a *representation* of an X.” And once an image is accepted as a representation, then the question is no longer, “Is the representation more or less truthful?”, but rather, “Is the representation more or less convincing?”

The strongest argument that it was the effectiveness of the picture that mattered—the degree to which it was *convincing* rather than *true*—was made by Robinson at the end of *The Elements of a Pictorial Photograph*. There he challenged his reader to examine seven of his rural genre photographs, and to guess in each case whether he had used a model or a “real” person as the subject. In fact, it is difficult to tell; but more important is the implication in Robinson’s challenge—namely, the assumption that verisimilitude is as good as verity. The *effect* is all, the *means* nothing, Robinson claims: “The poet says, in default of the real thing, ‘Tis from a hand maid we must paint our Helen.’” Of course Robinson is careful to warn his reader against dressing up just anyone; if he wanted a peasant represented, for example, he would be careful to use old clothes on an intelligent, malleable model. Aesthetic considerations are at issue, not questions of verifiability. Moreover, he scorns the detective camera’s candid snapshots as producing unsatisfactory groupings.²⁵ Robinson is working within the genre of “art” photographs, and that, of course, is the key point: for the kind of “truth” that is relevant to art, in Robinson’s understanding, is a general truth, through which, in effect, the literal capacities of the camera are subverted.

The pictorial aesthetic that Robinson represented offered a good deal of freedom, but it was nevertheless circumscribed by codes of probability and convention that would become apparent only when they were transgressed. And the transgressions served to define more clearly the core of the aesthetic, as in the case, later in the century, of E Holland Day. Day was a master craftsman, a superb printer, a medievalist, and an aesthete, on familiar terms with the literary and art circles of his day; but he was also clearly an elitist, who, as Estelle Jussim puts it, “objected to the very accuracy of photography as catering to the demands of the masses for representationalism.”²⁶ Day’s studies of young women and men feature exotic costuming, sensitive posing, and dramatic lighting; they are representations of imagined inward states, often using a vocabulary drawn from mythology and religion.

Perhaps the culminating effort in this line was the *Crucifix* series he undertook in 1898; after starving himself satisfactorily and growing a beard, Day featured himself in an elaborate, pre-Hollywood version of the Crucifixion, complete with imported cloth and cross from Syria. Though Day was not without his defenders (notably the



E Holland Day, Crucifix with Roman Soldiers, 1898
(Courtesy of Library of Congress)

English photographer Frederick Evans), by and large people were outraged. At issue was not simply the blasphemous nature of the project (his critics thought it might have been better had he cast someone other than himself in the leading role), but what was seen as the failure of Day's art. Instead of transporting us to an aesthetically intact, dramatized Crucifixion, we are made aware, through the clarity of Day's lens and the fully revealing distance from the figures, of the tricks and artifice. As a critic of the day wrote, "we are looking at the image of a man made up to be photographed as the Christian Redeemer, and not at an artist's reverent and mental conception of a suffering Christ."²⁷ Just before the *Crucifix*, Day had made a series, *The Seven Last Words of Christ* (1898), which depicted the agony of Jesus (again F. Holland Day), exclusively in close-ups of the face, at dramatic angles, using soft focus. These images were felt to be more "convincing" than the *Crucifix*, chiefly because we are not aware of the physical actuality of the model. In short, the response to Day's work suggests that the issue in question was how convincing a representation the photograph provided, not the initial premise, which viewed the photographic subject as a general representation of reality, *a type*.

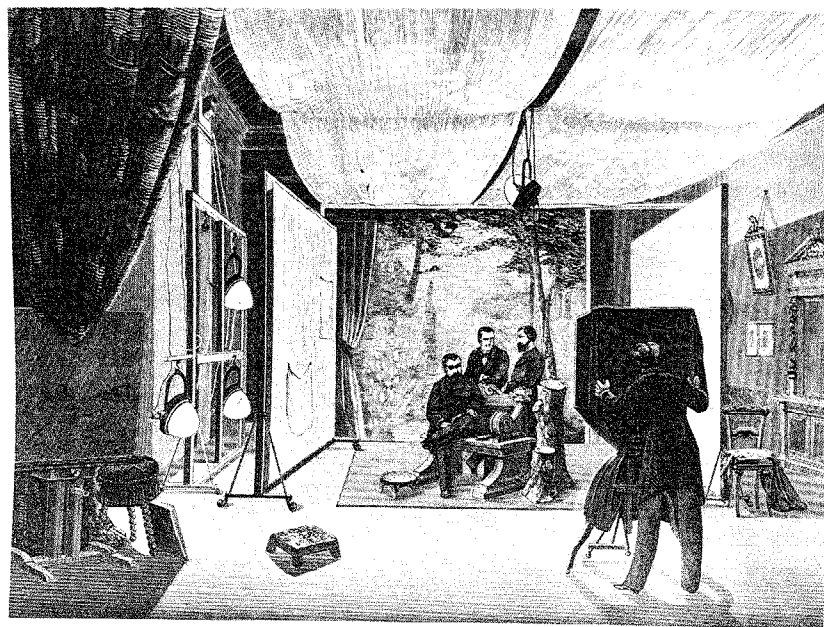
By type, however, we must understand not the scientist's general summation of a class; rather, the typology of nineteenth-century photography is—to borrow a word from poetic terminology—metonymic, whereby the pictured subject, with all its concrete particularity, *stands for* a more general class of like subjects. The individuality of the subject is thus presented on its own terms while it simultaneously serves the larger purpose of representing a general category.²⁸ Understanding the typological synthesis of specific thing and general meaning allows us to comprehend what may otherwise appear to be, as a recent study has it, "the bewildering notion that the camera somehow extracts what amounts to a Platonic ideal form behind the shifting variability of Nature."²⁹ But that is precisely the point: with varying degrees of sophistication, the photographic community did accept a typological concept of the photo-representation, whereby the image was viewed as both a mimetic and an artificial construction, both specific and general.

By far the greatest number of photographs taken during the nineteenth century were portraits of individuals, and we must test this

notion of the typological representation by examining the center of popular practice—the commercial portrait. At first glance the portrait would appear to be an exception to the rule I have been proposing. The goal of the photographer—if he prided himself on the "artistic" quality of his work—was to capture the living quality of his subject, "the *soul* of the original,—that *individuality* or *self-hood*, which differentiates *him* from all beings, past, present, or future," as put by Marcus Root.³⁰ The concept of truth expressed here thus seems quite different from the general truth of pictorial photography; rather it appears to be a truth that resides in the particular subject, and the effort of the photographer is to find that truth and reveal it. The greatest portrait photographers—Southworth and Hawes, Brady, Gardner—were thought to do just that, and the photographic journals were filled with practical advice on how to capture the sitter's unique personality—despite the encumbrances necessitated by a long exposure time.³¹

Yet in the process of discovering the sitter's "individuality," a kind of generalization was nevertheless aimed at. The advent of instantaneous photography in the 1870s and 1880s would eliminate the need for stiffly held poses.³² But commercial studios were slow to adopt the new technology, and for reasons that go to the heart of how the portrait was conceptualized: for if the portrait was to capture the unique truth of the sitter, it was to capture it in the manner of a painting, to find the pose that might sum up—in effect, generalize—the sitter's personality, a posture of dignity and repose; the instantaneous moment was more likely to result in a distorted expression, rather than the more *typical* truth of individuality aimed at.

In fact, the portrait became even more of a generalized statement in the years following the Civil War, as the sharp-focused eccentric individuality of the early daguerreotype style gave way to a softer, more artificial ideal of self-representation. The whole practice of retouching a negative was of course one very widespread method of normalizing a particular sitter by, one might say, removing the rough edges; if there were defects of complexion or other oddities that could be removed, it was the common practice of studio photographers, beginning around 1868, to remove them, with the added fashion of a slightly diffuse effect (replacing the previously universal ideal of the sharp focus) coming in around 1870. The great German photographer Hermann Vogel (with whom Stieglitz later studied) was one in-



Late Victorian photographic portrait studio, engraving

fluent advocate of retouching, arguing that while photographs will furnish representations “more correct than any other art,” they may not be absolutely correct; corrections of lens distortion and of other defects by retouching were necessary because “it constitutes the art of photography to present the reality true and beautiful.”³³

Although some protested the loss of “personal identity” in the newer styles, the age demanded an image of its own grace. Along with the Victorian hall-stand—which allowed everyone coming in or leaving the house to check his appearance—the studio portrait afforded an occasion for defining the self in conformity with prevailing norms of appearance and taste.³⁴ Where the first daguerreotype portraits, like earlier painted portraits, had often featured some visible sign of the sitter’s character or achievement (tools of the trade, etc.), the studios supplied a readymade background and social status for the patron in search of an image: the nearly universal accoutrements for the American portrait studio were the balustrade, column, and curtain in the 1860s, followed later by more bucolic and exotic set-

tings—rustic bridges, hammocks and swings, palm trees and parrots—for an increasingly urban audience.³⁵

The representation—or sometimes misrepresentation—of self and class that might result was not without its critics: one observed in the *Philadelphia Photographer* (1871) that a typical studio photographer entertains all social classes, “the aristocratic and educated” as well as the “uncouth and unlettered.” And while the former might look at home amidst the marble hall background, with columns and pretty furniture (the writer is evidently not troubled by the contrivance of the setting), the lower-class customer is clearly out of place: “If you desire to place him in a position suitable to his style and condition in life, you had better fill up and make surroundings of rudeness, and a pig, horse, and bullock.” He recommends finally a “plain, spotless, even background” as suitable for all social classes.³⁶ A few years later, another writer argued less invidiously that the aristocratic pretensions of the photo-backgrounds were simply inappropriate for a country claiming to be a democracy: “Old style backgrounds, painted sharply and representing palaces and marble columns, etc., are inadmissible, and absurd to use in America, where such things do not exist, and doubt if they would appear in good taste in any place except with royalty for the subjects.”³⁷ But these arguments for restraint and an appropriately egalitarian background in portrait photography were clearly running against the current.

Regardless of the background used, any studio portrait was singular and could represent only so much of the complex human personality. As Oliver Wendell Holmes had written, different portraits of our friends will show us wholly different sides of their characters, for our friend is “not one, but many, in outward appearance, as in the mental and emotional shapes by which his inner nature made itself known to us.”³⁸ Holmes’s own imagination here interestingly marks the limit of nineteenth-century photographic practice; for the photographer did not, at this time, have the theoretical capacity to incorporate different views of human personality within the same photographic construct. The closest we come is the occasional instance in the nineteenth century of the multiple portrait, as practiced, for example, by the Boston firm of Southworth and Hawes, who constructed a circle of poses looking like a lunar cycle of faces.³⁹ With the subject’s head turned at different angles and arranged symmetrically around a single large image at the center, it is the mounting as a whole that is so

striking. But the Southworth and Hawes example makes little attempt to bring out *different* sides of the subject's personality, showing us instead merely different sides of the face; it is an aesthetic study of variations on a single theme, not unlike the different poses assumed by a subject during a given sitting. Holmes's sense of the multiplicity of the human personality would await the twentieth century for true photographic expression, as, for example, in Alfred Stieglitz's extensive series on Georgia O'Keeffe.

The characteristic nineteenth-century interest in the *typical*, and the photographer's pursuit of the general truth of portraiture finds its most extreme expression in the theory of the composite portrait developed by the English scientist Francis Galton, who had a considerable following in America. Galton's composites are made by combining individual portraits into a single homogenized facial image and are thus not to be confused with the composites of the artistic pictorial photographers, who made combination prints using individualized images to compose a synthetic whole containing all of its parts. By photographing an individual as many as twenty times and printing a single composite print at the end, Galton argued that he would avoid the hazard of the single image and would arrive at an averaged expression that was the sitter's true self. "A composite portrait represents the picture that would rise before the mind's eye of a man who had the gift of pictorial imagination in an exalted degree," Galton wrote.⁴⁰ (Note Galton's association of his method with the artistic temperament.) Put together twenty different photographs of twenty different individuals, Galton believed, and it was possible to reveal the purity of type: Italian, Pole, Jew.

The composite may be based on the credible scientific notion that a comparison of items within a given class should yield knowledge of their shared, general characteristics. And it may also remind us, plausibly, of Charles Sanders Peirce's more or less contemporary notion of "the real" as a kind of infinite consensus—what is "ultimately agreed by all who investigate," independent of "what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it."⁴¹ But the photographic composite, in Galton's hands, became a tool for devising stereotypes in the interest of defining racial lines.

Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin and the founder of eugenics, had begun his composites at a time when immigrants were viewed by many in England and America with grave suspicion as a threat to the



Twelve Boston physicians and their composite portrait, ca. 1894,
from McClure's Magazine, September 1894

established social order. Knowing what they looked like (for it was assumed that all members of a given ethnic group looked alike) would help society defend itself against their potential criminality and radicalism. A camera enthusiast, George Iles, wrote, "Just as truth has been substituted for tradition in the case of animal movement, so we shall here replace vague impressions of foreigners and of special classes at home by exact and easily compared pictures."⁴² Yet Galton's approach was really diametrically opposed to the studies of animal movement by Eadweard Muybridge to which Iles refers. Where Muybridge separated what was perceived as continuous movement into its constituent parts, Galton corralled individuals into a forced whole.

Nevertheless, Galton's notion of an ideal composite, anticipating the logic of racial purity of the twentieth century, had its vogue in the late nineteenth century. For example, in the Anthropological Building of the World's Columbian Exposition there stood the twin statues of the ideal American male and the ideal American female.⁴³ Whitman had sung longingly of his own "divine Average," his ideal mothers and robust men, but his vision had been at bottom an inclusive one, a vision of plurality, not of the monolithic purification of gender. In the name of science, Galton had carried photography far from its typological character, creating in his composites parodies of the concept of the type: not the individual raised to the power of the general, but the individual blurred and blended into a social identity that imprisoned him or her.⁴⁴

Given its various efforts to overcome the limitations of the medium, photography in the nineteenth century could not be said to operate within what one might call a purely photographic aesthetic. (That would await the twentieth century.) Instead, the medium borrowed from existing approaches in other forms and genres: from the tourist sketch, the painted portrait, the staged tableau, even—as in the composite—from the scientific illustration. But what about the use of photography as a *historical record*? Was not the inherent literalism of the medium the great strength of the camera when used as a recording device, and was not that literalism at odds with the typological representation outlined above? One would think so; and certainly in the early years of the medium, as we have seen, a belief in the truth of the image was widespread. Because the photograph was made by sun-

beams, it was understood, as Joel Snyder has put it, "to provide information of an unbiased kind"; it assured "the audience of the absence of a 'narrator,' or of an agent who is directing the attention of the audience."⁴⁵ Yet, interestingly, as photography was gaining popularity through the stereograph market (from the 1850s to approximately 1910), some viewers apparently did need assurance from a credible source, serving indeed as a kind of surrogate narrator, that the image was "truthful," as in this inscription to be found on the back of some early stereograph cards: "I have looked these views carefully over and find them very correct. I was present when they were taken. The pictures and statuary are in their original places."⁴⁶ The views are "very correct"? Does the need for such a statement indicate that the photograph was believed implicitly, or that it was not?

The issue is a complicated one, for what one finds is that photographs presented as historical records—whether of events, landscapes, or people—were offered as literally true, but were in fact the product of an often doctored presentation. What one finds, in short, is that even while the image was presented as a "document," the photographer was constructing a *general* representation, a simulacrum of the real thing. Once again, verisimilitude was the goal, though verity was the claim.

What are we otherwise to make, for example, of Alexander Gardner's representations of the Civil War? Gardner presented his scenes of battlefields and encampments to the public in the *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (1866) by claiming their utter veracity: "Verbal representations of such places, or scenes, may or may not have the merit of accuracy; but photographic presentments of them will be accepted by posterity with an undoubting faith."⁴⁷ He was right, of course: posterity did accept the images with undoubting faith—until, that is, the meticulous studies of the photographs and the localities made by William Frassanito demonstrated that that faith had been misplaced. Thus, for example, Gardner had identified Union soldiers as, at times, Confederate soldiers; he had labeled one of his pictures "Field where General Reynolds Fell," even though the photographer had been nowhere near the field where Reynolds actually fell; he had dragged the same corpse from one location, where he had photographed it a first time, to another location (a sharpshooter's nest) for a second photograph and presented them both as records of different victims in different locales.⁴⁸ From a purely pragmatic point of view,

Gardner's reasons for misrepresenting his images are not difficult to construe: given constraints of time and events, he could expose only a limited number of negatives on the battlefield; but he had many more stories to tell, and so he paired a plausible image with a convincingly written narrative, and the viewer could never tell the difference. In Gardner's *Sketchbook* the narrative in fact dictates the viewer's reading of the image. And what this suggests most notably for our purposes is that Gardner was playing upon his audience's beliefs in the veracity of the medium while taking for himself a much more flexible view of photographic practice, whereby the manipulations of the photographer were permissible in the interest of achieving a rhetorically convincing effect.

The example of Jacob Riis similarly straddles the categories of fiction and documentary, artifice and mimesis. It is symptomatic of our confusion over late nineteenth-century photography that recent commentators cannot agree on a definition of Riis's virtues. While one critic might applaud his style for being appropriately crude, direct, and honest, another might laud it for being deceptively artful, shrewdly calculating.⁴⁹ And the nineteenth-century response reflected a similarly divided sense of what Riis was after: witness the reviews of *How the Other Half Lives*, which celebrated the volume for the "accuracy" of its scenic descriptions, and also for its fictive vigor—"enormously more interesting than any novel that ever was written or that ever will be."⁵⁰ These inconsistencies in the response to Riis point to a photographic practice that was acceptable in its own time but appears inconsistent to us now.

For Riis, the documentary mode was much less exacting in its purity than we would like to think; it allowed for a flexibility of practice in the streets (similar to Gardner's on the battlefield) that places it within the same broad field of pictorialist practice, with its franker manipulations of staged subjects. True, Riis did not employ models to pose as the urban underclass; he did not, at least, clothe his subjects, or drag them into a studio in order to better control the content of the image, as did Sigmund Krausz, for example, in his *Street Types of Chicago: Character Studies* (1891).⁵¹ Yet we miss something important if we fail to see the degree to which Riis manipulated his representation of poverty to reflect a preconceived image of the poor, turning his subjects into types before the eye of the camera.

This technique is most evident when Riis gains the cooperation of

his subjects to *play themselves* for the camera. Riis was fond of staging "candid" shots in which he would position various street boys in a corner staircase, or in the crevice of a building, or in some other typically "forgotten" place, and ask them to feign sleep (one can see the smiles playing on their lips). The vulnerability of childhood, coupled with the vulnerability of sleep, was a doubly pathetic combination. Other times we see children working in a sweatshop or saluting the flag in a classroom, their eyes sneaking a look at the camera they were presumably to "ignore." We do not know how often Riis paid his subjects, but he does tell us that he offered a tramp ten cents to sit for a picture, and that the tramp demanded a quarter if Riis wanted the pipe in his mouth as well. Riis paid for the pipe.⁵² And Riis reports that in several shots of a gang of youths, they enacted for his camera the mugging of a victim, and indeed they were excited at the prospect of photo-notoriety and themselves mugged for the camera's eye. Another gang insisted on bringing a sheep into the picture. These images are interesting just because they reveal so much about the interaction between photographer and subject, reveal what Riis could not have intended—the degree to which he was creating an artificial image of the urban poor. Or, to use the terms invoked earlier to frame this discussion, Riis gives us, with the often willing and knowing collaboration of his subjects, a metonymic typology of urban slums, representing for us "the poor," "the miserable," "the other half." He is after the general truth of a general category, and the finer truths of individuals necessarily escape him.

A similarly illustrative use of photographs is evident in the anthropological photography of the late nineteenth century, brought to a climax in Edward Curtis, whose sensibility was formed by nineteenth-century practices, though his work spans the years from the turn of the century to 1930, when the final volume of his monumental *The North American Indian* was published. Curtis aimed "to picture all features of the Indian life and environment" with a kind of objectivity that he is careful to state at the outset: "Being directly from Nature, the accompanying pictures show what actually exists or has recently existed (for many of the subjects have already passed forever), not what the artist in his studio may presume the Indian and his surroundings to be."⁵³ Yet as Christopher M. Lyman has shown, Curtis's representations were contrived in a variety of ways. They may not have been taken in a studio, but they otherwise reflect the



Jacob Riis, *Showing Their Trick, Hell's Kitchen Boys*, ca. 1889
(Courtesy of Jacob A. Riis Collection, Museum of the City of New York)

photographer's active mediation, his interposing of an idealized image of Indian life upon his subjects: by dressing them in the appropriate picturesque modes (supplying props—for example, headdresses—where necessary); by eliminating from their immediate surroundings artifacts that may have been adopted from white culture (for example, alarm clocks, brand names on canvas tenting); by changing day to night (in his darkroom) and adding other kinds of dramatic lighting in order to enhance the romantic aura of the Indian.⁵⁴

Likewise we have evidence now that even among expeditionary photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan, the camera was treated as an expressive, rather than as a strictly literal medium. This can be seen, for example, in O'Sullivan's practice of tilting the frame for emphasis and effect, or in his series of six photographs of the Green River in Colorado from the exact same vantage point at different times of the day.⁵⁵ (O'Sullivan's posing of human subjects in his pictures also seems to be expressive and not simply for purposes of measuring space.) And Martha Sandweiss has noted that William Henry Jackson on occasion would piece together separate negatives to compose an enhanced, more artistically attractive combination print of a given scene.⁵⁶ These practices point to a use of the medium that is consonant with the generally pictorialist sensibility of the nineteenth century I have been sketching. As such, they seem to qualify Rosalind Krauss's otherwise cogent argument that O'Sullivan and other landscape photographers were merely producing "views" (to use the nineteenth-century terminology) of singular sights that together compose a catalogue of information for some institutional sponsor, whether governmental survey, stereo company, or railway line. The expeditionary photographers may not have thought of themselves as artists, as Krauss argues, but even when seemingly most literal, the nineteenth-century professional was striving for a rhetorical effect.⁵⁷

The movement from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth saw a subtle but definite change in the way photography was viewed outside the circle of professionals: from a passive medium to an active medium. Though photography was from its beginnings a product of artistic manipulation and technological experimentation, it presented itself to the popular imagination as an art of the machine in which the passive character of the mechanical process was its dominant characteristic, as opposed, say, to the active

processes of the scientific imagination. Here, for example, is geologist Clarence King, who led Timothy O'Sullivan through the Southwest around 1870, and who offers a typical contrast between the passivity of the camera and the activity of the scientist as he recounts a pause in his own geological investigations: "I was delighted to ride thus alone, and expose myself, as one uncovers a sensitized photographic plate, to be influenced; for this is a respite from scientific work, when through months you hold yourself accountable for seeing everything, for analyzing, for instituting perpetual comparison, and as it were sharing in the administering of the physical world."⁵⁸ King's implied metaphor of the mind as passive camera plate turns up as well in a more sophisticated form at the end of the century in the analogy between the mind and the camera: "Has the Brain a Photographic Function?" asks the *American Journal of Photography* in 1897, suggesting that visual images are "impressed" upon the brain, and later reactivated, in the same manner as the photographic process.⁵⁹

But if there was any basis for thinking of photography as passive during the time when the camera was fixed on a tripod while the subject waited for the release of a shutter, that began to change with the development of new technologies of photography; and with these changes the whole set of assumptions held by photographers and—especially—viewers began to change.⁶⁰ With the faster shutter speed of the modern camera, the stream of time could be interrupted and motion could be broken down into its constituent parts; King's notion of photography as a passive recording of nature persists through the century, but during the last decade a new way of thinking about the camera begins to be formulated, one that in effect takes the terms King has opposed to photography—the probing, analyzing, and active observing of scientific work—and transfers them to photography itself. Eadweard Muybridge's studies in animal movement, which received wide publicity, were the significant catalyst.

Experimenting with the design and placement of his cameras, Muybridge succeeded in representing the stopped motion of, first horses, then virtually every kind of creature that could move across a field of vision. The arrangement of that motion against a grid background, with the individual frames themselves presented on the page in a grid-like structure, gave an aura of scientific discovery to the visible increments of movement, and had a startling effect upon peo-

ple's confidence in their unaided vision. No one had ever *seen* what Muybridge revealed; our notions had been approximate, and often incorrect; the artists had been wrong. (Though it is important to note that Muybridge himself did not recommend that the artist slavishly follow his stop-motion images, recognizing a difference between an artistic rendering and a literal recording.)⁶¹

A world of observation had opened up with high-speed sequential photography, and Stieglitz's aesthetic of instantaneous photography would flow from the same technical possibility, eventually making the contrived arrangements of the pictorialist photographer seem outmoded. Moreover, as the hand-held "detective" camera became popular among enthusiasts, what had been a passive historian, a witness to events after they had happened, became now an active intruder upon private and public life; legal minds worried about the loss of our right to privacy, while psychologists spoke of our need to incorporate our previously hidden selves into our concept of being.⁶²

The camera was becoming, at the turn of the century, the symbol of a kind of intrusive presence in society: a culture that had been fascinated with spectacles and replications of reality, and that had brought myriad photographic microcosms into the parlor, was itself becoming the spectacle. (Even Walt Whitman, after commencing his career with a deliberately photographic representation of self, would complain, late in life, "I've been photographed, photographed, and photographed, until the cameras themselves are tired of me.")⁶³ And the subject who had composed a self with the help of the knowing professional and in the safe confines of the photographic studio, was being turned out into the streets. With the camera becoming lighter and falling into the hands of the amateur, the metonymic typology of photography would yield to the autobiographical particularity of the family album; the pictorialist synthesis would gradually fall apart before the instantaneous aesthetic of Stieglitz, and the documentary photographer would have to defend his practice in a community of viewers less likely to believe what they saw. Yet the full absorption of these various changes in the technology and practice of photography lay ahead, in the twentieth century. To look back on the practice of photography in the late nineteenth century from our own perspective is to see a world of artificial realism in harmony with a culture of replications, where what was offered as almost nature was sufficient.

Along with photography, literature was a part of this culture of

replications, and the aesthetic of *types* was as characteristic of the conventional popular literary work as of the photographic work. Yet toward the end of the nineteenth century, in the movement of literary realism—as in the contemporaneous new movements in photography mentioned above—there occurred the momentous breakdown of the culture of replications, with its typological aesthetic. In the debates surrounding the advent of realism, with their self-conscious polemics and cultural battle cries, the problems of representation, and of fact and fiction, were argued keenly and with a full realization of the social and aesthetic ramifications of the issues. And, significantly, photography would itself play a key role in establishing a model for a kind of factuality and intensity in representation, and would serve as an important catalyst in the whole shift from a culture of replication to a culture of authenticity.

FOUR

The Romance of
the Real

The debate surrounding literary realism in the last decades of the century was simultaneously a debate about *what* the legitimate subject matter of fiction ought to be and about *how* to see and represent it. The word itself—realism—meant different things to different people, and was variously high or low, uplifting or vulgar, idealistic or literal, depending on who was speaking about what. The earlier realism—with which I will by and large not be concerned in this chapter—is in harmony with the culture of imitation that I have outlined in earlier chapters: one would find it regularly in such magazines as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's Monthly*, which would grace the parlor table, along with the photo album. It is a fiction of genteel heroes and heroines and recognizable local types, a fiction of uplifting sentiment in harmony with a Christian ethos, a fiction of small-scale subjects and interiors.¹ My focus here will be instead on the shift that occurs in the meaning and conception of “realism” late in the nineteenth century: from a realism that was in harmony with the culture of imitation and that reaches its complex and grand culmination in the illusionistic fiction of Henry James; to a realism that encompasses the new movements of “veritism” and “naturalism” and that takes its inspiration from the younger generation of writers who identified with the West and Middle West. Put more simply, it is a movement that attempts to bring literature and life closer together. In that newer realism one can see, in effect, the beginning of the breakdown of the culture of replication, a process that will result in the modernist art that develops more decisively after the turn of the century.

I will be dealing primarily with the period of the 1890s, for it is in that decade especially that the literature of local color, a staple of middle-class consumption along with sentimental romances and historical fiction, was giving way to a literature attempting to introduce