

# GEORGE PLATT LYNES

THE DARING EYE

Allen Ellenzweig

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ALLEN ELLENZWEIG

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*For James M. Peoples*

*In Memoriam*

*David B. Boyce*

*and*

*Rose Apatov Ellenzweig*

*my beloved mother*



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## Preface

I first became aware of George Platt Lynes in 1977 when the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in New York presented an enticing yet brief retrospective of his photographs. Although I do not remember the show in all its specifics, the male nudes, the portraits, and the mythological subjects struck me with full force. There was an element of frank homoeroticism in the nudes, obvious both because of the beauty of the youthful models and for the theatrical lighting in which they were presented. The dreamlike studio spaces, in which light came from everywhere and nowhere and companion shadows confounded the atmosphere in mystery, produced an almost hallucinatory effect. That a photographer working in the 1930s–1950s dared to present the male body in a manner so lavish and laudatory projected these images into the late 1970s, a decade after the Stonewall Rebellion, when the very terms of homosexuality, as an erotic and social force, were being reframed. Of Lynes's life, I knew nothing.

In the decade that followed, a series of large-format photography books published by Jack Woody's Twelvetreets Press reintroduced Lynes as a key practitioner of what A. D. Coleman has termed "the directorial mode," pictures imagined by the photographer into a narrative reality inside the artifice of the studio setting. Here were portraits of writers and artists, performers and socialites, as sharply psychological as they were dignified or glamorous, sometimes both. Here were fashion images of the great modeling beauties of the interwar years. Here were dazzling ballet stars of George Balanchine's early period in America in a simulacrum of classical dance, and here as well was male pulchritude on glorious yet often somber display. The Twelvetreets volumes gave us useful chronologies and excerpts from previously published contemporaneous texts that discussed the key Lynes genres; a picture of the man himself began to emerge even as his own pictures returned for public viewing.

The 1998 publication of *When We Were Three: The Travel Albums of George Platt Lynes, Monroe Wheeler, and Glenway Wescott, 1925–1935* significantly enlarged the picture of Lynes, a gay man who had lived for over a decade in a ménage-à-trois with his intimates, Monroe Wheeler, a deluxe illustrated book publisher and eventually director of exhibitions and publications at the Museum of Modern Art, and the highly regarded fiction writer and essayist Glenway Wescott, Wheeler's primary partner who was pushed sexually to the margins with the entrance into their fold of the younger George Platt Lynes. In this lavishly illustrated tour of their three peripatetic young lives, based in Paris and the

Côte d'Azur, Arena Editions gave us biographical essays by Anatole Pohorilenko, Wheeler's last lover and executor, and the art historian James Crump. At once, a transatlantic cosmopolitan world was revealed to contemporary queer aesthetes and aficionados, especially those within it who were old enough to have viewed Gertrude Stein's Lost Generation as a cultural touchstone. I count myself among that cohort. Although never a committed devotee of Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald, I discovered how Lynes and Company provided an alternative to the heterosexual mythos that had grown up around the literary Paris of the expatriate Americans.

For a long time, I resisted the siren call of *When We Were Three*. I was never a part of that cosmopolitan world; I had only aspired to it, traveling to Paris several times, living for a summer at an artist and writers foundation in the small town of Vence on the French Riviera, and in residence for a half year in the City of Light, for that brief spell pursuing the life of the expatriate freelance American writer with a special interest in photography. Years later, home in New York, and well after the publication of my 1992 historical study *The Homoerotic Photograph* in which Lynes's male nudes figured alongside those by nineteenth-century camera enthusiasts like the Prussian Wilhelm von Gloeden, I was encouraged to write a biography of George Platt Lynes, by then a figure more fearsome than attractive to me. He had grown up middle-class between New Jersey and the Berkshires and made himself an enticing cosmopolitan figure on both sides of the Atlantic. He had achieved enormous success and suffered a humbling downfall. His decline was as swift as his rise had been meteoric.

Fashion photography had been his earliest and most sustaining métier. Because of its demands and editorial constraints, it was the genre he least embraced. He was one of Condé Nast's picture makers, alongside such men as Cecil Beaton, Horst P. Horst, and John Rawlings. His images of chic models and socialites were regularly featured in *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Town and Country*. Previously, as a marginally well connected youth in Paris and then on the Riviera, he took amateur portraits of Gertrude Stein and Jean Cocteau, and soon after, as a budding professional, shot literary luminaires like André Gide and Colette. Eventually, his portfolio of famous faces from film, opera, literature, theater, and the fine arts encompassed a roster of transatlantic notables, everyone from Thomas Mann to Ingrid Bergman, Lotte Lehmann to Lotte Lenya, Arnold Schoenberg to Burt Lancaster, and Katharine Hepburn to Katherine Anne Porter. He became the de facto official photographer of the several classical dance companies founded by Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine, allowing him to immortalize early ballet stars on the American scene, such as Lew Christensen, Maria Tallchief, and Tanaquil Le Clercq. For all his commercial success, however, his private obsession with the male nude, as an aesthetic ideal or in group relations, could not be publicly displayed, remaining unavailable for open sale, and only published in

the limited arena of the early homophile European subscription magazine *Der Kreis* (The Circle). What saved these frank homoerotic images for future generations was the friendly association Lynes developed with the pathbreaking sexologist Dr. Alfred Kinsey, to whose research archive at Indiana University Lynes entrusted large quantities of his male nudes and examples from his other genres. By doing so, Lynes's visionary representation of the homoerotic impulse in all its variety was preserved for a future posterity, shielded by a scientific veneer. Nearly everyone in the field since who has worked with the male nude has taken inspiration from his example. We see his trace in the formalist proximity of black and white males in Robert Mapplethorpe, in the high-gloss musculature of Herb Ritts's bodybuilders, in the sweet natural light that falls on fresh-faced naked youths in the dreamscapes of Duane Michals.

Whatever had put me off about Lynes—he had been too beautiful, too lucky in love and in his carnal life, while his posthumous re-emergence made him a figure of glamour that I most certainly was not—I finally succumbed to the realization that he had lived the kind of cultivated life I had once imagined. And unlike the shameful past presumed to have been the lot of all queer men and women who had lived before Stonewall, he had thrived within the supportive cocoon of an array of lesbian and gay men, and male and female bisexuals, many of them considerable cultural figures, for whom life had been, if not a “cabaret,” then certainly not a vale of tears. My interest became writing about Lynes as an influential figure within that sophisticated world of cosmopolitan and queer tendency between the wars of which so many of us have been the beneficiaries. If Lynes never entered the canon of the greatest twentieth-century figures in photography—Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Paul Strand—it was in part because he worked in commercial arenas that were often denigrated as beneath serious critical assessment (fashion and dance photography, and the suspect category of the “celebrity” portrait). And although, even in his lifetime, he contributed images to large museum exhibitions, he never saw himself as a member of any school or aesthetic movement. He fled from any aesthetic orthodoxy just as he ignored partisan politics and showed little interest in the contentious issues of the day.

So, never mind that the Surrealist tinge of so much of his early photography recommended him to Julien Levy, whose landmark gallery championed European Surrealist painting. Levy also claimed photography and its history as worthy of respect and consideration. He took on Lynes and exhibited him alongside Walker Evans. And never mind that Pierre Matisse, son of the Master Henri, gave Lynes a retrospective of his portrait photographs that established him as a superb cartographer of the cultural zeitgeist and a sympathetic chronicler of the psychology of the human face. As for Lynes's singular achievement portraying the male nude in remarkable breadth—young men across class lines, racial categories, and physical types—his endeavor was too frankly a celebration of male

amity and shared eroticism for his era to support. In short, his interest was “premature,” produced in an uncongenial atmosphere with both legal limitations and social restrictions. His nudes predated our current interest in male beauty, homosociality, and same-sex eroticism as subjects of popular discourse, queer theory, and academic inquiry. Yet the revelation of Lynes’s images in this genre decades after their first creation helped lay the foundation for the very intellectual ferment that the representation of male homoeroticism in photography, from the medium’s inception, inspired.

Finally, I have come to a different understanding of Lynes’s place in the pantheon of twentieth-century photographers. Although he had not pursued photography as a rarefied art, but as a means to earn a living, he had used all his imaginative and technical skills to achieve a visually rich survey of his era’s greatest artistic contributors; to present a sense of choreographer George Balanchine’s protean contribution to the classical dance; to devise dazzling Surrealist-inflected reconstructions of the great myths of antiquity; and to present luxurious couture and everyday fashion on women whose style and beauty he rendered with sympathy and, depending on the model, with real affection and admiration. Of course, there was always the category in which he most invested his passions, where he presented the male form as worthy of the delectation, desire, and tribute as any paid to supremely idealized women by an Ingres or Courbet, or, say, to Georgia O’Keeffe by Alfred Stieglitz.

Lynes destroyed many of his negatives and prints during his lifetime, limiting the reach of a somewhat narrower oeuvre that survived. And his shortened lifespan likewise reduced the number of productive years he might have had to expand the range of his work in the genres he had taken up while alive. “But the glass was neither half empty nor half full,” I once wrote in an appreciation of his career. “[I]t was already overflowing. Lynes is *sui generis*, a professional photographer not quite like any other, whose best work has the thrill of revelation.”<sup>1</sup> To be his biographer in the way I wished, I would interrogate through Lynes, his life and career, the broad social milieu of sexually non-conformist cultural achievers in which he flourished, and perhaps discover how culture, too, may seed the ground for later political advocacy and activism. Of such consequences, Lynes would have been skeptical. And yet, so fierce was his pursuit of portraying male physical splendor, and so devoted was he to the arts and those who produced it, that he bowed before the altars of sex and culture and made of them his own religion. Whatever our differences, I hope I have done Lynes justice.

Allen Ellenzweig  
New York City, August 2021

# Acknowledgments

My first thanks go to a constellation of people known to me through my friend Steven Haas, who, as a graduate student decades ago, lived in the home of Russell and Mildred Lynes in New York City. Russell Lynes was George Platt Lynes's younger brother who in 1988 completed a manuscript about George's life and career that was never published. During Haas's residence in the Lynes home, he also came to know Russell and Mildred's son George Platt Lynes II and his wife, Jane Lynes. Haas, a student of art history, became a photographer and, through the Lynes family, acquired considerable knowledge of George Platt Lynes. It was Steven Haas who encouraged me to write a biography of George Platt Lynes years ago, and who introduced me to George and Jane Lynes. I became the beneficiary of their friendship. Steven laid the groundwork by bringing to George and Jane my first book *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe*. Soon I entered their companionable circle and had their blessing to move forward, with George the Second lending me a copy of his father's manuscript, "The Daring Eye of George Platt Lynes," whose title I have inverted for my own use. I am therefore most grateful to Steven Haas, now director of the George Platt Lynes Foundation, to George Platt Lynes II and Jane Lynes, to their son Joshua, and to Elizabeth Lynes Hollander, Russell and Mildred's daughter, whom, unfortunately, I knew too little before her death. Finally, I am indebted to Russell Lynes, whom I never knew personally, for writing a rich and detailed account of his brother's life that has served me, and writers before me, in writing our essays and articles and books about George's life and work.

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Through my research, I encountered a unique circle of aficionados of the George Platt Lynes universe. We have become a band of brothers, each allied to a different member of the George Platt Lynes–Monroe Wheeler–Glenway Wescott threesome or to affiliates of their circle. So, I thank for their support and advice Vincent Cianni, Jerry Rosco, Michael Schreiber, and Joe Scott. More recently, the energetic young Jarrett Earnest took us all by storm with his show “The Young and Evil” at the David Zwirner Gallery, New York (February 21–April 13, 2019), which memorialized the artistic projects of Lynes and his mostly gay or gay-adjacent peers: Paul Cadmus, Jared French, Margaret Hoenig French—the “PaJaMa” collective—as well as Charles Henri Ford, Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein, Bernard Perlin, Pavel Tchelitchew, George Tooker, and Jensen Yow. Jarrett Earnest’s curatorial work was an inspiration as I closed in on completing the first draft manuscript of this book.

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I am indebted to a number of institutions and their staffs for enabling archival research and/or providing copies/microfiche of documents—first and foremost, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale; the George Platt Lynes Foundation Archive; the New York Public Library (especially the Jefferson Market Library, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building); the Morgan Library & Museum; the Museum of Modern Art Archives and Library; the Condé Nast Archive; and the Monroe Wheeler Archive. Institutional collections that provided photographic scans for illustrations are duly credited elsewhere.

Many friends and relations, and people not personally known to me, responded to two GoFundMe campaigns I initiated to aid my research. I acknowledge and thank those who donated at the highest suggested level or beyond: Alice Berliner, Guy Burch, Ellen and Paul Dulberger, Michael Hampton, Harriet and Fred Kriegel, Noah and Amanda Kriegel, Beth Laskin, Lynn Luckow, Vance Martin, Joann Roth Oseary, Todd Rosin, Alan Schwartz, Jonathan Silin and David Townsend, Fred Wasserman, and George Yudice. I acknowledge with thanks all contributors at any level, knowing well how even smaller gifts can represent a sacrifice or hardship for an individual donor.

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# Abbreviations

## **Institutional Abbreviations**

BSF	Berkshire School Files, Sheffield, Massachusetts
CNA	Condé Nast Archive, New York City
GPLFA	George Platt Lynes Foundation Archive, New York City
HRC	Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin
KILSC	Kinsey Institute Library & Special Collections, Indiana University, Bloomington
MLM	Morgan Library & Museum, New York City
MOMA	Museum of Modern Art Archives + Library, New York City
MWA	Monroe Wheeler Archive, Newburgh, New York
NYPL	New York Public Library, New York City
YIVO	YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Archive + Library, New York City
YCAL MSS	Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
<i>Specific Call Numbers indicate the following collections:</i>	
YCAL MSS 76	Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers
YCAL MSS 77	Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection
YCAL MSS 134	Glenway Wescott Papers
YCAL MSS 136	Monroe Wheeler Papers
YCAL MSS 147	George Platt Lynes Diaries and Memorabilia



## Note on Sources

The single most important source for this book was the unpublished manuscript of George Platt Lynes's life written by his younger brother, Russell Lynes. It appears to have been completed in 1988 judging from a date penciled on its final onionskin page. Initially, and for nearly a decade, I consulted this carbon copy of the text given me by George Platt Lynes II, the nephew of his namesake. This bound manuscript came with two title pages. The first was "The Daring Eye of George Platt Lynes: A Memoir." The second was "The Autobiography of George Platt Lynes," an obvious reference to Gertrude Stein's "The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas."

Years into my work on this biography, I was gifted a different copy of the Russell Lynes manuscript, printed on standard paper, that emerged from the estate of Monroe Wheeler. It bore only a single title page: "The Daring Eye of George Platt Lynes: A Memoir." It was generally more legible than my onionskin copy, and I began to rely on it almost exclusively. From time to time, I checked to see that the pagination remained the same as the earlier version I had been consulting, but I did not do so systematically. Each copy had its own handwritten editorial notes, and one had to remember that both were produced by typewriter and not by word processor. It would have been maddeningly difficult to confirm just how "identical" one manuscript was to the other. In the main, I found that there was broad conformity between the two.

Of significant primary sources, I especially credit the correspondence of George Platt Lynes, Monroe Wheeler, and Glenway Wescott, and correspondence between Lynes and Gertrude Stein, found at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, as well as Lynes family correspondence and related documents gathered and organized by Russell Lynes for his use in the writing of his "memoir" of George. The entirety of this latter material is under the custodianship of the George Platt Lynes Foundation, New York City. I retain eccentricities of spelling, punctuation, and style when quoting from these letters.

The Harry Ransom Center's archives of George Platt Lynes photographs—along with early exhibition brochures with contemporaneous commentary by Glenway Wescott; primary documents concerning Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, and Gloria Swanson, with whom Lynes became acquainted; and a commentary on his career written by Lynes and published in the short-lived magazine *Bachelor*, aimed at cosmopolitan men of a certain temper—were encouraging discoveries early in my research. They piqued my curiosity and granted me

insight into the atmosphere and intellectual concerns of the Lynes circle as his career was emerging.

The last important trove of correspondence I relied on were letters that passed between Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey and George Platt Lynes held by the Kinsey Institute Library and Special Collections at Indiana University, Bloomington.

Allen Ellenzweig  
New York City, August 2021

PART I

THE PRECOCIOUS PUP



# 1

## Past Is Prologue—1955

The fashion, dance, and celebrity photographer George Platt Lynes left his New York Hospital bed to go to the ballet. His doctor had given him permission to have these outings, although more than once, fatigued, he returned before the end of a performance.<sup>1</sup> His wan appearance might have surprised those who knew him only from a distance; the princely Lynes had long been a man of note with his silver white hair and cultivated tan. His nephew, and namesake, distinctly remembers at a half-century remove a spring walk along Madison Avenue at the height of the business day. As he and Uncle George stepped in one direction, the women passing in the other were clearly stunned by this apparition of a handsome man who was “wearing an elegant tweed jacket . . . looking as dashing as ever.” They nearly froze in place. Proud to be at his uncle’s side, the teenaged George thought to himself, “Sorry, girls, he ain’t interested!”<sup>2</sup>

Tonight, instead of Lynes once again admiring the young Julie Andrews in her American Broadway musical debut in the 1920s pastiche *The Boy Friend*, he would attend George Balanchine’s full-length production of *The Nutcracker*.<sup>3</sup> This was the Russian-born choreographer’s rare nineteenth-century story ballet set to music by Tchaikovsky for which some forty youngsters from the School of American Ballet populated the stage. It had been a family hit when it premiered a year earlier in the winter of 1954, although the *New Yorker* subtitled a less than enthusiastic review “Caution—School Children.”<sup>4</sup>

Now, it was late autumn 1955; the company was presenting *The Nutcracker* for an extended Christmas season at New York’s City Center of Music and Drama, the Balanchine troupe’s home as resident company since 1948.<sup>5</sup> George Platt Lynes was paying homage to the many dancers he had photographed (for example, Fig. 1.1), some of whom had been his intimates—or, put another way, with whom he’d been intimate. Lincoln Kirstein, the philanthropic and organizing power behind Balanchine, had known George Lynes as a boy of fourteen at the Berkshire School in Sheffield, Massachusetts, where they had both been students. Through their later reacquaintance, Lynes, from 1935 on, became, de facto, the official photographer of the several Kirstein/Balanchine companies that preceded the world-renowned New York City Ballet.

Lynes had had a falling out with Kirstein, the source of which Lynes claimed was a mystery. He wrote in a letter over a year earlier:





Fig. 1.1 Ralph McWilliams, 1952. Throckmorton Fine Art, LLC, New York. © Estate of George Platt Lynes.

There's a coldness (!!!) these days between me and Lincoln of his manufacture, and I'm in the dark about it . . . Come to think of it, when Lincoln picks a quarrel, does the quaralee, does even he himself, know what it's about. Too often I've heard him say, "You know what I don't like about him? Him." . . . Anyway, I admire and appreciate and value him, crazy coot though he may be, and I miss being in on his activities.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Lynes was “excluded” by Kirstein from photographing this new *Nutcracker*—an opportunity, his brother Russell writes, that “he had, after so many years of photographing the Balanchine ballets, assumed was his.”<sup>7</sup> His close friend, artist Bernard Perlin, remembered that Lynes was “heartbroken.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Lynes was either genuinely unaware of any particular affront he had perpetrated against this important old friend and professional benefactor, or he chose to ignore that their contact had of late grown “infrequent.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly, he did not know that Kirstein characterized him behind his back as both “silly” and an “idiot child.”<sup>10</sup> Yet this late autumn evening, Lynes—“Giorgio” to his friends—was determined not to miss out on the performance.

He arrived by taxi from the hospital on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to the City Center on West 55th Street. Giorgio and many of his *amici*, the gay New York cultural set, often with luxury tastes and limited funds, liked the hall for its cheap tickets. A few bucks got you a good seat in the house and you could show up to buy one a half-hour before curtain and still make it to a performance.<sup>11</sup> Older and more established men might bring younger ones first entering New York’s homosexual circles to the ballet, as to the opera. As historian and biographer Martin Duberman writes, “[I]n the fifties and early sixties cross-class sexual contact between men was more common than subsequently” and a night out at City Center might serve as part of a young gay man’s education into New York’s sophisticated gay society.<sup>12</sup>

Lynes had once been such a well-bred youth come to the big city in need of mentoring, but his first entry into a distinctly homosexual milieu had taken place in Paris, not New York—and this very evening, he was only several weeks returned from the Paris he hadn’t seen in nearly twenty years. Now, in ill health, while he was not old, he was at forty-eight certainly on the other side of his youth.

He was walking to his seat in the Center’s luxuriously appointed space with its glazed mosaics and stained glass in faux-Moorish style. In 1948, Kirstein and Balanchine’s Ballet Society had an enormous success presenting the Stravinsky-Balanchine ballet *Orpheus*—conducted by Maestro Stravinsky himself—at the Center. So electric was the public response that additional performances were scheduled. The reaction prompted civic leader Morton Baum to invite Kirstein and Balanchine to form a resident ballet company at the Center.<sup>13</sup>

By then, George Platt Lynes had been photographing Balanchine’s choreography for over a decade. His later *Orpheus* images at once commemorated the remarkable team that created the work—Balanchine as choreographer, Stravinsky as composer and conductor, and sculptor Isamu Noguchi as set and costume designer—and brought to life two of the signature dancers who performed in it—Nicholas Magallanes and Francisco Moncion. Yet this 1950 Lynes suite of *Orpheus* images also imagined the pas de deux between Orpheus and the Angel of Death at a level unrealizable in public performance; under Lynes’s direction,

Magallanes and Moncion appear in the nude, in shimmering light and shadow that lend discretion to their exposure and convey an atmosphere at once ethereal and timeless. For Lynes, after two years out in Hollywood heading up Vogue Studios, the *Orpheus* pictures were a triumphant return to form, not only as ballet photographs, but as examples of his passionate pursuit of the male nude, a genre in which he had worked devotedly, obsessively, and privately since starting to take pictures in the late 1920s.

With Balanchine and Kirstein finding a permanent home for their new ballet company, Lynes was assured at least one reliable, if modest, source of income. And by 1948, he needed it. His career had not flourished as he had hoped during his two years heading up Vogue Studios in California, what with the enormous expenses of decorating a new house and frequently entertaining—with lavish dinners and buffets for professional friends visiting from the New York fashion world or Hollywood stars on the down or upside of their careers. Never one to stint as a host, at one such event, Lynes wrote his mother, he had “thirty-odd for dinner. . . . A couple of men to serve and a couple of boys to park cars. . . . The guests were well assorted, a couple of each kind and there are lots of kinds: like the animals in the ark, two and two.”<sup>14</sup> But on his return to New York, he had difficulty regaining his foothold, as fashion photography was moving on to a more insouciant *verité* style, distinct from Lynes’s calculated studio setups of the 1930s and 1940s. Even months before he abandoned the sunny climes of the West Coast, he admitted to a friend that it was “a mistake to have come to California from the commercial point of view.”<sup>15</sup> And on his return to New York, he discovered he had lost ground—to Richard Avedon, for one, the younger photographer who had taken over Lynes’s former New York studio at 640 Madison Avenue. Lynes had left the place in shambles. Avedon remembered, “The studio was in disarray with many of Lynes’ photographs piled on shelves and in the garbage.”<sup>16</sup>

The years back in New York saw a slow but steady downturn in Lynes’s fortunes. He, George Platt Lynes, had photographed nearly every artist of prominence in theater, dance, movies, and literature of the previous twenty-five years: from Gertrude Stein and Jean Cocteau to silent screen legend Lillian Gish, dancer/choreographer Jerome Robbins, Christopher Isherwood, W. Somerset Maugham, and Igor Stravinsky. He had photographed elegant models for *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue* and *Town and Country*. His succession of New York studios had become necessary destinations for accomplished artists affirming their cultural standing, for women of fashion displaying their professional and unerring chic, and for naked young men performing their physical perfection under Lynes’s personal direction. In high-keyed lighting at once theatrical and flattering, Lynes made his subjects look the part they needed to play. He was a confirmed member of that elite group of photographers—among them Cecil Beaton, George Hoyningen-Huene, and

Horst P. Horst—who established the primacy of the Condé Nast empire in promoting celebrity and fashion images.

But now, in 1955, photographer George Platt Lynes, who lived high, decorated deluxe, and spent money like a profligate, had been through a near ruinous encounter with the IRS in 1952 for payment of back taxes totaling some \$5,000—an exorbitant sum at the time.<sup>17</sup> He was ordered to have his business property sold at auction—cameras, lights, the “assets” of his professional life.<sup>18</sup> Lynes had been kept afloat by the skilled, if exasperated, aid of his responsible younger brother, Russell, the managing editor of *Harper's Magazine*, and Russell's wife Mildred, also known affectionately by her maiden name, “Akin.”

The past six or seven months had also been a stark if ambiguous confrontation with his own mortality—although he declared his “sex urge” remained strong—and by dint of will he had flown over to Europe.<sup>19</sup> He had gone from Paris to Rome and back to Paris, a sojourn of seven weeks. He had maintained his piquant running correspondence with good friends like artist Bernard Perlin and novelist Katherine Anne Porter. He had dined with *New Yorker* Paris correspondent Janet Flanner and visited his longtime friend, the painter and set designer Pavel “Pavlik” Tchelitchew. In Paris and Rome, he'd seen Tennessee Williams and Gloria Swanson, the silent-screen siren made newly famous in middle age with her 1950 star turn in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*.<sup>20</sup> And however demanding and moody he may have been during his tour, Lynes's charms had not failed him utterly; he flew back to New York with a young Canadian in tow who remained to care for him and served as “guardian at the gates” as he re-entered New York Hospital little more than a week after landing at Idlewild Airport.<sup>21</sup> On December 1, Gloria Swanson, an early health faddist, wrote “George, dear” from Rome:

What on earth are you doing in a hospital?—I just heard.

Since the holidays are so near, may I wish you the best of Christmases by saying, dear God, please get George out of the hospital—and keep him out!—that the New Year will give you complete well-being.<sup>22</sup>

Viewing the dazzle of the ballet and the City Center's grand performance space was now like another homecoming for Lynes. All of Lynes's interiors aimed to impress a self-appointed coterie of urbane sexual and cultural sophisticates in an atmosphere of tribal rituals as rare and internecine as any the Shriners or Freemasons had brought to their Mecca Temple, for the Center had once been their New York headquarters. For well over a decade, Lynes had been staging the life of a contemporary Florentine prince in several apartments, from swank Park Avenue to rough-trade Hell's Kitchen. Too ill to work before his trip abroad, he had been forced to give up his own place. His last residence before going into the

hospital had been his brother and sister-in-law's snug brownstone on the Upper East Side where Lynes, on the topmost floor, had a modest aerie. And then, so shortly back from Europe, home was an antiseptic room of New York Hospital—in which he proceeded to hang some of his favorite paintings, including, as one visitor remembered more than fifty years later, a Surrealist work by Yves Tanguy.<sup>23</sup>

Now in this 1955 *Nutcracker* season, among Balanchine's muses was the elegant and doomed Tanaquil Le Clercq, dancing Saturday night performances in the role of Sugar Plum Fairy. Partnering her in this "Grand Pas de Deux" was her Cavalier, New York City's local kid, Jacques d'Amboise, an ebullient and athletic regular Joe from the city's streets who had recently been loaned out to film the major 1954 Hollywood musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

But in the 1930s, when for a time Balanchine needed financial security and departed to work as a film choreographer in Hollywood, Lincoln Kirstein had integrated markedly American themes into his own ballet repertory with dances like *Pocahantas* (1936), *Yankee Clipper* (1937), *Filling Station* (1938), and *Billy the Kid* (1938). Kirstein, having written the stories for these four works, was advancing popular themes for an audience beyond the usual elites. "Featuring sailors, cowboys, and mechanics, the defining characters of these ballets were traditionally manly," writes ballet historian Peter Stoneley. "And yet sailors, cowboys, and mechanics were also the emergent heroes of a queer American pantheon."<sup>24</sup> Although left unspoken, homosexual representation was there in the culture if you knew where to look. And to present these "regular Joes" as heroes on stage, Kirstein sought out collaborators from his wide acquaintance, invariably queer—bisexual or homosexual—including composers like Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, and choreographers like the still young Jerome Robbins, and Englishmen Antony Tudor and Frederick Ashton. For sets and costumes, he reached out to Russian émigré painter Pavel Tchelitchew, and American figurative painters Paul Cadmus and Jared French, an intimate couple of whom the former eventually became Kirstein's brother-in-law when Lincoln married Fidelma Cadmus.<sup>25</sup> Throughout this early period of Kirstein's efforts to cultivate an indigenous audience for a new "American" ballet, George Platt Lynes was there to document the results—and to train his camera on the faces of many in this circle of gay and bisexual collaborators, some of whom became his own friends, Tchelitchew, Cadmus, and French chief among them. Reciprocally, these visual artists put Lynes in their drawings, paintings, and photographs, so that an informal admiration society provided mutual support, serving as "advertisement for both the sitter and the portraitist. One way an artistic circle constitutes itself as such is through portraits of its members."<sup>26</sup>

By this evening of *The Nutcracker*, he had photographed nearly every principal dancer in the New York City Ballet in his signature theatrical light. For many pictures, he had restaged alongside “Mr. B” moments from the Balanchine oeuvre in ways that the choreographer himself believed “had an importance prompted, it is true, by the dance, but finally, independent of it. His photographs have several lives of their own: as a record, as portraiture, as social-history of the taste of an epoch, and as beauty.”<sup>27</sup>

But the photographic legacy of Lynes is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to his ballet images. Decades later, he was rediscovered for the mastery and breadth of his portraiture. He captivated a fresh audience of photography enthusiasts with, for example, a 1931 silhouette of Gertrude Stein that looks, for all the world, like a head on Mount Rushmore or a profile on a Roman coin, and he immortalized the beauties of his era, women like painter and writer Mai-Mai Sze, daughter of a former Chinese ambassador to the United States; the Mercury Theater and film actress Ruth Ford, whose brother was the poet and poetry editor Charles Henri Ford (and “Pavlik’s” lover); and Lisa Fonssagrives, the patrician beauty who would eventually be muse to and marry photographer Irving Penn. Investing his long interest in the literature and music of his era, Lynes photographed émigré “exiles in paradise” during his brief Hollywood Vogue tenure, bringing forth indelible portraits of German émigré composer Arnold Schoenberg and German literary eminence Thomas Mann, or back in New York so singular a couple as Romanian refugee illustrator-satirist Saul Steinberg and his wife, the painter Hedda Sterne. From the start, Lynes’s earliest forays with the camera brought him in contact with the artistic zeitgeist, so we benefit from his rather assured eye, if not yet his high-key studio style, in early portraits of Jean Cocteau and André Gide and in later ones of Cocteau, W. H. Auden, Virgil Thomson, and Marianne Moore. If we want to understand the between-the-war years, we must look and see who populated its cultural landscape, and Lynes is an excellent guide.

Like movie star photographers, Lynes adopted the directorial mode, working within the confines of studio interiors abetted by simple if sometimes odd props. He lit his subjects to a fine sheen—especially in his 1930s series of fantastical images inspired by Greek mythology. By the time Lynes was rediscovered in the late 1970s and 1980s, *Life* magazine and Magnum photojournalism was losing sway as the sole mode of black-and-white image-making worth our notice. A good deal of Lynes’s early work was naturally thought Surrealist—hadn’t his dreamlike (or is it nightmarish?) image called “The Sleepwalker” been included in the 1936 Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition “Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism”? It was a category he rejected, claiming, as one press agent

paraphrased him, that he had “taken only one surrealist picture in his life, and that is the . . . portrait of Salvador Dali himself.”<sup>28</sup>

As his commercial career foundered in the late 1940s, his commitment to images of the male nude became increasingly the focus of his attention—as if conjuring some utopian future when the beauty of men would be taken as a matter of course. This was a private but by no means a secret obsession. His nudes had long circulated among friends, and no less a public figure than Dr. Alfred Kinsey collected Lynes images for his study of sexual behavior. Lynes’s enthusiastic cooperation with Kinsey was notable for transpiring in an increasingly censorious period; art historian James Crump aptly observes, “In more than one letter Lynes made reference to the postal authority’s possible seizure of his work.”<sup>29</sup> Fines and jail sentences were not unknown risks, and such punishments were meted out to various physique photographers in the postwar period.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the American postal service “participated in extralegal harassment. Using obscenity statutes . . . the department established a watch on the recipients of physical magazines and other gay male erotica.”<sup>31</sup> Lynes’s strong belief in his large body of male nude images produced over three decades were tributes not only to male beauty, but to male same-sex relations and homosocial community; this demanded his finding a long-term custodial solution for their safety. With Kinsey’s interest, Lynes was comforted knowing that an institutional archive would confer on them an aesthetic and scientific legitimacy that no postal inspector, provincial judge, or opportunist politician could ever understand. Lynes thereby secured a legacy that would inspire such later proponents of high-art male eroticism as Robert Mapplethorpe, Herb Ritts, and Bruce Weber when, rediscovered, his male nudes were exhibited in a wholly changed social environment.

What is fascinating and instructive about “Giorgio” is how he became this cosmopolitan figure, career and health depleted, walking gingerly to his seat at the City Center of Music and Drama in 1955. He was nothing but a boy from New Jersey, the son of a clergyman. By age eighteen, he was in Paris being introduced to that doyenne of the American literary avant-garde, Gertrude Stein, and became for a time a minor figure in her major circle—“Baby George” she called him.<sup>32</sup> A few short years later, he was part of a singular ménage-à-trois, enamored of two older talented and handsome Americans, novelist Glenway Wescott and a designer of rare illustrated books, Monroe Wheeler. Unlike closeted gay life as imagined before the changes wrought by the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, these three men designed a way of life that appears as inventively bohemian as the roundelay of London’s Bloomsbury Group.

The performance of *The Nutcracker* was over. Having sated their appetite for Balanchine's delightful \$80,000 Christmas confection, of which one critic worried that it looked like "catering to the elements of mediocrity in public taste," the audience flowed out onto West 55th Street<sup>33</sup>

By the time the crowds spilled from City Center, George Platt Lynes was nowhere among them. He had left early due to his illness.<sup>34</sup>



## 2

# Imperial Fantasies

George Platt Lynes was born on April 15, 1907, in the modest Essex County city of East Orange, New Jersey, neighboring Newark. He was the son of a young lawyer, Joseph Russell Lynes, and his wife, the notably beautiful Adelaide Hall Sparkman, who had a teaching certificate from Hunter College of the City University of New York. The couple had wed in 1906, by which time Joseph Russell had earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania (1901), and followed this with a Bachelor of Laws from New York Law School (1904). Two years later, however, he turned away from the law, which “was not, in his view, a moral profession,” and began studies at the General Theological Seminary in Manhattan. While a seminarian, Joseph Russell worked evenings in the box office of the Metropolitan Opera, at night ferrying across the Hudson River to New Jersey for further transit home to East Orange.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the great classic arias hummed in his head on his journey—they certainly became both inspiration and comfort to his son George, whose life became one great devotion to culture in all its forms; George Lynes took pleasure in the operatic canon and classical music.

George was named for one George Platt, his paternal great-grandfather, an English immigrant from London born in 1812, the year of America’s second war with the mother country. George Platt had been apprenticed to his father at age fifteen as a “painter-stainer” and came to New York by the late 1830s. He began as a maker of “blinds” who married Mary Catherine Russell of Connecticut; her ancestors had come to America from England in the seventeenth century. In 1853, when Platt moved his business to 53 Broadway, the signage read “George Platt, Interior Decorations.” He was by then a professional of reputation.<sup>2</sup> In *The Architecture of Country Houses*, first published in 1850 by the influential writer and magazine editor A. J. (Andrew Jackson) Downing, Platt the emigrant Englishman was given the highest praise:

When a villa is designed by an architect, he generally superintends and directs the finishing of the interior; and in villas of considerable importance, *interior decorators*, who devote themselves to this branch of the profession, are called in to complete the whole, as the builder leaves it. Some of these, like Mr. Geo. Platt, of New York (who is at present the most popular interior decorator in the country), possess talent enough to take an apartment or a suite of apartments,

design and execute the decoration, and colour, and furnish them throughout in any style.<sup>3</sup>

George Platt Lynes appears to have consciously styled himself after his forebear, for throughout his life he created in his surroundings a style of décor that did not necessarily follow the moment's fashion but represented his own eccentric taste in furnishings and artistic decoration. It was a talent distinct from the profession of photography for which he became known. Bernard Perlin, who was among those closest to George in the last decade of his life, repeatedly remarked on this. "George had such grand style," he said. "It wasn't pretentious; it was just that he was an aristocrat and he looked and behaved like one."<sup>4</sup> On another occasion, Perlin remarked, "His décor was always lavish, clever, unpretentious, and knockout beautiful. He knew how to live like a rich man, however not."<sup>5</sup> That George knew how to live like a rich man was, in fact, his central pretense. His aspirations were a mixed ideal of appearing to live in princely domestic settings while aspiring to participate in the culture of his generation at its highest echelons. The two could often be in conflict; culture does not always pay.

Interior decorator George Platt's daughter, Mary Edith Russell Platt, married Joseph Isaac Lynes of Norwalk, Connecticut, whose family, living in New England environs, descended from the mid-seventeenth century, although the family name was originally spelled *Lines*. Mary Platt and Joseph Isaacs Lynes were thus the parents of Joseph Russell, George's father, who changed his middle name from Isaacs to Russell on succeeding to the bar to prevent being thought a Jewish lawyer. He thereby became Joseph Russell Lynes.

Adelaide Hall Sparkman, George Platt Lynes's mother, was the daughter of a New Yorker whose family origins were in the American South. Adelaide's mother was Ellen Fulton, distantly related to Robert Fulton, known for his early portraits and landscapes, but remembered best for being the inventor of the first commercially viable steamboat.<sup>6</sup> Adelaide consequently also had a sense of family accomplishment, although her Hunter College teaching certificate did not prepare her for the regime of a minister's wife.

Adelaide was not ready for the demands of her first household where she lived in East Orange with her own mother, her mother-in-law, and her divorced sister and niece. This made for a domestic circle of five women and a lone male, Joseph Russell Lynes, no doubt requiring forbearance on all sides. To this troupe was added the first-born child, George Platt Lynes, who was a "dangerously ill" baby whom the doctors did not believe would survive. He was fed barley water "a drop at a time" until he was finally able to take heartier nourishment. His early frailty encouraged in his parents a watchfulness and tendency to coddle.<sup>7</sup>

The toddler George moved with his parents in 1910, along with both his grandmothers, to the rectory of St. James Episcopal Church in Great Barrington,

a picturesque town in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. Near the end of that year, on December 2, another son was born, named Joseph Russell Lynes Jr.—although he was simply called “Russell,” a healthy child “over whom the parishioners cooed and fussed.”<sup>8</sup>

Russell Lynes remembered the early years in the St. James rectory in idyllic terms, describing their stone and shingle house with steeply sloped roof and a spindled balcony on the third floor as “in the Queen Anne style,” popular in 1890s America. There was a wide front veranda furnished with “wicker chairs and a table and a swing that hung from its ceiling by chains.” This served as a “summer playroom” for him and older brother George. A corner tower of the house looked out “on the tall elms of Main Street across the trolley tracks to a sweet-smelling bakery and an upholstery shop.” The house stood between St. James Church and the town courthouse, which held the “lock-up” in its basement. In front of the brick courthouse stood a “winged victory” holding a gilded laurel wreath at arm’s-length, a memorial to the town’s Civil War dead.<sup>9</sup>

George was widely regarded as a beautiful child, with blond hair in his first years that turned brown as he grew to adolescence. In his early youth, he resembled his father, but over time came to favor Adelaide and her side of the family. He could be willful and rebellious. He was willing to speak up, and sometimes did so to the consternation and embarrassment of his parents and their guests. Russell wrote of one incident: Adelaide had gathered the Women’s Auxiliary for their Wednesday sewing group in the rectory, some ten or twelve women sitting in a circle in the parlor, conversing as they set about their task. Young George returned from a walk with his nurse and planted himself in the middle of the parlor to size up the ladies at their sewing. He zeroed in on one and walked up to her forthrightly.

“I certainly don’t like you,” he said, and then turned to walk across the room to another of the women. “But I do like you.”

If, in the moment, the group was dumbfounded, the story nevertheless made the rounds in Great Barrington, no doubt to Adelaide’s mortification.<sup>10</sup>

The drama of holding an elusive power seemed to fire George’s imagination, whose fantasies “at the ages of seven or eight,” as Russell described them, “were not to grow up and become a fireman or the engineer of one of the trains that chuffed and whistled on the tracks a hundred yards behind the rectory.” His brother’s fantasies “were more imperial.”<sup>11</sup>

One day, the Reverend Mr. Lynes dropped off George at Tim Fox’s barbershop on Main Street to get a haircut. When he returned, the boy was regaling Tim—“a bald, spruce, slight man”—and anyone else in the shop, fragrant with “bay rum and *eau de lilac* paradise,” with his adventurous life story. He claimed he was really not a minister’s son at all “but a Russian prince who had escaped and been brought to Great Barrington and left there temporarily with the minister and

his wife.”<sup>12</sup> To distinguish himself through a rise in social status was the impetus of George’s life, although distinguishing himself among his peers may well have been a way of protecting himself from taunts and jeers. As he grew, he displayed an effeminate quality that would not sit well with boys who *did* prefer as their heroes the local fireman, the train engineer, the constable, and the team athlete.

The search for a noble inheritance likely sparked George going to “a good deal of trouble to trace his ancestry” when he reached his twenties. His quest may have been prompted by the family lore that “Lynes” was a variant of “Luynes,” which might connect the family to the French Duc de Luynes whose impressive château stands in the Loire Valley. The three Luynes brothers were Huguenots who, so the story went, came to Connecticut in the seventeenth century “and changed the spelling to Loines, Lynes, and Lines. This seems to have no basis in truth,” Russell concluded.<sup>13</sup>

In their youngest siblinghood, the difference of three years was a wide “gulf” between the Great Barrington Lynes brothers, allowing each to essentially go his own way—although occasionally, Russell “came tagging after” his older brother. The town of Great Barrington was a picturesque setting in the early years of the twentieth century, which Russell remembered in vivid detail:

On Saturday evenings there were band concerts performed by local horn-blowers and drummers in the octagonal bandstand, with a peaked roof and spindled railing on the lawn next to the town hall which was . . . the be-columned, red-brick courthouse. There in the summer crowds gathered, to listen to Sousa marches and sentimental tunes (“It’s a Long, Long Trail”; “Keep the Home Fires Burning”; “The Missouri Waltz”; “After the Ball”). They came by wagon and carriage and Model-T from nearby farms and villages to shop and go to the movies. When they were finished, they sat on the grass or the green, slatted benches and while the children chased fireflies, they ate ice cream from the fountain in Harper’s drugstore and popcorn from the red and horse-drawn popcorn wagon that parked in front of the Mahaiwe Bank. Railroad Street, a block away, harbored the town’s several saloons, and in the course of the evening, Mr. Ushman, the chief of police, occasionally picked up a few over-indulgers and ushered them to the cells of the lock-up. They were safe there from falling and hurting themselves and from their pilfering friends. George with me as his accomplice would hand them cookies, swiped from the rectory pantry, through the barred windows which were high in the lock-up cells but at ground-level outside.<sup>14</sup>

George’s earliest schooling was in a private kindergarten. A “dry-spoken, witty and sharp-featured New England spinster,” Marion Gilbert, lived well into old age, long enough to share her recollections with Russell Lynes. She spoke with

“amused affection,” and remembered little George as “a handful who knew his own mind . . . quick but dreamy.”<sup>15</sup> In Great Barrington, George’s only other recorded education took place at the local elementary school, the William Cullen Bryant School, named for the nineteenth-century poet and journalist who had practiced law for some years in Great Barrington.

But George was soon off for the wider world. He was mostly known among classmates as just “George Lynes” before he incorporated “Platt” with its Anglophile and vaguely upper-class associations. At age eleven, he was enrolled in a boarding school not far from Boston and thrown into the bramble of an all-boys environment.

## The Great Barrington Boy

Beautiful, delicate, and willful George Lynes was eleven years old in the fall of 1918 when he was sent off from his father's rectory at St. James Episcopal Church in Great Barrington to the Fessenden School for Young Boys in the Boston suburb of West Newton. Founded in 1903 by Frederick J. Fessenden, the school took as its motto "Labor omnia vincit"—work conquers all—which headmaster Fessenden, a Latin scholar, would have borrowed from Virgil while at the same time taking up the manly ethos of the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. The Rooseveltian ideal of "work, hard work, then play" was thoroughly inculcated into the school community by *The Albermarle*, the student-faculty newspaper, and the *Fessenden School News*, which declared categorically, "Our school motto is as true as the fact that the sky is blue. There isn't a boy in school who does not believe that work will overcome all difficulties, that hard work will place him near the top."<sup>1</sup> This was written in 1913, so young George had yet to arrive to disprove it.

That fall of 1918 saw the Great War come to an end on November 11, but George and other students—those returning or, like him, new to the school—were marked before that happy day by the terrible "Spanish flu" pandemic, which we now recognize began transmission in American army camps in the spring of 1918, returned more lethally to American shores via troop ships to Boston harbor, spread to the army's nearby Camp Devens, and then steamrolled west and south via railroad to major cities and small towns.<sup>2</sup> By mid-September, Fessenden's Lane Hall had to be opened for sick boys—which meant that the infirmary on the third floor in the school's central mansion, Hart House, was already filled to capacity.<sup>3</sup>

Yet even amid the present medical disaster—which few then would have realized was to be one of history's worst pandemics, killing as many as 100 million worldwide—the school's culture of hard work and rigorous play remained steadfast.<sup>4</sup> Thus, *The Albermarle* regretted that "athletics have not had a fair chance to get under way. This is a calamity, as there is a great deal of promising football material."<sup>5</sup>

George would not have appeared "promising" in that respect. "He wanted to be both independent (even defiant)," his brother Russell writes, "and forgiven like most children of spirit."<sup>6</sup> This would have played into Joe and Adelaide's decision to see the boy face this new challenge, for the expense of educating George

at a reputable boarding school that drew the moneyed scions of good families far and wide—one of the first students at the school had come from Honolulu!—was a sacrifice on a rector's salary, which, Adelaide once confided, "was less than one of his parishioners paid his butler."<sup>7</sup> For fall 1918 and spring 1919, the total fees of nearly \$1,200 represented a significant sum for that day.<sup>8</sup> But Reverend and Mrs. Lynes must have judged that much was at stake for their difficult elder son. And a private boarding school had the advantage of offering an all-male teaching staff, unlike public schools, which were largely staffed by female teachers. As George was delicate in inward sensibility and outward appearance, the prospect of his having male mentors as role models would have offered the Lyneses some reassurance.<sup>9</sup> From a practical vantage, as future preparation for eventual placement in a first-tier university, a good boarding school seemed the required route.

The consequences of the flu epidemic at Fessenden were keenly felt. Due to illness and absence, "classes were disrupted" and *The Albermarle* reported that a good number of the students had fallen "far behind."<sup>10</sup> George seemed to be one of that number. His fall grades, in an ambitious program that included American History, Arithmetic, Bible, English, Geography, and Latin, were dismal. His winter and spring grades, however, showed marked, if not spectacular, improvement, but he never managed like many other boys to receive any awards for "Industry and Faithfulness" and "Deportment."<sup>11</sup>

Although uninterested in competitive sports, George was not without a certain martial spirit, and in the spring when the Twenty-Sixth Division—the "Yankee" Division made up of National Guard troops from all of New England—returned from France after the war, the boy wrote his father asking him to come to Boston so they could see the parade together.<sup>12</sup> "Almost everybody is going and I would hate to be left behind," George wrote. "But I wish you would come on to Boston and take me to see the parade and you could see it yourself. I heard someone say that there was going to be airplanes and I think perhaps tanks. There is nothing I could wish for more than to go to the parade with you."<sup>13</sup> George was also appealing to his father's military affiliations. Joseph Russell Lynes had been "a member of the then 'fashionable' Seventh Regiment in New York before he was married"; he also had "organized a 'home guard' unit in Great Barrington" during the Great War, although his Church superior had to persuade him not to take up an army commission.<sup>14</sup> Finally, there is something tender and appealing in George's assertion that there was "nothing" he could wish for more than to share the experience with his father—a desire to have the Reverend Lynes's reassuring male company in an outing that the boy understood would draw his father's deepest sympathies.

George was integrating into Fessenden activities, although these were on the arts, not the athletic, side of the ledger. He appeared as part of a presentation by the school's Choral Club, described in an issue of *The Albermarle* as "An Hour

with the Minstrels”: “[T]here flew in a flock of blackbirds, trained and tuned, by Mr. McAllister, that put to silence the movie machine . . . and walked off with an enviable amount of gratitude from all who came to listen.”<sup>15</sup> At the Annual Musical Recital, “George P. Lynes” is listed on the program as performing “Dream Castles” by Marie Crosby, likely a simple piano piece since recitals were usually for instrumental performances.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most intriguing, if small, item on George’s life at Fessenden, given the path his professional life would eventually take, is the single entry for “Lynes” in the school’s general ledger showing that on January 25, 1919, an unusual expense of 20 cents was incurred to buy him *film*.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the Kodak Brownie camera, first introduced in 1900, made the taking of pictures by amateurs—including schoolchildren—an everyday occurrence, so this can’t be taken as a decisive omen. Yet it is at least a curious coincidence that William Hall Walker, the owner of the impressive Tudor-style “Brookside” at the edge of Great Barrington, whose home and gardens George and Russell had frequented, had been a partner of George Eastman of Kodak and for many years was the head of Eastman’s London office.<sup>18</sup> The Reverend Lynes’s family often supped with Mr. and Mrs. William Hall Walker after Sunday services, welcomed by the wealthy parishioners. On their grounds with artificial ponds and a small lake, George was given “the run of the garden and greenhouses and the ample, sweet smelling house,” allowing him and Russell an early exposure to “the fragrances of wealth.”<sup>19</sup>

Any hint of young George’s interests apart from school goes some way to preview his early creative temperament. Even the use of his full name, George *Platt* Lynes, as a matter of legal formality and later as one of personal and professional choice, suggests an allegiance to his “visual” aesthetic inheritance from his paternal great-grandfather, George Platt, who we remember set up in 1853 as “George Platt/Interior Decorations.”<sup>20</sup> However, when he first entered Fessenden, the matter of George’s ancestral name was inadvertently confused. In the school’s catalogue for 1918–1919, he was listed as “George *Clatt* Lynes” and this mistake was picked up in *The Albermarle*’s issue of November 27, 1918, when, in its list of “The New Boys,” he appeared as “George C. Lynes, Great Barrington.”

It might have seemed as if George *Platt* Lynes of Great Barrington had never begun studies at Fessenden at all. Even Russell mistakenly claimed that the school’s records on George were destroyed.<sup>21</sup> Then, as it happened, the Reverend Joseph Russell Lynes accepted a new rectorate at St. Paul’s Church in Jersey City and the family moved away from the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts. Young George did not return to Fessenden in fall 1919.



The move to Jersey City was an advance in the Reverend Lynes's career, and although Russell characterizes the rectory as "a dreary, brown, wooden, characterless house next to the church," he grants that it was located in "a nice part of town" and the parish was "fashionable."<sup>22</sup> Yet in less than three years the family moved to another St. Paul's Church, this time in Englewood, New Jersey, where Joseph Russell became its rector.<sup>23</sup>

Entering the 1920s, then, young George's schooling was twice disrupted. The fall semester after his year at Fessenden, age twelve, George enrolled in the Berkshire School for Boys, in Sheffield, Massachusetts, perhaps a ten-minute drive from the Great Barrington rectory that the Lynes family had just left. George's Berkshire graduation yearbook refers to the "four years that George has been with us," between 1920 and 1925, but George's membership in the school's Camera Club covers 1920, and then jumps to 1923, 1924, and 1925.<sup>24</sup> The break from 1921–1922 was the two years he returned to New Jersey to be with the family, enrolling in Newark Country Day School, no longer extant. His first short tenure at Berkshire School from 1919 into 1920, only to return to the "dreary" family rectory in Jersey City, was due to "illness."<sup>25</sup> The cause was put down by Berkshire's headmaster to "extreme nervousness," a term suggestive of emotional frailties traditionally applied to girls and young women.<sup>26</sup> This was not the last time a nervous crisis, perhaps even something close to breakdown, required George to make a detour.

Meanwhile, younger brother Russell was enrolled in the Choir School of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where he spent the next five years boarding with "forty young sopranos aged nine to fourteen."<sup>27</sup> This must have been an exciting setting for the youngster—a mammoth Gothic cathedral, still under partial construction, sitting high on the promontory of New York City's Morningside Heights close by the distinguished neoclassical buildings of Columbia University.

Russell had five unbroken years at the Cathedral Choir School, while George "knew no such continuity or ritual."<sup>28</sup> That George left and returned to the Berkshire was managed, behind the scenes, by Joe and Adelaide with the firm patrician hand of Berkshire's founder and headmaster, Seaver Burton Buck, a friend and golfing partner of the Reverend Lynes.<sup>29</sup> Despite George's abortive early tenure at the school, Joe and Adelaide were committed "to straighten him out"—to borrow Russell's terms—and Buck seemed just the man to do it.<sup>30</sup>

Buck was a handsome silver-haired New England Yankee, born and educated in Maine, who later graduated Harvard with a degree in English literature. He also spent a year at Harvard Law School, and then headed up the English Department at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York, eventually becoming its acting headmaster. He founded Berkshire School in 1907.<sup>31</sup> Russell eventually followed his brother to Berkshire and noted that Buck "was an amiable . . . snub-nosed sportsman with eyebrows like shaving brushes and an affinity for tweed and

colored silk shirts.”<sup>32</sup> A less generous description was offered by Lincoln Kirstein, America’s protean cultural impresario of the twentieth century who first came to the school in 1922 and more than seventy years later remembered Buck as “a flush-faced Victorian pedagogue who considered himself heir to the ethos of [Thomas] Arnold’s Rugby and Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s School Days*.”<sup>33</sup> Kirstein has it that the “decently unfashionable” school “aspired to a pallid vein of low-Anglican Christianity and its weekly chapel service would have offended neither Catholic nor Jew.”<sup>34</sup> He acknowledged that “the student body was one-third composed of lads like myself who had problematic histories.”<sup>35</sup>

George Lynes fit the same description. The former Great Barrington boy was admitted on what was called a “scholarship,” which simply amounted to a reduction in tuition.<sup>36</sup> This was Seaver Buck’s nod to the Reverend Lynes, his friend on the links. It was certainly not a “reward for [George’s] academic excellence or promise.”<sup>37</sup> Its main buildings nestled at the foot of one of the largest of the Taconic hills, “The Dome,” which faced an ample meadow—yet this backdrop of commanding height “cast cold shadows over it by three o’clock on autumn and winter afternoons.”<sup>38</sup>

“Fierce” school athletics and chapel attendance were integral to the ethos of “Muscular Christianity” common to the WASP leadership class, first in Victorian England and later in America. As Kirstein noted, among its foundational texts was Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s School Days* of 1857 with its vivid portrayal of heroic schoolboy action in team football within “a moral tale of growing maturity and knowledge of right from wrong.”<sup>39</sup> Yet over time the ethical lessons of sport were subsumed by the demands of gender roles. “Hughes may have conceived of ‘manliness’ as signifying duty,” writes one literary interpreter, “but by the 1880s . . . ‘manliness’ was virtually synonymous with athleticism.”<sup>40</sup> One historian of the era explains, “For at least four decades before the Great War, clergy had been hard at work arguing that Christianity was not only a masculine religion, but that muscular men embodied the spirit of Christ most perfectly . . . [defining] a Christian ideal that placed manliness and physicality, vigor and strenuousness, above theological erudition, pastoral service, and other allegedly sissified, overcivilized pursuits.”<sup>41</sup> Seaver Buck’s Berkshire School was therefore typical of his era’s ethos, as Fessenden had been; Endicott Peabody, who founded the more prestigious Groton in 1884, “laid out his school’s intent in three words: it would cultivate ‘manly Christian character.’”<sup>42</sup>

Berkshire School’s athletic program can easily be imagined as a series of humiliations for a boy of “extreme nervousness” whose youthful mannerisms his younger brother does not hesitate to characterize as “effeminate”; for example, George “threw a ball ‘like a girl,’ a dead giveaway to other boys.”<sup>43</sup>

George’s awkwardness among his sporting peers may have influenced his lax attitude toward his schoolwork. His years at Berkshire were marked by missives

exchanged about his middling academic performance between Headmaster Buck and the Reverend Lynes, and between Adelaide and Headmaster Buck. George either could not, or would not, apply himself. After Christmas and New Year's holiday in January 1923, Buck wrote to the Reverend Lynes and assessed George's improved self-control, without any increase in scholarly temperament, "over the boy we had with us two years ago":

His ability, I think, is good. His effort, moderate. He has not impressed any of his masters as being strenuous at his academic job. I am not ready to say that he is what I call a lazy boy, but he is not yet what I call an industrious one. He is also what I call a promising boy.<sup>44</sup>

This year of his return to Berkshire eventually showed a noticeable effort by the boy, perhaps reflecting his awareness of the parlous financial position in which his education proceeded. George was happy to report to the headmaster the results of his college board grades: "In Algebra I got 80% and in Caesar 75%, which is really better than I expected." But George's acknowledgment of Buck's personal support is especially noteworthy: "I feel that last year, except for one or two things, is the most successful year I have had anywhere, and I want you to know how much I appreciate what you are doing to make it possible for me to go to Berkshire."<sup>45</sup>

At sixteen, he was increasingly sensitive to his position at an institution of more privileged boys for whom the same financial considerations had not been necessary. The Lyneses and Mr. Buck still fretted over George's ability to fit in socially with the Berkshire crowd. Earlier in January when Buck commended the boy's improved self-control, he shaded the compliment with another remark: "He is still inclined to be 'kittenish' from time to time in his relations with the boys, which naturally results in rather more friendly skirmishing and 'rough-housing' than is altogether desirable."<sup>46</sup> Buck's terms register as euphemistic; he does not want to suggest outright that the boy is flirting. Such a construction would have bordered on the indecent. Nor would he have had to state the obvious, for George's effeminacy was observable and, as Russell writes, his older brother was a "poseur who . . . struck attitudes that set him apart."<sup>47</sup> Yet Headmaster Buck reports that the "friendly skirmishing" and "rough-housing" was more than "altogether desirable." Was the friendly skirmishing too physical? Did the rough-housing border on aggression or, perhaps, something just shy of the sexual?

A month later, in a letter of early February, Buck surely added a measure of anxiety for the Reverend Lynes to whom he wrote the following:

[E]ven now, he [George] finds getting on with the crowd pretty difficult. Recently there arose a necessity for my taking a hand in the situation, and I took

occasion to say several things which I think not only helped George, but helped some of the more “red-blooded” elements, so to speak, of the school, who understand their responsibilities, their limitations, and their opportunities. It is nothing serious, but something we can have a chat about when I see you.<sup>48</sup>

Although he may not have meant to, it is possible that the headmaster inadvertently sent up red flags when that was the opposite of his wish—a wish *not* to alarm the Lyneses. Instead, in his mind, he was alerting them early in case matters worsened, while reassuring them he had the situation under control. He was trying to quarantine a problem before it got out of hand. But the exact nature of the problem was never stated, except through indirection.

Russell would learn on entering Berkshire School after George finished in 1925 that his older brother had been nicknamed “Tess,” short for “Titless Tessie.”<sup>49</sup> Yet Lincoln Kirstein, hardly a paragon of hale and hearty manhood on the Berkshire campus, who had been characterized as both “affected” and “morbidly introspective,” understood George Lynes to be, in his biographer Martin Duberman’s terms, the “class outcast” and “the true pariah among his classmates” who was viewed as “some sort of foppish freak.”<sup>50</sup> Kirstein confided to his diary while at Berkshire that he thought George was “a sneering little bitch . . . [who] never really gets below the varnish of anything whether it be poetry, drawing or talking . . . his life is a pose . . . he fancies he is pretty to look at and saunters through the post office, into the reading room to the library and back, waving his extremities.”<sup>51</sup> Kirstein also viewed George as a junior Oscar Wilde, “parading Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily firmly clenched in his not too medieval hand.”<sup>52</sup> The young Lincoln’s wicked wordplay certainly confirms Russell’s earlier characterization of his brother as a girly-mannered “poseur” and comes perilously close to Lincoln calling George a “sissy boy,” or similar coinage, but Lincoln’s diary also relates an anecdote that provides a different perspective. According to Kirstein, George, sick of ceaseless taunting and “in utter desperation,” once “whipped out his knife and melodramatically stabbed” a Berkshire student.<sup>53</sup> Duberman casts doubt on some of Kirstein’s diary commentary, so this brief tale of silent-screen extravagance may not be accurate in its details, yet it still suggests the extent to which George felt the scapegoat at Berkshire.<sup>54</sup>

George’s truer measure was taken by the school faculty, at least some of whom saw in him a student capable of doing work better than he actually produced. The most enthusiastic report, if not one of unalloyed approval, came from Mr. Stevens, his English teacher: “A very gifted student, though not a reliable, constant worker. He will do well what he likes, and will make little attempt to do at all what he does not like. His work, in composition, is showing less of the utterly weird element which so dominated last term. In literary appreciation he is the best in the class.”<sup>55</sup>

George was an avid reader, although his mother worried to Mr. Buck that his literary taste “is being formed too much from French and Russian sources . . . which hardly seems the best steady diet for an unformed mind,” and she believed that George was too much under the influence of an older student named Wesson Bull.<sup>56</sup> Bull was among a small number of Berkshire companions, like Adlai Harbeck and others Russell calls “homosexual partisans,” with whom his older brother was simpatico.<sup>57</sup>

Adelaide’s fears seem well founded if even his English teacher believed George’s writing showed an “utterly weird element,” but to Russell, Adelaide’s tastes were “conventional” and “tended toward ‘improving’ books . . . sources of possible material for her husband’s sermons.”<sup>58</sup> As a Berkshire alumnus, Russell could credibly testify that the school’s English curriculum took literature as “something that had happened but was not continuing to happen.”<sup>59</sup> In fact, “it ended once and for all with Conrad, Kipling and Galsworthy.”<sup>60</sup> So if George’s writing betrayed familiarity with T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” as Russell demonstrates, it might signal a dangerous precocity to mentors of more conservative temper.<sup>61</sup> For example, in an article for *The Dome*, whose title “And I, Tiresias” is a direct reference to lines in Eliot’s masterpiece, George’s descriptive language is particularly lush:<sup>62</sup> “There is a pool with strange fish behind the wall at the far end of the chamber, and the ceiling is tufted with flamingo feathers. . . . Against the wall is a couch with an ivory pillow that is covered with lynx skins . . . and on the floor is a beaten basin of fresh fruit.”<sup>63</sup>

But the *recherché* quality of his language could also fit the occasion, as in a poem entitled “Sunset” that he published in *The Dome* of June 1923, where he begins:

Daintily upon a sea  
Of mauve  
Deepening to lavender  
Boats,  
Pure gold  
With fleecy sails  
And joyous colored ensigns,  
Ply between sky-ports  
’Twixt saffron isles  
And silver cities,  
Bearing on a happy commerce<sup>64</sup>

Throughout the spring of 1924 and into 1925, Adelaide expressed her concerns about George’s academic stumbles, offering Mr. Buck evidence that she and the reverend were doing all they could to keep the boy on track, for by his junior

and senior years the prospect of getting their son into a top rank college seemed uncertain. Adelaide thanked the headmaster for sending along a Harvard University catalogue.<sup>65</sup> No evidence of George's academic shortcomings was going to interfere with Adelaide and Joe's determination to see him enter an elite university.

George clearly felt the pressure. In one letter to Headmaster Buck, Adelaide commented that George assumed that "because he has given up Latin he will not be able to take an A.B. at Harvard," which worried her and Joe because their son "has no inclination for a science degree and we know of no other degree that he could work for other than those of the professional schools."<sup>66</sup> By the spring of 1925, George's final semester, Adelaide wrote in a mood of real gloom to "My dear Mr. Buck," admitting that "Dr. Lynes" was feeling discouraged that their joint efforts might all come to nothing with George not getting into college. She turned to a different prospect and asked for Buck's advice:

He has been offered an opportunity to go to Paris this summer, a chance which he will probably never have again and we are very anxious to give him the benefit of such an experience, but it will not be easy to plan for study under the unsettled conditions.<sup>67</sup>

Yale was now in their sights, at least in part because George had gone up to New Haven to visit Wesson Bull, his close friend and former editor at *The Dome*, who had already made it into the college.<sup>68</sup> The style of George's prose in one senior-year letter to Wesson, his now absent friend, suggests, in its repetitions and elisions, the likely influence of Gertrude Stein, and a quality of intimacy that might have distressed Adelaide who opposed the older boy's influence:

There is no reason in the world I think; I have told myself over and over that there is no reason why we have not seen [*sic*] for so long. Do you know that it is not since last September that we have seen, it is all very inexcusable, there is absolutely no reason. . . . I AM SO LONG AWAY FROM YOUR ELUSIVE COMPANY.<sup>69</sup>

For Adelaide, an inchoate hope to delay George's renewed companionship with Bull might have added weight to the argument for his trip abroad. The opportunity to go to Paris was by way of Adelaide's older cousin Kate and her husband, Walter B. Hardy, who had settled in Paris after their residence in England had finally been cut short when their fortune was put in the hands of a "private banker who turned out to be a crook."<sup>70</sup> The Hardys must have had sufficient fallback to remain abroad. George would need to take courses while in Paris to complete his college requirements.<sup>71</sup> Russell pegs Cousin Kate as a "formidable

and ample figure” who was “sharp-minded, forthright in her opinions and impatient of fools.”<sup>72</sup> Cousin Walter was a “white-haired man with a white goatee . . . a quiet-spoken and friendly gentleman . . . who was pleased and unflustered by the young.”<sup>73</sup> Adelaide and Joe could hardly have wished for better chaperones.

George’s enthusiasm for this arrangement was positive: “His wishes prevailed,” wrote Russell. “They usually did, where his family, including me, were concerned. It was easier to give in to George at whatever cost than to resist him. Sometimes he merely exerted the charm with which he was generously endowed; sometimes pathos, real or simulated, was his weapon.”<sup>74</sup> Yet Adelaide never spelled out the specifics of the arrangement to Buck—that the boy would be fulfilling his academic requirements and not just crossing the Atlantic for the pleasure of a summer spent in that most romantic European city where, as it happened, American and British writers were forging a new literature. Proximity to this literary activity would surely have been an attraction to George, with his taste for current writing, but would scarcely have persuaded the more hidebound Headmaster Buck of the scheme’s merits.

By this point, however, Buck surely knew the nature of the boy with whom he was dealing, and the particularities of temperament and need which the Lyneses were desperately hoping to address. There is evidence to support the adults’ tacit understanding of George’s aesthetic impulses—those “weird” aesthetic tastes—as suspect signifiers of his homosexuality. In a revealing letter of unknown date (c. 1923 or 1925), Adelaide seems first to blame herself, and then her and Joe, for some essential failure in raising their elder son:

I’d like to tell you if I could how we feel about your patience and justice toward him. George was born at a time when I was under a tremendous strain. He was a very ill and nervous child. The doctors gave him up utterly twice. When he began school the fact that he had neither the physical disposition nor natural prowess for games marked him among the boys as different—which of course threw him back upon himself—and put him in his contacts on the defensive—I make no excuses for any of the mistakes he has ever made. The fault may lie in our not properly knowing how to cope with a disposition we have been ourselves often at a loss to understand, but the boy has been oh so lonely all his life. His manner, his posing are just veneer to cover the fact that he doesn’t feel one with the crowd. He has tried to be hard so he couldn’t feel hurt. His response to certain boys was simply an alternative. He needed human intercourse and the better boys did not seek him out. I believe that in a few years the child will find himself and be happier and more at his ease—for he has fine feelings known only to us—consideration and affection and taste for the beautiful. All his interest in modern art and literature I feel is only a phase.<sup>75</sup>

This “taste for the beautiful” did not, in Adelaide’s mind, include modern tendencies in the arts, but this is exactly what thrilled George. He was responding to the “new,” which exerted a strong influence on the post–Great War generation whose faith in cultural and political shibboleths had been entirely shaken. Years later, George would write: “In private schools I was the sort of bright unpopular youngster who makes up for being lonely by elaborate make-believe about the arts and a cult of certain writers, such as Cocteau and Stein.”<sup>76</sup> For the young Lynes, his “make believe about the arts” was crucial—his writing poetry and keeping up with new poets were steps in that direction. In the earlier letter to Wesson Bull, he even forecast giving “poetry readings in fashionable New York houses and mak[ing] lots of free money.”<sup>77</sup> He was urged forward by an imaginative, creative sensibility, however immature and unfocused, and by a presumption that real artists would welcome him into their community in a way that the boys at school—most of them content with the conventional—would not.

Adelaide could not give her son’s “disposition”—an attraction to beauty, a rich fantasy life and “fine feelings,” a refusal to adopt conventional masculinity, a defiant if also defensive stance in opposition to masculinity—its proper name; in the decorous society of her time and class any one of these attributes in a young man was absorbed by the observer and understood without being named. It was the naming that was in some perverse way even less acceptable than the thing itself. And yet, shortly later in her letter to Buck, she confesses: “Of one thing I am certain, the boy is really trying very hard. It may not show much but he is waging a big fight with himself of which only I have any knowledge.”<sup>78</sup> She may not name its substance, but she detects her son’s internal war as only a mother can.

Seaver Buck fully apprehended George’s disposition by the time Adelaide asked him to pronounce on the wisdom of sending her son to Paris. In his way, Buck was a man of the world; a headmaster at a boys’ prep school would have to be shock-proof. However, Headmaster Buck could become morally indignant if, by his lights, the occasion warranted. In one instance, George “almost got thrown out [of Berkshire] for using the word ‘pubic’ in a piece for the *G&G*. (The *Green & Gray*, a school publication, was named after the school’s two teams comprised of students and faculty.)”<sup>79</sup> On another occasion, Buck went into high dudgeon over printing of the word “phallic,” also in the *G&G*. Buck asked the perpetrator of this usage to define the word. The hapless boy “wasn’t sure what the word meant” but guessed it meant “significant.” Buck proceeded to Lincoln Kirstein, who did not hesitate to say “the phallus” and added, “It has come to be used as an adjective.” To Lincoln’s impertinence, Buck replied, “I suppose you have read Oscar Wilde” and Lincoln parried, “Quite a lot.” No doubt in a fury at Lincoln’s equanimity, Buck shot back, “He was an *exotic* and do you know what he was sent to prison for?”<sup>80</sup> A generation after the Oscar Wilde trials of the mid-1890s, the Anglo-Irish playwright’s very name remained code for same-sex turpitude, and



Buck was not shy to point to it directly with a student he felt quite sure would take his meaning, as Lincoln certainly did.

Homosexual experimentation at Berkshire School was feasible, if also monitored. Several cabins or “shacks” on the slopes of the Dome had been built by boys since the school’s first years.<sup>81</sup> Although the cabins were off limits after hours, Kirstein recalls one halfway up the hill that “was our escape hatch for nocturnal feasts” and “was accessible, via a rope of knotted bedsheets, from a fifth-floor attic dormitory down to ground.”<sup>82</sup> And while homosexuality may not have been a topic for conversation, sex certainly was. Kirstein recalls a “collective insomnia” that found some “thirty or forty boys in a blacked-out school library.”<sup>83</sup> After the unfocused fun had died down, one of the football heroes made a “bumbling oration in which he advised all of us to return to bed and continue playing with ourselves,” which, Kirstein admits, was the prime focus of his first semester at the school.<sup>84</sup> And while the corridors were “nominally policed” after lights out, “visits to bedrooms other than one’s own were discouraged in vain.”<sup>85</sup> Three decades later, George would remember such nocturnal visits, some by the very boys who tormented him by day: “They’ almost hated themselves in the morning, but almost always they came back for more. . . . Bless their horrid hearts.”<sup>86</sup>

Buck was noncommittal in his reply to Adelaide Lynes, although he thought if conditions were “ideal”—including a change in George’s “attitude” toward his work—such a trip might be useful. Short of that, he thought going abroad would certainly delay George’s entry into Yale a full year.<sup>87</sup> It did not seem likely that George would be able to make up his deficits in time for the new fall term at Yale or anywhere else. His opinion would have arrived too late, for George had left for France the day before Buck wrote his letter.

Adelaide and Joe could not have known the subtle game Buck himself had to play in positioning George for admission to this college or that. For example, Buck’s letter of April 27, 1925, to the “Director of Committee on Admissions” at Columbia University—where George was interested in the School of Journalism—is damning with faint praise and innuendo: “Lynes is a rather peculiar boy, who, because of illness, has had many interruptions in his academic work. When he was quite small, he was with us for a year, and then, owing to extreme nervousness, dropped out for a period of two years.”<sup>88</sup>

There is no question that he is a boy capable of doing college work. His main interest is in literature. He is an omnivorous reader—rather inclined to “dabble” in art. He probably knows Oscar Wilde better than he knows Shakespeare.<sup>89</sup>

Headmaster Buck could not have made clearer the nature of the boy the Ivy League enclave high on Morningside Heights was likely to welcome into its hallowed halls: an *exotic* of the Oscar Wilde sort. Harvard University had

only five years earlier conducted a secret inquest at the highest administrative levels into a circle of students, junior faculty, and even Cambridge locals who engaged in homosexual activities, forcing those suspected to inform on one another in the absence of due process, and resulting in suicide and ruined reputations. The documentary evidence was kept hidden in a restricted Harvard archive labeled “Secret Court Files, 1920” and discovered in 2002 by a researcher for the *Harvard Crimson*. Yet the episode suggests the lengths to which the most revered of the Ivy Leagues was willing to go to prevent becoming a haven for those who succumbed to what by common consensus was thought the worst moral depravity.<sup>90</sup>

And just as Buck was trading in artful innuendo in his note to Columbia, Lynes’s own graduating classmates were artful in conveying double meanings in their 1925 yearbook (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2), where George’s one-page profile already assumed he was headed to Yale. First, they credited their peer as an “ardent worker for the *Dome* Board, composing many entrancing ditties”—such is their condescension to “dabbling” in verse—and then they allowed that:

he is accomplished to a great extent in artistic fields, having several portraits on display in the art galleries of New York. . . . In athletics, his one complaint is that although for four years he has run consistently with the track squad, as yet he hasn’t been able to catch up with them.<sup>91</sup>

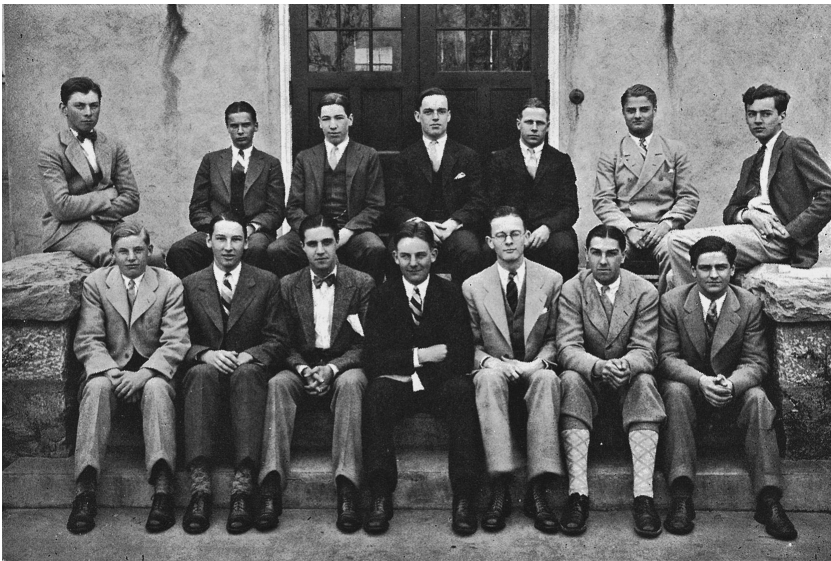


Fig. 3.1 Berkshire School Graduating Class 1925 (Lynes at extreme right). Courtesy Berkshire School Archives, Sheffield, MA. © Berkshire School.



### George Platt Lynes

Englewood, N. J.

Gray Club

"George"

Yale

Entered fall 1919; Gray Football '24, '25; Camera Club '20, '23, '24, '25; Green and Gray '24.

In the four years that George has been with us, he has been an ardent worker for the *Dome* Board, composing many entrancing ditties. As well as evidencing exceptional literary ability, he is accomplished to a great extent in artistic fields, having several portraits on display in the art galleries of New York.

In athletics, his one complaint is that although for four years he has run consistently with the track squad, as yet he hasn't been able to catch up with them.

We wish him success in college and in years to come.

Fig. 3.2 George Platt Lynes yearbook picture, 1925. Courtesy Berkshire School Archives, Sheffield, MA. © Berkshire School.

The last is a sly phrase, implying that he was running less *with* the team than running *after* them. For the rest, the story of his having already shown "portraits" in New York art galleries seems dubious—no document exists in the family archives to confirm this, and Russell is silent on the subject. This could well have been one of George's self-aggrandizing fantasies his classmates took seriously. But this brief bio of their already absent classmate—for by graduation, George was in Paris—allowed for an amalgam of hyperbole and cautious double meaning.

Before graduation, George had sailed for Paris where writers neither dabbled nor scribbled but made literature a way of life. It all was too thrilling as he looked out upon the ocean on the eleventh of April 1925, leaving in the ship's foamy wake the final weeks of his senior year at Berkshire School. He wrote to his parents and his brother on shipboard stationery printed with an illustration of the mighty RMS *Mauretania* belching its smoke high in the air from four smokestacks as its prow cut through the water:

My darlings— . . . In a few minutes we sail. There is not very much I can say. My ears are burning, the pen shakes in my hand. I am hoping, with all my heart I am hoping for many things—a double reward. Some day there will be satisfaction for us all—but now, this is the last frightening moment and this iron-ore water is of the same stuff as my mind, I am drugged, I cannot think. I wish I knew so many things—Tomorrow I will write again.

Always, always your true, devoted

George<sup>92</sup>

These were hardly the thoughts of a boy plodding his way across the ocean just to take catch-up courses for college. This is the breathless message of an aesthete-pilgrim on his way to the Promised Land. In a way that he might have fantastically imagined but could not have predicted, George was taking the most important step of his life.

## “Baby George” at the Stein Salon

In a small bound agenda titled “My Trip Abroad,” George’s first notation appeared on July 10, 1925, two months after his arrival in France. Having left Paris, he was now on the high seas, Gibraltar in his wake, his mother Adelaide at his side, en route to Italy. Ocean travel suited George: “Passed among the Azores two days ago. Exquisite cultivation! Minstrel show in the seventh, bridge tournament to-day, captain’s dinner to-night. Masquerade tomorrow etc. I have been on this boat all my life and am so enjoying it.”<sup>1</sup>

They were sailing with “the Bakers” south to the Mediterranean. George was chaperoned like E. M. Forster’s Lucy Honeychurch in *A Room with a View*, encountering some of the same difficulties that befell Forster’s Edwardians in relaxed southern climes. When they arrived in Rome, for example, the hotel management had not received their letter, so Adelaide and Helen Baker were given the manager’s room, and George suffered on a “small uncomfortable cot.”<sup>2</sup> Within a day the accommodations improved. They went off to the Vatican, whose highlight for George was “appreciating the sly coysome glances I received from several youths in the morning.”<sup>3</sup> Not exactly a religious experience.

Their little group made all the requisite tourist stops—the Baths of Caracalla, the Forum, Saint Paul’s Outside the Walls—but George’s private fascinations intruded. In Naples, he marveled at the beautiful bay and how a “fine white dust . . . covers everything.” He noted “Vesuvius smoking” and “Capri in the distance,” but concluded: “The Italian youth is beautiful. He is the stuff the tawny gods are made of.”<sup>4</sup> To imbibe beauty was like breathing air to George, but the sense of adventure, even danger, also held him in thrall. On the road trip from Pompeii to Sorrento, the party “[d]rove over the most stupendous mountains defying death and advancing fate more perfectly than ever before. . . All was so steep and dangerous and perfect.”<sup>5</sup>

His diary notations lend insight into young George’s aesthetic sensibilities in formation. He could be impatient of people and dismissive of anything or anyone less than visually pleasing. In Capri, he was amazed by the color of the water; it must have been a perfect aquamarine, but all the same he complained of being “jipped [*sic*] five lire to see a large unbeautiful man dive into the water & become pale blueish.”<sup>6</sup> At the Uffizi in Florence, he found the museum tour “interminable” and wandered off on his own till he found in the gem room “a primitive mask executed in green jade and quite large” that gave him “definite satisfaction

and pleasure."<sup>7</sup> He was remarkably assured of his own taste, with powers of discernment that likewise applied to people. His gracious summer assessment that the "Bakers make very pleasant traveling companions" was, months later, downgraded: "Afterthought: Bakers are wholly impossible. Nov. 6."<sup>8</sup>

The trip from Florence to Venice proved "ghastly"—long and hot—and the hotel was full up on their arrival, forcing alternate arrangements.<sup>9</sup> One day George swam at the Lido with Helen, and one evening he was happily "accosted" by four boys they apparently met while traveling. He sat with them on Piazza San Marco, and later George took a gondola ride with "William!" away from prying eyes.<sup>10</sup> The gentle sway of a regal Venetian bark upon Adriatic waters already prompted George to write just the evening before that a gondola outing "appeals to the lazy and luxurious in one if not the voluptuousness."<sup>11</sup> The next day, he spent the morning with the boys at the Café Florian, followed by a group swim at the Lido.<sup>12</sup> This likely figured into George's lament at departing on July 26: "I adore the city so it made me very sad to go. I hated to leave it more than any other place we have been."<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

His formal studies did not begin until that fall of 1925: physics and history at the Auteuil Day School and French at the Institut du Panthéon, all the while living a long stone's throw from his maternal cousins, Kate and Walter Hardy.<sup>14</sup> Yet George barely mentions his student activities in a separate "Five Year Diary," which for 1925 remains blank until mid-November. Then, suddenly, daily activities are noted as a roundelay of visits to the Hardys, especially dinners or tea with "Coz Kate," and frequent trips to the cinema—sometimes almost daily—along with concert going, as, for example, hearing the American pianist and composer Anton Bilotti "play Bach, Beethoven, Chopin & Liszt."<sup>15</sup> One day he is fitted for a "tux" to see Mistinguett, by then *the* legendary and leggy female music hall performer to whose show he paid repeat visits. It seems less his formal education than his cultural cultivation that occupied George.

So, he went off to see fashion designer Paul Poiret's collection at the Hôtel Druot, and days later attended a matinée gala at the Comédie Française to admire Russian émigré dancer and actress Ida Rubinstein, late of the Ballets Russes, whom he declared a "wonder."<sup>16</sup> That same evening, he attended the "New Negro revue,"<sup>17</sup> presumably referring to *La Revue Nègre* which arrived at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées that year and introduced the African American phenomenon Josephine Baker to *le tout-Paris*. Eighteen-year-old George Platt Lynes was soaking up fertile postwar Paris, a city where Diaghilev's ballet and opera seasons left their imprint upon the arts of dance, music, and scenic design, while African American musicians and performers like Baker provided receptive Parisians and Anglo-Saxon expatriates the nocturnal excitement of hot jazz and the erotic

frisson of the racially taboo. How telling of the 1920s that George, a boy of hide-bound New England, could within a season take in a shipboard minstrel show, reinforcing the crudest stereotypes of homeland Negroes, then run off to cross the color line in a Paris whose 1920s were a period of “négromania.”<sup>18</sup> Watching Josephine Baker’s black male chorus line may have allowed George’s first serious consideration of black male sexuality as a distinct category of interest.

Despite the fullness of his social and cultural calendar, letters from fall 1925 to his older Berkshire school friend Wesson Bull reveal an almost manic quality. His language is arch, his references to Greek love show-offy, and he engages a kind of camp tone that at once impressed well-educated “inverts” with coded signifiers and, for eighteen-year-old George, allowed a display of precocious, sometimes smart-alecky sophistication.

In an October letter, his archaic references undergird personal import, as if allusion to the ancients’ boy-love continues his and Bull’s previous Berkshire intimacy: “Wesson, dearboy: . . . it is to you that I write the first letter I seal with my Greek. . . . In the holy island of Thera an inscription commemorates the wedding of two young men, Eratos and Klainos, which was celebrated with all sorts of ceremonies. This is all I write to you now except for this poem which is tribute to the great maleness.” What followed immediately was an excerpt from the poem “Toward the Piraeus” by H.D., Hilda Doolittle, the Imagist poet and expatriate whose intimacies with men and women included a significant association with Ezra Pound. George delivered the start of Section 4:

If I had been a boy,  
I would have worshiped your grace,  
I would have flung my worship  
before your feet,  
I would have followed apart,  
glad, rent with an ecstasy  
to watch you turn  
your great head, set on the throat,  
thick, dark with its sinews,  
burned and wrought  
like the olive stalk,  
and the noble chin  
and the throat.<sup>19</sup>

The poem’s language, compared to George’s, is startling for its directness of expression, its unadorned nakedness of feeling and sharpness of observation. The language in other of George’s letters to Wesson is less self-consciously high-minded. In one, he revels in his fascination with the iconic Mistinguett. “La



Revue Mistinguett," he writes, "which I saw at the Moulin Rouge about a week ago is the vilest, most entirely obscene and most satisfactorily amusing thing that I have seen for ages; it also had its share of splendour and quantities of women with bubs [*sic*]." <sup>20</sup>

Occasionally, George's epistolary style is too clever by half, revealing a penchant for a vaguely smug superiority, but the content is peppered with hints that he is making some small headway in entering the Left Bank literary fray. In an October letter, he wrote to Bull on the back of an ornamental one-page menu from the Restaurant du Café de la Paix, replete with plates on offer and prices in francs. He mentions the companionship of a "Paul" and quotes back snidely to Wesson's charge that he, George, was "here among the driveling, arty, long-haired bunch." In a provocative vein, he mentions that literary editor Jane Heap "is a transvestite and undoubtedly other things which I will not mention" and asks Wesson to inquire of his well-informed friends "just where that famous Strix exists." Before signing off with "Love, reverence, & kisses, GPL," Lynes adds, "I have formally threatened my family that I may at any moment elope with my entire back account and visit the Greek Islands, Stamboul, Llassa, Indo-Chine and Siam. You would do well to suddenly appear here and affect disappearance along with me." <sup>21</sup>

The boy from Great Barrington is—need it be said?—very far now from insular New England, as he envisions the whole of the larger world. As for his living "among the driveling, arty, long-haired bunch," George counters that this doesn't characterize the people he meets. Of Jane Heap, co-editor with her lover Margaret Anderson of the literary magazine *The Little Review*, is she proof against the charge because she isn't "long-haired"? To use George's term, she is a "transvestite," which, like a host of Parisian and Parisian-based woman of the 1920s, could simply mean she sported short hair and clothing tailored like a man's. The significance of such fashion was somewhat ambiguous, since "[t]he modern woman's attributes—male haberdashery and accessories, cropped hair, cigarettes—occasionally doubled as signifiers of lesbian identity," yet, as one period observer wrote near the end of the First World War: "the very latest fashion craze is for women to cut their hair short. Everyone is doing it: . . . Coco Chanel at the head of this list." <sup>22</sup> For George, Heap's public cross-dressing persona suggested "undoubtedly other things," but he refrained from naming them in the absence of certain knowledge, yet perhaps as well because he didn't know which term would properly apply: "In the late 1920s and 1930s the word 'lesbian' was not yet in common usage . . . adjectives like 'Sapphic' and 'Amazonian' were loosely applied to women who loved women." <sup>23</sup> And where has he met Jane Heap and how does he know what other "things" she may be? Finally, *where* is this place called the Strix?—and what *was* it?—and he wonders if Wesson's informed friends can offer more precision; he clearly suggests that he's searched more than once.



When George finally located the Strix after dragging himself along Boulevard Montparnasse “for blocks and blocks” on either side of La Rotonde, it was “only by chance” that he at last fell upon his goal.<sup>24</sup> On the back of the Strix menu he writes to Wesson at Yale:

It is a queer place . . . filled with many females of advanced (*ou d'un certain*) age who had along younger and younger and more attractive females, there were tables of boys and men, and tables of men and women. It was discouraging to notice that most (especially the women) . . . either looked imbecile or very cynical and bitter. Nothing violent happened; there was no demonstration of any kind. Only exuberance. Yet two men (well over forty) who sat at the table next to me spoke long and loud using very often the word homosexual. That is about all I can recount now. After I have been again perhaps I can write you something sensational.<sup>25</sup>

He discovers a place where the word “homosexual” may be pronounced aloud and a place frequented by men “well over forty.” It is as if young Lynes is shocked to hear the category named within earshot, and no less than by men in the middle decades of life. However harsh his estimation of some of the women who appear “imbecile . . . cynical . . . and bitter,” overall he can’t help noticing the setting’s “exuberance.” In fact, the Strix was a favored place among Paris literary expatriates and was also appreciated for being “the first place in the Quarter to resemble in any way the later American-type bar.”<sup>26</sup>

Between the wars Paris was, by some lights, a “golden age, an enchanted parenthesis.”<sup>27</sup> As Robert McAlmon, the expatriate publisher, wrote, “Paris is changing itself into a laboratory where a freer and more tolerant world is being invented: ‘inverts’ are alluring, lesbians are imposing boy-style, and transvestites have the rights of citizens. People fantasize about androgyny, debates about the third sex are launched, bisexuality is in fashion, and an uncomplicated libertinism is imagined.”<sup>28</sup> This sexual freedom drew a goodly number of artists and writers from England and America; a term like *sexpatriates* should have been invented for them on the spot.

The very literary circles George hoped to rub up against would be the locus of the fresh experiments in living that Paris was inventing. He already mentioned Jane Heap, an American who with her intimate companion Margaret Anderson—along with, for some years, the strong editorial influence of Ezra Pound—managed the literary journal *The Little Review*, remarkable for having published early work by T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Ford Madox Ford, and the serial publication (1918–1921)—followed by an infamous court action for sending “obscene” materials through the mails—of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.<sup>29</sup> In an undated letter to Wesson, probably from November 1925, George invoked the name of

another central figure in the ferment that was literary Paris: "I got you a picture of Joyce from Sylvia . . . but I have decided to keep it for myself as not only did I very much adore it but I am too confoundedly poor here . . . to get anything for anyone. . . . I know to agree that Sylvia is most charming and wholly delightful; yesterday when I was there we conversed for a time."<sup>30</sup>

His invocation of Sylvia Beach, owner and manager of the most important Anglo-American bookshop and lending library in Paris, Shakespeare & Company, testifies to his and Bull's shared knowledge of the contemporary literary hot spots. By 1925, Beach had a few years before arranged publication in France of Joyce's *Ulysses* in book form, and her shop's location at 12, rue de l'Odéon, walking distance from George's residence at the Hôtel des Américains on boulevard Saint-Michel, would have been a mandatory stop. This was especially so if he thought to find a suitable photograph of James Joyce for Wesson; the walls of Shakespeare & Company were decked with framed authors' portraits, and fans of Joyce would have flocked there. It was no surprise that George found Sylvia Beach so completely delightful for she "interested herself in both writers and readers" and "exuded energy and missionary zeal."<sup>31</sup> She had the quality of a boyish androgyne; according to her biographer, she "bobbed her hair, never wore makeup, and insisted that her skirts be made short for ease of movement and built with pockets. . . . She delighted in inventing puns, quoting comic verse, and playing practical jokes."<sup>32</sup> George has already met the doyenne of Anglo-American modernism, Gertrude Stein. He makes a passing reference to Ernest Hemingway "whom Gertrude considers the only of the young of genius."<sup>33</sup> The familiarity of his language suggests he has heard her say it in his presence; he is now a member of the "Gertrude" club. But George seems so assured of integrating himself into such circles that he need not make too big a fuss.

A letter from George to "My dear Miss Stein" dated December 6, 1925, is moderate and gracious, and recalls their earlier meetings:

I have just gotten my copy of *The Making of Americans* and I write to ask if you would be willing to write in it for me as souvenir of the two afternoons when I went to your studio with the Hardys. I would appreciate it extremely, if you are willing, if you would let me know of some afternoon when I might bring it to you, and have the pleasure of seeing you again for a few minutes.

Sincerely,

George Platt Lynes

Alone is Paris! So—"Baby George"<sup>34</sup>

Such was his youthful charm to the great Gertrude—and perhaps as well to her companion, Alice B. Toklas, she who let nothing pass her inspection—that he had already acquired a nickname, though certainly not of his choosing: "Baby

George.” But he includes it ironically in this note to Stein to show that he accepts it in good measure.

Stein replied on about December 10 or 11 on her personal stationery: “My dear George, I will be at home Sunday afternoon about two o’clock and will be very glad to write my name in the book.”<sup>35</sup> Alas, there was a conflict with the date set, but George handled the problem deftly, although he was replying to her on the very Sunday morning she proposed to grant him an audience:

Dear Miss Stein: I did not receive your note until this morning and I regret extremely to say that I am . . . out of town for the day; and, as I would so much like to have you write in the book, I would appreciate it if you would let me know of some other afternoon for I have now no engagements that may not be postponed.<sup>36</sup>

Stein’s willingness to receive “Baby George” was entirely in character for a writer who, at fifty-one, doubted that she had attained sufficient recognition in the contemporary world of letters. Here was an attractive young man who wished to pay her tribute and one who, at merely eighteen, was more than casually informed about literary currents. That he should wish to have her sign his copy of *The Making of Americans* indicated that he might be—or wish to be—a serious reader of hers. The book, whose composition Stein dated to 1906–1908, was only then, in 1925, published in Paris by Robert McAlmon’s Contact Press.<sup>37</sup>

And she would have been right to think well of young George Lynes as a prospective acolyte. George insisted on knowing the facts of the literary case, as when he reminded Wesson, with self-satisfied glee, of a mutual acquaintance who, on George’s last visit to Wesson at Yale, “remarked that Gertrude Stein was becoming more comprehensible (there is no such word in the dictionary) and used her trick of repeating phrases to better advantage on her late work (meaning *The Making of Americans* which was then appearing in the *Transatlantic*); Tell him for me, in case he does not already know it that that particular book (which is just out over here and is very much longer than *Ulysses*; 925 pages of fine print) was written 1906–1908 and consequently is not late but rather early work.”<sup>38</sup>

Even as George was about to revisit the sanctum sanctorum of 27, rue de Fleurus, for Stein’s autograph, his journals and letters through the fall and into December reveal a young man immersed in a full, if not sometimes frantic, social and cultural life, with a changing cast of erotic love-objects. Of “Paul” especially there were occasional rhapsodies shared with Wesson: “Rejoice in the prospect of someday seeing my Paul’s photograph or even the lad himself; all beauty fades in the mere thought of comparison with him.”<sup>39</sup> Shortly after, he writes, “Paul has gone to Switzerland to play with the mountain goats (they have them there don’t they) and will not be back until Christmas” and in the meantime, he writes, “I am

being a perfect angel and gentleman. I . . . have renounced for the present, what Paxton calls, all Ultimate Nasty Relations."<sup>40</sup> Finally, he rebukes Wesson for his lack of enthusiasm, or worse, rejecting George's point of view:

I find it necessary to speak very sternly and seriously to you about a point of conduct; it is . . . positively indecent to even intimate that you know or have ever seen any one who can compare with Paul. Should you ever meet him your heart would be broken by the thought of your groping frustrate caresses. . . . You would weep and swoon; but that is the unhappy way of neurotics.<sup>41</sup>

These florid expressions contrast with George's terse diary entries, which nevertheless are revealing despite their brevity. On December 7, he simply notes, "School for first time in two weeks" and a fortnight later, "French for first time since Nov 21." If he was embarked upon an education, it was apparently not the one for which his parents thought they sent him to Paris. His cultural outings remained varied, including classical dance performances by the Russian émigré Anna Pavlova he attended with "Marie," a friend of the Hardys, or Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* at the Paris Opera, and dinners or teas with either or both of his Hardy cousins.

The very Sunday that he received Gertrude Stein's short note inviting him to come by at "two o'clock," George spent the day with the "Hardys & Marie at Saint Cloud. Tea dance there. Dinner Delmonico Percy. 'La Revue Mistinguett' again. Came to my room left 2:15."<sup>42</sup> Not unusual for a young homosexual of good family and worldly ambition, George was leading a quiet double life, respecting his family obligations by day, attending to his needs by night. For a boy who had essentially been blackballed at school, now was the opportunity to navigate a fresh world, to commingle his high and sometimes low cultural tastes—the Revue Mistinguett was, after all, "the vilest, most entirely obscene" yet "amusing" thing he had seen in ages—and to engage his youth and good looks for all the attention they could muster. "Percy?" It seems Percy dined with him at Delmonico, they continued on to Mistinguett's performance, and then Percy went to George's room and left two hours past midnight. A postscript diary entry next morning had the pair breakfasting together once Percy returned to retrieve the wristwatch he had left behind.<sup>43</sup>

Feeling forced to lead a divided life is not unusual as adolescents grow into adulthood, but George was keenly aware, as Headmaster Buck and Adelaide had been, that his aesthetic sensibilities betrayed him. So in his letter to Wesson mentioning the photograph of James Joyce he acquired via Sylvia Beach, he also wrote of an expected luncheon visit from "an idiot friend of mothers who is afterwards to come to see my room, that she may so well tell mother (who has not seen it) all about it in the most unreliable fashion." Rather than have the woman report

back about his room's décor, George hid pictures of special schoolmates Wesson and Adlai, and of his current literary hero James Joyce, as well as "a picture of the Luxemburg statue of Salammbo"—the exotic Carthaginian priestess of the third century BC, the heroine of Flaubert's historical Orientalist novel. In their place, he put out two family pictures and one of a former dog. "Does the hypocrisy of it appeal to you?" he asked Wesson. "When the woman has gone the family and the dog will disappear and we will bring out the charming Carthaginian maiden."<sup>44</sup> That the little nude of Salammbo could have suggested a quite opposite sexual interest than George's actual taste in boys nevertheless became suspect by virtue of her nudity, which might appear a spur to masturbation. And James Joyce's reputation for salaciousness in lengthy passages of *Ulysses* would have warned off George setting the Irish novelist up as a figure of hero worship. This little subterfuge would not be George's last experience of self-censorship.

But this double life—the earnest and eager young man seeking to ingratiate himself into the Paris literary scene versus the randy teenager with louche late-night habits—exacted if not a psychic toll, then a gnawing doubt. In a separate "notes" section at the extreme end of his diary, George wrote of an earlier tryst with "Percy": "The encounter with Percy is upsetting + frightfully depressing at the moment."<sup>45</sup> And in a similar note, the day following Percy's demand for the return of his watch, George categorically declared, "After last night I will not try to see Percy again."<sup>46</sup> George was sufficiently jarred that he engaged in a "[l]ong talk of importance" with his Cousin Kate.<sup>47</sup> Again, in a separate back-of-diary note, we learn the consequences of this discussion: "Talk in evening determines that I shall get rid of Wesson along with Percy & all the useless, neurotic degenerates around."<sup>48</sup>

It seems improbable that George unburdened himself on matters of sexuality to "Coz Kate," but Russell had characterized the "square-jawed, blue eyed" woman as "forthright in her opinions and impatient of fools." Likely conversation with her included the kind of no-nonsense guidance that would force George to fresh reassessments.<sup>49</sup> All the same, George's rash language—"useless, neurotic degenerates"—sounds like the high-dudgeon of a moralizing Bible-thumper. Is he castigating all homosexuals, or only the "useless" and "neurotic" ones? And what constitutes being "useless"—useless to whom?

Writing from Cousin Walter's residence at 39, rue de la Bienfaisance to brother Russell at Berkshire School, George revealed having bought "ninety (90) small oil paintings by Phelan Gibb from Cousin Kate, and I have since sold twelve of them for almost twice as much as I paid for the lot. I am keeping eight for myself and the rest are all for sale. I am to give Cousin Kate half of whatever I make on them above the five pounds for Gibb who has very very little money. . . . It is my first speculation and it has turned out very well."<sup>50</sup>

His involvement with the paintings of Harry Phelan Gibb, a British painter and friend of Gertrude Stein, may indicate that Miss Stein's personal influence has already made itself felt.<sup>51</sup> Surely this was the case when George noted his interest in a Juan Gris watercolor he saw at the Galerie Simone. Stein had first acquired works by the Spaniard Gris in 1914 at the David-Henry Kahnweiler gallery—Picasso's dealer—and she had recently had published, at Jane Heap's invitation, an "appreciation" of Gris in the winter 1924–1925 issue of *The Little Review*.<sup>52</sup> By then, after two visits with the Hardys in the fall and a likely "book signing" visit to Stein before 1925 ended, George would have seen works by Gris on Stein's walls at rue de Fleurus. His interest in the Spanish painter provides a second instance of young George adopting the tastes of his new avant-garde idol. A few days into the new year 1926, George bought the Gris watercolor.<sup>53</sup>

While George's purchase was probably influenced by Stein's example, his impulsive reactions to male beauty needed no such tutorial. At age eighteen, while Cousins Walter and Kate kept their eye on him with frequent dinners and teas and outings, George also lived independently in the Fifth Arrondissement on the Left Bank sufficiently distant from the Hardys in the Eighth so that he could feel his life was his own. His interest in tasting, and being tested by, fresh sexual experience were assertions of that independence, despite his qualms about "useless, neurotic degenerates." On a "strange" walk down the Avenue de l'Opéra, he met a young Mexican named Rafael. They went off to dinner and followed up at the *Revue Mistinguett*—George's third visit.<sup>54</sup> Next day, they parted at eleven in the morning, but met up again for dinner at the *Strix*, and then the pair went off to the cinema. George concluded: "He is an adorable person for me."<sup>55</sup> A few days later, however, George was already in state of enforced withdrawal: "Dec. 30: I think I must really adore Rafael in spite of all best resolutions, and now he is away from me in Berlin and I will probably never see him again."<sup>56</sup> On New Year's Day 1926: "Do I or do I not really adore the gone Rafael?"<sup>57</sup> But he would learn that distance had its compensations, for on January 5 he received "[m]y first real love letter from R today."<sup>58</sup>

The next of George's subsequent visits to the Stein/Toklas household, without the company of his adult Hardy cousins, took place mid-January: "Tea alone at Miss Stein's (i.e. there were no other guests)."<sup>59</sup> He would use such visits to good effect, putting himself forward not merely as a precocious boy of practiced charm, but as a young man searching to establish his place in a crowded field of acolytes. He was entering the Stein circle at the right moment.

For nearly two decades, her place on rue de Fleurus had been a site of pilgrimage for Americans wishing to see the remarkable modern art collection Stein and her brother Leo had amassed beginning in the first ten years of the twentieth century, along with a similar collection their nearby brother Michael and

his wife Sarah had. Alice B. Toklas more than simply replaced Leo in Gertrude's affections; she inherited the run of the household over time and the position of Gertrude's utterly devoted companion and confidante. But the post-Great War era ushered in a decade of flux for Stein as "new alliances after the armistice . . . situated her at the center of an international network of up-and-coming artists, many of them gay or bisexual. These affiliations differed from those she had formed before the Great War with vanguard painters such as Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris, and Matisse. Sexual nonconformity (for which artistic nonconformity provided an alibi) formed the basis of Stein's postwar relations."<sup>60</sup>

The newcomers, many of them in their mid-twenties, included a number who had been led to her altar by the quick-witted Harvard-educated composer, Virgil Thomson, such as the French poets René Crevel and Georges Hugnet; the neo-romantic painter Christian (Bébé) Bérard; the Russian émigré artist Pavel Tchelitchew; the Dutch painter Kristians Tonny; Thomson's partner, painter Maurice Grosser; and the American writer Bravig Imbs.<sup>61</sup> This expanded to include Tchelitchew's partner, the composer Allen Tanner; the author, photographer, critic, and Harlem Renaissance gadfly Carl Van Vechten; the art critic Henry McBride; the painter Eugene Berman; and the distinctly insinuating Frenchman and expert on America's founding history, Bernard Faÿ, who was to become Stein and Toklas's lifelong intimate.<sup>62</sup>

According to James Mellow, "Among these young men [Stein] was a kind of mothering figure and sometime muse; for the painters, she was an occasional patroness whose reputation as a discoverer of genius could be useful to their careers. From one month to the next, fortunes rose and fell at the rue de Fleurus. Among themselves, the young men vied for her attention."<sup>63</sup> In his memoir of the period, Bravig Imbs remembered Stein "sitting majestically like a Roman emperor," and employing manipulative social tactics by "taking a deep malicious pleasure in the all but mortal combat she had encouraged among her guests. She was not only extremely versed in the French art of 'brouille'—arguing and encouraging "falling-outs"—"but had this extra accomplishment of stirring up quarrels between people without ever once stepping into the shadow of blame herself."<sup>64</sup>

George's entrée was a smoother one, since he had not crossed the threshold of the Stein/Toklas residence as an artistic combatant, and his noticeable youth, good looks, and charm, accompanied as he was by two mature members of the American expatriate community, Kate and Walter Hardy, would have initially protected him from the fray. Yet his ambitions were vaguely literary, and he had distinguished himself to Stein by his request for her signing his copy of *The Making of Americans*. In the new year, 1926, he presented himself in another guise, for he was of that generation "on the Continent and in America," as Robert McAlmon observed, where "every second college boy, radical, or aspiring



writer wished to start a magazine."<sup>65</sup> Although he did not officially fall into any of McAlmon's categories, George sensed that if he made himself useful to Gertrude Stein, his association with her would be useful to him. George was taking advantage of his growing circle of Paris acquaintance, including a friendship with a young American woman named Edith Finch, a "New England bluestocking, recently graduated from Bryn Mawr."<sup>66</sup> She and George, Russell remembered, "shared an enthusiasm for the arts of the past as well as the present, and in what were then generally (and academically) considered the outrageous products of Matisse and Picasso and Juan Gris" and "the nonsensical utterances of Stein and Pound and Eliot."<sup>67</sup> In January 1926, George and Edith quickly developed a rapport. Edith was seven years George's senior, but their mutual interests and her worldliness made her a perfect female companion for George, who had little sympathy for women of pinched sensibilities. She was no one's mother, she had no ties to his father's Englewood parish, and she was roughly his peer. Something was brewing.

Suddenly, toward the end of that month, George's calendar sped up with incident as he and Edith planned a trip to London. Significantly, before leaving, he announced in his diary: "Arranged with Gertrude for the publication of 'Descriptions of Literature.' Dinner . . . and Casino de Paris with Edith."<sup>68</sup> With Edith Finch's help, George arranged to have some accomplishment in his pocket before crossing the Channel. He had reawakened an earlier calling: to put new writing into print, to get out the word for modern literature, and to highlight the newest visual artists. George's surge of initiative reflected his growing sense that his days there were dwindling; he would soon have to return to Englewood. His time in New Jersey would be without definition if he did not give it shape. College, if he was to go at all, would not begin until the fall of 1926, so he had dreary months ahead to fill. He enlisted Edith's enthusiasm, likely also her partial financing of this publishing project, which was to include other authors besides Stein and Tchelitchev, all paired with illustrators. At the same time, he was hurrying to experience all he could before the inevitable homecoming.

The boundary between his professional endeavors, suddenly humming along, and his pursuit of personal pleasures was a line easily crossed—especially in this heady world of ambitious and creative young men vying for the favor of Queen Gertrude. On January 31, the day before flying to London, he lunched with the Hardys, and then spent the entire afternoon talking shop with Tchelitchev and his companion-lover, the composer and pianist Allen Tanner. George noted in his journal: "Allen is so beautiful and intelligent & clever. I shall certainly try to return in ten days."<sup>69</sup>

In London the next day, he dined at the Ritz with Edith, and then attended a performance of *No, No, Nanette*, the Broadway musical comedy that introduced "Tea for Two" to the American songbook. But from the moment he left Paris



that morning, he spent “[a]ll the day with memories of Allen!”<sup>70</sup> The intrusion of Tanner into his thoughts sharpened on arriving at his London hotel when he found a letter waiting for him from Rafael, his brief Mexican paramour now off in Berlin. George wrote, “He seems so far away and the advent of Allen almost obliterates him. Can I never love truly and continuously!”<sup>71</sup> For one so young, it feels remarkable that the issue of an eternal love should preoccupy him, though there was a hint of prophesy in it.

The London trip engaged a round of theater-going, dining and dancing at the Savoy, and taking in museums and galleries, including the British Museum, the Tate, the National Gallery, and a John Singer Sargent exhibition, with Edith Finch as his frequent companion.<sup>72</sup> He even squeezed in a morning visit to a tailor to be fitted for a bespoke suit.<sup>73</sup> The West End drew George to its several popular entertainments, including two visits to Noël Coward’s farcical comedy *Hay Fever*,<sup>74</sup> but his attendance at the Sigmund Romberg operetta *The Student Prince* on February 4 had special impact. Afterwards, he met “for a moment” one of the cast members, a player named John Coast who had previously appeared in the very successful Broadway run of the play in the role of Captain Tarnitz; George paid a repeat visit the next evening.<sup>75</sup> That led to dinner with Coast at the Savoy, after which the two repaired to George’s hotel room, which the actor left at two in the morning.<sup>76</sup>

This full agenda of sightseeing and good living goes some way to explain George’s private admission: “Penniless (so to speak) in London. Not enough even to pay my hotel bill. And it is not pleasant to have to cable again for more.”<sup>77</sup> The Reverend Lynes, true to form, did not disappoint his son.<sup>78</sup> All the same, George continued returning to *The Student Prince* and squeezing in post-matinee or evening trysts, with Coast spending a full evening in George’s hotel room on one occasion, to which the now quite practiced Lynes remarked of Coast, perhaps damning with faint praise: “He is a dear.”<sup>79</sup> Unlike Paul or Rafael before him, Mr. Coast did not make George fall into full swoon. Perhaps the crucial difference was that where Paul in Switzerland and Rafael in Berlin remained out of reach, Mr. John Coast was readily at hand. George enjoyed juggling a series of favorites with the dexterity he lacked playing sports, for he admitted: “And now if it were to be John (which well it may) that would be almost too many.”<sup>80</sup> Note the “almost.” On February 9, the last opportunity for him and Coast to be together after another performance of *Student Prince*, George recounted in his diary that “John’s manager interferes. Hell!”<sup>81</sup>

But George’s intense activities and seductions did not abate once he and Edith returned to Paris. Immediately back in the French capital on February 10 through the last days of his Paris residence, George crowded in a series of rendezvous with Edith Finch, journalist Bernardine Szold, Gertrude Stein, the Hardys, and Pavel & Allen, aka “Alushka”—called “the boys”—while Allen Tanner, alone, made his

way quietly into young George Platt Lynes's bed.<sup>82</sup> Within these same final frenzied days of February, George jotted down with satisfaction: "Rene Crevel to do second pamphlet."<sup>83</sup> A few days later, he dined with Pavlik and Alushka, and the poet René Crevel joined them. Afterward, Crevel returned to George's room.<sup>84</sup>

Getting Surrealist poet Crevel (Fig. 4.1) to contribute to George's publishing venture was surely abetted or encouraged by Gertrude Stein; George noted Crevel's doing the second pamphlet before he even mentioned in his diary meeting him "for a moment," although they may have already made each other's



**Fig. 4.1** René Crevel, 1928. Photograph by Berenice Abbott. Gelatin silver print, 23.4 × 17.2 cm ( $9\frac{3}{16} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$  in. ). Purchase, Kurtz Family Foundation Gift, in memory of Harry H. Lunn Jr., 2001. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Image source: Art Resource, NY. © Berenice Abbott.

passing acquaintance among other guests at the Stein/Toklas residence.<sup>85</sup> Crevel was in Gertrude's good graces. She regarded him "as the complete exemplar of 'French charm.'"<sup>86</sup> Alice Toklas, too, fell under Crevel's sway. "In the parlor," the specialist of the Stein salon, James Mellow, writes, "Crevel was effusive and lively, politely kissing Gertrude's and Alice's hands on arrival."<sup>87</sup> Often fighting bouts of tuberculosis, yet still quite productive as a writer, Crevel would later be characterized by Stein as "young and violent and ill and revolutionary and sweet and tender."<sup>88</sup> As George had taken Stein's lead in acquiring his Juan Gris watercolor, so he confidently associated in business and in bed with members of her circle who had her approval.