

LOREN GLASS

LITERARY CELEBRITY

IN THE MODERN UNITED STATES,

1880-1980

*Mark Twain*

*Jack London*

Authors Inc.

*Stella K.*

*Ernest Hemingway*

*Robert Milder*

Authors Inc.



# Authors Inc.

*Literary Celebrity in the  
Modern United States, 1880–1980*

Loren Glass



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*For my father*



In America everybody is  
but some are more than others.

—Gertrude Stein





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# Introduction

## *Authorial Personality in the American Field of Cultural Production*

Gertrude Stein rarely doubted herself or the value of her work. Though she was frustrated by her inability to get published in the 1910s and 1920s, she maintained a stubborn confidence, supported by a small coterie of friends and confidantes, that she was the most important writer of the twentieth century, a modern literary genius. When, however, after the publication of the phenomenally successful *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933 and her triumphant tour of the United States in 1934 and 1935, she finally achieved the recognition she always knew she deserved, Stein suffered from both an identity crisis and writer's block. *Everybody's Autobiography*, published in 1937, was her reflection on these uncomfortable consequences of success in the United States. Stein claims:

It is funny about money. It is funny about identity. You are you because your little dog knows you, but when your public knows you and does not want to pay for you and when your public knows you and does want to pay for you, you are not the same you.<sup>1</sup>

The transformation of the literary value of a text in turn transforms the identity of the author who wrote it. Now that Stein was the world-famous writer she had always known she would become, she felt strangely as if she had become someone other than who she had been before.

Stein had, in short, become a celebrity. Her triumphant return to the United States was announced on the front page of most of the urban dailies; her name appeared in neon lights on Broadway; she was flocked by interviewers and autograph seekers. Suddenly, Stein saw her name everywhere, and strangers recognized her on the street. She had earlier



alleged, “I write for myself and strangers,” but this self recognized by strangers felt different than the one for whom she originally wrote.<sup>2</sup> Her celebrity had oddly conflated “myself and strangers” into a new public subject irreducible to either author or audience.

### *Celebrity Theory and Authorial Autobiography*

*Authors Inc.* tracks the developments in American cultural and literary history that enabled Stein, an author whose writing few Americans would even attempt to read, to become for a time one of the most celebrated literary figures in the United States. Stein entered into an already-established authorial star system in which the marketable “personalities” of authors were frequently as important as the quality of their literary production. Authorial celebrities from Jack London and Edith Wharton to F. Scott Fitzgerald and Anita Loos had become loosely integrated into the larger market in “personalities,” and famous authors had become part of the public “society” about which gossip and information circulated in popular newspapers and magazines. Although many high modernist authors dismissed the American culture of celebrity, Stein’s fame confirmed that the modernist “genius” could easily become a star.

This modernist dismissal of U.S. mass culture has caused literary and cultural critics, until recently, to neglect the central role of celebrity in the careers of many classic American authors. The seemingly unbridgeable divide between literature and mass culture mandated that such apparently ephemeral and trivial phenomena be relegated to the “minor” genres of biography and literary gossip. Despite all evidence to the contrary, authors and the critics who canonize them have traditionally worked under the assumption that great literature is somehow beyond or outside the logic of the market.

This assumption has been challenged by more recent scholarship. Marshaling the formidable critical arsenal established by two decades of theoretical and methodological transformation in the humanities, scholars such as Daniel Borus, Amy Kaplan, Thomas Strychacz, Jennifer Wicke, and Christopher Wilson have revealed the degree to which canonical American authors have been engaged by and implicated in the U.S. mass marketplace.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, no book-length study has emerged that considers the central role of celebrity in this relationship. *Authors Inc.* is

meant to prove that such a consideration is crucial to our understanding of literary authorship in the twentieth century.

If the significance of celebrity authorship has been somewhat neglected in recent cultural studies, the role of celebrity itself has suffered from no such neglect. In fact, it could legitimately be labeled a growth industry. P. David Marshall's *Celebrity and Power* is one of the more useful and stimulating studies to emerge in this new field. Marshall effectively emplots the historical imbrication of capitalism and democracy that has given rise to the contemporary culture of celebrity, and summarizes the theoretical methodologies that have proven helpful for its analysis. He settles on a semiotic understanding of the culture of celebrity in which "the celebrity sheds its own subjectivity and individuality and becomes an organizing structure for conventionalized meaning."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, "the denotative level of meaning of the celebrity is the empty structure of the material reality of the actual person."<sup>5</sup> This bracketing of the "material reality of the actual person" in turn becomes central to Marshall's methodological approach to the analysis of the celebrity text.

Marshall's study represents an important methodological and historical synthesis in celebrity criticism, a subfield of cultural studies established by the publication of Richard Dyer's groundbreaking *Stars*.<sup>6</sup> Like Dyer, Marshall both documents the historical rise of modern celebrity and summarizes the various approaches that have been developed for its academic analysis. Both books reveal the degree to which the academic study of celebrity has emerged as a dialectical response to the popular obsession with the "material reality of the actual person" that Marshall brackets as fundamentally "empty." Thus, Marshall opens his work by essentially dismissing "popular studies of celebrity," including celebrity autobiographies, as ideologically mystified attempts to "uncover the 'real' person behind the public persona."<sup>7</sup> His book then proceeds to illustrate how celebrity criticism can work to demystify the rhetoric of individualism that informs these more popular celebrity discourses.

Marshall's work shows how the opposition between high and low persists as a ballast for critical authority. It is not surprising, then, that neither Dyer nor Marshall deal extensively with literary or intellectual celebrity. Rather, they focus on the modern culture industries of film, music, and television, in which the individual agency behind the celebrity persona is clearly vitiated, if not irrelevant. The enormous scale and scope of the corporate culture industries in relation to any discrete individual

makes it easy to conceive of the “celebrity” as the product of an impersonal system that responds to the needs of an equally vast and amorphous audience. Writers, on the other hand, have sustained an ethos of individual creative production over and against the rise of these culture industries in which they nevertheless have had to participate. The individual authorial consciousness as elaborated by the practice of modernist authorship stubbornly persists as something more than an empty structure, complicating the easy dismissal of the celebrity’s subjectivity in so much recent celebrity theory.

Marshall claims that “the ‘celebrity function’ is as important as Foucault’s ‘author-function’ in its power to organize the legitimate and illegitimate domains of the personal and individual within the social.”<sup>8</sup> Marshall’s reference to Michel Foucault is as significant here as his correlation between authorship and celebrity since Foucault—along with Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and a host of other French theorists—has, in essence, enacted a peculiar modulation between these two functions in the American academic public sphere. This highly ironic oscillation between pop celebrity and authorial genius retrospectively illuminates the intimate relations between modernist modes of authorial self-fashioning and mass cultural models of fame. Foucault and Barthes, in particular, have come to be associated with the “death of the author,” and the replacement of the authorial consciousness by the freer play of the “text.” And yet, both theorists, unwittingly or not, found themselves objects of intense cults of personality that seemed to contradict their own theories of textuality.

Both Foucault, in “What Is an Author?” and Barthes, in “The Death of the Author,” posit authorship as a historically variable belief about the source of texts—a belief whose centrality to literary production was challenged by the rise of modernism. Hence, Barthes contends that while “the image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life,” it was Stéphane Mallarmé who began to see “the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner.” Similarly, Foucault, mobilizing Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka as signal examples, maintains that “writing has freed itself from the dimensions of expression. Referring only to itself, but without being restricted to the confines of its interiority, writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority.” Despite their differences, both essays affirm and celebrate the liberation of the text from the author as opening up a new terrain of linguistic in-

determinacy and free play. It would be difficult to underestimate the influence they have had on an entire generation of literary and cultural critics in U.S. universities.<sup>9</sup>

I would argue, however, that they have had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, if they have precipitated an enormously enriched understanding of the historically variable functions of the author, they have also ironically elevated figures such as Foucault and Barthes to almost legendary status as authors and writers themselves. They have become famous authors precisely by announcing the death of the author. As Seán Burke confirms in his study of *The Death and Return of the Author*:

They have been accorded all the privileges traditionally bestowed upon the great author. No contemporary author can lay claim to anything approaching the authority that their texts have enjoyed over the last twenty years or so. Indeed, were we in search of the most flagrant abuses of critical *auteurism* in recent times then we need look no further than the secondary literature on Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida, which is for the most part given over to scrupulously faithful and almost timorous reconstitutions of their thought.<sup>10</sup>

This apparent contradiction strikingly resembles the careers of the modernist authors to whose work they recur.<sup>11</sup> Few things are more striking about the primary spokespeople for modernism than the contrast between their stated theories of self-effacement and their actual practice and literary-historical destiny of self-aggrandizement and even shameless self-promotion. T. S. Eliot no sooner claimed that poetry should be an “escape from personality” than he became the object of an international personality cult, eventually appearing on the cover of *Time*.<sup>12</sup> James Joyce could affirm that the author sat invisible, “paring his fingernails” behind the text; but he nevertheless became at least as well known as he was well read, particularly after the censorship of *Ulysses*.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the entire modernist “lost generation” was absorbed into American mainstream culture through a bombardment of gossip memoirs that affirmed the mass cultural cachet of the personalities behind these persistent assertions of “impersonality.”<sup>14</sup>

This tension between impersonality and personality was not only an expression of the modernist resistance to mass cultural commodification; as Eliot’s famous dictum reveals, it was also internal to modernist understandings of the relation between author and text. Poetry may be an

escape from personality and emotion, but “only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.”<sup>15</sup> For Eliot, the exceptional personality is the necessary condition for the escape from personality. The personal biography of the literary artist may, as the new critics insisted, be “extrinsic” to the meaning of the work of art, but it remains significant for the exclusive social world of “those who have personality and emotions” in which the work of art circulates. For modernist artists, personality in the biographical sense tended to be sublimated into the concept of “style,” which as Barthes affirms, “has its roots in the depths of the author’s personal and secret mythology.”<sup>16</sup> Personality continued to function as a factor in the literary field, even if one of the interpretative tenets of that field was to bracket it from the successful work of art. Certainly Eliot’s own gaunt, vampiric pose and high-priestly charisma became tightly associated with his critical and poetic style as his fame and influence increased. This new critical take on authorial personality embodies a contradiction not unlike what Pierre Bourdieu identifies as the literary “interest in disinterestedness.”<sup>17</sup> Much as modernist artists were interested in appearing disinterested, their personality tended to inhere in their ability to escape personality through rendering it as style. This contradiction would become particularly acute in the modern United States due to the highly unstable relations between what Bourdieu calls “the field of restricted production,” in which writers and artists produce for a small public of each other, and the “field of large-scale production,” in which writers and artists produce for the “general public.”<sup>18</sup> In the modern European field of cultural production from which Bourdieu draws his examples, the split between the avant-garde and bourgeois was concretely undergirded by well-established cultural hierarchies and institutionally separated markets for art and literature. In the modern United States—with a much-less-established tradition of high culture and a far-more-developed mass cultural public sphere—many authors whose self-understanding was based in European models of restricted production found themselves having to adapt to the marketing strategies and audience sensibilities of large-scale production. In fact, the volatile passage from the restricted elite audience of urban bohemia and “little magazines” to the mass audience of the U.S. middle-brow became a signature career arc for American modernist writers. Along this arc, the model of the author as a solitary creative genius whose work goes unrecognized by the mainstream collides with the model of the author as part of a corporate publisher’s marketing strategy. It is in the

tensions between these two fields that the contradictions of modern American authorial celebrity emerge.

In order to unpack these contradictions, I turn to the very genre that Marshall excludes: the autobiography. Autobiographies of celebrated authors explicitly dwell on the tension between private creation and public appropriation, and reveal how the two emerge in dialectical relation. As Mutlu Konuk Blasing affirms, authorial autobiography

represents a self-examination that is at the same time private and public, for the interaction of personality and collective life that autobiography embodies is reflected in the author's personal appropriation of the language of the times. Since autobiography thus bridges public and private life, the hero of autobiography is the paradoxical private-person-as-public-hero.<sup>19</sup>

This “paradoxical private-person-as-public-hero” can be seen as the textual location where the modernist creative consciousness comes up against the public personality. In authorial autobiographies, we witness the author explicitly attempting to reappropriate the public discourse that determines the authorial career.

Blasing quite broadly defines autobiography as “works in which the hero, narrator, and author can be identified by the same name”—a definition that has been codified by Philippe Lejeune as “the autobiographical pact,” wherein the name on the cover confirms for the reader that “the author, the narrator, and the protagonist” are identical.<sup>20</sup> Lejeune’s notion of the autobiographical pact has been enormously useful for scholars of autobiography in its apparent resolution of both autobiography’s generic ambiguity and its problematic claims for reference. As John Paul Eakin contends,

The beauty of the emphasis on the identity of the proper name is that it seems to locate the problem of generic definition safely in the text, free from any messy extratextual involvement with the ethic of sincerity that has bedeviled the poetics of autobiography since Rousseau. The importance of the autobiographical pact in the text, nevertheless, resides in the fact that it is willy-nilly the sign of an intention.<sup>21</sup>

For Eakin, the genre of autobiography challenges both new critical and poststructuralist erasures of authorial intention and control. In fact, the

introductory discussion in Eakin's important study focuses on the "autobiography" of Barthes. Eakin brilliantly reads Barthes's claim that "in the field of the subject, there is no referent," over and against Barthes's late-career fascination with the referential possibilities of photography, arguing that in the end, "autobiography is nothing if not a referential art, and the self or subject is its principal referent."<sup>22</sup> And Eakin concludes that by reproducing his own handwriting on the flyleaf of the French edition of *Roland Barthes*, Barthes betrays "in the signature the very affiliation with the world of reference that the words purport to deny."<sup>23</sup>

This stubborn fascination with the possibility that the name, in the end, must somehow mandate a referential relation between the private consciousness from which writing emerges and the public sphere in which it circulates undergirds the culture of authorial celebrity. In this study, I have deliberately selected protomodernist and modernist texts that challenge or pressure the autobiographical pact in order to document the degree to which celebrity troubled many American authors' sense of their relation to their texts and audiences. Celebrity challenged deeply held convictions about authorial inspiration and property in texts by appearing to cede creative agency and control to the mass audience and literary marketplace. It is my argument that in the collision between private interiority and public exteriority that these texts document, we can see emerging the intimate dialectical relation between modernist authorship and mass cultural celebrity that deeply informed the field of cultural production in the twentieth-century United States.

### *Literary Property and the Right to Privacy*

Any study that deals with the emergence of a modern culture of celebrity in the United States must engage the work of Warren Susman, whose essay "Personality and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture" established the shift from nineteenth-century moral character to twentieth-century performative personality as a foundational interpretative paradigm for any cultural history of the U.S. self during this era. Susman's observation that "character . . . is either good or bad; personality, famous or infamous," economically indicates the pertinence of his paradigm for the emergence of modern celebrity.<sup>24</sup> Susman himself notes that the "new consciousness of personality . . . leads . . . to a new profession—that of being a movie star or a celebrity."<sup>25</sup>

This easy contrast between character and personality, and the apparently obvious correlation between personality and celebrity, however, risks obscuring the complications and contradictions of this new “modal type of person.”<sup>26</sup> The emergence of “personality” has become virtually axiomatic as an interpretative paradigm in American cultural history, leading many critics and historians to overlook the ambiguity of the term. In particular, I would like to examine the term’s relation to contemporaneous debates over intellectual property and the right to privacy.

The close relation between these debates, and the centrality of the term personality to their discussion, is foregrounded in Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis’s highly influential article “The Right to Privacy” in the *Harvard Law Review*. Warren and Brandeis worry that “instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life.”<sup>27</sup> They lament that “gossip has become a trade.” In an uncannily contemporary-sounding panic, they warn that “to satisfy a prurient taste the details of sexual relations are spread broadcast in the columns of the daily papers.”<sup>28</sup> In order to protect against this scrutiny, Warren and Brandeis argue for what many legal scholars have agreed was an unprecedented right: “the right to privacy, as part of the more general right to the immunity of the person,—the right to one’s own personality.”<sup>29</sup> This personality, according to the authors, is both “intangible” and “inviolable.”<sup>30</sup>

Their logic turns on the question of whether or not personality can be considered a form of property. At first, they appear to assume that the answer is yes: Those intangible qualities that make up “one’s own personality” can be recognized as legal property since the flexibility of common law has gradually expanded the definition of property to include “every form of possession—intangible, as well as tangible.”<sup>31</sup> As evidence, they draw an analogy between the “inviolable personality” and intellectual property, affirming “the common law secures to each individual the right of determining, ordinarily, to what extent his thoughts, sentiments, and emotions shall be communicated to others.”<sup>32</sup> This common law right has normally been construed as an instance of a right of property in that literary and artistic productions are the product of intellectual labor from which the author has a right to profit.

At this point, however, the authors are forced to concede that “where the value of the production is found not in the right to take profits arising from publication, but in the peace of mind or the relief afforded by the ability to prevent any publication at all, it is difficult to regard the



right as one of property.”<sup>33</sup> Since it takes no real labor to produce one’s “inviolable personality,” and it involves no economic loss to have it publicized, it is hard to construe it as a form of property in the Lockean sense. The analogy with copyright breaks down here since personality does not seem to have the same relation as the literary text either to the labor theory of value or the economic system of exchange.

Warren and Brandeis attempt to resolve this difficulty by inverting the relation between copyright and privacy, making the former logically dependent on the latter. First, they confirm that copyright, though a right of property, is independent of an artistic or literary work’s actual manifestation in the marketplace and material world. Thus,

the protection afforded by the common law to the author of any writing is entirely independent of its pecuniary value, its intrinsic merits, or of any intention to publish the same, and, of course, also wholly independent of the material, if any, upon which, or the mode in which, the thought or sentiment was expressed.<sup>34</sup>

Following the established definitions of intellectual property, the authors confirm that ideas are independent of their material expression. By also rendering ideas independent of “pecuniary value,” though, they make it difficult to sustain the logic of intangible possession with which they began. If intellectual property is independent of both its material expression *and* its pecuniary value, it is hard to see how it can be construed as property at all. It is at this point that the authors invert the relation between copyright and privacy by claiming that common law understandings of copyright depend on a prior assumption of a right to privacy: “The principle which protects personal writings and all other personal productions, not against theft and physical appropriation, but against publication in any form, is in reality not the principle of private property, but that of an inviolable personality.”<sup>35</sup>

Warren and Brandeis’s article figures prominently in the conclusion to Mark Rose’s important study of the eighteenth-century origins of copyright, in which he alleges that their instinct to establish copyright as a precedent for the right to privacy was sound since “the institution of copyright stands squarely on the boundary between private and public.”<sup>36</sup> Yet he neglects to consider why this particular impulse would emerge at this time, or why, a hundred years after what most scholars agree to be the key century in the development of copyright law, Warren

and Brandeis felt the need to invert the order of precedent between privacy and property.

In fact, Warren and Brandeis's almost deliberate failure to establish a specific property in which their right to privacy inheres registers a striking transformation in the structure of the U.S. public sphere after the Civil War. With the emergence of new media, an industrial economy, and an urban mass society, public and private realms interpenetrated in new ways. On the one hand, private life increasingly achieved its significance through public exposure in the new metropolitan dailies and mass-market magazines that so distressed Warren and Brandeis; on the other hand, this public exposure was increasingly understood in terms of a mass public engrossed in the private experience of reading and consuming.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, as the reading public expanded and transformed in the decades following the Civil War, figures in the publishing industry became increasingly concerned about what Henry Dwight Sedgewick designated "The Mob Spirit in Literature." With a nervousness not unrelated to Warren and Brandeis, Sedgewick fears that the audience for literature had become "increasingly vehement in its likes, dislikes, and opinions, forces the book on its neighbors with greater rigor, buys, borrows, gives, and lends more and more with the swift and sure emotions of instinct."<sup>38</sup> Many in the magazine and book industries worried about the effect this mob spirit might have on the reputation of authors, production of literature, and habits of readers in the United States. Established cultural hierarchies seemed to be threatened by the increasing interpenetration of literary and mass cultural fields.

Popular literature had, of course, caused anxiety for the cultural elite over the entire course of the nineteenth century, but the emergence of mass society altered the cultural and institutional coordinates of this concern. For one thing, publishers and editors came to believe that "a large part of our population consists of actual or would-be authors."<sup>39</sup> The national mass public came to consist of potential authors and cultural producers; readers became theoretically interchangeable with the famous authors whose texts they read. Julian Hawthorne decried the fact that

the ease with which [books] are produced in material form, and the cheapness of their price, causes them to be read by everyone, and the familiarity with methods of literary composition thus acquired enables anyone, almost, to write books that publishers will print and the public will read.<sup>40</sup>