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## The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment

Lauren Berlant

### 1. The Lady and the Stereotype

*The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* is an anonymous collection published in 1855, whose purpose was simultaneously to capitalize on and to undercut the vast popularity of Fern's *Ruth Hall*. The editor of *The Life and Beauties* takes Fern's newspaper columns and reprints them with sarcastic commentary, and since these columns themselves were often organized as ironic exegeses of opinions published elsewhere, *The Life and Beauties* sets up a kind of *mise-en-abyme* of gendered irony, a redoubled doubleness that formally embodies the contested conditions of public enunciation under which Fern and many of her sister writers labored and profited. One such entry, on married life, addresses the views of "Sambo." Fern's column is a response to a citation whose origin is the popular lexicon of white, patriarchal America.

"Sambo, what am your 'pinion 'bout de married life? Don't you tink it de most happiest?"

"Well, I'll tell you 'bout dat ere—'pends altogether how dey enjoy themselves."

"Sambo! Sambo! be quiet! You needn't *always* tell the truth. White folks don't. Just as sure as you do it, you'll lose every friend you have."

"Don't roll up the whites of your eyes at me that way. It's gospel I'm telling you. I promise you I don't go through creation with my eyes shut; and I've found out that good people always tell the truth *when it don't conflict with their interests*. . . . Oh! y-e-s, Sambo, matrimony is a 'blessed institution,' so the ministers say . . . and so everybody says—except those who have *tried it*? So go away, and don't be *woolgathering*. You'll never be the 'Uncle Tom' of your tribe." (*Life and Beauties* 162-63)

The editor of *The Life and Beauties* uses this column, retitled "Mrs. Farrington on Matrimony," to undermine Fern's critical authority on marriage, since her own history scandalously includes divorce (from her second husband, "Mr. Farrington"). Refuting the "false" Fern with the "true" Farrington, the editor arrogates the privilege of naming to expose her indecorous refusal to submit to patriarchal-domestic identity; her ventriloquization of Sambo is, by his lights, a further sign of her indiscretion, for in authorizing "Sambo" over "Farrington," she appears shamelessly to have chosen a degraded cross-margin alliance (with an African-American stereotype!) over the proper womanly marriage to white masculine authority, here embodied in her former editor, acting *in loco patriarcae*.

It is as though her projection of authority onto the African-American stereotype redraws Fern in a kind of miscegenated moral blackface and makes her a kind of monster. Between Fern and Sambo, we witness the political alliance of vernacular speech, a grotesque idiom of language and the body. The minstrel discourse of Sambo in American culture derives in part from the slaves' dramatic parodies of life in the "big house" (see Boskin); the vulgar speech of Fern occupies an analogously ambiguous relation to the domestic space in which it finds its "subaltern" identity.<sup>1</sup> Sambo and Fern's ironic tap dance thus reverberates far beyond the manifest frame in which marriage turns out to be a disappointment.

Fern's deployment of race and gender stereotypes not only refers to the oft-used woman's rights analogy between white heterosexual women and enslaved African Americans, but also to the current problem of women's professional emergence into capitalist culture. The express motive for producing *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* was to defend Fern's father and especially her brother, N. P. Willis, whose cultural and familial patrimony she caricatures savagely in *Ruth Hall*. These men were pseudofictively savaged in the novel because they let Ruth/Fanny fall between the cracks of patriarchal protection by abandoning her emotionally and financially during her early widowhood. The collective domestic behavior of men in the novel leads Fern to repudiate the patrifocal family as a site of female fulfillment, although she desires intensely to live in a family made up of mothers and daughters. But the men's personal behavior in life and in the novel also points beyond the patriarchal family to oppressive practices in the public sphere, which emanate in particular from the profession of "letters": Fern represents newspaper and periodical journalism, as well as book publishing and sales, as another site of gender discipline, where

her legitimacy as a journalist always is in question by male culture experts for its non-normativity as feminine labor and also for its vulgar feminine content. She, in turn, constantly aligns her writing with other more typical woman's work: that of housewives, seamstresses, prostitutes. Print capitalism appears to Fern simultaneously utopian and degraded, central to a revolutionary discursive democratization of the national public sphere yet nonetheless the source of revitalized race, gender, and economic exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the tension between democratic and capitalist public sphere practices, this study of Fern means to address locally a larger set of questions, notably: how might the commercial production of a popular feminine discourse be read as a test case in the collaboration of capitalism with social change? How might the case of "women's culture" illuminate the current discussion about how popular genres express both critical and conservative fantasies, operating as sites of consent that enable alliances across antagonistic, or at least different, social positions? And, finally, what does it mean that we witness, in this history, a collaboration between the commodity form and the stereotype on behalf of a feminine counterpolitics?

In mid-nineteenth-century America, the popular discourse of feminized "sentimentality" translated the materials of official history and domestic life into the abstract, relatively autonomous realm of "woman's interests," a realm governed by certain immutable "laws." These laws were articulated as part of a set of territorializing social forces, which explicitly served what Fern names the "*public or private—call it by what specious name you will*" (*Ruth Hall* 310). Fern understood that the increasingly urbanized, alienated life of industrializing America separated women and men into the separate times and spaces of the public and the domestic, which came to seem naturally gendered by virtue of which sex dominated where (see Ryan); but Fern also sensed, in a more self-reflexive way than did her sentimental peers, that the meaning, the pacing, and the spaces of everyday domestic life were themselves the effect of a new capitalist ethos of personal instrumentalization, where the woman bore the burden of seeing that there would be no affective, no intellectual, no moral, and of course no economic waste.<sup>3</sup> Fern's work in periodical journalism, which asserted the sovereignty of subjective knowledge, aimed to convert the meaning and value of female life in the quotidian: to witness it, to affirm the dignity of its unhistoric acts (often in the face of patriarchal and economic brutality, and extreme isolation within the family and from other women), but also to transform

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its mind-threatening monotonous and hermetic sameness by proposing her own brand of female soliloquy as a public, collective, and emancipatory form of expressivity and invention, available for any socially silenced subject.<sup>4</sup>

But to foreground Fern's critical function tells only part of a complex story. For her work takes a wide range of advocacy positions within sentimental culture, from the nostalgic maternal to the prophetic feminist. Here I use Fern to explicate how this peculiar popular discourse on women in the second half of the nineteenth century used the expanding cultural resources of industrial capitalism to make women into a "new" consumer group: circulating around a subject addressed and newly empowered by a female culture industry. It would be more accurate to call this a female "subculture" industry since the discourse on woman it ratifies is formed around the genericizing, stereotyped identities that marked women's representation in the dominant culture. Despite some evidence to the contrary, the generic "woman" articulated within the folds of this industry was made to seem dominant, even hegemonic in American culture—not simply contained in subcultural margins as a victim/problem (see Gilroy 26), but also venerated as an "expert," in her moral, maternal capacity to understand and to authorize people in her intimate everyday life and in the texts of women's culture that claimed to represent her experience and her interests as a "woman."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The American Female Culture Industry

The American female culture industry developed a series of generic strategies—which might be called "modes of containment"—whose purpose was to testify to the heretofore "private" trials of womanhood, to demystify patriarchal practices, and to consolidate female collective identity without necessarily abrogating "woman's" loyalty to heterosexual culture. The history of these modes of containment would trace the dialectic between their critical incursions into the patriarchal public sphere, on the one hand, and their "sentimental reflex," on the other, which involves the assertion of a feminine value that still exists in a private realm outside of social circulation. The sacred aura of this maternally identified site, which is always, as it were, projected *post facto* from a moment of modernity in crisis, hovers as loss and desire over virtually every production of the female culture industry. The most conventional sentimental novels mute their oppositional function, casting the ideals of

feminine and masculine self-discipline as moral pedagogy in an attempt to return to sacred, domestic time; but the larger history of public "women's culture" recasts conventional sentimentality as the ur-instance of collective social practice for bourgeois American women, whose foundational distinguishing mark was to refuse to identify female interest as "political"—that is, interested in obtaining power within the terms of the patriarchal public sphere (see Tompkins). In this sense, nostalgia for sacred maternal time was redeployed as the imaginary time-space of a feminine counterpolitics. The rising hegemony of urban culture as the site of public fantasy partly made this shift possible.

In sentimental domestic culture the most explicit expression of this elastic "feminine" form is the complaint—a generic name applied caustically to Fern's work, but a name she also uses and covets since, through her, the "wail of discontent" silently spoken by the mass of women finds publication (see *Life and Beauties* 27, 219; *Ginger-Snaps* 82). The "female complaint" is an international mode of public discourse that demonstrates women's contested value in the patriarchal public sphere by providing commentary from a generically "feminine" point of view. It has frequently been deployed against specific nonsexual violences in the political public sphere—for example, in women's antiwar activity. But typically, especially in the American case, the female complaint involves an expression of women's social negation: it is a rich archive of patriarchal oppression, circumscribed by a sense that woman's lack of legitimacy in the public sphere appears virtually inescapable, with the forms of patriarchal sexuality a fact of life so deeply entrenched they appear natural. The a priori marking of female discourse as *less serious* is paradoxically the only condition under which the complaint can function as an effective political tool: the complaint allows the woman who wants to maintain her privileged alignment with heterosexual culture to speak fearlessly because the vernacular mode of her discourse assumes the intractability of the conditions of the complaint's production.

The female complaint is thus an aesthetic "witnessing" of injury. Shuttling between a sexual politics that threatens dominant structures of authority and an affirmation of the female speaker's practical powerlessness, the female complaint registers the speaker's frustration, rage, abjection, and heroic self-sacrifice in an oppositional utterance that reveals the constraints and contradictions of feminine desire in its very saying (see Berlant). The appeal of this form for women is, first, in the therapeutic pleasure of demystifying patriarchy—usually depicted as "men" in the flesh, as male-identified women, or as

impersonal capitalist institutions like banks and businesses whose operations were manifestly patriarchal. In this sense the complaint often relies on the bribe of its sentimental reflex, representing masculinist practices in a feminist way, but accepting as semifixed and even desirable the domestic axes of patriarchal culture, in memories of the mother and dreams of marital bliss.

The design of these strategies had a second purpose, though, apart from demystifying and perhaps reforming institutional and personal misogyny. Sentimental culture also established a broad audience of women, aiming to stake out a safe feminine space, a textual habitus in which a set of emotional, intellectual, and economic styles, knowledges, and practices might be formulated in common and expressed with pleasure. From its inception in the late eighteenth century, the sentimental abstraction of the values of "woman" from the realm of material relations meant that interactions among classes, races, and different ethnic groups also appear to dissolve in their translation into sentimental semiosis (see Armstrong): No matter what my race/class, if I address you as "woman," your other social positions, and even your particular domestic activity and sexual practice, dissolve in the simulacrum of generic gendered experience.

Since the mid-nineteenth century in America, this logic of female legitimation, commodified as a point of identification, has marked public intrafemale discourse all over the political spectrum—conservative, reform, and radical. But while the claim to be working for "common" women and women in common was broadly articulated, many popular women writers, among them Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Louisa May Alcott, developed a counterstrain, which aimed critically to distinguish "women" in their particularity from "woman" in her generic purity. Whereas conventional sentimental texts tended to see the relation between the historical particular and the transcendental generic woman as a relation of fallen to fulfilled sign, this affiliated mode tended to characterize these relations of type as fraught with struggle and socially destructive for women, the family, and society at large. Yet rather than deeming these kinds of gender discourse as inertly opposed to each other because they promote different strategies for transforming normativity, I suggest that they are best viewed dialectically because they are constituted by the same terms and are negotiating the same social strains within the category "woman." The reflexive relation between what we might call pure and critical sentimentality is, indeed, what has maintained the sentimental intelligibility of "women's" texts while they have nonetheless in-

corporated progressively more explicit critiques of the patriarchal public sphere in America.

In sum, nineteenth-century sentimental activists of all political persuasions charged themselves and their sister women with the dual aim of social amelioration and change. By providing consolation of various sorts to the women whose negation was the fate and the fact of their lives, as well as the passport to whatever power and pleasure the gender enjoyed, the sentimental agent also aimed to transform the values and practices of domination that went along with life in the patriarchal public and private spheres. Yet it would be hasty to conclude that the war of position in which the female sentimental discourses were engaged emerged from a basic consensus about what, exactly, they were trying to save.

Clearly, the producers of this discourse were mainly white and identified with casting the racial values of bourgeois domesticity as the cultural given in Victorian America. Our current critical concern with the linkages between sentimentality and American reform movements like abolitionism suggests that this general aspiration toward bourgeois female hegemony "really" had the *greater* aim to transform the whole world as we know it (see Yellin, *Women and Sisters*); that is to say, we now see these bourgeois women, transformed into a collectivity by way of social praxis and literary production, extending their spiritual, ideological, and political victory to the downtrodden of races, classes, and genders. Whether one sees this female reformation as contributing to the bathetic self-consumerism of mass society, as Ann Douglas does, as an energetic feminine refusal to reproduce the structures and values of the patriarchal public sphere, as Jane Tompkins does, or as a pedagogical tool for making hegemonic the self-disciplinary ethos of the bourgeoisie, as Richard Brodhead does, these divergent representations of literary sentimentality presume similar things: first, that female sentimental discourse is interesting only as it engages with the public sphere and, second, that its main urgency was not in representing women per se but in social power as it circulates through the sex/gender system.<sup>6</sup>

Whether dressed up in bloomers or petticoats, then, the female sentimentalists were power transvestites, whose sentimentality about female experience would be simply embarrassing were it really the narcissistic, trivializing realm of value it often appears to be. But in my view female sentimental discourse is a mode of abstraction that has no a priori political implications for the power of women or other marginalized groups whose interests are named as the manifest motives for

its deployment. Indeed, it often had a more humble, but not unrelated, function to the positions sketched out above: sentimental ideology served as a structure of consent in which domestically atomized women found in the consumption of popular texts the experience of intimate collective identity, a feminine counterpublic sphere whose values remained fundamentally private.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. On Redefining the Female

Lost in this transfiguration of sentimental ideology into a pure "politics" is a theory of the "nonpolitical" feminine subject on whose "behalf" it was deployed. The need for such a theory of the "feminine" was central in the national conversation about how even to frame the "woman" question. By using "feminine," rather than more dignified terms like gendered or female, I mean to be evoking a problem of terminology. The protocols under which one discusses what women want have always hinged on the adjudication of antagonistic theories of what women are (see Riley). Women's sentimental culture, and the industry of productions addressed specifically to the "subject" of femininity, generated an enormous amount of material dedicated to explicating the relation between what Fern calls "the female woman" as she appeared to be and "woman" as she appeared in her dignified, abstracted dreams of herself (*Life and Beauties* 80). Sometimes, in Fern's words, the woman simply decides to let "life [appear] like the dream that it is" (*Fern Leaves* 187). Fern's assertion that woman's realities take place in the spaces of "repose," at night, in the face of suffering and death, of projected and thwarted desire, and in the general rush of detail that overwhelms woman in everyday life, reinforces Douglas's argument that the sentimental world of feminine power/knowledge writes the women as "hothouse products . . . self-announced refugees from history" (223). When life is but a dream, there is no laboring body, no real desire or pain: this is one of the many reasons that death, in much of this literature, is not only the sacred payoff for living a painful life, but also is an attitude the living woman must assume in order to stay sane. But the bourgeois female impulse to express need, desire, and pleasure unabsorbed by home, church, or the patriarchal dictionary also raised the possibility that "woman," seemingly absorbed in her role as the manager of domestic comforts, somehow had retained a personal subjectivity, an autonomous identity.

Sentimental female autobiography thus raised the possibility that under the "woman" lurked something horrible, a residual "female" whose knowledge and desire was not entirely caught up in the patriarchal domestic economy. For this reason, throughout the century, sentimental discourses struggled over whether the word "female" should be allowed to represent "woman" in the public discourse about her. Historians of American English attribute this struggle to the general desexualization of language, but for female sentimentalists, more than simple "decency" (another taboo word) was at stake. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, argued passionately against its use. She convinced the board at what was then called Vassar Female College to drop the word, for this reason: "When used to discriminate between the sexes the word *female* is an adjective; but many writers employ the word as a noun, which, when applied to women, is improper, and sounds unpleasantly, as referring to an animal. . . . It is inelegant as well as absurd . . ." (qtd. in Mencken, *AL: Supplement I* 652; see also *American Language* 303).

Noah Webster's (446) and John Walker's (79) dictionaries agree: the noun "female" is a sex noun, and calling a woman a "female" reduces her from her gender to her sex. Agitation around this issue motivated legislators to change the language of the laws they made in order to avoid accidentally imputing sexuality or desire to the gender (Craigie and Hulbert 954): the word "lady" came into use to distinguish rarified women from vulgar females.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when Fern calls a woman a "female woman," she speaks specifically of the worst kind of feminine, feline, male-objectified woman. A "female woman" is a woman who trivializes herself or competitively extends this self-negation to other women. "There's more cats than Ferns in the world," she says, "and complimentary notices from a female woman look suspicious. . . . When [such] a woman pats you with one hand you can be morally certain she's going to scratch you with the other" (*Life and Beauties* 80). Throughout her career, even after her admission of the value of woman's rights, Fern characterizes female duplicity as a present danger. But while theorists like Hale saw the name "female" as a degradation of women's cultural refinement, Fern usually characterizes the "female" in the woman as the mark of her colonization by patriarchal culture: the female woman is first and foremost an animal who has been degraded by her identity within a culture that rewards female stereotypicality. Fern calls these rewards "a relic of barbarism" (*Ginger-Snaps* 13).

Her major response to the lure of the female stereotype is

to write countless articles against what she calls the "pattern" or the "model" wife, mother, sister—the woman who sees it as her duty and desire to be inevitable, to be true to "form": "I know scores of bright, intelligent women, alive to their fingertips to everything progressive, good, and noble, whose lives, hedged in by custom and conservatism, remind me of that suggestive picture in all our Broadway artist windows, of the woman with dripping hair and raiment, clinging to the fragment of rock overhead, while the dark waters are surging round her feet" (*Ginger-Snaps* 72–73). The failure to cultivate intellect, talent, or simply self-expression has a sublime range of effects on women: most paradoxically, the woman becomes a grotesque slave to surfaces and form, dedicating herself to policing both her own and other women's adherence to rule while often becoming massively hypocritical. Fern's satire of such women includes coquettes, wives who adhere to marriage manuals, and rigidly bluestocking feminists. While her sarcasm about feminine theatricality might be read as further degradation of women for their fulfillment of type, by representing overall a wide range of women Fern marshals evidence against "those conservative old ladies of both sexes, who would destroy individuality by running all our sex in the same mold of artificial nonentity" (*Ruth Hall* 295).

Fern's essay "The Other One" plays out in a frenzy of irony the patriarchal logic of female genericization. The column is structured as a response to a male authority's loving nominalization of woman as "the other sex," without whom the world "would be only a dark and cheerless void." Fern responds to this idealizing sentiment by suggesting that, on the contrary, women are actually worthless, a waste of human resources. For women are consumed by their "Mutual Admiration Society; emptying their budget of love affairs; comparing bait to trap victims; sighing over the same rose leaf; sonnetizing the same moonbeam; patronizing the same milliner, and *exchanging female kisses!*" (*Life and Beauties* 277–78; see also *Ruth Hall* 310–11). But it turns out that even the erotic intimacy of female identity is sexual policing in disguise; women are so obsessed with being the Other to men that they feign love to mask their mutual scrutiny. Fern pretends to be so disgusted by this sentimental spectacle that she concludes "Oh, there never should be but one woman alive at a time."

But then the essay inverts again, for Fern imagines that the "one" woman alive would be herself. If she were the last remaining woman, Fern imagines that she would turn the tables on men, by making them the generic Other, spectacularly ri-

diculous in their competition to please her—body, mind, and soul. The "femininity" of "worthless" women is redefined as a name for the way disempowered, delegitimated subjects act. Through this parody of patriarchal practices, the culture of sentimental desire is revealed as an archive of subjugation and distortion. In Fern's view, men who turn women into embodiments of their own love of rule should simply marry men, since the women they imagine are more mannequin than human (see *Ginger-Snaps* 128).

But the affectively colonizing effects of female uni-formalism are much more seriously degrading and penetrating than this satire of manners might suggest. Fern's novella *Fanny Ford*, for example, asks that "God pity her, who, with a great soul, indissolubly bound, must walk ever backward with a mantle (alas! all too transparent), to cover her husband's mental nakedness!" (*Fresh Leaves* 122). Like the plot of the book itself, Fanny is "bound" to a profligate husband; her pure and innocent belief in human virtue and wifely submission drives her, like so many of Fern's subjects, insane. The debility of women who are virtuously bound to form is not dramatic or sensational, but private and hidden: "Ah! there is no law to protect woman from negative abuse! no mention made in the statute book (which *men frame for themselves*) of the constant dropping of daily discomforts which wear the loving heart away. No allusion to looks or words that are like poisoned arrows to the sinking spirit" (*Life and Beauties* 268). Fern calls this kind of marital torture "legal murder" and says its brand of justice is more likely to transgress against than to protect women from the most banal forms of male violence.<sup>9</sup> This petty violation is not simply contained in domestic spaces: Fern's repeatedly expressed wish to wear men's clothes comically refers to the daily degradation of women who happen to walk the street unprotected by the visible arm of a man (see *Ruth Hall* 309–10, 299–304; *Fresh Leaves* 56–58). So vulnerable are all women to uninvited male mental and physical abuse that Fern links herself and her "common" sisters with prostitutes, who are simply the exaggerated embodiment of the "woman" who has silently submitted to the sexual economy of patriarchal culture (*Ruth Hall* 308–09).

I have focused here on the dark side of Fern's distances from sentimental consolation, measured in her enraged sarcasm at the practices and effects of patriarchal man- and womanhood. There are many texts spread throughout her career that validate sentimental ideality in a nonironic sense as well: in texts like "A Word to Mothers," which argues that "a mother's reward

is in secret and in silence," she invokes maternal martyrdom as an unflinching index of moral and practical virtue; in texts like "Bogus Intellect" and "Two Kinds of Women," she repeatedly asserts that married women's submission to a domestic regimen must precede any incursions into the public sphere (*Ruth Hall* 332–33; *Ginger-Snaps* 125–28). Old maids and other women forced by circumstances to earn wages have slightly different privileges and obligations, but these are wrought by tragic necessity, not by choice, and involve their own dialectic between radical gender redefinition and sentimental reflexivity, or, to use Fern's language, between "sense as well as freshness, and conversation and repartee as well as dimples and curves" (*Ginger-Snaps* 147).<sup>10</sup> Noncoherent about the value of domestic ideology and women's rights agitation, Fern has no single position on the woman question, except that she consistently stages the baptism of woman's lot in her continual confrontation with the stereotype to which she must submit, either under duress or spurred on by desire. Her critique of the middle-class embrace of stereotypicality extends to its effects on men as well as women. But her interest is in asserting that as long as "woman" appears to be "a walking advertisement" for a cultural type, "women" will be immersed in triviality and modes of self-abasement that range from the heroically pathetic to the embarrassing (*Life and Beauties* 283). Fern does not settle on one response to the fact of female humiliation; her perennial task is to testify to the patterned postures women take in public, in their infinite and contradictory variety.

#### 4. "All Femality is Wide Awake": Fanny Fern's Fresh Leaves

Fern's reading of domestic sentimentality acts as an apology and a consolation for the anguish of living under patriarchy, but this critical pose does not align Fern solidly with feminism—or at least authorize her female audience to rupture relations with domestic fantasy. Instead of making simply a complaint against men and male-identified women, Fern carries out the struggle to install female dignity within domestic life by criticizing two disembodied and objective patriarchal forms that define the negativity of women's experience: the dictionary and the nation.

Countless times, à la Becky Sharp, Fern repudiates the patriarchal dictionary, which preserves in panhistorical form the archaic formations of male dominance: its most elaborate incarnation is in the masculine "dictionary on legs," whom

Fern exiles from the scene of domestic literature in the introduction to her novel *Rose Clark* (qtd. in Baym, *Women's Fiction* 32–33). As a metonym for the sum of patriarchal culture, the dictionary itself takes up the space of what women cannot yet say, the silence of subalterns, marked out by their very speech: on the subject of husbands, one of her characters writes, "well—THERE! when I think of THEM, I must wait till a new dictionary is made before I can express my indignation!"; on her desire to reinvent clerical definitions of women, she declares that "if I were to swallow a whole dictionary, I couldn't clothe that idea in words!" (*Life and Beauties* 141, 169; see also *Ruth Hall* 101, 146, 229).

Of course, women have already swallowed the bitter pill of patriarchal language; and so when Fern proclaims that "All femality is wide awake," she links Margaret Fuller's feminist neologism with granting dignity and expression to the otherwise degraded female libidinousness of woman (*Fern Leaves* 380). "Femality" is a force in excess of the forms of negation and containment that characterize life within the patriarchal abode. Even "pattern" women "exceed" their stereotype (*Fern Leaves* 380–81): "femality" reroutes female excess from abasement and hypocrisy to a productive and positive vernacular drive, not feminist but celebratory of women's consciousness in a populist appeal.<sup>11</sup> But we must follow carefully the limits of this noun: "femality" is wide awake, but the material conditions of social life lag miserably behind consciousness. Nonetheless, Fern's assertion of women's psychic emergence (which is tied to her own position as a female journalist within a burgeoning women's culture industry) is a strategic intervention into the impasse of sentimental culture—its representation of feminine ideality and its renunciation of the female residues not caught up in "type." The invention of a new language, derived from what she calls the "Fern dictionary," will enable Fern as exemplum "to express [her] surplus enthusiasm" and "tumultuous emotions"—to decolonize herself, and so to "forget" strategically the matter of patriarchal culture (*Life and Beauties* 112). "If I wasn't bound to collect their mental skeletons to hand up in my dissecting-room, I should eschew the whole sex," she writes, calling her persona a "female naturalist" (*Life and Beauties* 205). Indeed, on occasion she contracts a terrible case of citational amnesia, as in the time she cannot remember whether the line "*He* for God only, *she* for God in *him*" was written by John Milton or Mother Goose (*Life and Beauties* 121).

But along with revealing the patriarchal quotation marks

around the language and culture in which women have assumed distorted "female" identities, Fern's agitation against the dictionary also has a patriotic edge: to repudiate Webster's dictionary as she does repeatedly is to reject the American vernacular so deeply associated with the nation's revolutionary emergence. In Fern's writing, national identity constitutes both the promise and the fraudulence of liberal culture. Her many essays against British and French society champion the common sense that distinguishes American women. But when addressing what her country has done for her as a woman, Fern measures with her very body the distance between women and citizenship or national personhood. Her columns "Independence" (from *Ruth Hall*) and "A Little Bunker Hill" (from *Fern Leaves*), for example, argue that American rights refer only to "masculine rights," for women cannot be considered "free" in America, either in the political or the urban public spheres.

"FOURTH OF JULY." Well—I don't feel patriotic. . . . I'm glad we are all free; but as a woman—I shouldn't know it, didn't some orator tell me. Can I go out of an evening without a hat at my side? Can I go out with one on my head without danger of a station-house? Can I clap my hands at some public speaker when I am nearly bursting with delight? Can I signify the contrary when my hair stands on end with vexation? Can I stand up in the cars "like a gentleman" without being immediately invited "to sit down"? Can I get into an omnibus without having my sixpence taken from my hand and given to the driver? Can I cross Broadway without having a policeman tackled to my helpless elbow? Can I go to see anything *pleasant*, like an execution or a dissection? . . . Can I be a Senator, that I may hurry up that millennial International Copyright law? Can I *even* be President? Bah—you know I can't. "Free!" Humph! (*Ruth Hall* 314–15)

To Fern, citizenship is not an abstract condition or privilege: it is a relay to protection and legitimation under the law and in the public sphere, which includes the world of the arts and the more banal experiences of the body in the marketplace. She focuses not just on the vote, but on laws limiting women's rights as wives and mothers within marriage and in the labor force. She also frequently points out the absurdity of the degree to which society regulates juridically what women wear and what they say. She even argues that the extension of the national

promise to women might make the streets safer for women. Finally, she imagines a time when women might speak as abstract citizens too—as "authors" protected by copyrights and as national politicians.

In so lampooning and lamenting the bogus promises of American citizenship, Fern finds her strongest link to the rhetoric of nineteenth-century feminism, which derived its first documentary model in the Declaration of Independence. (The Declaration of Sentiments looks exceedingly like a rationalized female complaint, which is perhaps why Fern teasingly refers to the feminist conference at "Sigh-racuse" [*Fern Leaves* 346].) In any case, the challenges to American constitutional, juridical, and ideological gender mystification brought by woman's rights activists became, by the 1860s, increasingly central to Fern's thought about what it would take for women to gain dignity in modern America. In addition, transformations in domestic and capitalist attitudes toward the value of women's labor also captured Fern's attention. America justifies in theory a freedom of personality and public trespass as well as a collective politics of consent; in the sum of its practices, however, America becomes the name for the negative space women like Fern were attempting to occupy, with their minds and voices preceding their actual and juridical bodies. The degree to which the national space signified the barrenness of women's lives is depicted bathetically in "A Business Man's Home; Or, A Story for Husbands," which speaks yet another narrative of silent female martyrdom to husbandly torture and neglect. Fern notes that the house of Mr. and Mrs. Wade is a place of the wife's exile from dignity and pleasure, its white walls vacant, "with the exception of a huge map of the United States in the hall . . ." (*Fresh Leaves* 16–17).

##### 5. Conclusion: Commodity Consciousness

In the concentric spaces of the nation, the home, and the dictionary Fern identifies the uninhabitable place of American womanhood. In that contested terrain, dominant structures of political legitimation, sexual desire, and personal self-expression appear perversely to undercut the possibility of legitimate "female" agency, although the feminine subject is allowed to choose the contradictions of her constraint, whether they be in the double consciousness of hypocrisy or the self-abasement of mar-



tyrdom. As a matter of content, Fern's intervention into these spaces is more radical than that of many sentimental domestics because she has seen the power of women's culture to deform the women it addresses by enforcing the distance between domestic ideology and everyday experience. Amnesia permeates the sentimental pieties of domestic fantasy as women are, in her terms, "bewitched" into forgetting the information about marital and juridical brutality toward women they read and hear about from other women (see *Fern Leaves* 377-79). Such "forgetting" dooms women to repeat their abasement to domestic fantasy.

Fern's insistent vernacular aims to provide a mnemonic, to turn her audience of atomized ladies into a generic woman with "one ear" who will paradoxically recognize her unique female self in Fern's disembodied voice (*Ruth Hall* 224). This voice, which has experienced the banal and the extreme misogyny of American culture, does not tell the one feminine ear to seek out a utopian, revolutionary form of desire, nor even, typically, a feminist one; Fern insists instead that women should expect the structure of everyday life *as it is* to pay off on its promise to fulfill the woman, to recognize her specific needs and talents. In thus ranging among domestic and feminist fantasies, Fern shows how the elasticity of sentimental form includes its diverse popular audience—by appealing to the "reality" that all women are genericized and therefore misapprehended in their very uniqueness. It is here that we can begin to see the collaboration of the commodity and the stereotype, for being generic becomes the founding condition for the culture of reflection and resistance that marks the history of sentimentality in America.

Nina Baym has suggested that the nineteenth-century American novel reproduced a contradiction in these terms with respect to the feminine subject. The novel increasingly promotes psychological complexity and depth of character, while insisting that women be drawn to type. The solution the women's novel offered to this was to demonstrate again and again the "education" of a girl to the self-mastery necessary to live the life of typicality (*Novels* 99-105; see also *Women's Fiction* 11-21). But if the novel does serve this psychojuridical function, it is also an insufficient index to our understanding of the cultural work of sentimentality for women. Fern herself distinguishes between novelistic and journalistic representations of the feminine subject.

Fern's address to her novel readers assumes a different

"experience" from that of her weekly consumers. In the preface to *Ruth Hall* she sees the narrative of female emergence from sentimental innocence to a victory within realism as a vehicle of hope for the "tired heart" whose own "continuous story" has been characterized by obstacles similar to those encountered by Ruth/Fanny (3). In contrast, in *Fern Leaves* she looks neither for narrative exemplification, personal empowerment through the construction of compelling literary characters, nor a communal scene of reading in which the performance performs the family in the symbolic time and space of bourgeois self-staging in everyday life. Rather, she looks for punctuated identification: "Some of the articles are sad, some are gay; each is independent of all the others, and the work is consequently disconnected and fragmentary; but, if the reader will imagine me peeping over his shoulder, quite happy should he pay me the impromptu compliment of a smile or a tear, it is possible we may come to a good understanding by the time the book shall have been perused" (vi).

Fern wants to elevate women from the mental emptiness and obsessive activity of fashioning daily life. She offers the form for feminine legitimation in the fragment, the detail, the essay, journals—not by genericizing women's experience, but by expressing the frustration of being generic. Through this mode of female identification one woman's disclosure of the frustrations of everyday life ennobles the lives of other women; moreover, the complaint installs woman's writing as a part of an ongoing pedagogy about how to negotiate the contested life of femininity. Most important, though, is that her witnessing of bourgeois feminine sensibility is here raised to a hermeneutic at the level of the punctum: it is the *point* to which the author and reader of the female sentimental text will return. This is the main form of power/knowledge available to all women, of all classes and races, if only they will consent to consume it. For the women who experience no legitimacy in public, this periodic point of identification is itself the site of value and exchange, far more important and vitalizing than the content of any given column, whether sentimental or sarcastic. By providing a formal structure of identification through the example of her own "personal journalism," the expression of Fern's personality becomes the model for that kind of individuated expression she aims to enable the reader to imagine in herself. Fern thus aims not to change the lives of her audience; she wants to change their relation to what their minds can do, no longer in retreat from the world, but engaging actively in acute

analysis of it. As her character Minnie says, "My mind to me a kingdom is!" (*Fern Leaves* 282).

### 6. Coda: Strangers in the Night

The archival work of testifying to women's silencing into "stereotype" is also political, praxical: it registers the effects of private life and public caricature. But in a world where the abstraction of woman from women, of Sambo from African Americans, is both a sign and cause of American disenfranchisement, we can see at least that this mode of abstracting discourse within the female culture industry promotes consciousness as opposed to action, "mind" and memory versus politics, as a way of naming and containing female "excess." It produces as a commodity for women a form of identification whose power derives from its apparent natural superiority to social practice and public exchange. In this mode a cultural discourse about "woman"—her negation and suffering from her "domestic" pleasures—tells an open secret about women whose revelation, for the last 150 years, has been the dominant fact of female collective identity in America.

Fern's brother, N. P. Willis, was a central figure in the sentimentalization of national culture; he was one of the first publisher-editors of a national newspaper, the *Home Journal*, which introduced to America many of the most conservative male and female ideologues of the "cult of true womanhood," in its pure form an essentialist and ahistorical ethic of female discipline (see Brodhead). The *Home Journal* defined itself as national not through affiliation with political parties (which at the time were more regional in focus) but rather via a notion of "society" that diminished the political content of news in favor of less "sectarian" points of cultural convergence: Willis invented "fashion" and recast popular social opinion as national news, driving a wedge between culture and politics.<sup>12</sup> The introduction to the *Journal's* first number made explicit this intention: "In addition . . . to the entertaining features of the JOURNAL—its narrative, anecdote, humour, poetry and art—we shall give such a summary of news as will make the reader sure that he *loses nothing worth knowing of the world's goings on*" (qtd. in Auser 125). While late in his career he spoke out against slavery in this newspaper, during the 1840s and 1850s Willis was well known as an apologist for the status quo, who desired to displace the divisive issue by constituting the "national" in practices of style and taste. While the regional press

of the nation was infused with the political agitations of the abolitionist, woman's rights, and labor movements, segments of the emerging national press invested the elite practices of social caste with a suprapolitical, virtually transcendent value, manners seen through a gauze of morality and patriotism.<sup>13</sup>

Willis's desire to displace political discourse from the center of the social text also motivated practices in his personal life, some of which constituted unfortunate incidents in the lives of two struggling women: his sister, Fanny Fern, and Harriet Jacobs, who as Linda Brent pseudonymously authored *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). *Ruth Hall* tells the story of Willis's refusal to publish Fern's writing, while Fern and her children starved in urban tenements. Willis told her that she was too vulgar for his or any other journal and that she lacked the talent to write for a national audience. Ruth waxes bitter at his fictional counterpart's assessment of her provinciality and vows dramatically to make him yet "*proud to claim his sister*," presumably by finding her own kind of national audience (*Ruth Hall* 116).

At approximately the same time, and in an unrelated life plot, Willis employed as a servant in his home the fugitive slave Jacobs. He did not overtly support his wife's efforts to protect Jacobs from her Southern owners, and he also made no attempt to purchase the manumission papers that would enable her to get her freedom. He seems hardly to have recognized her plight at all, although *Incidents* speaks lovingly of the efforts Mrs. Willis (aka "Mrs. Bruce") made on Jacobs's behalf. Jacobs's letters reveal that she intensely mistrusted Willis, writing her narrative in secret, at night, over a period of five years while in his employ (Yellin, "Written By Herself" 481–83). In her previous life as a Southern slave, Jacobs lay entombed in a hollow ceiling, hiding there from her owner for seven years; as a Northern writer she undergoes a similar garretting, away from the cold eye of N. P. Willis. It is extremely ironic that Elizabeth Cady Stanton called *Ruth Hall* a slave narrative, since an authentic slave narrative emerged from such a similar source (Conrad 173).

And yet the link between Brent and Fern in Willis, which led to their individual textual fame and legitimacy, also signifies the differences in their struggles to gain freedom and economic autonomy. As Hazel Carby has demonstrated, Brent and other early African-American women writers appropriated the conventions of sentimental domesticity as a frame within which to explicate their own brutalized and parodically domestic experiences in slavery (45–61). This code-crossing established the

protections of sentimental domesticity both as an ideal for which the slave woman yearned and an obstacle to the politicization of white bourgeois women (see Spillers 76–80). The very act of speaking “woman to woman” established a common identity at the level of ideality and measured an experiential gap of which consciousness itself was only the necessary but insufficient condition under which social change might take place. Simultaneously a genericizing and a disidentifying gesture, such use of “sentimental womanhood” graphically shows that even when American women apparently speak the same “language” at the same historical “moment,” their coarticulation maps out their differences with regard to the privileges and offenses of the dictionary and the nation.

We can see this ambiguity in the juxtaposition of Fern and Jacobs. We might put Fern in a logic of equivalence with Jacobs, because of their mutual violation by Willis and the apolitical sentimental culture he advocates and profits from, even as Fern puts herself in an equivocal position with Sambo, who becomes the “difference” between them. In *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern*, a white editor contests a white woman journalist’s critical representation of heterosexual life; Fern counters sentimental conventions about women and marriage by deploying a racist stereotype—so identifying her vernacular knowledge with “his,” in a deeply problematic and ironic gesture of affiliation and racism. In contrast, Jacobs did not have the privilege to stereotype white women for the purposes of cultural critique, since it was to a certain extent their identification she sought.

The endings of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Ruth Hall* provide further emblems of the likeness of and the distance between the two women sentimentalists. In the conclusion to her tale, Brent looks at her own bill of sale and remarks, “I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it” (200). In contrast, at the end of *Ruth Hall* the text brandishes triumphantly a bank note, worth \$10,000, that signifies the finale of Ruth’s triumph (209). Both women have struggled to procure these papers, but while the one denotes the minimal unit of freedom experienced by an American citizen, the other denotes a successful negotiation of the national-capitalist public sphere, a profitable commodification of female pain and heroism in an emerging industry of female cultural workers.

It is more than coincidence that sentimental discourse was the site of convergence for these two differently struggling women. The powerful desire both to assert individual specificity and generic gender identity expresses in polarized form the mental

paradoxes that characterize the women represented within the sentimental genres of the female culture industry. Any discussion of this industry needs to address its problematic relation to the racial, classed, and ethnic subjects whose “privileges” as citizens and consumers were strongly contested in American culture; but since the products of sentimentality aimed to dissolve what appear to be intractable or pseudonatural differences that fix cultural hierarchy, it is also necessary to see how, in its own terms, sentimental discourse figured itself as an emancipatory commodity. And so any investigation of American female sentimental discourse must trace the ambivalent politics of its rhetoric, as it shuttles between profiting by deconstructing dominant stereotypes of “woman” and passing off generic female self-identity as itself a commodity, a thing to be bought and shared.<sup>14</sup> But sentimentality never reveals its intimacy with commodity culture: sentimental ideology is the public dream-work of the bourgeois woman.

### Notes

1. In citing, through the word “subaltern,” the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, I do not mean to minimize the differences between the situation of the bourgeois white woman of the American mid-nineteenth century and the colonial situation of the subjects of Western imperialism in India. Yet we can see international linkages in the “narrow epistemic violence” that plots the impossibility of unencumbered public female speech and the strategies of indirection that work as a “floating buffer zone” (285). We can see that, caught in the space between being a “descriptive” hegemonic class and a discursive projection of a “transformative” class, the female sentimentalists of the nineteenth century occupy an affiliated moment in American culture. “Whether or not they themselves perceive it . . . their text articulates the difficult task of rewriting its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility” (285).
2. Fern’s father and brother were publisher-editors of controversial journals. So coextensive is Fern’s familial genealogy with the history of American letters that James Parton’s contemporary biography of Fern considers her less as a product of familial identity than as an event in the annals of American popular journalism. Fern was that, indeed, as the first American woman to have her own regular newspaper column and, not coincidentally, one of the earliest modern media stars, whose essays and books were accompanied by extensive advertising campaigns that proclaimed their popularity prior to their publication. The definitive reading of Fern’s own collaboration with the mechanisms of print capitalism, which casts *Ruth Hall* as the first bestseller, is Geary. For the foundational reading of American “women’s novels” that argues for the practical (professional, not political)

centrality of their participation in the marketplace, see Baym, *Woman's Fiction*.

3. In her insertion of the essentialist spaces of sentimental difference into the places of urban domestic modernity, Fern is identifiably a "realist," in Fredric Jameson's sense, who produces "this whole new spatial and temporal configuration itself: what will come to be called daily life, the *Alltag*, or, in a different terminology, the referent—so many diverse characterizations of the new configuration of public and private spheres or space in classical or market capitalism" (374). On the oppositional capacities and practices of this new capitalized space, see de Certeau and Ross.

4. Fern frequently registers her rage at how the isolation and monotony of women's lives threaten them mentally, in the direction of insanity or psychic dullness. One might think that the lunatic asylums were filled with ordinary women, so frequently do her tales mention female insanity. *Ruth Hall* tells the story of Ruth's one female friend, Mary Leon, whose marriage to an unsympathetic husband reveals the privileges of the bourgeois wife to be privileged forms of male domination that lead to insanity and death (chapters 25 and 54). For journalistic discussions and depictions of the mental toll wrought by the dreary routine of women's everyday life, see these pieces by Fern: "Blackwell's Island No. 3," *Ruth Hall* 306–09; "Tyrants of the Shop," *Ruth Hall* 339–40; "A Postscript to a Sermon," *Ruth Hall* 356–58; "Helen, the Village Rose-Bud," *Life and Beauties* 190–99; "Horace Mann's 'Opinion,'" *Life and Beauties* 111–12; "Thorns for the Rose," *Fern Leaves* 49–58; "A Word to Mothers," *Fern Leaves* 234–35; "The Bride's New House," *Ginger-Snaps* 16–24; "Fanny Ford," *Fresh Leaves* 114–209; "Delightful Men," *Ginger-Snaps* 44–52.

5. Reynolds argues that the women sentimentalists really were not tremendously popular; that they *seemed* to be dominating the hearts, minds, and purses of the American reading public is, however, crucial testimony to the rupture in patriarchal expectations even the most ideologically conservative of these women writers achieved (338).

6. These important positions do not represent the range of major work on these early days of bourgeois women's culture: it seems the more literary an account is, the more likely it is to be embarrassed by the excesses of sentiment and the more motivated it is to rationalize such excesses in the normative languages of political life. This defensiveness can be historically explained by the American academic tradition of pathologizing and belittling women's culture as bad irrational writing about banality. In contrast Baym, in *Woman's Fiction*, argues for the women's import in themselves and puts forth no culturally symptomatic account of the phenomenon of women entering the public sphere of print capitalism; Yellin's *Women and Sisters* takes on the politics of feminine iconography in the American political imagination as an index around which she organizes her reading of the interface between the cultural work of self-identified women, African-American, and nationalist authors; Sánchez-Eppler speaks most powerfully on the contradictions of cross-race and cross-class identification between white sentimental workers and their African-American object-referents. Extremely interesting evidence suggesting the uneven development of literary sentimentality and other forms of bourgeois expression—with literature lagging

behind the more performative forms of journalism and theater—is provided by Halttunen.

7. Felski suggests that women's gender-reflexive literary incursions into the public sphere of discourse are rooted in twentieth-century feminist practice, and her analysis of the feminist use of confession to establish an intimate public sphere is excellent. But a far broader range of women participated in the production of this sphere in America in the nineteenth century, as has been established by Kelley and Nancy Walker. For the British case, see Lovell and Armstrong.

8. In addition to the choice between female and woman, "lady" appeared to designate at least one kind of feminine subject not vulnerable to the linguistic equation of female animality with female subjectivity: women's organizations appeared like "the Ladies' Association for Educating Females." See Mencken, *AL: Supplement I* 653.

9. See also Fern's "Thorns for the Rose," "Mary Lee," and "Edith May; or, The Mistake of a Life-Time," in *Fern Leaves* 49–58, 83–88, 108–113; "Delightful Men" and "Blue Monday" in *Ginger-Snaps* 43–52 and 70–73.

10. Susan B. Anthony's appropriation of Fern's "The Old Maid of the Period" signifies perfectly the problem raised by the complaint's ideologically elastic form: in her essay "Homes of Single Women," Anthony quotes Fern at length on how woman's rights has enabled a new type of woman to emerge, who is self-sufficient and not dependent on any husband for her upkeep or her pleasure. But Anthony's quotation from Fern elides without ellipsis many feminizing passages of Fern's text (*Ginger-Snaps* 146–48), which describe, for example, how the modern old maid has "two dimples in her cheek, and has a laugh as musical as a bobolink's song. She wears . . . cunning little ornaments around her plump throat . . . and her waist is shapely, and her hands have sparkling rings, and no knuckles; and her foot is cunning, and is prisoned in a bewildering boot . . ." (148–49).

11. Fuller's use of "femality" emphasizes "woman's" role as a harmonizer of disparate elements and an inspiration for labor and art (114–15). Fern's appropriation of this term adds "consciousness" to the mix of renewing and purifying activity that distinguishes "woman" in Fuller's view; it emphasizes agency, emergence, practice.

12. Simpson (144) points out that while Willis popularized the transcription of vernacular speech into writing, he used the vernacular mainly to install comic class discriminations within the field of popular letters. Fern uses sentimental discourse similarly, both insisting on its populist authenticity and writing parodies of it.

13. Trenchant testimony to Willis's retrogressive cultural and political practices is available, for example, in the letters of Lydia Maria Child. She not only lambasts Willis for focusing on "mere external things" (298) like the "*American world of fashion*" exemplified in Mrs. Lincoln's fashionable foreign bonnets, while "oppressed millions must groan on" (396); she also asserts that "*The Home Journal* is not violently pro-slavery, but it is very insidiously and systematically so. *The New York Herald*, the *Day Book*, and

the *Home Journal*, are announced by the Jeff. Davis organs to be the *only* Northern papers that the South can securely trust" (378).

14. Perhaps Fern is mindful of this irony of colonized consciousness when she initiates her first book with this disclaimer: "And, such as it is, it must go forth; for 'what is written, is *written*,' and—stereotyped" (*Fern Leaves* v).

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## The Still Life

Mark Seltzer

### 1. The Aesthetics of Consumption

One of the most evident paradoxes of the insistently paradoxical notion of a "culture of consumption" is the manner in which a style of life characterized by its excessiveness or gratuitousness—by its exceeding or disavowing material and natural and bodily needs—is yet understood on the model of the natural body and its needs, that is, on the model of hunger and eating. Hence if, as Jean Baudrillard argues, "it is necessary to overcome the ideological understanding of consumption as a process of craving and pleasure, as an extended metaphor of the digestive functions" (*For* 85), it is nevertheless the case that such an understanding continues to govern accounts of consumption, both "for" and "against." There is certainly nothing unusual about such a linking of political economy and physiology. The notion that the body and the economy indicate each other is a commonplace of economic thinking from Aristotle to Malthus or Marx to the present (see Gallagher). But it is precisely the antinatural and antibiological bias of the culture of consumption—we might say the *sheer culturalism* that marks the discourse of consumption—that makes such a propping of consumption on the body seem paradoxical or contradictory.

Yet this paradoxical relation to the body perhaps represents something more than an "ideological understanding" or misunderstanding. For Baudrillard, for instance, it is as if the extension of the pleasures of the body to its representations, the extension of biology into ideology, is itself "a process of craving and pleasure," a sort of addiction to the pleasure of overcoming the body that, in turn, "it is necessary to overcome." The "culture of consumption" would, in this view, seem to have something like the same relation to culture "as such" as the forms of representation called pornography have to sex "as such." In the turning away from the body to representation, the story goes, in the turning away or perversion from need to want, in short, in the turning away from nature and necessity to pseudo-needs and unnatural or artifactual wants, both the culture of consumption and pornography—and they are, for this reason,