OUR LIVELY ARTS:

AMERICAN CULTURE AS THEATRICAL CULTURE, 1922-1931

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In the first decades of the twentieth century, critics like H.L. Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks vociferously expounded a deep and profound disenchantment with American art and culture. At a time when American popular entertainments were expanding exponentially, and at a time when European high modernism was in full flower, American culture appeared to these critics to be at best a quagmire of philistinism and at worst an oxymoron. Today there is still general agreement that American arts “came of age” or “arrived” in the 1920s, thanks in part to this flogging criticism, but also because of the powerful influence of European modernism.

Yet, this assessment was not, at the time, unanimous, and its conclusions should not, I argue, be taken as foregone. In this dissertation, I present crucial case studies of Constance Rourke (1885-1941) and Gilbert Seldes (1893-1970), two astute but understudied cultural critics who saw the same popular culture denigrated by Brooks or Mencken as vibrant evidence of exactly the modern American culture they were seeking. In their writings of the 1920s and 1930s, Rourke and Seldes argued that our “lively arts” (Seldes’ formulation) of performance—vaudeville, minstrelsy, burlesque, jazz, radio, and film—contained both the roots of our own unique culture as well as the seeds of a burgeoning modernism. In their analysis, Rourke and Seldes stood against easy conceptual categories (especially “highbrow vs. lowbrow”) that did not account for the
richness of American culture. Both resisted the tendency to evaluate American art by the standards of European modernism. And by foregrounding matters of race and ethnic identity (even when they dealt imperfectly with them), they showed popular entertainment to be a matter of national significance. Most importantly, the American culture they defined was, above all, theatrical; it craved performance, it was performance.

My research project, therefore, finds its mission in relation to two primary developments: (1) the growth of American modernist arts and (2) the growth of cultural criticism of those arts. My argument, however, cuts a path between—and often in opposition to—the standard explanations for both of these developments. Indeed, against the received wisdom that modern American culture depends upon the pervasive spread of European modernism, I argue that American popular performance itself is the necessary foundation for our modern culture.
For my parents.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Opening

In the first decades of the twentieth century, America was teeming with technological change. In 1910, one third of the world’s railroad mileage was in the United States; just twenty years later, the automobile had come to primacy, with 30 million cars on a nationwide network of systematically numbered roads. In 1923, about 40 million Americans saw a film; in 1930, following Al Jolson’s transformative “talkie” The Jazz Singer (1927), 100 million people went to the movies. Pittsburgh’s KDKA, the first radio station, began broadcasting in 1920 by transmitting the results of the Harding election. By 1923, over 500 radio stations were in operation, producing a variety of musical and dramatic programs; by 1929, twelve million families owned a radio.

Urbanization was in full swing, with Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Boston all over one million people by 1920; New York was over five million. The New Woman and the New Negro made their way within these growing cities, enfranchised but not entirely welcomed.

In New York, both publishing and printing were booming industries, second only to the making of women’s garments. Magazines and journals proliferated, with The New
Republic, The Dial, The New Yorker, Partisan Review, The Saturday Review of Literature, The New York Herald Books, The Masses, Time, and Vanity Fair adding to venerated standards like The Nation, Atlantic Monthly, and Harper’s. New publishing houses were springing up, including Viking, Boni/Liveright, Dial Press, and Alfred A. Knopf. Critics and intellectuals of all stripes abounded: the pages of American magazines and books overflowed. “It was a good time for magazine writers, and I suppose,” Gilbert Seldes wrote dryly, “for book writers of all kinds.”¹ H.L. Mencken skewered the “booboisie” (his coinage) and their grotesque foibles in the pages of The Smart Set and American Mercury, as Sinclair Lewis did in his novels Babbitt and Main Street. Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell had touched off a torrent of muckraking, exposing the treachery of big business and the corruption of politicians. Dorothy Parker and Alexander Woollcott held court at the “round table” at the Algonquin Hotel, passing withering judgment on the tasteless and the gauche. In Crisis and Opportunity, as well as in their speeches, lectures, and books, W.E.B. DuBois and Alaine Locke defined the New Negro. From the “beloved community” of Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Randolph Bourne, and Lewis Mumford, to the Vanity Fair coterie of Edmund Wilson and Frank Crowninshield, through the bracing intellectual histories of Charles and Mary Beard: the list of American critics and their pet projects (and peeves) in the early decades of the twentieth century is long. As historian Michael Kammen has suggested, it was at this moment that American “cultural criticism truly came of age as a vocation.”²

At the same time, Alan Brinkley points out, these critics “experience[ed] a disenchantment with modern America so fundamental that they were often able to view it only with contempt.”³ Both the intellectuals and the artists of the new generation, in the
process of creating a modernist culture, turned a critical eye on American society.

Whether they decamped for Europe, like Ernest Hemingway or Gertrude Stein, or obstinately remained, like Ambrose Bierce, American culture appeared to them a stagnant quagmire of Puritanical philistinism, lacking both the grace of certain European traditions and the iconoclastic energy of modernism.

Yet, this negative assessment was not unanimous, and its conclusions not foregone. Two writers in particular—Constance Rourke (1885-1941) and Gilbert Seldes (1893-1970)—proposed an alternative view of America’s burgeoning culture. With optimistic gusto, Rourke and Seldes evaluated the popular (and populist) roots of American culture. Both maintained the skeptical eye of the disenchanted as well as a commitment to modernist experimentation; at the same time, they reformulated (and reaffirmed) many of the values and ideas of Emerson, Whitman, and Twain. In doing so, Rourke and Seldes rejected a growing separation (in critical discourse at least) between elite and popular culture, locating a vibrant and hybrid American identity in the “lively arts” (Seldes’ formulation) of performance: vaudeville, musicals, storytelling, radio, and film. Through their critical engagement with performance, they made the case for a special kind of modernist culture in America.

In this project, Rourke and Seldes found new ways to fulfill the role of public intellectual. For them, the vocation of cultural critic became one of both advocacy and attack. Both stood against easy conceptual categories (including that of “highbrow vs. lowbrow”) that did not fully account for the richness of American culture. Both resisted the tendency to evaluate American art by the standards of European modernism. And by foregrounding matters of race and ethnic identity (even when they dealt imperfectly with
them), they transformed the seemingly insignificant topic of popular entertainment into a matter of national importance. Throughout, against a backdrop of a torrent of critical writing that focused its attention almost exclusively on American literature and society, Rourke and Seldes defined an American culture that was, above all, theatrical. It craved performance. It was performance.

I am not the first to note the affinities (if not overt connections) between Rourke and Seldes. Their names have often been evoked in the same breath. For example, Greil Marcus names Seldes and William Carlos Williams as Rourke’s only peers in his introduction to the 2004 reissue of Rourke’s landmark *American Humor*. In his foreword to the 1965 reprint of Seldes’ *Stammering Century*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. lists Rourke, Bernard De Voto, and Lewis Mumford as part of Seldes’ cadre of “gifted amateurs who illuminated the past with such flair and vivacity.”4 In her comprehensive history of New York in the 1920s, Ann Douglas praises both Seldes and Rourke (this time in conjunction with Zora Neale Hurston) for establishing “the credentials of popular culture as the center of American Studies.”5 More suggestive, though, is Douglas’ observation that Rourke’s *American Humor* possessed a “dazzling interpretation of the American hybrid identity that Gilbert Seldes explicated in *The Great Audience*…. Like the skyscrapers, like *The Great Audience, American Humor* is a celebration of the polyglot national character.”6 Yet, despite this recognition of Seldes and Rourke, none of those astute commentators provides more than a passing homage. Consequently, no study has yet drawn Rourke and
Seldes into conversation. It is precisely this that I aim to do. More importantly, I hope to reconfigure our understanding of American culture in the 1920s and 1930s by listening closely to what they have to say.

I will not, however, claim that Rourke and Seldes were in perfect accord. On the contrary, they are in some ways fundamentally opposed. For example, Rourke was an adamant regionalist who lived her entire life in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and argued against the presumed centrality of New York City for American culture. Seldes, a transplanted New Yorker who relished the thrum of the city, trumpeted its primacy. Rourke looked to folklore for the roots of American culture while Seldes turned to mass entertainment for the same. But these differences are salient, and make for fruitful discord. The tensions they evoke (i.e. urban vs. rural society, folk vs. mass culture, past vs. present values) are, in fact, central to the American culture that they both explored.

Moreover, I will not claim that Rourke and Seldes perfectly understood (or described) American culture. As a writer, Rourke is often elliptical; Seldes sometimes turns glib. In argumentation, Rourke fell prey to special pleading; Seldes became at times a chest-thumping exceptionalist. Most importantly, both Rourke and Seldes stumbled on matters of race: she conflating minstrelsy’s portrayals of African Americans with the actual culture, he succumbing periodically to racist caricature of African Americans as savage in dance and song. Yet these imperfections are also salient; they run as subtext throughout the material, reminding us how difficult and how dangerous it is to set about the task of defining any aspect of “the American experience.”
1.2 Introducing Constance Rourke

On December 14, 1932, author and critic Constance Rourke wrote a characteristically generous response to graduate student Esther Porter, who requested advice on the construction of her dissertation. One guesses that Porter approached Rourke, then riding the crest of success from her landmark book *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931), because they shared the same alma mater, Vassar College. Porter was attempting to construct a history of Montana theatricals.

Approaching Rourke made good sense because west coast performance was one of the subjects she knew best: her book, *Troupers of the Gold Coast* (1928), was a history of Lotta Crabtree and nineteenth century west coast traveling players. In a letter filled with suggestions on individual caches of handbills and personal collections of newspaper clippings, Rourke offers a bit of advice that crystallizes her animating concerns as a writer, scholar, critic, and advocate:

There is a certain sort of book on theatricals about which I feel rather bitterly. Let me be high handed and urge you to avoid it. With a very rich factual material I suppose O’Dell may be forgiven for writing in this manner. The example I have in mind is W.G.B. Carson’s recent *The Theatre on the Frontier* with its inviting title and dry interior. When the plays and the acting are not of intrinsically the greatest importance I cannot see the point of a long, loving, detailed account of the movements of actors and the members of casts. No one could value the history of the theatre in this country more than I do: it seems to me to belong in the very heart of our social history, being perhaps as important as camp meetings. Of course the theatre is nothing without an audience, and obviously it’s nothing without an interaction between the audience and the stage. To treat the theatre in a vacuum seems to me to be an almost useless thing to do. The absolute interaction in the past is of course exceedingly difficult to reconstruct…. What I’m hoping you’ll do is write your thesis as a social history rather than purely theatrical history. If you think I’m being very impassioned, set it down to the state of mind one’s in on finishing a book, plus the conviction that all this is really important if ever we are to know our own character and history and literature.
In this ephemeral note of encouragement and advice, Rourke sums up the threefold concerns that run throughout her work. First, she took it as a matter of principle that her role as a public intellectual required that she write in an accessible and lively way: no antiquarian or scholarly chronicles for her.

Second, she tirelessly sought to articulate “our own character and history and literature.” That is, she directly engaged Van Wyck Brooks’ 1918 declaration, in his “On Creating a Usable Past,” that America’s lack of an aesthetic or cultural tradition resulted in the pale artistic capabilities of the nation. Rourke, who was given her start as a critic by Brooks himself, vehemently disagreed.9 Countering his argument, Rourke celebrated the rich brew of folk and popular culture of an energetic, modern country. Significantly, by the 1930s, Brooks came to take a more catholic view of American culture, a stance he credited to Rourke: “my horizon was indefinitely broadened by Constance Rourke’s eager and eloquent studies. She was already preparing for the general history of American culture of which she finished parts before her death; and she wrote, from time to time, to tell me of the proofs she found that America had its own definite aesthetic tradition.”10 When Rourke died unexpectedly in 1941, it was Brooks who edited her last notes and writings into The Roots of American Culture (1942).

Third, and most important, is Rourke’s claim that the theatre is at “the very heart of our social history.” The theatre, as well as the theatricality of American culture more broadly construed, is in fact a fundamental trope which threads throughout her entire body of work. It is essential to her argument. It shapes her writing style. It is the core of the American culture she explicates. She argues, consistently and eloquently, that the theatre is the essential core of American culture.
In *American Humor*, hailed by Lewis Mumford as “the most original piece of investigation and interpretation that has appeared in American cultural history,” Rourke set about the ambitious task of finding a way to “know our own character and history and literature.” To do so, she delineated three main American cultural types as comic figures: the Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the Negro minstrel. She traces their transformation through a variety of popular media, including jokebooks, almanacs, newspapers, and what she calls “theatricals.” For her, the category is a broad one, encompassing the legitimate stage, from Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* onward, as well as burlesque, vaudeville, minstrelsy, and the host of anonymous strolling players who traveled westward with the pioneers. On the basis of this investigation, she identified a native performative tradition of importance that predates the modernist drama of her contemporaries, like Eugene O’Neill. But, she also reveals in *American Humor* the understanding that guides all of her writings: “Americans had emerged as a theatrical race.”¹¹ That is, the American character was in itself a performative one.

For example, in *American Humor*, the “stroller” (for her, the itinerant performer, whether actor, lecturer, evangelist, or orator) garners a chapter all to himself. He is, in fact, a fourth type, in league with her Yankee, backwoodsman, and minstrel. But more importantly, he encompasses all three: in her examples, each of them appeared onstage, and all of them were roles played (or masks donned, in Rourke’s parlance) by nascent Americans. The stroller, then, becomes for Rourke both a archetype and an emblem of the American character. He bridges and he unites: in her imagining, Americans become, above all, a nation of “self-delineators.”¹² We construct an identity and we perform it.
In her selection of subject matter, Rourke suggests that the widespread presumption that culture equals literature is a fallacy. First, Rourke defines American culture in theatrical rather than literary terms. Performance looms large in her thinking, but drama is scarcely seen. In addition to the emphasis on performance in American Humor, Rourke wrote in depth about Lotta Crabtree, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and P.T. Barnum. One hundred pages of her three-hundred page Roots of American Culture was devoted to a chapter on the “Rise of Theatricals.” Later in her career, Rourke would turn to the visual arts, writing full-length studies of John James Audubon and Charles Sheeler. She edited the Federal Arts Project’s Index of American Design, and wrote several smaller studies on Shaker art. The bulk of her original work (as opposed to her prolific book reviews) is, in fact, on subjects other than the literary. Her consistent, if tacit, approach suggests an insistence on a comprehension of American culture that encompasses not merely the recognized and celebrated tradition of poetry, novels, and the essay, but also, most tellingly, popular performance, folklore, folk art, and celebrities.

Yet the two books and one extended article that have been written on Rourke primarily focus on her literary criticism in the last portion of American Humor. These studies, though informative, gloss over her work on art and the theatre. Scholars of performance, too, have improbably neglected her, for her work on performance, which makes a persuasive case for the centrality of theatre and performance studies in the formation of American character and culture, has gone largely unremarked.
1.3 Introducing Seldes

If Constance Rourke made popular (and populist) performance essential to the construction of the American character, then Gilbert Seldes made the same kinds of performance essential to the definition of American modernism.

Seldes began his life as a cosmopolitan cultural critic in New York. As an editor at The Dial, he was responsible for the first American publication of works by James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. But by the 1920s, Seldes began to chafe against the too-neat critical divide between art and entertainment. He also rejected the oft-repeated suggestion that American art paled in comparison to European. In his The Seven Lively Arts (1924), Seldes writes:

What Europeans feel about American art is exactly the opposite of what they feel about American life. Our life is energetic, varied, constantly changing; our art is imitative, anaemic (exceptions in both cases being assumed). The explanation is that few Europeans see our lively arts, which are almost secret to us, like the mysteries of a cult. Here the energy of America does not break out and finds artistic expression for itself. Here a wholly unrealistic, imaginative presentation of the way we think and feel is accomplished. No single artist has yet been great enough to do the whole thing—but together the minor artists of America have created the American art. And if we could for a moment stop wanting our artistic expression to be necessarily in the great arts—it will be that in time—we should gain infinitely.14

Seldes would go further, arguing that the “lighting strike” of modernism in America was intimately linked with its modernity. It found its fruition in native arts, like musicals, movies, and comic strips. It grew out of a particular mix of immigrant and native cultures and an embrace of (and experimentation with) new technologies. Seldes was in line with Gertrude Stein’s suggestion that America had been modern longer than the rest of the world. It is American modernity, she suggested—that is, popular entertainments, media, and technology—that drives its modernism. Seldes’ writing, especially his Seven Lively Arts,
Arts and Mainland, vociferously expounds this position, calling for American artists and critics to leave behind their genteel, Puritan confinements and to embrace what is most American about America: its clamoring, pleasurable, urban entertainments. This was not a simple battle, however. Later, in a revised introduction to Seven Lively Arts, Seldes suggested that, early in his career, he had insufficiently named “the enemy.” The real liability for American culture was not Mencken’s “booboisie,” but instead those self-important arbitrators of the arts who had “long emancipated themselves from the gentility of the 1890s, who were acclaiming Eugene O’Neill and Strawinsky, but had not yet recognized the existence of the popular arts…. I had taken the position that these entertainments not only merited, but needed, critical examination.”¹⁵ That is, critics like H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan had spilled much ink in juxtaposing the banality of bourgeois tastes against iconoclastic avant-garde ones. But they had failed, Seldes suggests, to separate these bourgeois tastes from vital popular ones. In doing so, they had failed to recognize the real modern art he saw reflected in Al Jolson, Fannie Brice, Keystone Kops films, or Krazy Kat. Instead, they had favored a particularly literary avant-garde.

Seldes would search for similar examples of misguided highbrow criticism in the nineteenth century. Although Seldes’ The Stammering Century (1928), which examined reformist zeal in the nineteenth century, could be taken as yet another work attempting to uncover Brooks’ useable past, it is less a work of historical exegesis and more a piece of sustained criticism of highbrow condescension. The tacit point of the book is that the American character is at core a reformist character given to a grotesque zaniness. And, though a real disgust with Puritanical censure underlies his point of view (springing from
his deep resentment of Prohibition and its infringement of liberty), Seldes takes pains in
the introduction to *Stammering* to remind his readers that his work is one built on
affection for American eccentricity. Again, he stands against Mencken’s critical
cynicism, writing that *Stammering* could have been “a history of what Mr. Mencken calls
the *booboisie*.”

It is, however, nothing of the kind. In private conversation—and possibly also in
print—Mr. Mencken maintains that no quackery has ever been given up by the
American people until they have had a worse quackery to take its place. He holds,
explicitly and implicitly, that the difference between intelligent and unintelligent
people is the gullibility of the boobs, their irremediable tendency to believe
anything sufficiently absurd. The distinction is one of the reasons for Mencken’s
distrust of democracy and the history of manias and crazes in American
annihilates this distinction entirely.16

Seldes argues the obverse: mesmerism, Christian Science, and various strains of
utopianism were all, he says, first taken up by the educated classes. In the end,
*Stammering* is one sustained argument against Mencken’s disdain for the masses. Seldes
writes, “The anti-influence of—or the reaction against—Mencken is explicit from the
first page of this book” because “[h]e was the energy in the whole decade of
debunking.”17 And debunking, with its concomitant shunning of American popular
culture, was something for which Seldes would not stand.

Seldes’ bibliography is tangible evidence of his refusal to delimit his work (or his
audience) by the judgmental standards of a Brooks or a Mencken. As a critic, Seldes
moved with ease from the highbrow *Dial* to the middlebrow *Saturday Evening Post* to the
lowbrow *New York Graphic*, and to various points between, including: *Bookman, New
York Evening Journal, Vanity Fair, the Saturday Review*, and *Esquire*. Later, as Seldes
embraced the new media in entertainment, he would write for *TV Guide* at the same time
as he was writing for the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. In fact, Seldes was a pioneer in radio and television, eventually becoming the first dean of the Annenberg School of Communication. He produced, wrote, and performed before the microphone and before the camera for CBS, where he served as the first Director of Television. Rather than dismiss radio and television, Seldes spent the second half of his career striving to make them popular, entertaining, and useful.

So Seldes’ support for popular art, his deep appreciation of the modernist revolution in the arts, his embrace of new media, and his defense of American culture (which sometimes bordered on an exceptionalist standpoint) form the touchstones of his prolific critical work. Throughout, as Michael Kammen indicates, “was Seldes’ abiding interest in theatrical production of all kinds. That fascination was perhaps the most enduring of his entire career.”

Not only did Seldes work for nearly a decade as the theatre critic for the *Dial*, but, along with the countless radio scripts he created, he also wrote several plays. More important were his two translation/adaptations: of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (1930) and of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1939). *Lysistrata*, which hewed closely to Aristophanes’ original, was a minor success, running a respectable 252 performances. *Swingin’ The Dream*, Seldes’ retitled reinvention of Shakespeare’s comedy, was more daring in its fusion of high and low culture. Set in a jazzed up New Orleans, *Swingin’* starred Louis Armstrong as Bottom, featured Benny Goodman’s orchestra, and sported designs from Walt Disney and Norman Bel Geddes. It was warmly anticipated, but foundered with just 13 performances. Seldes was eternally frustrated by
the failure. However, both productions were key examples of Seldes’ desire to discover and to create modern American art in the theatre. If Rourke turned to the theatre to find the American character, Seldes turned to the theatre to find American art.

1.4 On the popular, for the people

Like other public intellectuals of their time, Seldes and Rourke were consciously writing for a wide audience. Their works are short on footnotes and long on vibrant prose. Both serialized their work in popular magazines—Rourke in Woman’s Home Companion and Seldes in Vanity Fair. Both dabbled in fiction—Rourke in short stories published by the Dial, Seldes in a series of full-length detective novels published pseudonymously, as “Foster Johns”. But their failure to conform to more contemporary assumptions about the critic (the most significant of which is that serious criticism is academic criticism) has posed a problem for their posthumous reputations.

For example, Rourke published Davy Crockett in 1934 as a book for young adults. The lively book has usually been read as a ripsnorter that conflates the myths about Crockett with the facts of his life. Yet, the research on which the book was built was extensive, painstaking, and groundbreaking. As Rourke wrote to her friend Constance Lindsay Skinner: “the Crockett legends…are my own particular discovery. I don’t mind that no one has fastened that medal on me as yet; sometime I hope it will be pinned, for they are important; they were thoroughly buried, and none but myself has found them…. Fact is nobody quite knows enough about this early lore to recognize the fact that I discovered them.”

19 In a later letter Rourke expands further:
I have been able to clarify the known facts about Crockett very considerably and to set them against their background. Most of the biographies hitherto have been much scrambled; one wouldn’t know from them anything distinctive about the life from which Crockett emerged. Also in the field of fact I have got to the bottom, I believe, of his political career. Able historians have made ridiculous statements about him, or have neglected him altogether…. My sources were the Crockett almanacs, of which there were many issues for twenty years; I have discovered fifty….they have never been considered before as part of the Crockett saga.  

Rourke goes on to discuss the controversy surrounding Crockett’s presumed illiteracy and the authorship of his autobiography: “It wasn’t an impossible job to find out just what Davy’s powers as a writer were, if one wanted to take the time to scour the collections. Of course he wrote the Narrative!” Thus, in writing a book for teenagers, Rourke undertook deep, creative, and pathbreaking research. It is as if the book is in disguise, a landmark reimagining of an American legend masquerading as a children’s book. Or perhaps it is something more audacious: a serious study of a popular American figure purposefully written for a popular audience.  

_Crockett_ is the most graphic example of the disjuncture between Rourke’s innovative work as a cultural historian (which, given her interest in popular culture, always involved unearthing material not commonly held, even today, by scholarly archives) and the critical perception of it. But even _American Humor_, widely recognized as her most important work, was sometimes dismissed. In his review of the book in the scholarly journal _American Literature_, Walter Blair “mistrusted” her work because “like many who write for both scholarly and general readers, the author provokes the former by failing to document thoroughly.” This review provoked Rourke, not in the habit of public squabbles, to “break a friendly lance” with Blair in the next issue of the journal. She wrote tersely, “My bibliographical note of ten pages, which Mr. Blair does not
mention, contains a full outline of my materials.”22 The criticism of the academic for the popular historian is one that would ever plague Rourke, to her frustration. But it did not motivate her to stop writing for a popular audience. This purposeful choice has continued (erroneously, I will argue) to cloud her work and her reputation.

Seldes, unlike Rourke, never styled himself a popular historian. Although two of his most important books—Stammering Century and Mainland—were works of history, he was, always, a critic and a journalist who wrote on the broader meaning of contemporary performances and events. He was proudly free from the constraints of the archive, as his 1957 foreword to the reissue of Seven Lively Arts, makes clear: “Except for a folio of George Herriman’s Krazy Kat and a few clippings, I don’t recall having with me any notes, data, or documentation. The whole book was written, in a sense, from memory.”23 Despite his freewheeling style, Seldes, unlike Rourke, did not rile academics by writing in a popular vein. Rather, Seldes’ problem was the quicksilver buoyancy of his writing. In a 1929 Bookman article entitled “The Young Critics of the Nineteen-Twenties,” Gorham B. Munson noted that Seldes’ work is “light and agile, and the serious-minded therefore put him down as superficial.”24 Of course, Seldes himself fans the flames of such criticism when he writes, as he did in 1964, “I am nothing of a scholar. I haven’t ever, consciously, written to suggest that I knew much of an intricate subject when I hadn’t studied it. But I have been content to be superficial.”25 But Seldes was a serious writer, one whose affectations of popular superficiality have (erroneously, I will argue) marked him as exactly that.

Ultimately, then, writing style, voice, and target audience are a key part of both Seldes’ and Rourke’s overall project to find ways to act as public intellectuals. But also,
their modes of writing attempt to do justice to their topics and aims. They sought a consistency and unity between the popular subject matter and a popular, accessible voice and style. In this, they attempted to define and to reach a readership that did not separate into high and low, even though various intellectuals had accepted (and propounded) the necessity, as they saw it, of such a divide. And, of course, by the second half of the twentieth century, much of the critical and historical study of American culture and society had become academic—university professors writing exclusively for university professors. The voice, style, and audience had become academic, even if the subject matter remained popular.

Not surprisingly, then, Rourke and Seldes became marginal figures for most academics. But their particular underuse in the fields of theatre and performance studies, fields which they celebrated as central to the construction of an American identity, is more vexing. Is it possible that there is a blind spot in theatre studies, grown out of the art theatre movement’s self-conscious attempts to wrench theatre from the grips of entertainment?

At the height of the art theatre movement, critic Sheldon Cheney founded Theatre Arts magazine in his campaign for the movement. In its November 1916 inaugural issue, Cheney contributed an article entitled “The Art Societies and Theatre Art” which crystallizes a philosophy that still lurks within the books we write about the theatre. In the article, Cheney called upon “the sister-arts,” pleading with them to “lend a helping hand to the drama, the one of them all that fell farthest and began its recovery last.” Like a fallen woman, the American theatre had been seduced and corrupted by its dalliance with mammon. It needed, Cheney suggested, to be elevated, to be pulled up out of the tawdry
mire of entertainment and replaced in the pantheon of the “sister-arts” of painting, sculpture, and music. It needed to *recover*, to quit, cold turkey, the bespangled temptations of the popular stage. It needed, in short, to become more like the European avant-garde: hard, austere, and purposeful. And it needed to be adversarial.

Of course, Seldes would chortle at the reformist habit of mind implicit in Cheney’s plea for purification a la European culture. But both Seldes and Rourke would strenuously oppose the notion that the theatre, the most popular of the arts, should be reformed, elevated, or otherwise protected. It is a democracy’s democratic art, and as such it is (and should remain) steadfastly of and for the people. Certainly, as Seldes’ theatre criticism demonstrates, its aesthetic standards could be improved. And Rourke’s studies expose the theatre’s exploitative ambivalence on matters of gender and race that mirror the culture’s own. But the American theatre, both argue, shows the nation more clearly than any other art what it is and what it wishes to be. Pressing it into the mold of European modernism would void that real significance.

So, as thinkers, Seldes and Rourke work at the interstices of a variety of schizophrenic divides that are still regularly invoked as organizing principles in teaching and writing about twentieth-century American performance. For example: popular theatre, with all its lowbrow vulgarity, sits on one side of a divide and art theatre, with all its highbrow aspirations, claims the other. There are cognate binaries that contribute to this truism: mass v. folk, film vs. theatre, or modernism vs. modernity. Seldes and Rourke pushed against such simplified and straw-man adversarial argument to look at the theatre’s broader function within American culture.
Yet the discipline of theatre studies has retained a tendency to configure American theatre history along these same binaries. From Cheney forward, it seems, our discipline (a discipline formed, in many ways, out of his campaign) has been so focused on why it is *legitimate* (that is, like the other arts) that it has forgotten why it *matters*. We have lost sight of what makes our field of study essential to understanding American culture, broadly construed. In accepting (and, through generations of scholarly writing, perpetuating) the criticism of theatre’s essentially popular nature that the art theatre movement propounded, we have ceded the theatre’s real importance in the articulation of the American character to fields like literature and sociology.

This is not to say that we have not, in the last twenty years or so, seen the error of our ways. The field of American theatre studies has produced important work that takes a more synthetic approach (for example, Bruce McConachie’s *Theatre for Working Class Audiences*, W.T. Lhanom’s *Jump Jim Crow*, Charlotte Canning’s *The Most American Thing in America*). All of these works, it should be noted, have moved us away from the “scriptocentric” focus on drama that Dwight Conquergood (presaged by Constance Rourke herself) has critiqued. Some of the credit for this awakening can be laid at the doorstep of performance studies and its embrace of thinkers like Erving Goffman and Victor Turner. Of course, performance studies has not been a cure-all; its scholars still, too often, maintain a neat oppositions between high and low (or, sometimes, colonial and indigenous) that are as inappropriate categories as the entertainment/art divide that theatre studies habituates. Yet, performance studies, with its focus on the present
moment, political action, and anthropological intervention, does insist that performance matters. And it is true, as Jill Dolan has written, that “The new language of performativity propelled performance to new visibility in academic discourse.”

But we would not have needed that propulsion, we would not have wallowed in scriptocentrism, we would not, in fact, have thought we required a book like Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) to remind us that the study of performance requires both, if, in the first decades of the twentieth century, we had listened more closely to Constance Rourke and Gilbert Seldes. Working historically, from both the archive and the repertoire, Rourke made the case for the absolute centrality of performance, onstage and off, to the American character. Working critically, Seldes established that same performance as the foundation of an American modernism that rivaled, if not superseded, the European. America was modern before the rest of the world, Gertrude Stein declared. And Rourke and Seldes fused theatre and performance studies before the rest of us had pulled them apart.

**1.5 Conclusion**

Constance Rourke and Gilbert Seldes believed they were engaged in a vital task for our nation. This task was a fusion of the historian’s act of reconstruction and the critic’s act of advocacy. So Rourke wrote:

A favored explanation for the slow and spare development of the arts in America has lain in stress upon the forces of materialism. But these have existed in every civilization; they have even at times seemed to assist the processes of art. The American failure to value the productions of the artist has likewise been cited; but the artist often seems to need less of critical persuasion and sympathy than an unstudied association with his natural inheritance. Many artists have worked supremely well with little encouragement; few have worked without a rich
traditional store from which consciously or unconsciously they have drawn. The
difficult task of discovering and diffusing the materials of the American
tradition—many of them still buried—belongs for the most part to criticism; the
artist will steep himself in the gathered light.28

The light gathered by Rourke and Seldes illuminated an America that was, as Ann
Douglas has told us, “hybrid” and “polyglot.” What fused this hybrid nation, what gave
it a common language was, according to Rourke and Seldes, nothing more nor less than
performance.29 Ultimately, both argued, explicitly and implicitly, that it was through a
long tradition of popular American performance that we could most clearly discern the
outlines of an American character and modern culture. It is that story that I am about to
tell.
The publishing industry had begun its tremendous expansion in the late 1800s. A steep reduction in postage rates for magazines in 1879 coupled with the introduction of the halftone press and color rotogravure in the 1880s made it possible to produce and distribute captivating magazines for something close to 10 cents per issue. Moreover, a boom in effective advertising, which moved away from columnar type to full-page, image-based spreads, brought significant profit to the magazine publishing industry for the first time. By the first decades of the twentieth century, a fertile field of publications were available for young writers, and more were on the way. See Douglas, *The Smart Magazines* 11-17.

2 Kammen, *The Lively Arts* 7.

3 Brinkley 639-40.


6 Ibid, 569.

7 Rourke is referring here to George C. Odell’s *Annals of the New York Stage*. The first of his sweeping fifteen volume chronicle appeared in 1927. Volumes five through seven were published in 1931; they happened to be glowingly reviewed for their “magnitude” by Arthur Hobson Quinn in the November 1931 issue of *American Literature* on pages 335-339. Rourke’s *American Humor* was reviewed by Walter Blair in the same issue on pages 340-343, so harshly that she (quite uncharacteristically) wrote in response in the following issue (March 1932, pp 207-210). Perhaps some of her animus might be ascribed to this yoked encounter.


9 Rourke met Brooks in 1920, via a letter of introduction from a former student. Brooks gave Rourke work reviewing for *The Freeman*, and later suggested to her a study of American popular figures that became *Trumpets of Jubilee*. See Joan Shelley Rubin, *Constance Rourke* 27.

10 Quoted in Rubin, *Constance Rourke* 59. The statement comes from Brooks’ *Days of the Phoenix* (1957).

Endnotes

12 Ibid., 91.

13 Joan Shelley Rubin’s sensitive Constance Rourke and American Culture (1980) and Samuel I. Bellman’s Constance M. Rourke (1981) were published within a year of each other. They were predated by Stanley Hyman’s incisive chapter on Rourke in his Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism (1948). Since 1981, no major works on Rourke have appeared. Rubin’s book, which grew out of her 1974 dissertation, is the last work to be constructed with access to Rourke’s personal papers in her family’s possession. Margaret Marshall, longtime friend of Rourke’s and literary editor at The Nation, had intended in the late 1940s to write a biography of Rourke. Her papers, in Yale’s Beinecke Library, include elliptical notes made from Rourke’s papers.

The story of Rourke’s literary estate is complex. When Rourke died unexpectedly in 1941 she was unmarried and childless. Her papers reverted to the possession of her mother, Constance Davis Rourke. When her mother died four years later, there was no immediate family, as Rourke’s father had died when she was a child and she had no siblings. All family possessions, including Rourke’s library, manuscripts, notes, letters, journals, and her vast collection of American art and Shaker furniture, were inherited by extended relatives who had tended to Rourke’s mother in her last years (to the disappointment of family friend and neighbor Linda Butler, who was administratrix of Rourke’s estate; see Butler’s files in the Marshall collection). Marshall gained access to this material and mentioned in letters that she was trying to persuade the family to donate or sell Rourke’s papers to Vassar College, Rourke’s alma mater. This hope never materialized; but neither did Marshall’s planned book on Rourke. By the early 1950s, after many false starts, Marshall formally abandoned the project. In 1951, Nelle Curry, another family friend, wrote a short biographical sketch of Rourke (unpublished), for which she won the University of Michigan’s Avery Hopwood writing award in 1951. This sketch is also in the Marshall collection at Yale. Appended to it are Linda Butler’s notes of dispute on several points.

Rourke’s papers remain in Carbondale, IL, under the control of the Shoaff family.

However, letters from Rourke can be found scattered throughout the collections of her correspondents and friends, in archives at Vassar, the New York Public Library, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Kentucky, and Stanford University. Rourke’s correspondence was wide, and it is in these sprinklings that we get a picture of her broad interests.

14 Seldes, Seven Lively, 301.

15 Ibid., 6, 8.

16 Seldes, Stammering xiv.

17 Ibid, xxiii.

18 Kammen, The Lively Arts, 161.
Endnotes

19 Constance Rourke to Constance Lindsay Skinner, 3 August 1933. Constance Lindsay Skinner Collection, New York Public Library.

20 Constance Rourke to Constance Lindsay Skinner, 1 February 1934. Constance Lindsay Skinner Collection, New York Public Library.


22 Rourke, Letter to the Editor, 210.

23 Seldes, Seven Lively Arts, 4.


25 Quoted in Kammen, Lively Arts 127. From the manuscript to Seldes’ autobiography, in Marian Seldes’ possession.


28 Rourke, American Humor, 235-6.

29 Two studies which predate my own are worth acknowledging here. Jeffrey H. Richards has explored the metaphorical usage of theatrical terminology in the construction of American identity in his Theater Enough: American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607-1789 (1991). The book turns up interesting anecdotes and usages from Cotton Mather, George Washington, and James Madison. However, as he writes in his introduction, his book is a “historically limited, primarily literary issue” focused on “the appearance of theatrical figures of speech in early American writing” (xiv). In his Portable Theatre: American Literature and the Nineteenth-Century Stage (1999), Alan R. Ackerman, Jr., studies “the relationship between theater and literature in nineteenth-century America,” arguing that the theatre was “a pervasive form of popular culture and an important forum for public life” (xii). So Richards is looking at theatre as metaphor and Ackerman is primarily interested in how the theatre influenced literature. Both studies are solid, useful work. But neither attempt the radical argumentation of Rourke or Seldes—that is, that American culture is theatrical culture.
CHAPTER 2

APPROACHING AMERICAN MODERNISM

2.1 The literary fallacy

Christine Stansell’s *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (2000) is a well-received work of intellectual history, written by a professor of history at Princeton University. Soundly researched and vivaciously written, Stansell’s study makes the all-too-familiar argument that it was New York’s bohemians who, in the early decades of the twentieth century, forced a dawdling and recalcitrant America to become modern. That is, to become modern like Europe was modern, and, in doing so, to throw over an oppressively genteel Victorianism.

The tides of modernity, which had washed over Paris in the 1870s and subsequently over Vienna, Prague, Munich, Berlin, and London, had finally reached American shores…. This book is about the men and women who ushered in that day of transformation in America, the people who embraced the “modern” and the “new”—big, blowsy words of the movement. The old world was finished, they believed—the world of Victorian America, with its stodgy bourgeois art, its sexual prudery and smothering patriarchal families, its crass moneymaking and deadly class exploitation. The new world, the germ of a truly modern America, would be created by those willing to repudiate the cumbersome past and experiment with form, not just in painting and literature, but also in politics and love, friendship and sexual passion.¹
Stansell’s quick summation embraces a cornucopia of presuppositions about the American character at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is prudish, commercialist, tasteless, repressed, inhibited. It embodies every quality symptomatic of an American Puritanism which crossed the Atlantic with the Mayflower and continued to color every element of the national culture. Too, Stansell celebrates the free spirits and iconoclasts who rejected this stereotyped American character: among others, Emma Goldman, Max Eastman, Eugene O’Neill, Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Beyond the presumption of an uptight American culture and its “lag” behind the experimentation of the European, is another far more insidious presumption. She writes:

New York in the 1910s was a writer’s city, literature the paramount art form. Downtown, books and magazines were the chief forms of entertainment and obsession, not painting or music, and bohemian conversation sooner or later settled on what the talkers were reading that week.²

Certainly, the publishing industry contributed to the major changes in American society in the early decades of the twentieth century. As the population of American cities increased and the literacy rate increased, the market for reading material increased as well. Two hundred magazines were in circulation in 1860, eighteen hundred by the end of the nineteenth century, and six thousand by 1905. A variety of journals that voiced the concerns of their emerging cultural communities—*The Masses* (1911), *Poetry* (1912), *The Smart Set* (1913), *The Little Review* (1914), *The New Republic* (1914), *Seven Arts* (1916), and the new *Dial* (1917)—were all part of this ferment. In 1918, 2,500 daily newspapers were in circulation across the country. These copious possibilities for seeing one’s work in print, aided by the passage of international copyright protection in 1891, provided a significant outlet for both critical and artistic writing.³ Certainly the invention
of the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1923 and the Literary Guild in 1926 assisted in this
growth, as did the continuing work of publishers like Alfred A. Knopf and Harcourt
Brace.

Yet, Stansell’s assertion that “literature was the paramount art form…not painting
or music,” is inherently problematic. Even if we restrict our view of modern American
culture to New York alone, as Ann Douglas quite successfully did in Terrible Honesty:
Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (1995), the notion that literature was more intrinsic to
the developing culture of the iconoclastic bohemians than music or art (or theatre, one
adds, noting that it did not even make Stansell’s exclusionary list) seems extreme. With
jazz and ragtime in the air, with Alfred Steiglitz’s 291 galleries and the 1913 Armory
Show and moving pictures before their eyes, with skyscrapers stretching to the clouds,
and (if we imagine they abjured the Ziegfeld Follies, which they did not) the Greenwich
Village Follies for diversion, the centrality of literature to modern American culture
seems a risky presumption to make.

Risky, indeed, but not unfounded. In making her case, Stansell is following the
rhetoric produced by a panoply of writers, bohemian and other, who were concerned with
the state of American culture as it entered the Great War. So Van Wyck Brooks
(psycho)analyzed Henry James and Mark Twain, H.L. Mencken celebrated Theodore
Dreiser, Edmund Wilson promoted F. Scott Fitzgerald. Critics are writers, and these
critics turned to writers to criticize, diagnose, and make their case for the successes and
failures of the national culture. A presupposed equation is endemic, as the title to a recent
anthology crystallizes: American Literature, American Culture (1999). Literature equals
culture.
Yet even Bernard De Voto, himself a major literary figure in the period, raised major doubts in 1944 about the yoking of literature and culture. He wrote, with brutal clarity, of *The Literary Fallacy*, which presumes:

…that a culture may be understood and judged solely by means of its literature, that literature embodies truly and completely both the values and the content of a culture, that literature is the highest expression of a culture, that literature is the measure of life, and finally that life is subordinate to literature.⁴

Yet, the fallacy (if it is a fallacy) persists, all the way through the work of contemporary historians and literary scholars. Even Ann Douglas, in her gold-standard *Terrible Honesty*, is under its sway: though she uses the theatre as a potent metaphor to frame her study, her focus is squarely on the literary. Her study is based on the lives of 120 New Yorkers, but the vast majority are writers: in a list of 58 significant residents of New York between 1920 and 1930, she names nine musicians, five stage performers, one sports star, three playwrights, and forty writers. The tilt is clear.

The focus on literature as culture has much to do with the accessibility of evidence for the construction of a history. Edmund Wilson, himself an eminent literary critic from the period and editor for *Vanity Fair* and the *New Republic*, mused on the problem of evanescence. In a eulogy written for one of his most influential professors, Wilson noted that “the work of a great teacher who is not…a great writer is almost as likely to be irrecoverable as the work of a great actor.”⁵ That which is performed—music, dance, theatre, and it seems, pedagogy—evaporates. But writing? Writing exists as composed. It explains itself. Of course literature has become the foundation on which we build our cultural studies. Writing remains.
Moreover, literary figures and critics alike in this period were particularly keen on telling their readers why their work mattered. Their voices are saucy and strident, and it is easy to take them at their word. In the foreword to *Shores of Light*, a collection of his own critical writing of the 1920s and 1930s, Wilson begged forgiveness for the tone:

> The self-assertive approach of the twenties, which seems rather brash today, I have not always been able to eliminate. We had grown up on the journalism of Shaw and Chesterton, Belloc and Max Beerbohm, and later, in the United States, of the Mencken and Nathan of the *Smart Set* and the Woollcott and Broun of the *World*. All these writers were everlastingly saying “I”: the exploitation of personality had become an integral part of criticism.6

The newer, younger critical voices between 1918 and 1941—Van Wyck Brooks, H.L. Mencken, Randolph Bourne, Waldo Frank, Bernard De Voto, George Jean Nathan, Lewis Mumford, Alexander Woollcott, Heywood Broun, Dorothy Parker, Carl Van Vechten—were marked by a pugilistic tone and by a penchant for *ad hominem* rhetoric. And they were, to a man (minus Parker), focused on literature as the source of the potential (and failure) of an American culture. Why? Perhaps, as Douglas suggests:

> In no one of the traditional elite arts save literature did modern American discover it had an edge; most of its exciting classical music, sculpture, painting, and architecture was created during and after the Great War, not before it. But the way that classic American literature suddenly and surprisingly took the lead was nonetheless emblematic of what happened with American culture more broadly speaking.7

Douglas implies that American literature surged ahead of the rest of the arts, to compete with and to surpass European literature. This is, possibly, the case. However, her observation is loaded with the key assumptions that shape the way we write about American modernism: concern with cultural lag, with what American art is, and with an elite/popular divide that separates art from entertainment. For Douglas as for Stansell, it’s important to note that theatre doesn’t even make the list.
To be sure, culture and literature had been bound together long before the loquacious modern American critics were on the scene. In 1868, John De Forest published “The Great American Novel” in *The Nation*, in which he called for a novel that would articulate a particular American region while at the same time also expressing the broader American character. That he turned to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1850-1851) as the best example so far would later mark him for the modern critics as hopeless anachronistic. Yet, from the earliest days of nationhood (and before), the call went out for an American culture unique in its lineaments, grown separate from its Anglo-Saxon heritage. And from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “American Scholar” (1837) to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s prefaces (1850s) to Walt Whitman’s “Democratic Vistas” (1871), the call often found its voice in the quest for American literature, praised by Whitman himself as the “highest of art’s forms, namely, the literary form.”

The quest was perennial, and perennially ended in disappointment:

Few countries have felt this chronic pressure to justify themselves; few have worried as anxiously about the legitimacy, coherence, and achievement of their nation’s literary heritage as America has, insofar as that literature was supposed to express something true and profound about the United States.

Surely, anxiety over the status of American culture, especially in comparison to the seeming monolith of European culture, also informed the aggressive tone of the work of the critics in the period.

The same set of questions led to the flowering of literary history as a field of study in the United States. In the wake of De Forest’s call for an American novel came canon construction through the teaching of American literature. Moses Coit Tyler produced *A History of American Literature, 1607-1765* (1878) and *The Literary History*
of the American Revolution, 1763-1785 (1897). Between 1888 and 1890, Edmund Stedman produced an eleven volume anthology, entitled the Library of American Literature (1888-1890). A wildly comprehensive collection, it included, amongst the work of Hawthorne and Stowe, a section on Negro spirituals. Brander Matthews, whose secondary school text Introduction to the Study of American Literature (1896) sold over 250,000 copies, lobbied for the study of American literature at Columbia University. Eventually, he developed the first course in American literature and in American literary history for the institution; later, he would also pioneer theatre studies, of a decidedly modernist sort, at Columbia as well. Barrett Wendell’s Literary History of America (1900) was popular, remaining in print until the 1940s, though its focus on the British roots of American culture marked it as outmoded. Even children’s magazines were part of the upswing: St. Nicholas ran a series of American author biographies in the 1890s. During World War I, the Cambridge History of American Literature (1917-1921), edited by John Erskine, William Peterfield Trent, and Carl Van Doren, definitively established an American literary canon.\textsuperscript{10}

These anthologies and chronological studies were quickly followed by a trio of more critical studies: Vernon L. Parrington’s Main Currents In American Thought (1927-1930), Van Wyck Brooks’ Flowering of New England (1936), and Robert E. Spiller’s Literary History of the United States (1948). With the intervention of New Criticism, which made critical study of a writer’s biography passé if not forbidden, Spiller’s work remained, by default, the standard reference work on literary history until the Columbia History of American Literature (1988).
In *Main Currents in American Thought*, Parrington studied not only fiction and poetry, but also sermons, political tracts, legal arguments, and philosophical works as part of the body of written material created by the culture. Later, in 1950, Lionel Trilling would, in his *The Liberal Imagination*, take Parrington to task for his over-reliance on a realistic model, the conspicuous absence of private women like Emily Dickison and Anne Bradstreet as well as African American figures like Frederick Douglass, and for a sort of bourgeois presumption of a developmental model in American literature. And though *Main Currents* has been called, by John Higham, a “noble ruin on the landscape of our scholarship,” it was taking stock of the foment of literary work at the turn of the twentieth century. In doing so, it not only embraces and promulgates the myth of literature as the anchor of culture, it also articulates two other key assumptions many of the critics held in common: that (1) American commerce has thwarted (and continues to thwart) any burgeoning culture, and (2) American culture would benefit from a tonic “realism,” or from a more “realistic” approach. Throughout, the overall tone of Parrington’s books remained one of pessimistic disappointment with and frustration in a poorly defined “mass,” “mob,” “bourgeoisie,” or, as H.L. Mencken would put it, “boobery,” that stood in the way of the creation of great American art. These concerns are synthesized in the third volume of Parrington’s study:

It is the man of letters—poets and essayists and novelists and dramatists, the eager young intellectuals of a drab generation—who embody the mind of present-day America; not the professional custodian of official views…. It is to them therefore that one must turn to discover the intellectual currents of later America—to their aspirations as well as to their criticisms…. Amidst all the turmoil and vague subconscious tendencies, certain ideas slowly clarified: first, that the earlier democratic aspirations had somehow failed…. second, that even in the supposed heyday of our democracy, we had never achieved a democracy, but rather a careless individualism that left society at the mercy of a rapacious middle class;
third, that we must take our bearings afresh and set forth on a different path to the goal. As these convictions slowly rose into consciousness, a quick suspicion of our earlier philosophies arose to trouble us. With the growing realism of the times came a belief that our French romantic theories were mainly at fault and we must somehow go back to the rationalistic eighteenth century and start once more to create a democratic philosophy…. Utopias no longer seem so near at hand as they once did…. Our jauntiness is gone…. and in the spirit of sober realism we are setting about the serious business of thinking.11

Thus, the “man of letters” confronting the failures of democracy, especially those perpetuated by “a rapacious middle class,” responded with a call for sober, if pessimistic, realism.

2.2 Realism and its discontents

Parrington’s notion that literature could, and should, be a transformative force in society was not a new one. In the half century before the publication of his book, the idea had been propounded by nineteenth-century writers, like Harriet Beecher Stowe or Ralph Waldo Emerson. William Dean Howells may have been preceded by Hamlin Garland or Henry James, but his call, in the June 1887 issue of Harper’s Monthly, for a realistic American literature was the one that resounded:

Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires…let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere.12

The campaign for literary realism continued into the early decades of the twentieth century. Ann Douglas calls this modern truth-telling urge “terrible honesty” and ably chronicles its appearance in letters, novels, and articles of the period. Raymond Chandler, she notes, suggested that “all writers…have a terrible honesty;” the shattering of rose-
colored-glasses became a fetish amongst them. So it should come as no surprise that the third volume of Parrington’s *Main Currents* is subtitled “The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920.” Writers of fiction and critics alike expected that their work would expose the reality of American life. In this desire, they were following on the generation of work by muckrakers and Progressive reformers, but with a crucial difference. Muckrakers and Progressives saw the failures of American culture, but believed wholeheartedly that they had the power to change things. In the hands of the next generation of critics, these reformist instincts would become mere pessimistic debunking. This dissatisfaction has its roots in two basic critiques of middle class culture: (1) the corruption of capitalism, also uncovered by the muckrakers and (2) the stilted and precious qualities of “genteel culture,” first named by George Santayana in 1911.

In 1906, with urban life expanding exponentially and American business booming, President Theodore Roosevelt coined the term “muckrakers” to corral a loosely organized cohort of authors devoted to investigative journalism focused on corporate corruption. Like the Man with the Muckrake in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), the muckrakers kept their eyes on the ground, turning over the filth that others merely ignored. In magazines like *McClure’s*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Collier’s Weekly*, the muckrakers exposed the dark side of the up-by-your-boatstraps myth made famous by Horatio Alger’s *Luck and Pluck* (1869). In Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Jacob Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Lincoln Steffens’ *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), Ida Tarbell’s *History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), unsafe working and living conditions, as well as the
greed of corporate bosses, were exposed in graphic prose. Immense disappointment in the abuses of unfettered capitalism, as well as dismay at the inability to rectify the problems, suffused the work of the muckrakers with profound, if passionate, dissatisfaction.

Similar sentiments were reflected in the fiction of hard-nosed realists embraced by the young critics, like Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) or Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900). However, the muckrakers as a group came to be viewed as overly earnest writers mired in Progressive Era crusading. From the vantage point of Prohibition, which took effect in 1920 and was repealed in 1933, they began to look like a prissy cousin of the Anti-Saloon League. The truth-tellers of the 1920s thus rapidly conflated the Progressive Era with the Gilded Age. And criticism of what came to be called “gentility” in both became the standard critical approach.

On August 25, 1911, Spanish-born George Santayana delivered a speech, entitled “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” before the Philosophical Union at the University of California at Berkeley. In it, Santayana suggested that American culture was built upon a precarious but pervasive divide: democracy fostered an energetic, sometimes barbarian, culture that the traditional culture wanted to reform and to control. “The genteel tradition” was Santayana’s term for the fallout from the collision of the two. More importantly, Santayana thought in terms of dichotomies, and shaped his understanding of American culture to conform. He wrote, “The American Will inhabits the sky-scraper; the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion. The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition.” So, in his formulation of a genteel approach to culture, Santayana aligns the will against the
intellect, the urban against the rural, the male against the female, and change against habit. His assessment would become the basis for, and the rallying cry of, the criticism of a generation of thinkers focused on the failures of American culture.

It would be a mistake, however, to understand Santayana’s genteel tradition as taking a position on another dangerous binary: that of high art versus low art. The genteel tradition, as Santayana set it forth, impeded the potential of a true American culture and art, of any variety. As Robert Dawidoff states, “The genteel makes the mistake of trying to civilize what is best left alone.” This part of Santayana’s viewpoint was often conflated with a broader critique, especially by H.L. Mencken, of the more vulgar (if vibrant) aspects of American culture in general. So Santayana, when he called for Americans to be “frankly human,” it seems, was misheard. In the nineteenth century, critical concern had been focused on the barbarianism of the nation, so unsuited for the finer things of culture. But Santayana, proposes the obverse of this criticism. He articulated a disgust instead with the mannerisms of literary politeness and with a culture that attempts to civilize its urges by papering them over with a delicate, but shallow, veneer.

This is not to say that the tone of Santayana’s lecture is anything but condescending. He seemed to support both high and low in American culture, yet the tone of the piece suggests that the whole project might be a foolish impossibility. Parrington described the approach, as employed by critics following Santayana, as a disgust with three main elements of the “bourgeois ideals and habitat, its tyrannical herd-
mind, its poverty-stricken materialism." The stakes, in this critical approach, were extraordinary. As Gordon Hutner notes in the introduction to *American Literature, American Culture*:

> Not only was the face of America changing amid the new immigration and not only was the new consumer economy being put into place, but Western culture was undergoing its greatest challenge in the Great War that raged across Europe. The criticism of literature became one of the primary ways that citizens could gauge the vitality of a national spirit and thus preserve a sense of the nation’s destiny.

The work of the new generation of critics was profoundly shaped by two titans in the field: Van Wyck Brooks and H.L. Mencken. Brooks and Mencken anchored two distinct approaches to the criticism of American culture. However, their take on the period was in concert and their enemies, for the most part were held in common. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. noted:

> Van Wyck Brooks had instructed the post-war generation that the American past had been dominated and destroyed by Puritanism. Mencken, while disagreeing with Brooks on many things, agreed that the past was sterile and the Puritan was the enemy, adding only that the excesses of Puritanism had been compounded by the follies of democracy.

In attempting to act as a tonic for a foundering American culture, Brooks and Mencken together inaugurated a period of intensely pessimistic criticism of American culture and society. They drew a cohort of like-minded critics about them, and in great measure they framed the basic terms of the conversation on American culture.
2.3 Passionate pessimism: Van Wyck Brooks and the “Beloved Community”

Van Wyck Brooks came to general attention with the publication of his *Wine of the Puritans* in 1908. Written a year after his graduation from Harvard, *Wine of the Puritans* inaugurated Brooks’ career-long critique of the puritanical qualities in the American character. According to Brooks, the sterility of American life thwarted any artistic attempt on its soil. *America’s Coming of Age* (1915) furthered this line of argumentation.

One section of *America’s Coming of Age* is headed “Highbrow and Lowbrow.” In it, Brooks begins by asserting that the judgmental university ascetic has enforced a divide between theory and practice that poisons the waters of creativity. Brooks traces this divide to the Puritans, for whom things were either godly or secular, with no gradations in between: all, he says, is “piety and advertisement.” This separation is what Brooks means when he refers to “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” terminology which he has been credited with placing into critical usage. He writes:

> These two attitudes of life have been phrased once and for all in our vernacular as ‘Highbrow’ and ‘Lowbrow.’ I have proposed these terms to a Russian, an Englishman, and a German, asking each in turn whether in his country there was anything to correspond with the conceptions as implied in them. In each case they have been returned to me as quite American, authentically our very own, and, I should add, highly suggestive.

What side of American life is not touched by this antithesis? What explanation of American life is more central or more illuminating? In everything one finds this frank acceptance of twin values which are not expected to have anything in common: on the one hand a quite unclouded, quite unhypocritical assumption of transcendent theory (‘high ideals’); on the other a simultaneous acceptance of catchpenny realities. Between university ethics and business ethics, between American culture and American humor, between Good Government and Tammany, between academic pedantry and pavement slang, there is no community, no genial middle ground.
According to Brooks, this divide first appeared in the eighteenth century, and is personified on the puritan’s side by Jonathan Edwards (and his “desiccated culture) and on the pragmatist’s side by Benjamin Franklin (and his “stark utility”). But the divide had been enforced, Brooks argued, by the university, a place “where ideals are cherished precisely because they are ineffectual, because they are ineptly and mournfully beautiful.” This ivory tower impotency, writes Brooks, “is surely the last and the most impenetrable stronghold of Puritanism, refined to the last degree of intangibility, which persists in making the world a world inevitably sordid, basely practical, and whose very definition of the ideal consequently is that which has no connection with the world!”

Brooks, then, proposed a binary that Santayana had not, four years before, addressed. Yet Brooks uses the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” in a manner quite distinct from their more colloquial connotations of “high class” and “low class” or “art” and “entertainment.” Through his usage, Brooks proposed a cultural divide anchored in the bifurcation of theory from practice, or between academic remove and business pragmatism. He did not argue for the need to bring the lowbrow up to the level of the highbrow, or for the need to bring the highbrow down to the level of the lowbrow. Instead, he sought “a genial middle ground” which can acknowledge, for example, that “slang has quite as much in store for so-called culture as culture has for slang.” The middle ground he seeks is one of “self-fulfillment” for writers: an independent track between either a career spent in an attempt to satisfy the high-minded dictates of literature professors or a career dedicated to the low-minded dictates of one’s own wallet.
In his 1918 *Dial* essay “On Creating a Useable Past,” Brooks’ extended his argumentation in *America’s Coming of Age* to diagnose the causes of what he saw as a pale American literary canon: “we have had,” he writes, “no cumulative culture.” That is, though the American character was predominantly, in Brooks’ opinion, Anglo-Saxon, the nation’s status as hybrid and polyglot left it with no common artistic lineage. So, Brooks said, writers as diverse as Irving, Longfellow, Cooper, Bryant, and Harte “have all come to a bad end, artistically speaking” because they lacked a clear American tradition from which to draw. Because “the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value” and because we are currently existing in “a travesty of a civilization,” writers are powerless to create an American literature that is both culturally relevant and successfully executed. And so, Brooks proposed, because “we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?”

Of what exactly that invented or discovered past might consist goes unaddressed by Brooks. However, the call was a magnetic one for a collection of critics, dubbed “the beloved community” by Randolph Bourne, who gathered around Brooks at a short-lived but influential magazine, *The Seven Arts*.

*The Seven Arts* was founded by James Oppenheim in November 1916 in order help “that lost soul among the nations, America” become “regenerated by art.” The magazine, which published work by Sherwood Anderson, Robert Frost, Paul Rosenfeld, John Reed, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, John Dewey, Carl Sandburg, Max Eastman, Eugene O’Neill, and H.L. Mencken, combined politics with culture as it sought for a radicalized democracy through an American artistic rebirth. It ceased publication in
October 1917, with the evaporation of financial backing that followed on its opposition to American entry into World War I, noting in its final editorial that it had attempted the job of “interpreting and expressing that latent America, that potential America which we believed lay hidden under our commercial-industrial national organization.”22 Seven Arts was absorbed into the new Dial.

In its brief lifetime, Seven Arts was a haven for the writing and thinking of a set of critics whose work dovetailed with Brooks’ own. Waldo Frank was an associate editor with Brooks, Lewis Mumford, and Randolph Bourne. Sometimes dubbed the “Young Americans,” Brooks, Frank, Mumford, and Bourne, by virtue of their collective desire for a communitarian society that places emphasis on self-realization through democratic participation, are usually viewed as sentimental nationalists, given to utopian fantasy. Later, their ideas were dismissed as socialist silliness. As Bourne declared in 1916, “All our idealisms must be those of future social goals in which all can participate, the good life of personality lived in the environment of the Beloved Community.”23

According to Casey Nelson Blake, whose Beloved Community (1990) is a key study of the quartet, their writings, which offered a critique of capitalism, derived from the transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Their political ideas were anchored in a kind of civic republicanism, itself a critique (especially via the work of John Dewey) of industrial capitalism. In both cases, however, the Young Americans turned this critique away from the public sphere to emphasize the key necessity of personal fulfillment in small communities. Their work was moral, aesthetic, and personal. Yet each of the four brought varied concerns and approaches to the table. Certainly, as they matured, their interests diverged and altered. Mumford would turn to an examination
of urbanity, science, and design. Frank would broaden his interest to the entire American hemisphere. Brooks would, following a paralyzing nervous breakdown, emerge more optimistic about American culture. Only Bourne, who died of influenza in 1918, would remain, forever, a “Young American.” But between 1916 and 1925, the “beloved community” would hold in common a pessimistic vision of an American culture unable, by virtue of its crass commercialism, to nurture their vision of artistic achievement.

For example, Waldo Frank believed that “in a dying world, creation is revolution.” In Our America (1919), Frank criticized the moral shallowness in modern American life brought on by capitalism. He proposed a “countermythology, a revision of the cultural history of the United States in direct opposition to the official folklore of Plymouth Rock, the frontier, and rugged individualism.” In a country focused on pioneering and conquest, Frank suggested, the spirit and culture were shunted aside. For this reason, he idealized the minority cultures of Native Americans, Hispanics, African-Americans, and culturally-bound Jews. He was drawn to what can be called mysticism in the writings of Bourne, Brooks, and Alfred Steiglitz. The Re-Discovery of America (1927-1928) was Frank’s sequel, in which he explored how mystical or intuitive values might be restored in the United States through psychoanalysis, relativistic physics, and modernist art in general.

Lewis Mumford established himself, in the 1920s, as a critic of literature and architecture, an urban theorist, and a utopian. In addition to his work for Seven Arts, Mumford wrote for magazines as various as the Dial, Freeman, and New Republic. His The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture (1926) was his most important early work. Here Mumford picked up on the familiar strain of failed
materialism, suggesting that America had the opportunity to start civilization anew, yet it succumbed to a capitalist anti-utopia, out of harmony with nature. The work of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Hawthorne which synthesized nature and culture promised a “golden day” in nineteenth century New England. However, the broader pioneering instinct that subjugated the land to commerce laid waste to the delicate promise of such thinkers.

Amongst the Young Americans, Randolph Bourne stands out, for unlike the others he did not reject institutions like family, region, religion outright as oppressively genteel. Rather, he complained that they had not been successful enough in providing a strong alternative to the desires of a capitalist civilization. But Bourne also stands out for his embrace of what he dubbed “transnationalism.” In a July 1916 article for Atlantic entitled “Trans-national America,” Bourne wrote: “America is coming to be, not a nationality, but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.”25 His embrace of America’s polyglot, hybrid, or mongrel (as Ann Douglas would call it) intermixture of cultures stood him in direct opposition to Brooks (and to Mencken). Stanley Hyman noted in his seminal Armed Vision that by 1947 Brooks had become “a narrow and embittered old gentleman with a white mustache.” He could also say this:

[Brooks] has emerged as increasingly xenophobic, his early resentment of immigrants, particularly “young East Siders,” with their “alien wants” bewildering the “hereditary Americans,” hardening in later books to a kind of Yankee racism, so that New England declined when “alien races pressed on the native race,” and in the last books “race” and “racial” are scattered as nuts in fudge.26
Certainly, an undercurrent of xenophobia can be detected in Brooks’ critiques; in fact, for him, New England was synonymous with a vision of an American aristocracy. And Bourne stood in opposition to this general approach. Yet, despite his faith in transnationalism, Bourne did not fully embrace the possibilities of a non-literary popular culture as crucially American. For Bourne, the movies were as damaging as genteel parlor songs. Though he “should like to believe passionately in the movies,” they were nothing but “lowlbrow snobbery.”

In a thousand ways it is as tyrannical and arrogant as the other culture of universities and millionaires and museums. I don’t know which ought to be more offensive to a true democrat—this or the cheapness of the current life that so sadly lacks any raciness or characteristic savor. It looks as if we should have to resist the stale culture of the masses as we resist the stale culture of the aristocrat. It is very easy to be lenient and pseudo-human, and call it democracy.27

Lacking its own unique culture or tradition, the only thing America could offer to all comers, Bourne bemoaned, were its popular arts: newspapers, movies, Tin Pan Alley songs, and vaudeville. These, Bourne argued, “tend to create hordes of men and women without a spiritual country, cultural outlaws, without taste, without standards but those of the mob.”28 So, though his critique of American culture seems initially more all-embracing than that of Brooks or Frank, it ultimately withdrew in disdain from the popular or folk arts and aligned itself with the standard of literature as high art.

Ultimately, then, the “beloved community” that surrounded Brooks was united in its quest for a uniquely American culture that was to be found primarily in literature. Though this quest had at its core a nationalistic fervor, it was, for these figures, continually marked by disappointment, a doomed enterprise beset by the stultifying influence of pragmatic capitalism and incurious pioneering. They wanted to find, or to
nurture, American literary art; at the same time, they were profoundly pessimistic about the chance of it ever existing at all. So they sought for a useable past, but what they uncovered was always, to them lacking: Howells failed for being too genteel, Henry James for being too uncertain, Twain for being too comic, Stowe for being too feminine. And on and on. In this perspective of fatalistic idealism, Brooks and his “beloved community” established the dominant tenor of criticism in the period.

2.4 Debunking: H.L. Mencken’s American

If the members of the “beloved community” were pessimistic in their search for an American culture, H.L. Mencken, while no less convinced of the fruitlessness of the search, took more pleasure in the cataloguing of its failures. Mencken’s flippant voice permeated American critical discourse in the early decades of the twentieth century through his “Free Lance” column for the Baltimore Sun, as well as through two influential magazines. For the Smart Set, Mencken was book critic from 1908 to 1923; he would assume co-editorship with theatre critic George Jean Nathan for the last nine of those years. On their severing of connection with Smart Set, the pair founded American Mercury in 1924. Mencken’s own preferences were for European (and Germanic) literature and philosophy: Shaw, Nietzsche, Galsworthy, Gorki, Hauptmann, Wells, and Synge. He ascribed American second-rateness to its Puritanism, and also to its stupidity. Edmund Wilson sized Mencken up:

The human race, according to Mencken, is composed of “gentlemen” and “boobs”; the gentlemen, by virtue of their superiority, have made themselves masters of the good things of the world; and the peasants, who, by virtue of their ineptitude, remain fettered to the plough and the bench, are embittered by envy of “their betters.” It is this envy which supplies all the issues of politics in a
democracy: it is the desire on the part of the peasants to rob the superior classes of rewards unattainable by themselves or to restrain them from the enjoyment of activities that they are unable to understand. The superior classes possess a monopoly not merely of property and pleasure, but of the higher virtues as well: they embody all the learning, all the taste, all the fortitude, all the intelligence, all the sense of personal honor and all the sense of social obligation. A government by the people, therefore—that is to say, a government by persons characterized by the opposites of those qualities—is sure to be a scandal and a farce. The United States is such a farce and scandal.29

So Mencken’s philosophy is, Wilson succinctly says, “a sort of obverse of Leaves of Grass.”30 If Santayana had his will vs. the intellect or the raw vs. the genteel, and if Brooks had his highbrow vs. lowbrow, then Mencken brought another set of polarities to the table: gentlemen vs. boobs, superior vs. inferior, and European vs. American. This divide would animate the entirety of his body of work, and would shape the tone of the critics who followed, or aped, his style.

As Brooks and his circle were motivated by a desire to discover a renaissance in American culture, Mencken too produced work that praised some aspects of the nation. In 1919, one year after the publication of Brooks’ “On Creating a Useable Past,” H.L. Mencken’s magnum opus, The American Language, went into its first printing. The book is a linguistic Declaration of Independence, going to great pains, and 770 pages, in order to demonstrate the ways in which “American” speech and writing differs from “English.” Mencken collates, quantifies, and creates taxonomies. He shows how American linguistic innovation springs from necessity, as in the adoption of Native American words for indigenous animals and plants (raccoon, squash), from our polyglot heritage (kindergarten, shebang, smithereens, yen), and, most importantly, from a creative, aggressive approach to neologisms (to fizzle out, cloudburst, spreadeagle, to dodge the issue).
In many respects, the book is motivated by what seems like a faith (or at least a delight) in the vibrant vulgarity intrinsic to American culture that Santayana suggested needed to remain unhampered by genteel reformism. Mencken, certainly, saw his work that way:

Let it be admitted that American is not infrequently vulgar; the Americans, too, are vulgar (Bayard Taylor called them Anglo-Saxons relapsed into semi-barbarism); American itself is unutterably vulgar. But vulgarity, after all, means no more than a yielding to natural impulses in the face of conventional inhibitions, and that yielding to natural impulses is at the heart of all healthy language-making.31

Overall, Mencken says, American has “tang.” Its vibrance springs from the American character itself which, Mencken writes, encompasses “a general impatience of rule and restraint, a democratic enmity to all authority, an extravagant and often grotesque humor, an extraordinary capacity for metaphor.”32

In The American Language, Mencken seems to have found a wellspring of the usable past that Brooks claimed did not yet exist. It is America’s very pragmatism, Mencken seems to say, its willingness to get dirty to find a solution, that formed its special character—a character which was played out in its democratic linguistic innovations. Yet Mencken, as a critic and a man, was actually profoundly undemocratic. He made a career out of tweaking the “booboisie.” In fact, if Brooks’ dichotomy was highbrow vs. lowbrow, then Mencken’s was patrician vs. boob. And he was decidedly the champion of the former. Indeed, in his own writings, he perfected his voice of the patriarch.
When Mencken founded *American Mercury* with George Jean Nathan in 1924, the magazine was established with his credo in mind: “to depict America for the more enlightened sort of Americans—realistically, with good humor and wholly without cant. It is read wherever a civilized minority survives the assaults of the general herd of yawpers and come-ons. Its aim is to entertain the minority—and give it consolation.” In fact, according to Edmund Chielens, over a third of the essays published in the magazine between 1924 and 1929 lampooned some aspect of the American scene, including pedagogy, chiropractic, Christian Science, Prohibition, puritanism, and the sad credulity of rural America. The topic had been a ripe one for Mencken’s flogging, for in 1920 he had published *The American Credo* (again with George Jean Nathan, his partner in crime), a joshing romp listing 869 points that the American boob takes as truth: “every circus clown’s heart is breaking for one reason or another,” for example, or “the farmer is an honest man and greatly imposed upon,” or “the real President of the United States is J.P. Morgan.” He propounded a similar line of critique in his *Prejudices*, a six volume collection, published between 1919 and 1927, of his pieces from his Free Lance column in the Baltimore *Sun* and in the *Smart Set*.

Indeed, unlike Brooks, who bemoaned the failures of American literature, Mencken took permanent and perverse pleasure in mocking its shortcomings, calling the act “debunking.” Brooks wanted to diagnose and prescribe; Mencken wanted only to grouse and eviscerate. Mencken’s foolish American was as straw a man as Santayana’s genteel reformer was a straw woman, of course, but that did not stop him stirring up a delightful storm about him for several decades. And, in fact, Mencken’s American boob
became one of the greatest caricatures of all time, impressing itself, as Edmund Wilson noted, “on the imagination of our general public in a way that has not been equaled by any other recent literary creation.”

2.5 Civilization in the United States

So we see two basic camps of critical approach. In one corner was Brooks and the other “young Americans” who cried out for a useable past that would ground a new production of truly American literary art. In the other stood Mencken, a force unto himself, who excoriated the foibles of the American democratic bourgeoisie as he yearned for an aristocratic barrier to protect the production of a truly American literary art. In harmony with Mencken were Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woollcott, and the other wits of the sharp-tongued Algonquin “round table.” Both groupings followed the basic outline of Santayana’s critique of the genteel tradition in America.

All of these criticisms were folded together in one touchstone repository in 1922, when Harold Stearns edited an ambitious volume on Civilization in the United States.

The nucleus of the book was brought together by common assumptions. As long ago as the autumn of last year [1921] Mr. Van Wyck Brooks and I discussed the possibility of several of us, who were engaged in much the same kind of critical examination of our civilization, coming together to exchange ideas, to clarify our individual fields, and to discover wherein they coincided, overlapped, or diverged…. We wished to speak the truth about American civilization as we saw it, in order to do our share in making a real civilization possible.

The book consists of thirty chapters, each of which took up a discrete topic of concern.

Conrad Aiken wrote about Poetry, John Macy about Journalism, Walter Pach about Art, Elsie Clews Parsons about Sex, Geroid Tanquary Robinson about Racial Minorities, J.E. Spingarn about Scholarship and Criticism, Deems Taylor about Music, and Harold
Stearns himself about America’s Intellectual Life. *Civilization in the United States* also provided a repository of work by Van Wyck Brooks on Literary Life, H.L. Mencken on Politics, Lewis Mumford on The City, and George Jean Nathan on the Theatre. These four shared three basic areas of concern, articulated by Stearns in his introductory matter to the book:

That in almost every branch of American life there is a sharp dichotomy between preaching and practice…. That whatever else American civilization is, it is not Anglo-Saxon, and that we shall never achieve any genuine nationalistic self-consciousness as long as we allow certain financial and social minorities to persuade us that we are still an English Colony. Until we begin seriously to appraise and warmly to cherish the heterogeneous elements which make up our life, and to see the common element running through all of them, we shall make not even a step towards true unity; we shall remain, in Roosevelt’s class-conscious and bitter but illuminating phrase, a polyglot boarding house…. That the most moving and pathetic fact in the social life of America to-day is emotional and aesthetic starvation…. We have no heritages or traditions to which to cling except those that have already withered in our hands and turned to dust.36

Elements from Brooks’ highbrow/lowbrow divide infuse the first area of concern, and his call for a useable past informs the last. The desire to shrug off Anglo-Saxon culture resonates with Mencken’s *American Language* as well as with Bourne’s call for transnationlism. The premise seems, in short, sound, even open minded. Yet the essays themselves are overwhelmingly cynical and jeering in tone. So Mumford declares that “there was neither fellowship nor social stability nor security in the scramble of the inchoate commercial city, it remained for a particular institution to devote itself to the gospel of the ‘glad hand.’”37 Or Mencken declares that the average politician’s “intelligence is that of a country newspaper editor, or evangelical divine…. To demand sense of such a man, or wide and accurate information, or a delicate feeling for the public and private properties, is to strain his parts beyond endurance.”38 It’s possible to open the
book up and within a page find examples of just such self-satisfied crabbing. Santayana is certainly a spectral presence in Stearns’ criticism of “the extraordinary feminization of American social life, and…the intellectual anaemia or torpor that seems to accompany it.” To Santayana’s critique, Stearns adds that “the grandiose maintenance of our women” coupled with the fact that “the things of the mind and the spirit have been given over, in America, into the almost exclusive custody of women” have made advance in the intellectual arena virtually impossible. Brooks’ declaration that “what immediately strikes one, as one surveys the history of our literature during the last half century, is the singular impotence of its creative spirit” crowns the book’s pessimistic approach. It is young, and it is angry. Most importantly, in his chapter on “Literary Life,” Brooks ties himself to Mencken in a call for a clearer divide between artists and the general population:

Considered with reference to its higher manifestations, life itself has been thus far, in modern America, a failure. Of this the failure of our literature is merely emblematic.

Mr. Mencken, who shares this belief, urges that the only hope of a change for the better lies in the development of a native aristocracy that will stand between the writer and the public, supporting him, appreciating him, forming as it were a cordon sanitaire between the individual and the mob. That no change can come without the development of an aristocracy of some sort, some nucleus of the more gifted, energetic and determined, one can hardly doubt. But how can one expect the emergence of an aristocracy outside of the creative class, and devoted to its welfare, unless and until the creative class itself reveals the sort of pride that can alone attract its ministrations?

The desire for a barrier, and for a protected creative class, was made tangible in a wave of expatriation: the Atlantic ocean itself separated the artist from the suffocating influences of American culture itself. If Brooks rejected the genteel mob and Mencken rejected the
gauche one, the expatriates rejected the American mob entirely. After putting together *Civilization in the United States*, Harold Stearns moved to Paris: to handicap horses.43

2.6 Expatriation

The list of American literary expatriates is a long one. Ezra Pound left for London in 1907, but he ended up in Paris between 1920-1924. In a Paris anchored by Gertrude Stein, writers like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald (as well as European artists like James Joyce, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Constantin Brancusi, Tristan Tzara, and Andre Breton) found themselves rubbing shoulders with over 32,000 Americans living permanently in Paris by 1924.44 In fact, many of the artists and critics that were deeply interested in writing about America, including Sherwood Anderson, Djuna Barnes, Kay Boyle, Malcolm Cowley, Hart Crane, E.E. Cummings, Matthew Josephson, Gorham Munson, and William Carlos Williams, spent a significant amount of time in Paris.

The departures were so numerous that, in 1924, they led Paul Rosenfeld, who also participated in *Seven Arts*, to write *Port of New York: Our America* in 1924. The metaphor of transatlantic travel served as the organizing principle. The book raises a series of questions, which would thread throughout the concerns of critics as a whole in the period. What should be the relationship of American artists to their own culture? Should artists ship out for Paris or remain docked in their home port? Where can American artists find inspiration? What is American art? But the cultural axis the book describes, stretched between Paris and New York, belies other key binaries in the critical discourse of the period. Central among these is an antagonism between European culture and an American culture whose presumed center was New York City.45
Of course, not everyone went to Paris. T.S. Eliot, a more total expatriate than most, headed to London, where he eventually took British citizenship. While there, he published a magazine entitled *Criterion* between October 1922 and 1939. The magazine, which concurrently published the *Waste Land* with the American *Dial* in 1922, took up an eclectic variety of topics. It was pugnacious, saucy, and international. It was also suffused with Eliot’s approach to culture in general, which he eventually articulated in *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture* in 1948. In that book, he wrote, “…it is an essential condition of the preservation of the quality of the culture of the minority, that it should continue to be a minority culture.” The protection of the artistic minority from the (presumably artless) majority resonates with Mencken’s call for a protective American aristocracy. In fact, in the third volume of his *Prejudices* (1922), Mencken argued that the reason why so many writers were expatriating was precisely because of the absence of such an aristocracy. There is a strain of modernism, characterized by the work of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, that was in general suspicious of democracy, progress, and the contemporary world. It was also skeptical of the efficacy (or possibility) of finding a Brooksean useable past. This approach clearly resonates with Mencken’s own. Yet, Mencken always remained resolutely on the American side of the Atlantic, the better vantage point from which to harass the bozarts. Between Eliot and Mencken, however, a debunking style of criticism was coined: Wilson noted that they “between them rule the students of the Eastern university: when the college magazines do not sound like Mencken’s *Mercury*, they sound like Eliot’s *Criterion.*”
The general tenor of the time was, as Parrington noted in the outline to his final volume of *Main Currents in American Thought*, one of “disgust.” He intended to take his book through 1920 and died before he could do so. In that section, he planned a portion on “purveyors of current disgusts,” with a focus on Mencken. Within this he saw three main elements of critical concern: “the attack on democracy,” “the attack on industrialism,” and “the attack on the middle class.” The choice of the words “disgust” and “attack” are crucial; certainly, the three strands of democracy, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie are those that anchor the writings of Brooks, Mencken, and the expatriates. That is, for most of these artists and critics, modernism and democracy (and its popular culture), were in necessary conflict. Modernism, by definition and by design, was basically anti-democratic in its oppositional values, and as it appealed to an exclusive, minority elite.

### 2.7 Rourke and Seldes against the grain

Into this climate of disappointment and debunking stepped Gilbert Seldes and Constance Rourke. Not surprisingly, what Brooks, Mencken, and the expatriates had to say influenced them both. However, both of their careers can be understood as a series of sustained arguments against key elements of these perspectives. For example, Brooks’ critique of American literature shadowed Rourke’s search for its roots in folk culture. And Mencken’s critique of the American character shadowed Seldes’ search for its enactment in popular culture. Mencken’s pervasiveness would draw Seldes’ exasperation and ire. For her part, Rourke would find in Mencken, and in his “booboisie”, nothing but
a contemporary example of the tall-talking, swaggering, perpetually over-the-top American. She was amused, she said, by the “noise” he made.

Seldes and Rourke, then, disputed the mainstream of young critics between 1915 and 1941 in five major ways. These five distinctions form the bedrock of their critical ideas on American culture and identity.

1. They examined the nonliterary. In contradistinction to the habitual search for Americanness in literature, Rourke and Seldes explicitly searched for nonliterary roots to American culture. They examined folk traditions, performance, visual art, media, and popular writing (like jokebooks and almanacs) with the same intensity and respect that most critics brought to the works of Eugene O’Neill or F. Scott Fitzgerald. The choice to do so was a rebellious one.

2. They emphasized the nonrealistic. Rourke was explicit on this count. She frankly refused to use the word “realistic” because she found it so mismanaged. But more importantly, the American character she detailed in her major works was “fantastic,” “mythical,” “bombastic,” “larger than life,” and “theatrical.” In a climate of criticism that campaigned for “terrible honesty” and realistic novels, Rourke sought out an alternative vision of American art. And she tracked the roots of that vision back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. For his part, Seldes argued that American popular entertainment was at its best when it was “fantastic”, “demoniac,” “lunatic,” and “grotesque.” He praised the surreal turns in comic strips and in comic monologues as particularly American. He
sought for “distortion, caricature, and transposition” in the theatre. Like Rourke, 
his understanding of American art ran in contradistinction to the prevailing 
critical attitudes.

3. *They reconsidered the heritage of the American nineteenth century.* Both saw it as 
a period more radical than Brooks, Mencken, or Santayana might have thought. It 
was also more fertile than the trio imagined. It certainly provided the useable past 
Brooks desired; however, that past, Rourke would show, was lodged in the non-
literary creations of the period. Moreover, in examining popular entertainments of 
the period, Rourke named decidedly un-genteel traditions as the dominant 
heritage in American culture, upsetting Santayana’s presumptions. For his part, 
Seldes found in the nineteenth century penchant for fads and cults a touchstone 
example of the “herd mind” of Mencken’s own “better classes.” Seldes would use 
this discovery to unsettle the very foundations of modernist elitism.

4. *They were optimistic.* In their own work, both Seldes and Rourke bring a more 
positive perspective to American culture than the dark vision of the “beloved 
community” or the expatriates. Both looked to the “smiling aspects of life” that 
the then-passe William Dean Howells had named as “the more American.” That 
is, Rourke and Seldes saw comedy and burlesque as more indicative of the 
American character than realism. They were not Pollyannaish in their optimism, 
as I hope to show, but they were weary of the negativism of Brooks and Mencken. 
In this, they maintained a more friendly view of “the people” than most critics. 
Seldes was overt in this attitude in his articles for the *Saturday Evening Post.* And 
Rourke embodied this spirit in her life lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
5. They were frankly untroubled by working in the commercial marketplace. Though Brooks and his “beloved community” saw the commercial aspects of American culture as inherently stultifying, Rourke and Seldes took work for pay without apology. Both wrote some of their best work under contract to popular magazines, and both would eventually write about the positive influences of capitalism and patronage. Seldes, in particular, would use his platform in the popular press (and later, in the popular media) to encourage the mass audience to stand up against the demagoguery of critics like Mencken in particular. Rourke would argue that there was no point in writing about popular culture if the work created would not be consumed by a popular audience.

In short, according to Seldes and Rourke, American culture should be praised for precisely those qualities for which the majority of critics denigrated it. Their project was audacious, and it remains, in large part, unfinished.
Endnotes


2 Ibid. 147.


4 Bernard De Voto, *The Literary Fallacy* 43.


6 Ibid. x.


17 Parrington xv.


Endnotes

20 Brooks, America’s Coming of Age, excerpted in Van Wyck Brooks: The Early Years, 79-96. All subsequent citations from this edition.


29 Edmund Wilson, The Shores of Light, 293.

30 Ibid. 294.


32 Ibid., 75, 140.


34 Edmund Wilson, The Shores of Light, 297.

35 Stearns, Civilization in the United States iii-iv.

36 Ibid. vi-vii.


Endnotes

40 Harold Stearns, “The Intellectual Life,” Civilization in the United States, ed. Stearns, 139, 141. It’s worth noting here that Santayana himself reviewed the book for the Dial in June 1922. On the whole, he was displeased with the tone of the book. The authors, some of which had been his students, were “morally underfed, and they are disaffected” (4).


42 Ibid., 193-194.

43 Selzer, Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village 10.

44 Ibid. 9.

45 See Wanda Corn, The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935 for an excellent analysis both of Rosenfeld’s book and of the broader expatriation movement, especially as it pertains to American painting and sculpture in the period.

46 Quoted in John Storey, Inventing Popular Culture 26.
CHAPTER 3

CONSTANCE ROURKE ON AMERICAN PERFORMANCE, 1885-1931

3.1. Introduction

Constance Rourke was born on November 14, 1885, in Cleveland, Ohio. Her father, Henry B. Rourke, is lost to history, mentioned only in oblique passing as a “designer of hardware specialties” who died of tuberculosis by the time Rourke was three years old.1 Rourke and her mother, Constance Davis Rourke, were left alone, thrown onto their own devices; for the rest of her life, they would remain a close-knit, self-sufficient pair. Their relationship was intense and guarded, sometime secretive. It was certainly the most significant one of Rourke’s life, which was spent, with the exception of research trips often taken in her mother’s company, entirely in her mother’s home in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As a family friend noted, “Everyone who begins talking about C. soon shifts to her mother.”2 And indeed, her mother permeates her story and her work.

Yet, we must guard against simple psychologizing. When Margaret Marshall, former book editor for The Nation, was granted access to Rourke’s papers in the late 1940s, she noted the vast correspondence between mother and daughter. They exchanged letters almost daily when Rourke was in college and when she was on trips to New York on business.
Illustration 3.1

Portrait of Constance Mayfield Rourke, 1934

From the collection of Linda Butler
Reprinted in Joan Shelley Rubin, *Constance Rourke and American Culture*
I saw a lot of letters. Most of them were rather perfunctory—the sort of letters you’d write to a person if you were writing them every day—but I did find some interesting statements of plans and ambitions. And of course they gave me a picture of the relationship. It was an extraordinary one, as you know. It was amazingly free and based on mutual confidence and love that is so seldom present between mother and daughter that one naturally hesitates to believe in it without the strongest evidence. They were deeply dependent on each other, but it’s much too simple to say that either dominated the other.³

This may or may not be the case. The truth, as it is so often, is probably somewhere in the middle. But the fact is that Rourke’s mother was an indelible presence in her life. Certainly, the relationship was one that fostered economic, social, and intellectual independence for two women ahead of their time.

By all accounts, Elizabeth Davis Rourke (1852-1944) was a fiercely independent woman. At a young age, she left her Illinois home in rejection of the evangelism of her revivalist preacher father. She became a progressive teacher, training with Susan Blow, a pioneer in kindergarten education, in St. Louis. She married and divorced a man known only as “Linton.” She studied painting and sculpture, and may have met her second husband, Henry Rourke, after seeing a display of his work in a store window and tracking him down. She took up metalwork herself. She lived an itinerant life with Henry, staying in hotels and boardinghouses as they peddled their wares. She changed her first name, for reasons uncertain, to Constance. And she cut off all relations with immediate and extended family, never turning to them for assistance when Henry died in 1887 or 1888.⁴

It’s unclear how the mother and daughter came to Grand Rapids, Michigan in the winter of 1888. But they were alone, and in need of money. To begin with, Mrs. Rourke scrounged up art students, baby Constance in her arms as she went door to door. Later,
she started a movement for kindergartens in Grand Rapids; by 1892, she was a school principal. Through force of her considerable will, she managed to forge a comfortable life for herself and her daughter in their adopted home town. And always, Mrs. Rourke’s daughter was her constant companion, and to all outward appearances, an exceedingly devoted one. Reticent and difficult in other relationships, Rourke turned always to her mother.

Constance Rourke entered Vassar College in 1903. As Joan Shelley Rubin, Rourke’s expert biographer, notes, “Vassar promised young women solid training in independent thinking, offering an education backed by traditions of social responsibility as well as social grace. It was a logical choice for a woman determined to provide the best for her daughter, and perhaps to see her attain the intellectual and social benefits of the eastern education she herself had never had.” Vassar in the Progressive era emphasized social service and enrichment, a position which dovetailed with Mrs. Rourke’s own interest in newer educational theories. And its literature courses, on which Rourke focused, was guided by what Gertrude Buck, a Vassar professor, described as “social criticism.” According to Buck, “social criticism” stood against examination of literature by broad standards of “timelessness” and instead focused on the efficacy of any given work for any given reader: “the real, that is, the social, value of literature depends primarily not on what is read, but how it is read.” As Rubin notes, Buck had also acknowledged the importance of work done by fellow Vassar instructor Laura Wylie, who pushed students to look for “social forces beneath rhyme and rhythm and metaphor.” The examination of literature as a social, not aesthetic, document, would inform Rourke’s critical methodology in the years to come.
When Rourke graduated from Vassar in 1907, she was voted by her classmates as the first recipient of the William Borden Fund, which provided $1500 “to enable some member of the senior class to enjoy a year of leisure and study in Europe with the general purpose of a broader view of life and the intensifying of life toward social service.” But Rourke chose to defer the award for a year, returning to Grand Rapids to teach grade school for a year. This arrangement may have been based on financial necessity, but it may also have accommodated her mother, who would travel with her as chaperone and who wanted to attend the Third International Art Congress in London in 1908. Whatever the reason, Rourke began her post-college life in education, a field in which two thirds of professional women of her day worked, and a field to which she would return, reticently, through 1915.

Rourke and her mother traveled together to Europe from 1908 to 1909. During this time, she studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and was a reader in the Bibliotheque Nationale and the British Museum. She visited schools undertaking educational experiments. She attended lectures, observed suffrage meetings, frequented art galleries. Although the Borden Fund required recipients to stipulate a plan of study, no coherent picture of Rourke’s time abroad emerges from her varied activities. Save, perhaps, this, from a letter sent to her mother, who had returned early from the journey: “I am very genuinely interested in education, but I also feel the necessity of doing continuously a certain amount of creative work. This as far as I can see is incompatible with a ‘career’ as a teacher.”
Despite her doubts about a career in education, and despite her growing desire to undertake “creative work,” on her return to the States, Rourke accepted a position as a tutor for a family in Poughkeepsie. When that job concluded in 1910, she took another, teaching argumentative writing at Vassar. She did publish, albeit in the field of education, one essay, on “The Rationale of Punctuation,” for the *Educational Review* (1915). Whether or not she wanted it, education was rapidly becoming her career.

And then, in 1915, Rourke resigned from Vassar. At the age of 30, Rourke decided to turn to gamble on a career of writing. She was fully aware of the problems such a choice would present for her and for her mother. “Success is difficult,” she wrote, “especially if one aspires to belong to the very first rank, as I do.” She might have added, though she did not, at any point, seem to have explicitly acknowledged the role of gender in her career: “especially if one is a woman.” It was surely the case in the early decades of the twentieth century that the role of public intellectual was mainly the province of the “man of letters,” who might, upon graduating with an east coast education, stroll into a critic’s position at a magazine or newspaper. It would not be so easy for Rourke.

In 1915, when Rourke was deciding to pursue her new career, Van Wyck Brooks published *America’s Coming of Age*, the book which contained an essay on highbrow and lowbrow that would influence the rhetoric of cultural criticism for decades to come. He was just a year younger than Rourke herself. In his equally significant “On Creating a Useable Past” (1918), Brooks had written “we have had,” he writes, “no cumulative culture…. Is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?”
Of what exactly that invented or discovered past might consist goes unaddressed by Brooks. In many ways, however, Constance Rourke’s entire career can be understood as an answer to his question. It can also be seen as a rebuke: the assumptions that underlie his perception of a void at the heart of American culture are predicated on a search for meaning exclusively within the realm of literature. Rourke pointed out, however, that if we stepped away from such assumptions a whole new world might come into focus. We might, as she wrote in *Trumpets of Jubilee*, be able to “make a world out of wilderness.” Certainly, his 1918 essay prompted much of her thinking in the years to come.

### 3.2 First publications

The years between 1915 and 1920 are a poorly documented time in Rourke’s life. After declaring in August 1915 that she would focus on writing, Rourke returned home to Grand Rapids, ostensibly to do so. But she appears to have been taken ill for a time, possibly with tuberculosis, though this is unclear. Finances must have been a concern, because she returned to teaching for a time in 1917 at a local high school. But then, she had a breakthrough: in June 1918, Rourke saw “An English Raconteur,” her first professional review, published in the *New Republic*. At the time, the *Republic*, which commenced publication in 1914, was itself a young magazine amidst a surfeit of young magazines, part of the publishing boom in the first decades of the twentieth century. Like many of these publications, the *New Republic* was constantly in search of writers to fill their pages. But just how Rourke got her foot in the door, even at a new publication, is unknown.
“An English Racounteur” was a review of an assortment of short stories about “English low life” written by Neil Lyons. This may seem an odd topic for a woman who would make the delineation of the American character the object of her life’s work. However, Lyons’ research and writing technique, as Rourke describes it in the review, closely mirrors what would eventually be her own. According to Rourke, Lyons documents the lives and characteristics of the British poor, taking “a robust delight” in their “mind and methods,” and is “at no pains to maintain a consistent front, sociological or literary,” in his writing. She notes with approval that Lyons turns to humor, even satire, for his insights. Most importantly, Rourke notes, Lyons’ rich rendering of colloquial language provides “the direct revelation of character which makes the pieces substantial.”

In conclusion, she notes, that “His fresh immediacy springs from a real companionship, with subject and audience alike.”

It is almost as though Rourke is forecasting her own work in American Humor, which would come to fruition thirteen years later.

“An English Racounteur” was the first of nine reviews and articles that Rourke would write for the New Republic between June 1918 and August 1920. The subjects of the reviews were surely not hers alone to determine, and they meander topically. However, two of the nine articles were not reviews, and these hold within them clues to her growing interest in popular and folk culture.

The first long article was entitled “Vaudeville,” published in August 1919. In it, Rourke critiques vaudeville staging practices. Its scenic drops, she writes, fail to echo the elaborate fun of its performances: “the accomplishments of a troupe of acrobatic dogs, for example, may be set in a chalky grey imitation French drawingroom.” The solution to the thoughtless incongruity, Rourke says, lies in savvy use of color, surprise, fantasy, and
“a touch of absurdity.”\textsuperscript{16} Presaging her later work on the American character, Rourke says that the vaudeville stage should not turn to realism, but rather to humor. The piece would be one of the few that Rourke would write on her own period.

Rourke’s second long article, “Paul Bunyon,” was published in July 1920. This piece is Rourke’s first documented foray into folk tales and legend. The piece is largely a summation of key tales collected by Professor P.S. Lovejoy of the University of Michigan’s forestry school, with whom Rourke had planned on co-writing a book on the legendary lumberjack. The project failed to materialize; however, it is her analysis of the tales in the \textit{New Republic} article which demonstrates her burgeoning interest in and approach to American folktales. She opens the article with this statement:

\begin{quote}
The lumber industry in the United States has produced something more than the ferment of discontent known as the I.W.W. Coming out of the same harsh conditions, rising from the same soil of isolation, there has developed a cycle of stories which may be as near as we shall come to a native American folk-lore, centering about a huge, preternaturally clever lumberjack called Paul Bunyon, for whom there is no known origin or prototype.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

The search for a “native American folk-lore” will continue to percolate throughout Rourke’s work. But it is in the concluding paragraph to the article that Rourke’s critical agenda becomes, for the first time, clear. She argues that, although the Bunyon stories might have a close kin in Scandinavian or French-Canadian tales, they are at root American:

\begin{quote}
…think of them as a purely American invention, a spontaneous reflex of the imagination, with foreign influences having a partial moulding effect. Certainly the rapid fertility and ingenuity of the stories seem indigenous, as is the zest with
which situations are pushed to their furthest and their absurdity explored with a
tireless patient logic; and the whole basic method of solemn, preposterous
exaggeration touches the very core of American humor.\textsuperscript{18}

This paragraph holds the germ of \textit{American Humor}. Already, she is marking out the
territory as her own.

### 3.3 A foot in the door

1920 was a watershed year for Rourke, who spent about five months on the east
coast knocking on doors, trying to scrounge up review assignments to allow her to stay in
Grand Rapids. Within that year, June was a crucial month. First, her string of reviews had
begun to garner her some reputation as a critic. This reputation gained her a meeting with
the publishers at Harcourt, Brace, and Howe on a possible book. In a letter to her mother
dated 5 June 1920, Rourke wrote:

\begin{quote}
Result of my talk with Howe of H.B. and H. He is interested in my plan for a
book, and prepossessed in its favor by introd. from MacC [MacCracken, professor
at Vassar College]. I told him that I wanted to make some changes in the mm
[manuscript] and he said that in any case he couldn’t promise to read it for two or
three weeks…. I don’t feel sure that he will take it but I think there is a chance;
and if he doesn’t I have an introduction to the Yale Press from Dr. MacC, and
Ruth [Pickering Pinchot, a former student of Rourke’s] thinks that Heubsch, who
makes a speciality of rather small books and who also published Hackett’s Ireland
and his Horizons would be interested…. Miss Wylie and Miss Buck and Dr.
MacC were all so pleased with the narrative paper, and people do seem to know
my critical work; so on the whole I feel encouraged to think that something may
come of it.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

The book proposal in question was to be an extension of some of her educational work,
on “the psychology of narration.” At roughly the same time, Rourke submitted a short
form of it to the \textit{Yale Review}, which rejected it.\textsuperscript{20} This would mark the termination of her
work in education: Rourke would never return to the field, as a scholar or practitioner.
It was also in June 1920 that Rourke first met Van Wyck Brooks. Again, Ruth
Pickering Pinchot intervened for Rourke, writing a letter of introduction to Brooks. Of
the meeting, Rourke wrote to her mother:

I went to see [Brooks] yesterday afternoon, and as a result am taken on as a
reviewer for *The Freeman* with three books to do whenever I get ready…. I am
very pleased about this for several reasons. In the first place Brooks knew my
work, and I had only to ask for the work and got it without any discussion. Then
he told me that the reviewing on *The Freeman* is on just getting going; it is going
to be a much bigger thing.²¹

*The Freeman*, a short lived literary magazine, had just begun circulating in 1920. The
first two reviews Brooks commissioned from her were on a book about Jane Austen and
“Learned Ladies” in England in the seventeenth century, published in August and
September of 1920 respectively—two appropriately ladylike topics. But, with the growth
of Rourke’s interest in American culture, Brooks began to supply her with more topically
appropriate review work, including William Dean Howell’s edited collection, *The Great
American Short Story* (1920). Through 1921, Rourke juggled reviewing responsibilities
for the *New Republic* and *The Freeman*. Later that year, Brooks recommended that
Rourke write a study of significant American popular figures; the suggestion pushed her

Of course, when Rourke first wrote her mother of her intention to reject a career
as a teacher she did not say that she wanted to be a critic, or a historian: she said she was
interested in pursuing “creative work.” Rourke’s interests included the writing of fiction.
Alongside her developing career as a critic, Rourke had been writing short stories. Two
of these ("The Porch" and "Portrait of a Young Woman") appeared in the *Dial*, in October and November 1921, shortly after a young critic named Gilbert Seldes had become managing editor for the publication.

It is tantalizing to imagine Seldes selecting Rourke’s pieces for publication. In an August 1923 review of several collections of short stories, Seldes complained bitterly of the general lack of quality within them. In a footnote to the review, Seldes noted, “The *Dial* will offer, presently, a collection of stories from its pages, under the imprint of Alfred A. Knopf. So those who feel that my objections to other stories are chiefly due to the fact that they haven’t appeared in the *Dial* can add that to their justification. The objections remain; and *Stories from the Dial* will only enforce their validity. They will, additionally, be good stories.”

Though this cannot be substantiated, it is important to note that one of her pieces, “The Porch,” was selected for inclusion in *Stories from The Dial* (1924), an anthology of fifteen stories that had run in the publication. In this collection, her short story rubs shoulders with works by Sherwood Anderson, D.H. Lawrence, Padraic Colum, Arthur Schnitzler, and Thomas Mann. Surely this selection suggests that her work was deemed outstanding by the editors, of which Seldes was the most influential.

“The Porch” is the story of Maude, a young bohemian woman living in a small town where front porches are both stage and audiences, sites of public action and the judgment of that action. When Maude disappears with a carload of her friends for the freedom of the West, her mother knows she will neither return nor marry the boy she left with. Rather than endure the gawping of the neighbors, Maude’s mother stages performances for them on their porches, attempting to convince them that Maude, in a
nod to propriety, had married. The story ends ambiguously, with Maude’s mother refusing to move from her home because she has just fixed up her porch the way she wants it.

Both “The Porch” and “Portrait of a Young Woman,” which is a snapshot of a spoiled, fast-living bohemian woman, fit awkwardly within Rourke’s body of work. She never published any further fiction, for example. And, as tempting as it might be to analyze the stories as the fantasies and wish-fulfillment of a lonely spinster, it seems more likely that they are actually Rourke’s riff on her mother’s own biography: Elizabeth “Constance” Davis Rourke was forever close-lipped about her own youth, which was tinged with suggestions of bohemianism, flight, and small-town gossip. Whatever the case, as 1921 came to a close, Constance Mayfield Rourke had established herself as a critic and author.

So it may seem peculiar to examine her list of publications and see, after her hustle to gather publications and reputation, a gap in published work between January 1922 and August 1925. She seems to have disappeared. In actuality, Rourke made a calculated choice to withdraw from the deadline pressures of review work in order to focus on more extended studies in American popular and folk culture. Her next move would be to a writers’ colony in New Hampshire for a short tenure.
3.4 Retreat: The MacDowell Colony

In the summer of 1922 Rourke arrived at the MacDowell Colony, an artist’s colony and writers’ retreat in the rolling hills of rural Vermont. Over the next few years, it would become for her a regular retreat and a place to forge new professional connections. That summer, Rourke was in residency with Mary and Padraic Colum, Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, Elinor Wylie, and, notably, with Gilbert Seldes.24

The MacDowell Colony, which continues to operate, was founded in 1907 on a two hundred acre tract of land outside of Peterborough, New Hampshire. The property belonged to composer Edward MacDowell and to his wife, Marion. Edward was best known in his lifetime for Indian Suite (1896), a work blending Native American melody with Romantic orchestration. That same year, he was tapped by Columbia University to head their newly-formed Department of Music. In his position as Chair, he was often too busy to undertake his own compositions. So the MacDowells purchased the land in New Hampshire as a retreat for Edward.25 When the main farmhouse on the property itself became too distracting for Edward, Marion arranged to have a cabin built in the woods as a studio for him. The division of living space from working space became intrinsic to the Colony in the coming years.

Unfortunately, by 1907, MacDowell was in prematurely failing health (and would die a year later). The question of what to do with the property gave rise to an inspired decision: turn it into an artists’ colony.26 The idea was not his alone: MacDowell had, since 1900, been on the board of trustees for the Corporation of Yaddo, another artists’ colony located in Saratoga Springs, New York. In fact, artists’ colonies, of varying sorts, abounded in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dublin,
a colony within miles of MacDowell in New Hampshire, and Cornish, further away on the Connecticut River, were both well into their existences. Most importantly, a colony in Old Lyme, Connecticut was presided over by Marion MacDowell’s cousin, Florence Griswold. But the MacDowell Colony was set apart from the rest by Edward’s, and later, Marion’s, focus on “the affiliation of the arts.” Edward firmly believed in a Wagnerian fusion of all arts, and so an essential component of his colony became its simultaneous support of writers, artists, and musicians.²⁷

By the time of Rourke’s time there in 1922, the Colony had grown into thirty-two individual studios with various support buildings. Then as now, each studio was relatively isolated, allowing for working solitude. Every day, a picnic basket lunch was quietly delivered to the door of each studio, allowing for uninterrupted work. Breakfast and dinner were taken in the Colony Hall, a centrally located common building, and sleeping dormitories are located in three buildings near to it.²⁸ Residency at the Colony was fellowship-based; that is, residents could choose to pay a modest fee for their tenure, but were not required to do so.

Of course, in addition to their remarkably utopian value to those in residency, artists’ colonies had a whiff of self-indulgence about them. And financing an operation like MacDowell, which tried to accommodate any artist it deemed worthy, regardless of ability to pay, was a challenge. J.P. Morgan, when approached by Marion MacDowell for support, reportedly offered her a personal annuity on which to live but “not a cent for a damn-fool scheme for indigent Bohemians that would never work.”²⁹ To counter this perception, the MacDowell Colony in its early years focused on a kind of propriety and structure quite in contrast to the stereotype of bohemian life. There were but two rules at
the Colony: do not visit another studio without invitation, and no one may be in a studio after dark. In her memoir about the Colony, Pulitzer Prize winner Margaret Widdemer stressed the strict mores of the place:

There were few written rules in the Colony, and what there were, were in the main sensible and intelligent. But the unwritten ones, or Colony policy, were those of her [Marian MacDowell’s] girlhood’s day, with a few improvements of her own. Also, though her heart was buried in Mr. MacDowell’s grave (you might visit it on Sunday, if in a serious and reverent frame of mind, but not sit on it, and not as a mixed twosome), she frankly preferred the male to the female. She expected and usually got from the men something close to the attitude of the medieval troubadours to their ladies, a single-hearted platonic worship which kept their minds off anybody else. I must say they got a lot more work done that way.

Women colonists, therefore, were in the minority. It wasn’t that Mrs. MacDowell kept them out. But all too often they were as she said regretfully, “not the Colony type”…. The Colony type as I observed it, which most of the women were, was rather mousy, rather neuter, and rather past youth.30

It would seem Constance Rourke fit the disparaging bill. Yet, despite the aura of propriety, the Colony was known for its vibrant conversation and easy connection-making. Colonists were forbidden to return to their studios after dark (ostensibly for reasons of safety), which meant that evenings were given over to lectures, concerts, readings, exhibitions, and long discussion.

These evenings of discussion surely influenced Rourke’s work. And her perspectives surely influenced those of her interlocutors. What conversation she must have had with Gilbert Seldes, who was in residence with her in 1922 and in 1924, is impossible to recover. But other traces of her time at MacDowell have survived. In a 1930 letter to Canadian author and folklorist Constance Lindsay Skinner, Rourke wrote, “Thornton Wilder was here for a month, and I always find him extraordinarily interesting; he is so chock full of material for one thing, reference, intuitional judgments, and that sort of thing.”31 Rourke’s time with Wilder at MacDowell first overlapped in
1924; they were there again together in 1930. From 1930 forward, references to Wilder are sprinkled throughout Rourke’s work. For example, she lectured on his work at various locations in 1931. And she wrote an article in 1940 entitled “Art in Our Town” for the Nation that called to mind several elements of Wilder’s 1938 play Our Town. Certainly, Wilder’s textured approach to American culture would have resonated with her own.

But we’ll return to that issue later. For now, it’s 1922 and Rourke is leaving MacDowell to return to her town, Grand Rapids, Michigan. There, she nursed her mother through breast cancer. And she wrote.

3.5 Trumpets, Troupers, and a Character: Naming a Useable Past, Framing a Useable Present

The significance of the critic is measured by the problems he puts to us.

Gilbert Seldes, “The Artist at Home,” 20 May 1925

Between 1924 and 1931, Constance Rourke was selective in her journalistic work. She produced just seventeen reviews or articles, almost all for New York Herald Tribune Books. These seventeen were savvily chosen, on topics in what was becoming Rourke’s area of expertise: nineteenth century American popular culture. Primarily, in this slice of time, Rourke investigated the aspects of American history and life that would provide the topics for her three major books—Trumpets of Jubilee (1927), Troupers of the Gold Coast (1928), and American Humor: A Study of the National Character (1931)—all published by Harcourt Brace and Company. The first two of the three were, in 1927-
1928, serialized in *Woman’s Home Companion*, to fund Rourke’s ongoing research. And all three studies, as well as all of her reviewing work, focused on the same period and subject matter: nineteenth century American popular and folk culture.

In these projects, Rourke developed a working method that was uniquely her own. When figures like Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford were parsing literary works by Mark Twain and Henry James to find the roots of American culture, Rourke was scouring junk shops, estate sales, and oddball collections across the country for nineteenth century joke books, almanacs, handbills, and small-town newspaper clippings. Brooks and Mumford looked to the urban and the expatriate for their material; she searched the frontier, the rural, and the very-rooted folk.

Through the subjects of her three books in this period—Harriet Beecher Stowe, P.T. Barnum, Lotta Crabtree, Horace Greeley, blackface minstrels, stump speakers, stage Yankees, and yarn-spinners of all stripes—Rourke wove a tapestry of popular figures in nineteenth century America. In doing so, she argued that they, not major literary figures or artists, constituted the very fabric of American culture. Without obvious argumentativeness, she rejected Brooks’ belief that America had no culture and gently showed him where it was that he had failed to look to find it.

By July 1924, Rourke was already deep at work on what would become the first of her major studies of popular culture in nineteenth-century America. She had turned her attention to the Beecher dynasty, and in her writing about Henry Ward Beecher she was struggling to deal with his infamous affair with Elizabeth Tilton. In a letter to her mother she described her struggle:
The Beecher scandal…will indeed be a problem to handle. It cannot possibly be blinked; in fact, it makes the core and center of my study of Beecher…. I think there is no question Beecher was guilty…. I shall be glad to see the Mencken article. It is usually interesting to hear the noise he makes. But as a matter of fact they were pretty outspoken about sex in the Beecher days, if somewhat more naïve than some of our modern writers.32

She was curious about what Mencken had to say, but unperturbed by his “noise.” She was also unimpressed and unconcerned. Unlike Gilbert Seldes, whose ire sometimes was raised by Mencken’s baiting, Rourke simply immersed herself in her work with poise and with diffidence.

One of the handful of articles Rourke wrote during these years was a review of two books on Paul Bunyan for the Saturday Review of Literature in August 1925. She was interested in Bunyan because she had intended, years earlier, to collaborate on a book on the legends; the project was eventually abandoned. In her review, she describes the perils of criticism:

The path of the critic is perhaps as simple as the crooked logging road which was finally pulled straight by Paul’s Blue Ox. “You’d be walkin’ along it, all unsuspectin’, and of a sudden you’d see a coil of it layin’ there behind a tree, that you never knowed was there, and lyin’ there lookin’ like it was ready to spring at you.33

The critic’s winding journey of discovery (and surprise) echoed Rourke’s own experience in gathering the material for the two books she would create in these years.

Though Rourke still maintained her permanent residence in Grand Rapids with her mother, she made an extended trip to the east coast in 1924. In July, she returned to the MacDowell Colony, where she made the acquaintance of Margaret Widdemer, Elinor Wylie, Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, William Benet, and, of course, Thornton Wilder. Here she began intense writing on Harriet Beecher Stowe, a study which would become
part of *Trumpets of Jubilee*. When the Colony closed for the season in October, Rourke went immediately to New York with a book proposal for Harcourt Brace. From there, she wrote to her mother with glee:

> Am sending you a check for five hundred dollars by registered mail today. Brace offered it to me Friday before reading Harriet B.S. [Beecher Stowe] but decided it was more dignified to wait. They are all enthusiastic about Harriet…. I may drop in at The Dial this afternoon. Gilbert Seldes is going to give me a copy of his Seven Lively Arts.³⁴

Five days later, Rourke was meeting with Van Wyck Brooks, noting “he likes my work immensely, has read both portraits. I asked Mr. Brace to show them to him. He is in at H.B. [Harcourt Brace, where Brooks was a reader] twice a week now. This was vastly encouraging.”³⁵ Later that week, on November 11, she went to see a production of *What Price Glory*.

Rourke’s breathless immersion in the critical and cultural world of New York was unusual. Unlike the vast majority of critics in the period—including Kenneth Burke, Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woollcott, Lewis Mumford, George Jean Nathan, or Gilbert Seldes himself—Rourke did not place New York City at the center of American culture. She was more solitary, generally working from home and making forays into the big city only for research. In fact, the networking process did not come naturally to her. By 1928, after the publication of *Trumpets* and *Troupers of the Gold Coast*, Rourke was more aware of the need to build contacts and establish a network:

> One other kind of thing has been added which I hadn’t thought about at all except in an incidental way, and that is the possibility of seeing and meeting new people just in a general way. As a rule when I am very busy during these trips east, I just don’t, except for incidental visits with old friends. But it has been borne in upon me (by my publishers, among others) that I ought not to pass by the opportunity of meeting more interesting people who are interested in my work. Of course
there are not millions of them, but it is a pleasure of course, and then a number of insistent advisers have been telling me that I just must anyway, with one book out not very far back, and another soon to come. But it does take time!\textsuperscript{36}

And time was something that Rourke did not yet know was, for her, exceedingly limited.

3.6 Trumpets of Jubilee

Though Rourke made her early deals on the book that would become \textit{Trumpets of Jubilee} in 1924, in actuality, she had begun to formulate her ideas for it nearly six years before its final publication. According to Rubin, in July 1921 Van Wyck Brooks suggested that she create a study of some of the more popular figures of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{37} Why he did so is unclear. In 1921, Brooks had just completed \textit{The Ordeal of Mark Twain} (1920) and was deep at work on \textit{The Pilgrimage of Henry James} (1925). Both books are extremely pessimistic about American culture, making the claim that both Twain and James had the potential for true literary greatness but were thwarted by American pragmatism and irreverence. So a supportive study of the very popular culture and popular figures he believed limited American cultural production is a curious move. Clearly, even as Brooks seemed to support her study of popular figures, Rourke continued to take issue with his own approach to the matter.

Whatever the case, one year after Brooks’ apparent recommendation, in July 1922, Rourke wrote to Alfred Harcourt with an outline of her proposed study: \textit{Trumpets of Jubilee} would be a study of five figures from the mid 1800s: Lyman Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, and P.T. Barnum. It was, in a way, Rourke’s own revisionist version of Emerson’s \textit{Representative Lives}: instead of focusing on major authors and philosophers, Rourke would turn her attention to the lives...
of popular figures who were *truly* representative of their time and place. The title referred to the golden trumpets of the biblical book of Joshua, whose blasts caused the walls of Jericho to crumble. In the selection, Rourke underscored the place of religion in the period. More importantly, she at the same time announced her own critical aims and part of the revolutionary intention of the book. Rourke sounded a challenge to her fellow critics: *Trumpets of Jubilee*, she hoped, would bring down the walls proscribing the usual presumptions about the American nineteenth century.

At the time of proposal, Rourke already had a particularly clear sense of her organizational approach and writing style. She intended that the book would be presented “dramatically” and she wanted it to “read somewhat like a novel, with an effect of connection between the portraits and progression and even climax, the four or five personal dramas revealing a larger social drama.”\(^3\) From the beginning, even in a book that touched on the theatre obliquely, Rourke would use drama, theatre, and performance as the cultural frame for her story. Performance suffused the book. For example, Rourke narrates the stories of her five key “characters” in a highly visual, very theatrical manner: “Into this numbered company steps another character, or rather crowds his way, as indeed from the briefest acquaintance one might guess that he would do.” She refers to the “panorama” of their careers or, she qualifies, “the scenic diorama, as it might have been called by his friend and contemporary, Barnum, who purveyed this entertainment at the American Museum”).\(^4\) The language of the theatre is threaded throughout the book, quite purposefully.
But Rourke had another purpose beyond that of fine writing and storytelling. The five figures selected for presentation were chosen in particular for their hardy popularity, and Rourke made the fact of their popularity a central point of the book. In the forward to *Trumpets of Jubilee*, Rourke summed up her approach:

> It is a habit in these days to scorn popularity, and to measure successful leaders by their product, which may not always be exquisite. But popularity is a large gauge and a lively symbol; the popular leader is nothing less than the vicarious crowd, registering much that is essential and otherwise obscure in social history, hopes and joys and conflicts and aspirations which may be crude and transitory, but none the less are the stuff out of which the foundations of social life are made. At certain times and in certain places popularity becomes a highly dramatic mode of expression. One of the places, surely, is our own country; one of the times that middle period of our history when at last the great experiment in voicing the public will was fairly launched…. In this era of shattering change, many shrill or stentorian voices were lifted; orators appeared on every platform; with their babel rose an equal babel of print; perhaps there never was such noisy chorus or so fervid a response…. Out of that large and stirring confusion arose a few orphic figures: Emerson, Whitman, Melville, Thoreau, possibly Hawthorne, and in another arena, Lincoln; but we shall be concerned with these only as they oddly mix with the multitude or clash with it, or cross the paths of our popular figures.40

Implicit, then, in *Trumpets of Jubilee* is an answer to Brooks’ call for a useable past. Here, Rourke seems to say to Brooks, are five figures who lived alongside the major literary figures that you feature. But my figures, she suggests, influenced the society around them in more direct and more lasting ways than Emerson and or Melville, and certainly in more direct and lasting ways than the debunking critics of her day cared to acknowledge. Throughout the book she presses Greeley to the foreground as she pushes Thoreau to the background, and regularly links her characters with the activities of the more “major” literary figures.

In her five central figures, Rourke touches on four key elements of the middle years of the nineteenth century: abolition, evangelism, journalism, and entertainment. She
expertly demonstrates, albeit quite implicitly, how these four interplayed. But, as in all of
Rourke’s studies, her framework and argument are submerged beneath her quite vivid
writing. Ironically, her storytelling skill as a writer would, in the coming decades, impede
her reception as a serious scholar.

For example, in the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Trumpets*, on Lyman
Beecher, Rourke opens her story like any old-time storyteller, with “once upon a time.”

According to family legend, one of the remoter grandfathers of Harriet Beecher
Stowe could lift a barrel of cider and drink from the bung-hole. His son could lift
a full barrel into the cellar. They came of English stock, with a Welsh and Scotch
strain through the women of the family, and sprang from the Puritan soil of
Guilford in Connecticut, the home of the Beechers from the time of the Davenport
settlement. They were all blacksmiths.41

The storytelling quality of Rourke’s writing is clear. In fact, the Beecher lineage, from
father Lyman to children Harriet Beecher and Henry Ward, would become a sort of
dynastic morality tale or dramatic cycle anchoring *Trumpets of Jubilee*. Three of the five
chapters in the book are about the family. Together, these three chapters expose, in the
 guise of one family, the complex interplay of evangelism and theatre, the desire for fame
that can animate social activism, and the first stirrings of American celebrity. Rourke told
their stories, but in doing so she advanced a thesis about American culture.

For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) is perhaps the best known
Beecher, both for her abolitionism and for her serialized book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851-
1852). But in Rourke’s telling, however, Harriet is shown less as a bleeding-heart
supporter of the anti-slavery cause and more as a woman with a deep desire for fame, fed
by chronic self-aggrandizement and an iron will. Her religious faith intertwined with a
powerful desire to perform, to be seen. Rourke eloquently describes Harriet’s drive to
work situated amidst the chaos of home life with four children (the surviving of seven), as well as her marriage to Calvin Ellis Stowe, a bland clergyman who acquiesced to her drive for fame.

The interplay of evangelism and performance is further emphasized in Rourke’s chapter on Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887). Henry followed in his father’s footsteps as a preacher, and throughout his career he advocated for women’s suffrage, temperance, evolution, and abolition. But Rourke emphasizes his famed pulpit theatrics, like the trampling of the chains which had bound John Brown or a mock auctions at which his congregation purchased the freedom of slaves. As a famous orator, Henry drew Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain to his Plymouth Church in Boston. And, in Rourke’s analysis, Henry embodied the “roar of sound and the tumult of feeling” that Whitman poured into his poetry. Yet Henry had what Whitman did not: “from Whitman public favor was withheld. With all his passion for the crowd he failed to gain the public which he sought, either through writing or through speech.” Henry Ward Beecher “with an idiom which often closely approached that of Whitman, with an approach to rhapsody…which seemed more fluently or more crudely molded from the same stuff that Whitman used, Beecher kept the channels of public intercourse free; and—there was no doubt about it—among all the thronging number of public speakers he received the adulatory crown, the rosy native laurel.” In Rourke’s portrayal, Henry possessed the same expansive, embracing persona as Whitman, but he also possessed popularity and influence that had eluded Whitman. Finally, in Rourke’s analysis, Henry Ward Beecher was a man both embraced and then, in the wake of his infamous affair with Elizabeth
Tilton, rejected by the crowd. He was spectacular, in every sense of the word. “A remorseless English critic,” Rourke notes dryly, “called him the Barnum of religion.”

For Rourke the intense popularity and subsequent obscurity of a man like Henry Ward Beecher, who retained such marked similarities to a figure like Walt Whitman, clearly was at the core of the problem with the habitual elucidation of an American “useable past.” In her chapter on Horace Greeley (1811-1872), the newspaper editor and erstwhile presidential candidate who had exhorted America’s youth to “Go West, young men, and grow up with the country!,” Rourke noted, “An obtuse contradiction exists between the insubstantial figure of today and the living presence of Greeley in the florid mid-century….Was there something transient rather than elementary in Greeley’s character, so that he belonged to an era and quickly passed with it?” How a figure could tower so high above his period and then disappear so completely from public memory interested Rourke. The dilemma underscored and animated her desire to uncover the non-literary ephemera which was so intrinsic to daily life in its time but so easily disposed of.

P.T. Barnum (1810-1891) is the subject of Rourke’s final chapter. She approaches him as the quintessence of the American experience. “His history,” she writes, “grows into fable, mixed with the caprices of time—not the great fable, perhaps, but a portion of what might be called the American legend.” Rourke accords him special attention. Of course, Barnum’s flair for the fictitious led him to exhibition of creative bunkum at his American Museum, including such hoaxes and curiosities as Tom Thumb, the Fiji Mermaid, and the Siamese twins Chang and Eng. For Rourke, though, “he was something more than a creator of emporiums to give the public what it wanted….he let play upon
the faint stirrings of popular desires the energy of a sportive imagination, a fancy
primitive but dramatic."44 In this, and through the “lecture room” in the Museum,
Barnum, Rourke says, unleashed an American appetite for the theatrical.

Perhaps more than any other single force or figure Barnum broke down the
barriers which had long kept the American public from the theater; irresistibly his
audience must have filtered into the unsanctioned playhouses. But if he opened a
sluice, he also deepened a channel. Though his designation was a shell, and his
drama itself a caricature, he magnified the notion that the play must teach a
lesson.45

Despite regular failures and losses, including the incineration of several of his museums,
Barnum built an impressive entertainment empire (and fortune). He was a tireless self-
promoter and savvy marketer, whose many-editioned autobiographies both solidified his
reputation as well as drummed up consistent business. Yet, Rourke notes “almost nothing
substantial about him emerges from the ruck of contemporary evidence; scarcely another
figure of equal proportions has left so little behind him by way of personal print.
Necessarily he becomes a legend—an outcome he would have relished.”46

But Barnum is not the only figure to have left behind less tangible evidence than
his considerable reputation in his historical moment might seem to warrant. Rourke went
so far as to make the case that the popular, in the mid-nineteenth century and beyond, was
traceless. She wrote of Barnum’s audiences, “As they came and went, looking at his
preposterous conglomeration, who can say what they found? The imagination of the
forties and fifties, like that of youth, is difficult to recover; and Barnum’s greatest exhibit,
the public, left little trace of its conclusions.”47 Rourke would make it her career’s work
to uncover as many of these traces as possible, by looking for evidence where few
scholars of her day would follow.
In her conclusion to *Trumpets*, Rourke suggests that the most important thing that links her five figures together is what she variously calls “bombast” and “magnitude.”

Of all modes of expression bombast is perhaps the most difficult to understand, because it uses contemporary metaphor, and may spring from both terror and exhilaration, and from heroic enterprise…. Magnitude seems the single positive legacy of that forgotten time: magnitude which is upon us in a thousand rapid guises, with multiplied roaring sounds, with the greatest speed, the greatest numbers, with an infinitely expanding universe.

From that younger era shall we receive a warning, or a hope, or a challenge? Or a tradition?… Surely we find ourselves in a predicament not unlike that by which they were confronted: we too must make a world out of a wilderness. In this endeavor traditions would offer a foothold, no doubt: but traditions are often hard to discover, requiring a long and equitable scrutiny…. Yet certain clear emblems remain out of the past, for times of hesitation. Magnitude, which to us often seems deadening and terrifying and meaningless…. can inhere in human intentions. Largeness belonged to the leading figures of that day—belonged to its popular spokesmen. 48

In the conclusion to her first book, Rourke laid out what would be her critical agenda for the rest of her career. The nineteenth century in America can provide a “tradition”—a useable past—if we look to its popular figures. She provocatively asks us to consider: “Among many characters, great and small—who perhaps was small, and who was great?…. As the task of possessing the continent grew monstrous and chaotic, who offered imperishable counsel? Not Emerson, or Whitman.” 49 Why, then, were critics looking to Whitman and not to Ward Beecher, to Emerson and not to Barnum, in their quest to explicate American culture? Rourke demanded, politely, that they think again.

Most importantly, the popular figures she emphasized in *Trumpets of Jubilee* were, all of them, marked by a kind of larger-than-life magnitude or theatricality. The core significance of performance and of theatre would motivate and shape her next book,
published immediately after *Trumpets*. In it Rourke would turn more directly to the theatre itself, writing “A passion for the theater ran like a strong and brilliant coloring through all that animated life.”

### 3.7 *Troupers of the Gold Coast*

In 1926 and 1927, pieces of what would become *Trumpets of Jubilee* were first published in a ladies’ magazine, *Woman’s Home Companion*, alongside advertisements for baby formula and foundation garments. The magazine was an eclectic repository of information deemed to be of interest to women, but the information was broadly scoped. For example, the same issues in which Rourke’s work was published also featured poetry by Carl Sandburg and essays by DuBose Heyward. Rourke’s story of Harriet Beecher Stowe ran in six installments between February and July 1926; her story of Henry Ward Beecher ran in five sections between September 1926 and January 1927. Publication in the popular magazine was lucrative for its authors: from her sale, Rourke earned a cool $10,000. The funds from the sale would support months of painstaking primary source research for Rourke’s second book, *Troupers of the Gold Coast* (1928).

*Troupers* extended two key elements of Rourke’s vision of American culture in *Trumpets*. A full-length study of Lotta Crabtree (1847-1924), the actress and entertainer who made her name in the mining camps of gold-rush California, *Troupers* shifted Rourke’s interest in the theatre as the primary American mode of expression away from the realm of metaphor (where it had been situated in *Trumpets*) and into the world of the theatre itself. Second, as she had done in *Trumpets*, Rourke revealed that America’s vital energy and character could be discovered in the supposedly minor or marginal people
whose popularity outstripped that of the elite figures about whom most literary studies had been written. In both of these techniques, Rourke sustained her work in answer to Van Wyck Brooks’ lament. She celebrated a useable past in American popular culture.

In this work, Rourke pioneered her “living research” techniques. First, the funds from Trumpets supported seven months of research in California in 1927, during which Rourke and her mother duplicated the journey of Lotta Crabtree and her mother up the Pacific Coast. It also supported her painstaking primary source research, in old newspaper offices, in the personal collections of Lotta fans, in scattered caches of playbills and programs throughout the American west, and in the testimony of eyewitnesses to her performances. Lotta Crabtree, it’s important to note, had died just three years prior to Rourke’s study. Yet Lotta’s story, and her reputation, were already beginning to disintegrate. So Rourke’s work was also an act of preservation.

Rourke opened Troupers with not a “Foreword” but with a “Salutation.” In nine pages, she acknowledged the contributions of a variety of memoirs, interviews, and personal collections from which she had drawn, noting, “Seldom has a compact era had so ample a personal literature.” To reconstruct Lotta’s life, Rourke drew from newspapers in San Francisco, Sacramento, Sonora, Grass Valley, Placer and Sierra County, and Shasta, including Golden Era, Pioneer, Californian, Dramatic Chronicle, and Figaro. She also studied “old play-bills, miners’ song-books, minstrel and variety songsters, prints, scrapbooks…. A wealth of suggestion appears on the broad hangers as to favorite lyrics, entr’actes, and afterpieces, as well as sharp glimpses of personal destiny through the shifting of parts or changes in companies.” To find these, she ran ads in local papers requesting information on Lotta, followed leads, and generally relied on the kindness of
strangers. She discovered a vast network of personal collectors who held photographs, programs, posters, and pamphlets that were the essential material of her study (material which is, even today, poorly collected by most major libraries). And she interviewed surviving troupers, including Blanche Chapman, Emelie Melville, Clay Greene, Blanche Bates (of *The Girl of the Golden West*), and Ina Coolbrith (who toured with Adah Mencken and Mark Twain).

In putting together *Troupers*, Rourke adhered to the organizing principle that had worked to her success in *Trumpets*. She placed Lotta Crabtree, a seemingly minor popular figure, in the foreground of a story through which moved famous performers, like Edwin Booth, Adah Menken, and Mrs. John Drew. In foregrounding Lotta, Rourke made an implicit argument about American culture. That is, in employing such a narrative strategy, Rourke implied that Booth could be *better* understood if Crabtree and her milieu were understood. Moreover, Rourke insisted that the dancing and singing of young Crabtree before miners in California revealed as much, if not more, about American culture than the staging of Shakespeare by Booth in New York city and elsewhere.

It is crucial to note, however, that Rourke at no point directly or clearly states this point of view. Unlike the vast majority of her fellow public intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, Rourke made a habit of writing without directly picking fights. Her argument is submerged beneath engaging writing and persuasive marshalling of detailed evidence. Rourke says, without saying, that America’s generally accepted major figures can only be understood if their popular counterparts are fully comprehended. Moreover, those figures
generally deemed popular or less significant may in fact be exactly what American
culture hinges upon. The point of view would sustain her most important work, *American
Humor* (1931).

At the age of four, Lotta Crabtree moved to Grass Valley, California, with her
mother and father who were seeking their fortune as part of the Gold Rush. While there,
her neighbor, dancer Lola Montez, coached the young girl’s burgeoning performance
skills. Soon after, Lotta began touring mine camps throughout the state as a juvenile
performing curiosity. Eternally petite and saucy, Crabtree returned in 1864 to the east
coast to much success as Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Little Nell in *The Old
Curiosity Shop*. By 1870, she would headline her own theatrical company. She retired a
wealthy woman at 45 in 1892, and when she died in 1924 her estate was valued at $4
million. She left most of the money to charity.

Rourke opens her book on Lotta by suggesting that the entire 1840s boom town
culture was fundamentally theatrical:

If not wholly theatrical these sounds and appearance were in friendly alliance with
the theater. Interludes of singing and dancing were popular on every stage, as if
the cult of an earlier California had joined with that of the roaring, song-singing
newcomers. But the amazing circumstance was the spontaneous eagerness with
which the Americans had turned to the drama itself. Even the soldiers of
Stevenson’s regiment who had arrived before the discovery of gold, who had
come for the soberest of reasons, not only as soldiers, to hold the country, but as
colonizers to settle there, had begun almost at once to give plays….At Monterey
in the spring of 1848 the wing of a long adobe house was fitted up for them as a
theater, with a pit, a little stage, and a wooden drop curtain which was lifted and
lowered like the lid of a box. Here they produced stout old English farces and
even Shakespeare.

At Sonoma in the Valley of the Moon another company of the regiment
turned to theatricals at about the same time, and played for four months in a
miniature theater. The unexpected enthusiasm sprang up in San Francisco. A few
young stragglers of fortune united in the spring of 1848 to give plays. Another
band met in the autumn for the same purpose at the dubious Shades Tavern. The building of a theater was discussed even when the town was only a scattered village of tents and tiny wooden houses.\textsuperscript{53}

Rourke continues her chronicle of west coast theatricals for thirty-five pages. Against the generally accepted view that American theatre was developmentally anchored on the east coast, Rourke suggests that it flourished first, and most fully, in the West. From there it imbued the entire culture:

In no other area of the country had the theater come into such unchastened, free and abundant life. Elsewhere the theater had always suffered from repression, except perhaps in a few scattered cities of the South. On this new frontier nothing was repressed, either plays, actors, or the audience. Men quarreled over renderings, and protested when lines were cut. Acting versions of the plays often changed hands among the miners for more than their weight in gold. If burlesque and extravaganza prevailed, every new experiment in the theater was welcomed. Recondite plays like \textit{The Critic} had been produced; and the rewards offered to favorite players remained lavish, taking the form of a rain of nuggets in the camps and often in San Francisco, with the cosmopolitan addition of diadems and watches, golden flowers and jeweled brooches.\textsuperscript{54}

In Rourke’s analysis, the theatre, away from the east coast, was vibrant, essential, and very very popular. Of course, the frontier, as Frederick Jackson Turner had famously suggested in his “Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), itself created freedom by loosening the bonds of custom. In a significant way, Rourke suggests, the frontier itself made Lotta’s remarkable career possible.

Within this milieu, Lotta’s career success turned on two key choices. The first was to shift from “legitimate” pursuits to the more popular blackface minstrelsy. Though her mother balked at the roughness of the form and consistently worked to find Lotta dramatic roles “worthy” of her talents, Lotta would have her some of her greatest successes when she blacked up, as Topsy. She also learned the banjo and took key parts
in the minstrel walkaround. The tiny redhead, now known as “Miss Lotta,” was beloved for her explosive dancing and her raw theatrical energy. Minstrelsy, as a form, encouraged such displays.

The second move came later in Lotta’s career, toward the playing of “hoydenish” roles. Lotta had always performed mostly for men; in the mining camps where she made her start, she was a spectacle both for her youth and her femininity. She, and her mother, capitalized on the combination. But, when Lotta moved east and took on roles in *The Pet of the Petticoats*, for example, she began to cultivate an alluring, but rough, persona. She smoked on stage, and off. She continued to engage in physical humor, “roll[ing] off sofas and show[ing] far more than an ankle….her short skirts were daring.” Of this risk, Rourke writes:

She was shattering traditions as if she could not contain herself within stereotyped forms. She was already a comedian, or *comedienne*, as the stage prefers it, footloose, turning to new amusement whatever she touched, creating the airy structure of extravaganza in unlikely places.

Broad comedy for women was still rebellion. In a period when a delicate distance was considered an ultimate feminine quality, it was rebellion indeed to forget the prerogative of a languishing charm; it was nothing short of revolt to diminish the aura by which woman—it was hoped—might always be surrounded, and actually to laugh with an audience, thus shattering distance altogether. Few actresses even in the liberal California days had attempted it, even though a tradition for comedy prevailed there.

Rourke had reappraised Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Trumpets* as a powerful woman who consciously directed her own career. Similarly, in *Troupers*, Rourke looked to Lotta as a counter to the critical charges regularly leveled against a genteel, fainting femininity in American culture. Here, Rourke shows us a woman who was immensely popular and
admired who did not fit the mold. Lotta embodied a lively, theatrical, rough, non-Puritan, and native strain of American culture. She stood in stark contrast to the gentility which the likes of George Santayana perceived in the same period.

More important for Rourke’s broader understanding of American culture as theatre, however, is her observation that Lotta belonged “to the theater but not to the drama.” Rourke writes:

The cry then and later was for native plays with a pictorial embodiment of American life. But perhaps more perishable materials were to prove deeply American. Keeping a pace which belonged to her own period, Lotta came to the brink of contemporary musical comedy, the blackface revue, of comic opera. She gave impetus to a form of fantasy in which native actors and composers and writers were to prove singularly adept. Perhaps this light and transient expression, appearing like fireworks, quickly dying, catching the changing color of the day, could never in itself endure. Yet it could be transmitted through the years by the most definite artistic heritage—quickly as this seems to vanish—that of the stage, with a momentum which seemed to belong inalienably to Lotta’s small figure, giving it a continued life.

Rourke’s observations here are incisive, and come to the heart of her growing case for the theatre as central to American culture. In this passage, Rourke proposes the popular theatre, in all its transience, topicality, and perishability, as more “deeply American” than any work of dramatic literature America had yet produced. Crucially, this profoundly American expression hinged on fantasy. In Trumpets of Jubilee, Rourke had named “bombast” and “magnitude” as key qualities of American art. With Troupers, she adds “fantasy” to the stable of adjectives she would use to flag an essentially non-realistic core to American cultural expression. The significance of this insight would coalesce in her next book, American Humor.
Of course, the call had been put forth, from *Metamora* onward, for a peculiarly American drama. Much to the chagrin of the majority of critics, the call was regularly answered with what had been called a disappointing failure to produce American dramatic literature on par with that of the European tradition. Where, critics wondered, was the American Shakespeare, Shaw, Goethe, or Ibsen? Rourke tells us that in figures like Lotta Crabtree—light, comic, exuberant, and most of all, fantastical—America could find its “most definite artistic heritage.” There is a tradition in American culture, Rourke asserts, and it is transmitted from performer to performer, from Lotta all the way to Fanny Brice, on the stage. It is a lived, vital culture—ephemeral and non-literary to be sure—and it constitutes a heritage, perhaps the heritage, of a lively American culture.

Both *Trumpets* and *Troupers* were generally well received. Often, however, the books were taken as pleasant and interesting reads, but they were not addressed as the ground-clearing works that they are. Rourke’s prose was charming, and the essential argument of the books was often lost (or buried) beneath it. Gilbert Seldes reviewed both works. His assessment of them is more insightful than most. *Trumpets of Jubilee* rates only a paragraph in the “Briefer Mention” section of the *Dial*’s book reviews; however, the tone of the analysis is uniformly positive. Seldes writes:

Miss Rourke has written not biography, but social history; she has managed to give the sense of the life of the time, and also to acquaint us with the serious and with the trivial problems of the time. Except that the documentation is a little too great for cursory reading, the book has every charm, not least the charm of an interesting temperament observing outlandish and beguiling movements of the spirit in others.58
It must be noted that her handling of documentation would ever present Rourke with criticism, either for being too extensive (in the case of *Trumpets*) or for being to scanty (as in the case, later, of *American Humor*). In both cases, dissatisfaction with the quantity of documentation was rooted in the nature of her work itself: it was directed at the general reader but produced by a serious scholar. Neither constituency, it seemed, would be satisfied with her final approach.

But Seldes was insightful when he declared that Rourke’s book, though it unfolded in a series of biographically-based chapters, was really looking at a broader social history. In both *Trumpets* and *Troupers*, Rourke begins with a personality and expands into the culture at large. And the personalities she chooses are uniformly from popular culture. Seldes, himself a critic focused on contemporary popular culture, saw that her historical work supported his critical work.

When Seldes came to review *Troupers* in 1929, he again stressed the significance of Rourke’s analysis of nineteenth century popular culture. He also noted her extraordinary writing style. The review, for *Bookman*, was entitled “How, and How Not, to Write About Women.” *Troupers of the Gold Coast* was his prime example of how to do so:

The precision of [Rourke’s] words, the cadence of her prose, the justice and vividness of her observation, all seem to me remarkable even in an age of superior biographical and historical style. She cannot write a paragraph without distinction; and she seems incapable of copying the mannerisms of anyone, so that everything is fresh and personal.

...Miss Rourke has contributed something important to the history of the American theatre…. In brief, this history indicates how universal and how profound acquaintance with the theatre was nearly a century ago and, through the chief character, shows how the type of theatrical which is now most typically American rose out of the older, imported theatre.59
Seldes again keyed on the significance of Rourke’s work for his own. Rourke proves, he writes, that popular theatrical entertainments were central to the American experience in the nineteenth century. Moreover, though their roots can be traced to European performance, the comic entertainments that Lotta promoted—especially blackface minstrelsy, early musical comedy, and even her virtuoso solo comic acts—were fundamentally American inventions. They presaged the contemporary popular entertainments, in vaudeville and film, that Seldes was busy promoting as essentially American. Again, Rourke’s historical study supports Seldes’ contemporary criticism. Seldes sees that their approaches and concerns are allied. Rourke’s next work, *American Humor: A Study in the National Character* (1931) could only cement this point of view.

3.8 *American Humor* (1931)

*Trumpets of Jubilee* was published in book form in 1927 and *Troupers of the Gold Coast* in 1928. Both had, in many ways, been but a prelude for Rourke’s most important work, *American Humor: A Study in the National Character* (1931). Both required research in popular American print, song, and performance, and it was in these explorations that Rourke began to formulate her theories about American culture. *American Humor* would expand Rourke’s observations on popular culture and American performance to an all-encompassing approach to the American character, broadly construed. In the four years between 1927 and 1931, Rourke worked continuously, as she said, “like a house afire,” steadily building upon the methodological and interpretive groundwork she had previously laid. In 1929, she went to England for six months, accompanied by her mother, as a kind of writing retreat. And she returned to the
MacDowell Colony in 1930 to begin the intensive writing on the book. Of her work on *American Humor*, she wrote to her friend Constance Lindsay Skinner from the Colony on 19 August 1930: “My book has been exacting, and I have had both the pleasure and the tantalizing spectacle of having it grow rather continually. It’s been fortunate, for I have to work over things whose outcome I pretty well know, yet it has been slavish too.”

Upon publication, *American Humor* would establish Rourke’s reputation as a cultural critic. Lewis Mumford, whom Rourke had met in 1927 during his lecture tour to her home base of Grand Rapids, reviewed the manuscript for Harcourt Brace. He effused, “Miss Rourke has done the most original piece of investigation and interpretation that has appeared in American cultural history. It is in every way a brilliant book; and it casts fresh light, not merely on our own folk literature, but upon the great literary figures that have emerged from this primitive soil.” The praise is high, but not unwarranted. As in *Troupers*, Rourke examines a welter of primary source material from the popular arts to construct her vision of American culture. It is a highly original piece of research and analysis. Moreover, Rourke connects her discoveries in popular culture to the standard major literary figures of the nineteenth century. As in *Trumpets*, these figures are illuminated by the popular material, not the other way around.

The prime source of the “fresh light” that Rourke casts on these figures comes from American performance. In *American Humor*, Rourke explicitly yokes her understanding of American culture as expressed through bombast, magnitude, and fantasy to the stage, addressing American humor as anchored to the “fantasies of the theater.” Rourke shows the fantastical (and non-realistic) work created on the American comic stage to be rough, crude, and primitive. But rather than argue, as Brooks or
Mumford might, that these qualities impede American artistic achievement, Rourke suggests that they foster the full development of a vibrant American culture. Crucially, because “[t]here is scarcely an aspect of the American character to which humor is not related, few which in some sense it has not governed,” it is American humor, not its serious literature, that reflects and anchors the American character.63

Rourke opens the book with a rejection of the prevailing critical attitude of pessimism and debunking. In the foreword to her book, she writes:

Of late the American character has received marked and not altogether flattering attention from American critics. “It’s a wretched business, this virtual quarrel of ours with our own country,” said Rowland Mallett in Roderick Hudson. The quarrel seemed to begin in that period within which [Henry] James laid his story, soon after the Civil War; traces of it may be seen even earlier. It has deepened; it has occasionally grown ponderous; it has often been bracing; at times it has narrowed to a methodical hilarity. Since the prevailing note has been candid, candor may be offered in turn. This book has no quarrel with the American character; one might as well dispute with some established feature in the natural landscape. Nor can it be called a defense. Some one has said that a book should be written as a debt is gratefully paid. This study has grown from an enjoyment of American vagaries, and from the belief that these have woven together a tradition which is various, subtle, sinewy, scant at times but not poor.64

Rourke’s statement of purpose for her book is clear. She is not in sympathy with the “wretched business” of the negative criticism of America promulgated by Mencken or Brooks. At the same time, she is not attempting to write a mere “defense” of the culture. Rather, she chooses a middle ground, in which she declares that American culture is. She has found a rich vein of material in popular, humorous print and performance that proves, she believes, that there is, after all, an American cultural heritage which reaches back as far as the first settlements. Rourke suggests that the book is neither critique nor defense, but rather an explication of an extant “useable past” which has gone overlooked in the long tradition of American self-evaluation. It is a work of history.
Yet (misguided) negative criticism from the young intellectuals has had its effect. Rourke begins her study, which focuses on the years roughly between 1800 and 1880, with an attempt to clear this effect away. Asserting that the roots of American culture can be most clearly seen in its comic entertainments, she turns to Henri Bergson’s “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,” for support, quoting his influential 1900 essay: “The comic…comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as a work of art.” From her evaluation of the surviving ephemera of joke books, almanacs, monologues, and stage routines, Rourke says that “by 1815 the American seemed to regard himself as a work of art, and began that embellished self-portraiture which nations as well as individuals may undertake.” However, the American character developed extremely rapidly, and that rapidity, in combination with a significant amount of international and critical attention focused on the birth of the new nation, presented problems brought on by a kind of adolescent self-awareness:

Other national types had developed slowly, even through centuries, without close definition by themselves or by others. The American stepped full-length into the public glare, and steadily heightened the early yellow light. He gazed at himself…as in a bright mirror, and developed the habit of self-scrutiny, which may have its dangers for the infant or youth, whether the creature be national or human.

The cycle of self-creation followed by immediate self-scrutiny created a kind of hyper-aware feedback loop which Rourke suggests has hampered attempts to fully develop as a culture. In this, she implicates the strongly negative criticism of public intellectuals. Rejecting this approach, Rourke turns to her core analysis.
She begins her description with the analysis of three basic comic types that underlie the American character: the Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the minstrel. Rourke’s Yankee is a lean east coast swindler, whose rustic deadpan belies considerable manipulative savvy. Her backwoodsman, who often takes on the guise of a pioneer or a riverboatman, is a swaggering, animalistic barbarian for whom strength was an “obsession—size, scale, power: he seemed obliged to show their symbols as if after all he were not wholly secure in their possession.” Finally, (and most problematically) Rourke’s minstrel was a “black-faced Yankee,” tricky and sly, but without the Yankee’s deadpan. He was outwardly ebullient; inwardly he was profoundly despondent. The very fact that Rourke chose the minstrel as one of her triumvirate of types is significant. In doing so, she acknowledges race, and the problems of racial masquerade, as essential to the formation of American culture. At the same time, in her analysis of the minstrel, as we shall see, she makes risky presumptions about (and risky conflations of) African-Americans and minstrels within the broader culture. These complexities will warrant further analysis in this chapter.

Throughout the book, Rourke acknowledges several other popular comic types (including Bowery B’Hoy Mose, the stage Irishman, and the stage Dutchman) but she argues that none of them became as indelibly linked to the American character at large as her three key figures eventually did. These three comic types held essential qualities in common. All were tricksters of some sort. All were wanderers. All were resilient. All employed bravado. And, perhaps most importantly, because “laughter produced the illusion of leveling obstacles in a world which was full of unaccustomed obstacles…These mythical figures partook of the primitive; and for a people whose life
was still unformed, a searching out of primitive concepts was an inevitable and stirring pursuit, uncovering common purposes and directions.”

The three comic types were rough, and sometimes objectionable. But they served as starting point for the working out of the American character against a backdrop of a still-forming nation.

The articulation of, and serious analysis of, these three figures was but one part of Rourke’s project in *American Humor*. Her argumentative framework is, to a certain extent, submerged beneath her graceful (and purposefully non-confrontational) prose. However, it can be distilled into four basic propositions. In Rourke’s analysis, the American character, as presented in its popular arts, is

1. A native, and original, construction. It is not merely a pale reflection of its European roots. It is also not, as critics were commonly suggesting, Puritanical.
2. Mythical and fantastical. It is, therefore, explicitly non-realistic.
3. Theatrical. It is drawn to theatre as a mode of expression, and it is in and of itself a performative character.
4. Grounded in the popular, not the literary, arts. Therefore, attempts to evaluate it by literary standards will inevitably come up lacking.

1. The American character is a native, and original, construction. It is not merely a pale reflection of its European roots. It is also not, as critics were commonly suggesting, Puritanical.

Throughout *American Humor*, Rourke is keen to prove that her three comic types were American inventions necessitated by life in the new land. As she elucidates her key examples from the popular stage and print, she makes statements like: “The Yankee
seemed an aboriginal character sprung suddenly, long-sided and nimble, from the gray rocks of his native soil. Surely he was no simple son of the Pilgrim fathers.⁶⁹ That is, the Yankee was a folkloric type with no antecedent in Europe, and also, crucially, with no easy relation to the austere world view of the Puritan colonists.

Rourke does not deny the influence of Puritan constrictiveness on the development of American culture. But she refuses to make it the *definitive* element. Rourke argued, “As the texture of early Puritan life is examined, sources of Yankee strength become apparent, but not of Yankee humor: for humor is a matter of fantasy, and the fantasies of the Puritan, viewed with the most genial eye, remain sufficiently dark.” There is, she says, a “constant opposition” between “the dark emotions and an earthy humor” that is fundamental to the deadpan detachment and pragmatism of the Yankee.⁷⁰ In this analysis, Rourke implicitly rebukes critics, like Brooks, who have placed too much emphasis on the Puritan without accounting for the subversive shift inherent in the Yankee as displayed in comic materials in the American archive. They do not see the Yankee, she tells us, because they do not look: if the sermons of Cotton Mather are all that are analyzed, then the radical wit of the Yankee in comic monologue will be missed. And the picture of American culture that emerges will be hopelessly skewed.

The fact that the Yankee (and, by extension, her other two comic types) are peculiarly American inventions has not, Rourke notes, always been a source of pride. In fact, she tells us, from Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* forward, Americans have been insecure about their cultural significance in relation to that of Europe. The insecurity, she points out, has tended to play out in a dual-layered defensive rejection: “first that all refinements might be found at home; then that they didn’t matter.”⁷¹
The insecurity was abetted by a continuous trickle of criticism in continental travelogues, from the work of de Toqueville to Mrs. Trollope. The French, with the “amiable light luggage” of Rousseau, saw the American as a child of nature. The British, on the other hand, displayed “extreme credulity” in examining Americans and, in general, found them to be barbarously regressed from their British roots. The critics of Rourke’s own day were still laboring to refute such criticism, often acquiescing by agreeing that the continent was right in its assessment of a barren American culture. But Rourke sees things differently, noting that the American stage “from 1825 onward, when the British commentaries were in full swing” had already become a place to answer the charges. For example, the Yankee would lope onstage, “half bravado, half cockalorum,” and take the form of a peddler or a merchant who got the better of continental snobs. But, to the dismay of some, he was always, perversely, portrayed as everything that repelled Mrs. Trollope: “indefatigably rural, sharp, uncouth, witty. Here were the manners of the Americans! Peddling, swapping, practical joking, might have been national preoccupations.” Later, the backwoodsman “assumed in gross form the faults with which he was charged. He was considered uncouth, and he swaggered the more roughly. He was called a bragger and a liar: he gently retouched his exploits.”\(^72\) That is, creators and consumers of American humor flaunted their roughness in the face of the pretty refinements of the Continent. American humor hinged on this tactic: as Gilbert Seldes noted in *Seven Lively Arts*, “Juvenal and Johnson may have been superior to the thing attacked; it pleased the democratic American to pretend to be beneath it.”\(^73\) Or, as Rourke wrote of the American penchant for burlesque: “American audiences enjoyed their own deflation; they liked the boldness of attack, the undisguised ridicule.”\(^74\)
Of course, the critique of American roughness was not solely European. Sometimes it was an internal affair, with sophisticated city-dwellers ranged against frontier rubes. So, Rourke points out, the rural New England Yankee quickly moved from duping the British gentry to fooling New York urbanites in the plays Rourke cites. Likewise, the frontier-forging backwoodsman had to respond to “opprobrium of New England” that was “often as marked as that of Great Britain.” Thus, Rourke’s nuanced analysis of the insecurities and defensiveness inherent in American humor encompassed both the tensions between America and Europe as well as burgeoning regional posturing on the matter of culture and status.

2. The American character is mythical and fantastic. It is, therefore, explicitly non-realistic.

As she insisted in Trumpets of Jubilee and Troupers of the Gold Coast, Rourke again asserts that American popular culture is defined by its attraction to the mythical and the fantastic. In fact, the two words pepper the book. Her three key comic figures are, she stresses, “a myth, a fantasy.” All three figures, she writes, “join in a new national mythology.” Rourke links fantasy and myth directly to the nonrealistic. In her analysis of American burlesque, she notes: “It was not a realistic spirit.… The world of burlesque was still the familiar native world of phantasmagoria.” The Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the minstrel did not, she writes, invite “the literal view or the prosaic touch. The fantasies surrounding them might often be crude and earthy, but they were fantasies. These odd and variegated creatures were firmly planted in the spacious realm of legend.” Myth, fantasy, legend, phantasmagoria: the terms, all of which serve as
synonyms for “non-realistic” circulate insistently throughout *American Humor*. It is clear that a construction of American culture as rooted in fantasy and myth is crucial to Rourke. In light of a critical and artistic climate that was focused on realism as the apotheosis of artistic expression—from the paintings of the Ash Can school to the photography of Lewis Hines to the novels of Sinclair Lewis—her assertion was a radical one.

The point of view clearly caught the attention of critic Bernard De Voto. On 25 September 1931, just a few months after *American Humor* was published, Rourke sent a seven-page, typewritten letter in responding to a series of criticisms about the book’s approach to realism that DeVoto raised. DeVoto had apparently attempted to argue (as he was about to in his *Mark Twain’s America*) that Twain, the quintessential American humorist, was deeply realistic. Rourke demurred, and in doing so, clarified her position on the matter:

Now we reach the nub of a real controversy. I knew of course that the point was controversial and I believe that it is new—that is, the stress upon the poetic rather than the realistic strain in our literature…. I’m convinced the primary motive and color and impulse in *Huckleberry Finn* as in *The Gilded Age* or any other essential work of Mark Twain’s was not realistic. The moment you find burlesque you are out of the realm of the realistic—you are out of the field where the plumb-line can be sunk in a leisurely fashion and the slighter human foibles perceived—you are off hot-foot into a gay and glorious and impossible world, explosively larger than reality.78

She saucily concluded this section of the letter: “I’m really hoping that if my work should ever come into the purview of future critical judgment this idea [realism vs. fantasy] will be put down to my credit.”
De Voto was clearly unconvinced, as the debate continued through their next letters. Rourke responded, more pointedly, on 3 March 1932:

…if your contention is that American humor is mainly realistic, what do you do with the tall tale? What do you do with the repeated use of the tall tale or its effect constantly in Mark Twain? Surely the tall tale is highly American. It appears in anecdote, in speech, in monologue…. How do you explicate the tall tale as an example of realistic art? 79

Rourke stresses in the letter that she does not believe that American humor is antirealistic; rather, she argues that realism is not the dominant mode of communication within it. Here, she offers DeVoto some teasing advice on his planned *Mark Twain’s America*:

> I wish you weren’t going to nail a tattered flag like that of realism to your mast in what sounds to me like a grand book. Of course realism is immensely important, as is any distinct aspect of human perception. But if there were time I believe I could show you that it comes as both an outcome and a dead in most literatures, a climax and a finish.80

She concludes the letter with a direct explanation of the import of her work in *American Humor*.

> I feel that the outlining of the element of fantasy as continuous in American humor is something specially my own. So far as I know this has not been done before, though here and there the mythological may have been mentioned in connection, say, with the Paul Bunyan tales or some other specific group: but as a continuous element, shown in sequence, I think this had not been defined…. I believe that even the use of the word “fantasy” in relation to American humor is entirely my own.81

In both the September 1931 letter and the March 1932 letter, then, Rourke stresses that American humor (and thus, American culture) is rooted in fantasy or myth. She explicitly states that it is not grounded, though it is related to, realism. That she forcefully reiterates this point, along with the credit she feels she is due on the matter, suggests that the point
was exceptionally important to her. It also suggests that she was aware that the proposal ran distinctly counter to the general critical viewpoint, even for a fellow spirit like Bernard De Voto.

So in her correspondence, Rourke is abundantly clear about her approach. However, in her book, Rourke was at pains to avoid embroiling herself in arguments over terminology that would, she felt, bog down her writing. She steadfastly avoiding using freighted concepts such as “Realism.” In a letter to De Voto, she noted:

I have rather consistently avoided the use of the word “realism” throughout the book, because I think it is really difficult to define, because it immediately invites consideration of the usual antithesis of romanticism, because it seemed best to me in handling the material under consideration to use the directly descriptive attributes rather than the abstraction and the pigeon-hole.82

The very word “realism” seemed to Rourke both limiting and misleading. She preferred, she says, to describe what she saw rather than to attempt to categorize it. This reticence is in keeping with Rourke’s decision to “rather consistently not [argue] with everybody” because “[i]f I had begun taking up arguments they would have swamped the book all along the line.”83 She knew she was addressing the broader critical conversation about American culture, yet she refused to directly engage in it. Instead, she set up her alternative view as an impregnable truth.

3. The American character is theatrical. It is drawn to theatre as a mode of expression, and it is in and of itself a performative character.

The theatre, the “truant mode,” is the core of Rourke’s work on the American character. In making her case, she draws upon the rich heritage of American performance, noting that “Theatrical histories, memoirs, and accounts of travel by
strolling players have supplied a considerable bulk of material; these writings all but match the almanacs in importance as revealing popular humor, popular preoccupations, and evidences of the national character.” So Rourke addresses the work of performers (like George Handel Hill, a Yankee monologist), recurring characters in popular drama (like Sam Slick, a recurring rube character), and the musings of figures in popular print (like Jack Downing, of the Downing Papers). In all of these cases, even those that appeared exclusively in print, Rourke stresses their performative nature. For example, in her analysis of a book, *Jonathan Slick in New York* by Ann Stephens, Rourke says “the book is a monologue…Jonathan himself was there, talking.” Even in a book, there is performance.

The fourth chapter of *American Humor* is entitled “Strollers,” and it focuses on the itinerant performers on makeshift stages across the nation in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Here, Rourke makes a case for the apprehension of the traveling performer as a foundational figure, encompassing the Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the minstrel. That is, all three figures were portrayed on the stage, which became, in Rourke’s analysis, the crucible for experimentation with their form. For example, Rourke’s first illustration of the backwoodsman comes from the stage. She writes, “In 1822, at a theater in New Orleans whose pit and parquet were crowded with flatboatmen, an actor stepped out in buckskin shirt and leggings, moccasins and fur cap, with a rifle on his shoulder. He might have come from the audience.” According to Rourke, the Davy Crockett-esque backwoodsman, as an American type, makes his first appearance in the theatre. But his presentation there is, significantly, doubled. This backwoodsman is both a creature of the stage and of the frontier, both actor and audience. Rourke opens up the
complicated exchange between the performance of character on the stage and the performance of self in daily life. For her, the American character is a performed construction.

So Rourke’s presentation of the backwoodsman indicates two major elements of the significance of performance in *American Humor*. First, the history of the American stage Rourke narrates is that of the popular theatre, and especially of the popular theatre in locations beyond the east coast corridor. The backwoodsman does not first appear on the legitimate stages of Boston or Philadelphia; he bestrides the rough and ready boards of New Orleans. So part of Rourke’s contribution in *American Humor* is a quick history of the American stage that first asserts that the theatre was ubiquitous: “Everywhere they found theaters, or theaters were improvised for them; every one came, black and white, children and their elders.” But she also picks up from where she left off in *Troupers of the Gold Coast*. In that book, Rourke had argued that American theatre had flourished in the South and in the West when it still remained repressed in New England. In *American Humor*, she chronicles a detailed history of the American popular theatre that begins with Increase Mather on the topic in 1686, and extends through the work of itinerant companies in Kentucky in 1815, a Natchez theatre built in an old graveyard in 1820, and a variety of commandeered plantation ballrooms and saloons. Her strollers hop trains from Chattanooga to Savannah, stopping to perform *The Spectre Bridegroom, The Wizard Skiff*, and an incalculable quantity of burlesques. Ultimately, then, in Rourke’s history of the American theatre, the popular stage is of immense, central significance to the construction of both the national character and the nation itself.
But beyond the significance of the stage itself, Rourke’s presentation of the backwoodsman signals a second key element of her evaluation of performance in relation to the American character. Rourke writes,

> The Americans had in fact emerged as a theatrical race. No doubt many obscure influences tended to create this bias of character. The new country made a strangely painted backdrop before which the American seemed constrained to perform.…. And theatrical tendencies in the American character were heightened by a long intimacy with the stage.87

For Rourke, the American character was, at root, a performative one. First, she attempts to prove the “long intimacy with the stage” by bringing to light popular theatrical performance often obscured by a focus on the east coast legitimate stage. But she also underscores the essential theatricality of the American character itself. The backwoodsman, then, is a character constructed both on the stage and in life.

Rourke extends her analysis of American theatricality by exploring the ways in which characters, both on stage and off, choose to counterfeit and to pretend. Thus, the notion of masking or masquerade is central to the picture of the American types she draws. The stage Yankee, for example, pulled his pranks by pretending to be something he was not:

> Masquerade was as common to him as mullein in his stony pastures. Long-backed, thin, “lank as a leafless elm,” a New England coach driver might look as though a high wind would blow him away, yet he would wear nankeens and low shoes in winter weather, and was not fragile but lusty….he was an actor and troupe.88

The Yankee used his apparent physical weakness to convince his marks that he was harmless; then he would swindle them out of their very last dime. He pretended to be something he was not. The Yankee’s face itself served as a mask, of deadpan passivity:

> “In a primitive world crowded with pitfalls the unchanging, an averted countenance had
been a safeguard, preventing revelations of surprise, anger, or dismay…. No doubt the mask would prove useful in a country where the Puritan was still a power and the risks of pioneering by no means over. The Yankee retained it.” Moreover, his manner of speaking, “not so much a dialect as a lingo,” was also a form of subterfuge: “its oddities were consciously assumed. It was another form of masquerade.”

Of course, as a type, the minstrel is pure masquerade. In the form, a white man literally masked his face with burnt cork, and sang, danced, and joked in the guise of a comically stereotyped version of African Americans. Of the form, Rourke writes:

Minstrelsy was of course white masquerade; and the double use of the mask seemed to create a profound satisfaction for American audiences, as if the sheer accomplished artifice aroused an instinctive response among them. The mask might be worn as inheritance or for amusement or as a front against the world in any of these impersonations, concealing a childish and unformed countenance: but it was part of a highly conscious self-projection.

Rourke’s approach to blackface minstrelsy is, in many ways, more nuanced than that of many of her contemporaries. By 1931, the minstrel show had long since waned as a key form of entertainment in America. This is not to suggest that blackface performance had disappeared: figures like Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor continued to don the burnt cork mask on the vaudeville stage, and Amos and Andy had made their radio debut. But the minstrel show, with its typically all-male, all-white, three-part form, was but a memory save for amateur home, school, and lodge theatricals. At the time of American Humor’s publication, the books that existed on the topic, including Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth’s “Gentlemen, Be Seated”: A Parade of the Old-Time Minstrels (1928), were
primarily nostalgic in tone. Harkening back to the good old days of the 1850s, these works generally presented the minstrel show as an honest, if idealized, representation of the jolly character of the plantation Negro, who would “cut capers in chains.”

Such oversimplification of the dynamics of the form have long since been dismantled. From Ralph Ellison’s influential article “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” (1958) to major works like Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) and Dale Cockrell’s *Demons of Disorder* (1997), scholarly understanding of blackface minstrelsy has moved from naïve nostalgia to angry rejection. It has settled, in the past two decades, into a middle approach that envisions the form as ambivalent, oscillating in its portrayals between racial hatred and racial desire.

Rourke’s approach to blackface minstrelsy is similarly complex. Yet she was not immune to the dangerous conflation of the African American character with the minstrel character. For example, she repeats the anecdote of T.D. Rice discovering a handicapped Jim Crow in a Lexington horse stable and presenting Crow’s limping jig and lilting song on the stage to much success. Rice, she says, collected “plantation melodies” for “Ethiopian opera.” The notion that Rice’s performance was an “authentic” representation of slave life is fraught with assumptions about the character and status of African Americans.

The problem of assumptions about “authentic” representation expands as Rourke indicates that Rice’s Jim Crow, which was first seen in New York in 1832, was predated by blackface performance by Edwin Forrest.

In the early ‘20’s, at almost the precise moment when the backwoodsman appeared in legend with his “Hunters of Kentucky,” the southern plantation Negro was drawn on the stage in Cincinnati by young Edwin Forrest.
part, Forrest strolled through the streets, when an old Negro woman mistook him for a Negro whom she knew; he persuaded her to join him in an impromptu scene that evening. This little sketch seemed unimportant, but Forrest had studied the Negro character; he inaugurated a tradition for faithful drawing. Other impersonations, now lost to view, no doubt followed, like tentative portraits; and punctually in the early ‘30’s, when both the Yankee and the backwoodsman leapt to full stature on the stage, the Negro was also pictured in firm, enduring outlines.92

“A tradition for faithful drawing” is, most scholars would agree, not at the core of the blackface performance impulse. The minstrel is, if anything, a caricature of blackness. The intentions and effects of that caricature might be hotly debated, but the fact that minstrelsy fails to accurately presents blackness is not.93

It is important to note that Rourke never claimed that the Yankee or the backwoodsman were “faithful” representations of the American character. That is, she does not claim that they are real. Rather, the Yankee and the backwoodsman are discussed by Rourke as reflections of fantasies Americans were inventing about themselves, or as images engendered by the working out of the national character—images that were worked out, more often than not, in performance. “The young American Narcissus had looked at himself in the narrow rocky pools of New England and by the waters of the Mississippi,” Rourke wrote, “he also gazed long at a darker image.”94

So it is difficult to account for Rourke’s insistence on “faithful drawing” in the character of the minstrel. In some ways, it seems she is straining in an attempt to accord very legitimate significance to African American culture itself. For example, she argues, against the prevailing assumptions, that Stephen Foster “was the borrower” from African American musicians. She declares that the walkaround was “patterned on Negro dances….which in turn went back to the communal dancing of the African.” She asserts
that “Rice and [Dan] Emmett can only have borrowed the fables, probably with their tunes.”\textsuperscript{95} She is attempting to give real credit to African American culture for its contributions to American culture as a whole; unfortunately, in that act, she turns to the simplifying rhetoric of authenticity. More frustrating is that fact that, in her letters to Bernard De Voto, it is clear that she was not unaware of the complexities of cultural exchange between white and black. De Voto clearly took her to task for oversimplification, and she defended herself:

> The fact that, as Mr. Gordon says, one can’t find a genuine spiritual earlier than 1843, proves nothing, as it seems to me. We are dealing with an expression whose transmission is almost wholly oral and which was recorded, if at all, by white men. I believe it is true that there was taking on both sides. For example, I’ve been fairly sure that I found Irish jig tunes in one or two spirituals. But the handling has been transmuted, and I would defy anyone to take a pile of sheet music representing the songs of the day and the songs of minstrelsy through the forties and fifties—anyone, that is, who can read music and is sensitive to literary values—and find that they all belonged to the same general class—that of white composition.\textsuperscript{96}

Rourke’s perceptive analysis of her primary source material has been borne out by that of musicologists, like Dale Cockrell. Minstrel songs and spirituals alike commonly represent a fusion, and a transformation, of African and Irish tunes and rhythms. Yet in \textit{American Humor}, Rourke pushed aside her nuanced understanding of the complexities of cultural exchange in favor of an argumentative preference for the debt white culture owes to black.

Rourke is clearly aware of the negative connotations of blackface minstrelsy, and she attempts, in \textit{American Humor}, to debunk them in order to salvage the form:

> Blackface minstrelsy has long been considered a travesty in which the Negro was only a comic medium. To the primitive comic sense, to be black is to be funny, and many minstrels made the most of the simple circumstance. This exploitation was deeply resented by the anti-slavery leaders of an early day, and in the end
they went far toward creating the idea that the Negro lacked humor. After the Civil War it would still have been possible to reveal the many-sided Negro of the old plantations, but minstrelsy with its air of irreverence seems to have blocked the way. Because minstrels had sported with the Negro and had even sentimentalized his lot in a few songs, because of his tragic fate and wish to prove that he possessed moral worth, dignity, and capacity, his friends collected and discussed and displayed only his religious pieces, the spirituals which have seemed his special creation. But Negro humor was always abundant, and from it early minstrelsy drew as from a primal source, keeping the tradition for direct and ample portraiture. Burlesque appeared, but burlesque was natural to the Negro.97

Rourke is sensitive to the conundrum blackface minstrelsy presents: it appears profoundly, irredeemably racist and, at the same time, it reflects key elements of the American temperament and experience. To her credit, in choosing the minstrel as one of her triumvirate of comic types, Rourke asserts that the figure cannot be ignored. And the notion that a black countenance, however counterfeited, is intrinsic to the American character is radical, even in contemporary scholarship. However, Rourke’s essentialist assumptions about “Negro humor” or about what might be “natural to the Negro,” in combination with her drive to prove the legitimating authenticity of the representation, make her study of the minstrel deeply problematic.

In “Indivisible Man,” a 1970 interview with James Alan McPherson in the *Atlantic*, Ralph Ellison would hail Rourke’s work on minstrelsy as a pioneering and transformative explication of American culture that, for whatever its problems, had succeeded in positioning the African American central to it. And in his “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” (1958), he adopted and expanded Rourke’s basic argument about the theatricality of American culture, writing, “When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical….We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives
hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals.”98 Ellison refines Rourke’s analysis, but his understanding shares much with her insights, on not only minstrelsy but also the performative basis of American history and character.

4. The American character is grounded in the popular, not the literary, arts. Therefore, attempts to evaluate it by literary standards will inevitably come up lacking.

By framing the American character as a theatrical character, Rourke emphasizes performance, especially performance in popular entertainments. But she also de-emphasizes literature, which critics like Brooks and Mencken had propounded. She writes:

No drama came out of this broad movement: nothing can be clearer than the fact that drama as a powerful native form did not appear in America at this time or even throughout the entire nineteenth century. But the theatrical seemed a native mode. The Yankee first fully emerged in the theater; each of the trio of native characterizations was seen there.…

Now the theatrical, as opposed to the dramatic, is full of experiment, finding its way to audiences by their quick responses and rejections.... [I]ts measure is human, not literary. The American theater then...had significance, not because it might at some later time evolve into great national art, but because it was closely interwoven with the American character and the American experience.99

The theatre of the mid-nineteenth century should not be measured, Rourke demands, by the aesthetic standards of great art. Nor should it be berated for failing to produce stunning dramatic literature. Rather, it should be apprehended on its own terms, as the prime location of the working out of the American character. And if the theatre is a “native mode” itself “closely interwoven with the American character and the American experience,” then when Rourke asserts that its “measure is human, not literary,” she is
calling into question the familiar critical act of evaluating American culture by the literature it has produced. To understand American culture, critics should, she asserts, examine, with seriousness, the ephemeral stage.

Rourke takes this deflating of the primacy of American literature to the study of American culture one step further. In the latter half of American Humor, Rourke evaluates a series of “major” American writers by the standards of the American character as uncovered by in her performing Yankee, backwoodsman, and minstrel. The strategy is similar to her approach in Trumpets of Jubilee, in which Rourke closely examines popular figures, noting how the “major” figures stack up against them.

So, in Rourke’s analysis in American Humor, Abraham Lincoln “was consistently the actor, the mimic, caricaturist, and even a maker of burlesque. He used stories as weapons…. In a political contest in 1840 he mimicked his opponent on the platform in gesture and voice and walk and the smallest idiosyncracies of manner with so bitter a ridicule that at the end the man was reduced to tears.” In chapter six, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville are examined in light of the American comic character. Rourke shows how Emerson and Thoreau, for example, rely upon the monologue form. She declares that Whitman’s “I sound my barbaric yawn over the roofs of the world” is the cry of a backwoodsman. And for her, Poe’s grotesquerie draws as much upon American comic violence as it does on German or French romanticism.

Chapters seven and eight of American Humor represent a sustained, if perspicuous, dismantling of the influential work of Van Wyck Brooks on Mark Twain and Henry James. In his The Ordeal of Mark Twain (1922) and The Pilgrimage of Henry James (1925), Brooks had proposed both writers as key examples of failed American
artistic potential. Twain, Brooks suggested, was thwarted by his own willingness to capitulate to the American marketplace. James, on the other hand, lost touch with his country by expatriating and was rendered artistically impotent. Both suffered, he writes, because they lacked, in Brooks’ parlance, access to a “useable past.”

Rourke, however, reevaluates these two key American figures, each of whom rates their own chapter in her book, by the standards of a richly theatrical American culture. Rourke draws Mark Twain as a comic fabulist and raconteur, and argues against the necessity of making of him a realist or a naturalist. Henry James, Rourke says, “has been pictured as a troubled evasionist without a country; and the charge has been turned in to a militant charge against American civilization. Yet this theory can hardly account for the long engagement of a major talent.” Instead, Rourke shows James, too, as a fabulist, and one steeped in the tradition of Barnum and the stage, at that. She reminds us that James had wanted to be a dramatist and failed, and argues that the dramatic form remained strong within his novels.

In fact, the entirety of *American Humor* can be understood as an answer to Brooks’ claim that America lacked a useable past. In her exploration of popular print and performance, Rourke shows Brooks exactly where it lies: in the popular culture he so distrusted. She writes, “The primitive base maybe full of coarse and fragmentary elements, full of grotesquerie or brutality; it may seem remote from the wide and tranquil concepts of a great art: but it provides materials and even the impulse for fresh life and continuance.” To ignore or to denigrate American popular culture because it does not match up with predetermined evaluative standards inherited from Europe is to miss the point. In fact, Rourke went to far as to declare that even Brooks’ call for a useable past
was ahistorical, since, starting in the 1860s, there was already a concerted effort to
“recover the past.” “The years beginning in the late ‘60s and culminating in the ‘80s, so
often considered an arid waste so far as creative expression is concerned, were in fact
alive with a consistent purpose. It was as if a people were trying to bury itself in its
deeper resources.” During this time, figures from the American past, like Davy
Crockett, were placed on stage for scrutiny. The national self-searching culminates, in her
telling, with the 1880 founding of the Journal of American Folk Lore. Decades before
Brooks’ call for a useable past, a repository for just that material had already been
constructed. Brooks, simply put, refused to see it.

In addition to her critique of Brooks’ pessimism, Rourke spends some time in
American Humor taking on Santayana’s appraisal of the genteel tradition in American
culture. In particular, Rourke dismantles Santayana’s suggestion that gentility is a
feminized habit of mind that stultifies more virile attempts at culture-making. Rourke is
strategic when she writes:

Twittering poetasters and essayists, pretty story-tellers and studious novelists
were springing up by the dozen as if to refute the classic charge that Americans
were coarse. There was a great effervescence of what may be called the false-
feminine; a thin sweep of genteel writing, dreary to read, easy to destroy by a
touch of satire, came on like a weedy second growth when forests are cut….Gentility was assuaging; it was a convenient means by which recognition of
native literature could be avoided.

Rourke does not deny that pale, polite writing exists. However, she insists that it is not
feminine but rather false-feminine. And it is not the predominant American approach: it
is a “thin sweep” that allows “recognition of native literature” to be “avoided.” That is,
preoccupation with gentility in American literature flags an unwillingness to regard the
unavoidably rough, hardy tall tales and burlesques of the frontier as actual, legitimate,
capital-C, Culture.

In the final, concluding paragraph to *American Humor*, Rourke deflates the two
most damning critiques of American culture promulgated by Brooks, Santayana,
Mencken, and their compatriots: that Americans have no art because they are
materialistic and because they are philistines. And she neatly turns the criticism right
back around on the critics themselves:

A favored explanation for the slow and spare development of the arts in America
has lain in stress upon the forces of materialism. But these have existed in every
civilization; they have even at times seemed to assist the processes of art. The
American failure to value the productions of the artist has likewise been cited; but
the artist often seems to need less of critical persuasion and sympathy than an
unstudied association with his natural inheritance. Many artists have worked
supremely well with little encouragement; few have worked without a rich
traditional store from which consciously or unconsciously they have drawn. The
difficult task of discovering and diffusing the materials of the American
tradition—many of them still buried—belongs for the most part to criticism; the
artist will steep himself in the gathered light. In the end he may use native sources
as a point of radical departure; he may seldom be intent upon early materials; but
he will discover a relationship with the many streams of native character and
feeling. The single writer—the single production—will no longer stand solitary or
aggressive but within a natural sequence.  

It is not, Rourke tells us, that Americans have no art, no past, no taste. What they lack is
enlightened, catholic criticism.

**3.9 Conclusion**

Critical reception of *American Humor* was, in the main, exceptionally positive.
The book was named one of the American Library Association’s notable fifty books for
1931, and in 1933 it was chosen as one of the best books of the century by American
women. But if reviews were mainly positive, they were also a little less incisive than Rourke would have liked. For example, Eda Lou Walton, writing for the Nation stressed, as many reviewers did, the “charm” of Rourke’s book: “Miss Rourke is one of the few truly scholarly critics who write a beautiful prose. She is able so naturally to fuse her documentary evidence with her critical exposition as to convince any reader that her book…was written for pure pleasure.” Rourke was so grateful that Bernard De Voto had noted some of her deeper intentions in the book that she wrote to him: “Your emphasis on my attitude toward the American character as against the current deprecation pleases me very much. One or two of the reviews have touched upon this, but I would have liked an even greater stress, for I believe the feeling underlies the whole book, and that really in a sense the book stems from it.”

But there was also a thread of negative criticism of American Humor, and Rourke’s response helps clarify her ambitions for the book. In a review for the scholarly journal American Literature, Walter Blair of the University of Chicago said the book was “daring,” “startling,” and of “real value.” However, he staunchly rejected what he saw as the book’s thesis: that American literary work “of the highest order” is as rooted in American popular culture as in the aesthetics of Europe. He in particular objected to precisely what Bernard De Voto objected to in Rourke’s book: the suggestion that the American character is drawn more towards fantasy or legend than to realism. Her book, he argues, suffers because her writing is too “mystic.” Her research is useful, he concludes, but her analysis “topples.” Finally, “it seems desirable to remark,” he notes, “that, like many who write for both scholarly and general readers, the author provokes the former by failing to document thoroughly.”
Rourke wrote in response to Blair in the following issue of *American Literature.*

She focused her rejoinder on two elements of his complaint: that American humor is realistic and that writing for a popular audience is at odds with scholarly scruple. On the first matter, Rourke clarifies:

…in his contention that realism is the dominant element in American humor as against mine that its prevailing character is that of fantasy, Mr. Blair has undoubtedly raised an important critical question…. Let me say at the outset that I do not deny the presence of realism in American humor, as Mr. Blair suggests…. American humor often—even quite typically—seems to start with realism, but at the moment of humor it breaks into fantasy.  

From there, she carefully, and cogently, dismantles each of his complaints. Yet, as in her letters to De Voto on the subject, she is far clearer about her purposes in these rebuffs than she is in the book itself. Her writing is, sometimes, elliptical and oblique. She proceeds quickly through her material, rarely pausing to explain or defend. The smooth flow of her prose can, unfortunately, work against her.

On the second major critique—that her work is slim on documentation—Rourke is unapologetic, and, it seems, more than a little miffed:

I must disclaim a motive which he ascribes to me, that of attempting to please the general reader, with a consequent omission, as he says, of full documentation. For the most part I have indicated the general sources of new material within the text. There are some exceptions, but these were not arrived at because I hoped to beguile the general reader—a hypothetical creature!—but because as steadily as possible I tried to keep an eye on the object, in this case, native humor. Humor has a way of vanishing when too closely tied down by explanations and references. In some instances I have slipped stories into the text much as they were slipped into casual talk by native story-tellers, without a statement of sources. Mr. Blair says that scholars will be “provoked.” My bibliographical note of ten pages, which Mr. Blair does not mention, contains a full outline of my materials.

Rourke will have none of the condescending divide Blair imputes between the scholarly and the general reader, which she points out is a fictional construct. In her defense of her
handling of evidence, she stresses the gulf between the painstaking, and groundbreaking, research that went into the book (which is detailed in her extensive bibliographical note) and the crafted form of the book itself. Rourke intended to create a study that maintained the ebullient flow of American humor itself: a book that talked big and stood tall, a book that, in short, performed.

In 1925, Lewis Mumford declared, “We Americans have always had an infirm sense of history: to us, the past is simply the immediate precursor of the present; it is something we are outliving or sloughing off or getting beyond; that is, something almost disreputable, or at least indiscreet.” Rourke’s work, from Trumpets of Jubilee to American Humor, attempts to place that history squarely before her audience, in all of its disreputable and indiscreet glory. And, in fact, she suggests that the only Americans who tried to push it to the side were the critics and intellectuals who refused to acknowledge the vibrant lineage of real culture in America’s popular arts.
Endnotes


2 Joan Shelley Rubin, *Constance Rourke*, 3. I am indebted to Rubin’s work on Rourke not only because of her thoroughness and perceptiveness, but because she was granted access to Rourke’s personal papers, in the possession of the Carl Shoaff, Jr. family.


5 Ibid.


8 Qtd Rubin, *Constance Rourke*, 11.


10 Rubin, *Constance Rourke*, 15.

11 Constance Rourke to Constance Davis Rourke, December 1909. Rourke MSS. Qtd in Rubin 17.

12 Constance Rourke to Constance Davis Rourke, 27 August 1915. Rourke MSS. Qtd in Rubin 24.


16 Ibid., 116.

17 Rourke, “Paul Bunyon,” 176.

18 Ibid. 179.
Endnotes

19 The text is excerpted from seven pages of typewritten notes in box 14, folder 339 of the Marshall papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. The notes appear to be transcriptions of letters from Rourke to her mother that Marshall was collecting in preparation for her planned book (which never came to fruition) on Rourke. The original letters from which these excerpts are drawn are in the private possession of the Shoaff family, who hold all of Rourke’s papers.

20 Rubin, Constance Rourke, 27.


22 Rubin, Constance Rourke, 27.


24 Brooke Hubner of the MacDowell Colony consulted Colony records to find times in residence by Rourke and Seldes, and provided me with databases of their fellow Colonists during their tenures in 1922 (as well as Rourke’s tenure there in 1924 and 1932).

25 MacDowell is himself a fascinating figure in the history of arts education in the United States. In 1904, he resigned from Columbia in frustration with the university’s refusal to more fully integrate the arts into undergraduate education. He published his letter of resignation, and a debate was touched off in the New York press.

26 The history of the MacDowell Colony is rich and varied. For a study of its impact on American musicians, see Bridget Falconer-Salkeld’s The MacDowell Colony: A Musical History of America’s Premier Artists’ Community (2005). For a study of its impact on American artists, see Community of Creativity: A Century of MacDowell Colony Artists (1996), the gallery guide to an exhibition organized by P. Andrew Spahr for the Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, NH. One recent biography of Edward MacDowell himself exists, Alan H. Levy’s Edward MacDowell (1998), as does an anthology of writings that came out of the Colony, The Peterborough Anthology (1923), collected by Jean Wright and Herbert S. Gorman. Finally, there is a pamphlet memoir, delightfully gossipy in tone, on the extracurricular goings-on at the Colony, Summers at the Colony (1964) by Margaret Widdemer. Falconer-Salkeld’s book provides a useful timetable chronicling composers’ time at the Colony. However, no current book offers a similar overview of the writers or artists in residence. A history of the Colony that widened its scope to encompass all fields in residence would be immensely useful.

27 Bridget Falconer-Salked, The MacDowell Colony 22.

28 P. Andrew Spahr, Community 15.


30 Widdemer, Summers at the Colony 2.
Endnotes

31 Constance Rourke to Constance Lindsay Skinner, 19 August 1930, Constance Lindsay Skinner Collection.

32 See note 19 above.


34 See note 19 above.

35 Ibid.

36 Constance Rourke to Linda Butler, 23 February 1928, Linda Butler papers, Marshall MSS.

37 Rubin, Constance Rourke 27. Rubin refers to two letters in the privately-held Constance Rourke papers, from Brooks to Rourke on 1 July 1921 and 17 July 1921. She does not quote from them, however, so the precise content of Brooks’ encouragement and/or directives are unclear.

38 Quoted in Rubin, Constance Rourke 163.


40 Ibid. vii.

41 Ibid. 3.

42 Ibid. 229, 174, 175, 237.

43 Ibid. 241-242.

44 Ibid. 426, 371

45 Ibid. 399.

46 Ibid. 370.

47 Ibid. 401.

48 Ibid. 430-3.

49 Ibid. 429.

50 Rourke, Troupers vi.
Endnotes

51 Rubin, *Constance Rourke* 30. All kinds of Freudian possibilities have been imputed to this journey, which Rubin delves deeply into.

52 Rourke, *Troupers* v, vi-vii.

53 Ibid. 22-23.

54 Ibid. 57.

55 Ibid. 136, 156.

56 Ibid. 203-205.

57 Ibid. 224-225.


60 Constance Rourke to Linda Butler, 17 June 1939, Linda Butler papers, Marshall MSS.

61 Constance Rourke to Constance Lindsay Skinner, 19 August 1930, Constance Lindsay Skinner Collection.

62 Quoted in an advertising brochure for *American Humor*. Constance Lindsay Skinner Collection.


64 Ibid. 12.

65 Ibid. 22.

66 Ibid. 26.

67 Ibid. 40, 73.

68 Ibid. 86.

69 Ibid. 19.

70 Ibid. 20.

71 Ibid. 24.
Endnotes

72 Ibid. 24, 25, 46.

73 Seldes, *Seven Lively* 122.


75 Ibid. 45.

76 Ibid. 17, 67, 110.


78 Constance Rourke to Bernard DeVoto, 25 September 1931, Bernard DeVoto papers.

79 Constance Rourke to Bernard DeVoto, 3 March 1932, Bernard DeVoto papers.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Constance Rourke to Bernard DeVoto, 25 September 1931, 3 March 1932, Bernard DeVoto papers.

84 Ibid. 123, 243, 33.

85 Ibid. 38.

86 Ibid. 95.

87 Ibid. 92.

88 Ibid. 18.

89 Ibid. 21, 28.

90 Ibid. 87.

91 Ibid. 73.

92 Ibid. 72.
Endnotes

93 Eric Lott has argued, for example, that because the minstrel form originated and thrived in a racist, slave-holding society, scholars have assumed that its sole purpose was the creation and perpetuation of demeaning characterizations of African Americans. However, in his analysis, the racist content of the sketches and songs is exposed as not nearly so absolute as the hideous blackface mask seems to suggest.


95 Ibid. 78, 76.

96 Constance Rourke to Bernard DeVoto, 25 September 1931, Bernard DeVoto papers.


100 Ibid. 126.

101 Ibid. 187.

102 Ibid. 130, 180.

103 Ibid. 131.

104 Ibid. 235-236.

105 The reference to the ALA list comes from an undated letter from Constance Rourke to Constance Lindsay Skinner in the Constance Lindsay Skinner collection at the New York Public Library. In it, Rourke writes, “I was pleased that American Humor got on the ALA list of the notable 50 for 1931. It’s sometimes a practical honor.” On 28 July 1933, Rourke wrote to Skinner: “I’m pleased that “American Humor” is on the list of the best books of the century by American women—and entirely astonished. I’ve had a couple of letters but haven’t seen the list.” Valerie Hawkins of the American Library Association confirms the 1931 list: it was run in Booklist magazine. I have been unable to confirm the second listing.

106 Constance Rourke to Bernard DeVoto, 29 March 1931, Bernard DeVoto collection.


108 Rourke, “Miss Rourke Replies to Mr. Blair,” 207-211.
Endnotes


4.1 Introduction

Gilbert Seldes was born on January 3, 1893, in Alliance, New Jersey. The town was established as a utopian farm colony, and Seldes’ father, George, was a central figure within it. Like Rourke, Seldes lost a parent at three years old: his mother, Anna, died in 1896. Like Rourke, he grew up in the thrall of his surviving parent’s powerful personality. And as Rourke’s mother had rejected her religious upbringing, so too did Seldes’ father. A Russian Jew by birth, George Sergius Seldes was an adamant freethinker. Though Gilbert himself remained basically atheistic all his life, his Jewish lineage would become, from time to time, the topic of critique amongst his fellow writers.

Although Gilbert assimilated his father’s religious philosophy (or lack thereof), he was far less enamored of his politics. The colony at Alliance was without electricity, telephone, bathrooms, and running water. It was peopled with anarchists, faddists, and cranks. According to Michael Kammen, Seldes’ impeccable biographer, the time Seldes spent in rural New Jersey digging potatoes with utopians left him with “a penchant for moderation, a mistrust of wild-eyed idealism, and an appreciation for what he later called
Illustration 4.1

Portrait of Gilbert Vivian Seldes, 1934

From the collection of Marian Seldes
Reprinted in Michael Kammen, *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States*
‘humane capitalism.’ Unlike many of his generation, socialism never attracted Seldes.”¹

At the same time, Seldes found something poignant in the idealism of such places. In a 1923 review of H.G. Wells’ *Men Like Gods*, itself an essay in utopianism, Seldes observed, “The truth about Utopias is that they are all 110-proof. For all of our arguments that they won’t work, break on the rock of the Utopian character which can make them work; and all our arguments that they are silly or trivial or inhuman are shattered by the direct rebuttal that the arguments only prove how much we are in need of Utopia.”²

Seldes was not disappointed, then, to move to Philadelphia, where he attended its prestigious Central High School. Nor was he surprised when the colony at Alliance began to disintegrate, leaving his father to work as a pharmacist and drugstore proprietor in Philadelphia and, later, in Pittsburgh. Much later, in 1929, Seldes would write a novel, *Wings of the Eagle*, which would tell the story of the creation and failure of “Unity,” a utopian farm colony much like his father’s own.

When Seldes entered Harvard University on scholarship in 1910 (the same year Rourke began teaching at Vassar), his interests were turned toward literature, as he studied British and American writers. However, more important than the classes he took were the people he befriended. In a 1922 article commissioned by H.L. Mencken for a series on the subject of “Higher Learning in America,” Seldes said that he associated with a wide variety of men during his time at Harvard:

> Of the 609 men in my class I know a dozen by their first names, four of whom I knew before entering college; I know about five times that number of men who were in college in my time far better than I do even that dozen…. I knew chiefly those who attracted and interested me; to wit, in part: two poets, one millionaire man about town, one dilettante, one aesthete, the members of the dramatic club, the successive staffs of one college periodical, three Phi Beta Kappa men, two H
men, the members of the Socialist club and their chief enemies, two law students, several editors of the *Lampoon*, three uplifters, a debater, a debauché, a dramatist.3

Amongst this motley crew were: Scofield Thayer and James Sibley Watson, who later employed Seldes at *The Dial*; ee cummings; John Dos Passos; and Harold Stearns. For Seldes, the wide variety of acquaintances, and their varied tastes and politics, was by far more significant that the coursework he undertook. In the same article, Seldes dismissed what today we’d call the “networking” aspect of his college days: “The only important thing to me about being at Harvard is that it actually encourages an interest in the activities of civilized human beings.” However, when considered in conjunction with Rourke’s equally privileged education at Vassar, the professional connections Seldes made at Harvard considerably smoothed his way in the world of writing. In fact, in the spring of his senior year, Seldes wrote to his cousin, Judith Randorf, that he had been offered the opportunity to run a periodical when he was ready to assume “complete editorial control—I probably won’t be reading until 1920—but the offer, with finances, will be just as good then.”4 Michael Kammen theorizes that this “paper” might have been *The Dial*, where Seldes became managing editor in 1920; even if it was not, however, the notion that Seldes could have had such career security placed before him is radically divergent from the limited career opportunities that Rourke faced. And so, immediately following his graduation in 1914, despite having no prior training in the field, Seldes went to work for the Philadelphia *Evening Ledger* as their music critic.
4.2 Early journalistic work, 1916-1924

With the dawning of World War I, the Philadelphia *Evening Ledger* sent Gilbert Seldes, their music critic, to London in 1916. While there, he also served as a correspondent for the Boston *Evening Transcript, The Forum, Living Age,* and London’s *The New Statesman*. He made a few forays to the battle fronts of World War I. However, the bulk of Seldes’ work was directed towards reporting on British culture for an American audience and on American culture for a British audience. In this time, Seldes assumed a role of cultural interpreter and translator. In 1919, Mencken would assert, through *The American Language*, that American culture was so distinct from British as to have necessitated its own vernacular. In 1916 and 1917, Seldes was putting this distinction into action as he served as a critical bridge between the two cultures. During this time abroad, however, Seldes also gained the expatriate’s perspective on his home country. For Seldes, this took the form of “frightful patriotism. I can’t stay abroad very long,” he wrote, “because I feel myself drifting away from any sympathy with the U.S. That’s fatal.” In many ways, Seldes’ overarching concerns in the rest of his career were determined by this time abroad with its focus on cultural issues in particular.

But Seldes was also caught up in the war effort. Both he and his activist brother George tried to enlist when the draft did not pick them up quickly, and Gilbert eventually reached the level of sergeant during her service at Camp Lee in the deep South. He also wrote his first book, released on April 6, 1917, on the subject of the war: *The United States and the War*. The book, as he wrote to his cousin was not just a polemic to draw the country into the war to end war; rather, it was his attempt to “analyse the feelings of the U.S., to trace them back to their sources in the history and habits of the country, and
to explain why things are as they are, how they can become different.”6 Again, Seldes is interested in interpreting America to itself. Through this book, and his work as a journalist abroad, Seldes had achieved clarity about his career path: he would be a freelance writer. He was twenty four. Though he came to his decision sooner than Rourke at thirty, he had in mind a similar goal of mixing criticism and fictive writing.

With the war’s end, Seldes returned to the States. From 1918 to 1919, L’Echo de Paris became part of the stable of journals for which he worked. He also began to write some reviews for The Dial, and became an associate editor at Collier’s Weekly.7 Then, in 1920, Seldes was taken on as a second associate editor for The Dial, under Scofield Thayer, his Harvard friend who purchased the publication with James Sibley Watson in 1919. Seldes became managing editor shortly thereafter. It was at The Dial that Seldes began to make his name as a critic, and where he began to put roots down in New York, his adoptive home.

The Dial had itself adopted New York as its home. It had been founded by Francis Browne in 1880, in Gilded Age Chicago. Its title, however, was a reference to a quarterly of the same name that ran between 1840 and 1844 in Boston as an organ of transcendental philosophy under the leadership of Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Browne’s iteration was to be “A Semi-Monthly Journal of Literary Criticism, Discussion, and Information.”8 During its variegated lifetime, the politics and tastes of the Dial would fluctuate, based on editorial interest. In the nineteenth century, the publication published mainstream genteel writers, but by the early twentieth century, it would prefer avant-garde work.
In 1916, the journal shifted to the ownership of Martyn Johnson, who merged the Dial with his own publication, the Trimmed Lamp. Under Johnson’s tenure, the Dial featured major figures like James Sibley Watson, Paul Rosenfeld, and Randolph Bourne. When it absorbed the Seven Arts, it took on Van Wyck Brooks as one of its contributing editors. It also regularly published many of the Seven Arts’ stable of writers: D.H. Lawrence, Robert Frost, Sherwood Anderson, and Eugene O’Neill. Despite this rich literary vein, the Dial was, at the time, more similar to the Nation than to a purely literary magazine, publishing articles on politics and society alongside new poems and stories.

The Dial moved its headquarters to Greenwich Village in New York in July 1918. Under internal pressure for transformation, in November of 1919 the Dial published an announcement of termination of the editor and the entire editorial staff. James Sibley Watson was its new owner and Scofield Thayer its new editor. They declared in April 1920 that the Dial “cannot be everything to everybody. It is non-political and has no message for the million.” The goal of the Dial became, in keeping with Randolph Bourne’s call for “transnationalism,” the publication of the best creative and critical works from the United States and Europe in order to transform American culture. It published Djuna Barnes, John Dos Passos, Marianne Moore, William Butler Yeats. In 1922, it published T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Ezra Pound’s “Cantos,” and Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice. It also published two stories by Constance Mayfield Rourke. 9 The Dial became, in key ways, a voice of modernism, “widely considered the finest American journal of literature and the arts.”10 And the modernism that the Dial promoted was, in large measure, European in tone.
Seldes, as managing editor, was firmly in the middle of this ferment. As he served as a cultural bridge between the United States and Europe during World War I, so during his time at the *Dial* did Seldes stretch between literati on either side of the Atlantic. He regularly corresponded with Yeats, Picasso, Lawrence, Pound, Eliot, and H.G. Wells. And he regularly made connections for them, and various lesser known writers, with his magazine and others. For example, even though Seldes was not H.L. Mencken’s biggest fan (as we shall see), he tried to connect writers with Mencken’s influential magazine, the *Smart Set*. In July 1922, Seldes wrote to Mencken about an author identified only as “Wright:"

> My dear Mencken:
> I do not know whether Wright has done anything for you before. He has written for us and for The Freeman and I recommend him to your most thoughtful consideration. Perhaps you would be good enough to return it to me if you cannot use it. His own address is on the back of the last page.

In 1923, Seldes recruited Mencken himself as a reviewer for the *Dial*, of Thomas Beer’s book on Stephen Crane. Later that year, he recommended a reviewer to Mencken:

> Lisle Bell has been writing brief reviews for us ever since I remember, and some of the wisest and snappiest that have appeared in The Dial are his work. In his misguided enthusiasm for The Dial he seems to think that these facts ought to commend him to you and on the whole I think he is right.\(^{11}\)

The tone of these missives to Mencken suggest some of the sheer delight Seldes took in his work at the *Dial*. They also indicate the ferment of the time, when there was constant (if sometimes heated) exchange between publications and authors, and lots and lots of work to go around for young intellectuals.
In fact, there was often more work to go around than writers to take it on. Seldes often contributed as many as four articles to a given issue of the *Dial*. In November 1922, he provided one under his own name, one each under pseudonyms Vivian Shaw and Sebastian Cauliflower, and the last anonymously. In 1920, at 27 years old, Seldes began to work as the theatre critic for *Dial*. In this capacity, he would write seventy three “The Theatre” columns between 1920 and 1929, on top of those he wrote on specific performers, plays, or styles in the *Dial* and in other publications. His “The Theatre” column marked the beginning of what would become a lifelong interest in writing about the theatre. It would also mark the beginning of his articulation of an American modernism anchored in the popular performing arts.

Like many theatre critics and practitioners of the time, Seldes was interested in the transformative goals of the art theatre movement. Yet, he was also, already, skeptical of many of its claims of highbrow superiority. For example, in his March 1920 “The Theatre” column, Seldes reviewed a production of Tolstoy’s *Power of Darkness*, observing that “The practitioners of the new art of stage settings are sometimes given to demand absolute praise or blame and to belittle the spectator’s appreciation of the set in relation to the play.” He, like many of the new scenographers he would critique, was frustrated with the failure of acting to keep pace with the innovations of design. In an analysis of Eugene O’Neill’s *Beyond the Horizon*, he declared, “What do we want of our actors? We want beauty and we want ecstasy, and we are not getting much of either.”

So, lots of what Seldes was writing in his “The Theatre” columns of the early 1920s resonated with the calls to “make it new” of the Provincetown Players or the Washington Square Players. But his solution to the problem differed radically from the art theatre’s.
In May 1920, for example, he called on the American theatre to look to the “demoniac vitality” of Al Jolson. Seldes argued that Jolson, especially in his blackface persona, possessed a unique ability to control and to thrill an audience. Jolson’s full-throttle performances were, Seldes wrote, “electric.” Yet, behind their seeming exhaustive output, they were also models of restraint: Jolson skillfully managed his technique. His work was created as pure entertainment, but in its execution, it attained the level of art.

Seldes’ assessment of Jolson’s work and its significance would appear again in his first major book, Seven Lively Arts (1924). But as far back as 1920 Seldes’ predilection for the techniques, skills, styles, and joys of the popular stage was informing his vision for what the art stage might become. Similarly, in July 1920, he noted “Our regular stage has so little of fantasy; its nearest approach is through extravaganza, which is not the same thing.” The current season, he complained was a “totally unnecessary sacrifice on the altar of realism.” In this critique, the germinal form of his idea of the theatre can be deduced: the American stage needed fantasy, not realism. And popular performance knew how to achieve it.

In April 1922, Vanity Fair magazine published an index to current critical opinion in an article entitled “The New Order of Critical Values.” Ten “modern critics of America” were selected for inclusion: Heywood Broun, Henry McBride, H.L. Mencken, George Jean Nathan, Burton Rascoe, Raul Rosenfeld, Deems Taylor, Edmund Wilson, Willard Huntington Wright, and Gilbert Seldes. By simple fact of his inclusion in the ten it’s clear that Seldes had “arrived” as a major critical figure. But the information on taste and preference disclosed in the piece is perplexing. The editors of Vanity Fair asked each
of their ten critics to rank a list of about 250 figures from “the whole field of life and thought” on a scale from -25 (“utter condemnation”) to +25 (“complete approval”). Some, but not all, of the critics asked to do the evaluating, including Mencken and Nathan, were themselves included on the list. The results of the free-for-all were printed as a matrix in *Vanity Fair*, so that each critic’s scores could be compared to those of his fellows.

The figures included for evaluation ranged from Homer, Erasmus, Bach, and Ibsen to John Barrymore, Babe Ruth, Fanny Brice, and Billy Sunday. The matrix provides some amusing overlaps: Krazy Kat and Samuel Johnson both come out with an average critical score of 7.6. Douglas Fairbanks and Lenin both averaged 0. But it tells the reader significantly more about the values of the evaluators than the status of the evaluatees. Seldes was on the whole more positively disposed towards pop culture figures than most of the other critics. But he was not outrageously more favorable in his opinions. He diverged from Mencken, for example, in significant way only on the matter of major German figures. Bach got +25 from Mencken and 0 from Seldes, for example. And they agreed wholeheartedly on Mencken himself, both rating him a 5. The difference was largely in the matter of degree: a quick scan down the matrix shows pugnacious Mencken doling out primarily the extremes of -25, +25 and 0. Seldes was more measured in his evaluations, with few +25 or -25 rankings given, and a range of numbers in between.17

The next month, in May 1922, *Bookman* followed up on *Vanity Fair’s* article with its own “Spring Elections on Mount Olympus.” The same list of 250 names to be evaluated was given by *Bookman* to nine more critics it identified as the “centre” of
American critical opinion: Ernest Boyd, Henry Seidel Canby, Floyd Dell, John Farrar, Llewellyn Jones, Ludwig Lewisohn, John Macy, Louis Untermeyer, and Carl Van Doren. In the introductory matter to *Bookman*’s matrix, the predilections of the ten “liberal” critics from the *Vanity Fair* round-up were dissected. H.L. Mencken was pronounced a “hardened Germanophile.” George Jean Nathan was “a man bored, skeptical, and blasé” who “hates a good deed shining in a naughty world.” And Gilbert Seldes was criticized for the something “abnormal about his conception of the most significant genius of the past three thousand years being expressed in Henry James, Nietzsche, Charlie Chaplin, and Krazy Kat.”

The assessments, though playful, were incisive. Seldes was increasingly working to bridge high art and low entertainments in his critical work. In fact, he did enjoy Henry James, Nietzsche, Charlie Chaplin, and Krazy Kat. And he believed that each, despite their variances in content, form, or style, deserved serious critical attention. *Bookman*’s implication that there was something “abnormal” in the belief that they might together be considered “significant genius” was precisely the sort of highbrow critical condescension that Seldes was pushing against. For example, as Seldes continued to review mainly the art theatre for the *Dial*, he insistently added tags at the end of his essays like “The highest moment of the month for your correspondent was when he heard Mr. Al Jolson sing *Swanee*. That remains.”

It is crucial to understand that Seldes was not interested in uplifting or purifying the American popular theatre. Nor did he want to label it as “art” in order to give it legitimacy. Rather, he wanted it to be valued on its own terms, for the particularly vibrant Americanness it exuded. In an extended article for the *Dial* on vaudeville, he pointed out
approvingly that “vaudeville has refused to be uplifted and to reform itself.” It maintained an “inclusiveness” and a “freedom” that was “peculiarly and brilliantly its own.” American vaudeville, that is, was a hybrid and a polyglot form. It drew together disparate performances and disparate audiences. It was sometimes vulgar, often peculiar, but never dull. “The moral proposal I make,” Seldes concluded, “is that our critics leave it alone.”

In fact, in his critical work in the early 1920s, Seldes began to craft an inclusive approach to American culture that would animate his work for the rest of his career.

During these years, Seldes was working at an almost unimaginable clip. In addition to his work for the *Dial*, Seldes had been writing regularly for Van Wyck Brooks’ *Freeman* and for *Vanity Fair*. It was in the *Vanity Fair* articles, especially, that Seldes had begun to take on a different kind of critical voice. *Vanity Fair* was a “minor literary magazine” in comparison with the likes of the *Dial*. That is, it did not place such a heavy premium on modernist writing. Rather, it “reflected the personality of its suave and urbane editor, Frank Crowninshield.” In fact, it was one of a handful of “smart” magazines aimed at urban (generally male) sophisticates who relished equally the devastating wit of Dorothy Parker, a rollicking night on the town, a good suit of clothes, and an essay on politics. Its circulation in 1920 was a healthy 90,000. In its pages, Seldes began to write in earnest about popular culture. Most of the articles would find their way, in one form or another, into Seldes’ first major book, *Seven Lively Arts*.

According to Kammen, it was in this writing on popular entertainment Seldes “sensed that he was investing himself in a subject that might give him distinctive identity as a critic” in much the same way that Rourke sensed that her work on folk culture was determining hers. But Seldes was fatigued and found he had little time to devote to
thinking about his work in any context beyond the next deadline. And so he applied to, and was accepted for, a stay at the MacDowell Colony, an artists’ retreat in New Hampshire.

4.3 At MacDowell

Seldes made his first retreat to MacDowell in 1921; he followed this quickly with his second in 1922. That year, Constance Rourke was also in residence. Rourke was at the Colony “for part of the summer,” but continued her stay (there and at the homes of friends on the east coast) to an eventual five consecutive months. For his part, Seldes had “hoped to spend time there during the summer of 1922, but because he could not get away from The Dial his brief sojourn was delayed until mid-September.”

Both critics were in the early stages of their careers; both were working out the material for their first major works. Although neither of them left a record of their interaction during their time at the Colony, the place had a reputation for rich conversation and lasting friendships. It seems impossible that they did not discuss their writing, projects, and their strikingly similar ideas on aspects of American society and culture, for their time there overlapped by at least a month.

What did Rourke and Seldes discuss after the work day was through? They had published in the same magazines, and Seldes had selected Rourke’s short stories for inclusion in the Dial and the Dial anthology of short stories. Both figures were building a reputation as critics with a mission. Their perspectives on American culture were in alignment. Both saw much to argue against in the vociferous and influential writings of Brooks and Mencken. The projects they were working on reached into the same subject
area. Rourke was deeply engaged in writing *Trumpets of Jubilee* (which Seldes would later review warmly and acknowledge directly as he delved into the exact same subject matter in the coming years). Seldes was at the Colony to work on the germ of *Seven Lively Arts*. Surely Rourke would have been fascinated by his approach. Their moment of overlap came at a point of key career transition for each.

On departing the Colony, in the fall of 1922, Seldes made arrangements to travel to Europe for nine months. While there, he planned to undertake four major projects. First, at the behest of Henry Seidel Canby, he would work on creating a book for Harpers out of the articles in popular culture he had been writing. Second, he would look for new authors for *The Dial* (and remain on payroll). Third, he would look for new European plays for the Theatre Guild (and earn some money there, too). Finally, he would get some rest. He sailed in January 1923.27


Seldes also produced a vast quantity of journalistic writing. Between 1926 and 1930, he wrote dramatic criticism regularly for the New York *Graphic*. Starting in 1931, he penned five columns per week under the title “True to Type” for the New York *Evening Journal*. And on top of all this, in the same span of seven years, he wrote no
fewer than 285 articles and reviews for the Dial, Saturday Evening Post, Vanity Fair, Bookman, Freeman, Nation, New Yorker, Harper’s, New Republic, and Criterion. He even reviewed his own pseudonymous detective novel, Victory Murders (and not altogether positively) in the September 1927 Bookman.28

Between 1924 and 1931, Gilbert Seldes was a man on a mission, spreading the gospel of the popular arts to as wide an audience as he could reach. He moved freely and purposefully from the Dial’s highbrow aestheticism to the Saturday Evening Post’s unmatchable popularity, from the miniscule circulation of T.S. Eliot’s America-averse Criterion to the massive audience of Bernard McFadden’s unabashedly pulpy New York Graphic, and back again. He analyzed The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari with the same perspicuity as he examined The Kid, invoked Pablo Picasso’s cubism and George Herriman’s “Krazy Kat” comics in the same breath, and put the Ziegfeld Follies on equal footing with the Theatre Guild. He wrote history, drama, journalism, propaganda, and, for his own pleasure, fiction. In every forum, his subject matter or argumentation called for serious attention to be paid to the popular arts. He was iconoclastic and ubiquitous. He was also unfocused: his rangy productivity (coupled with his choice of subject matter) practically begged for the charge of dilettantism to be leveled against it. In the midst of this maelstrom, Seldes created his most influential work, Seven Lively Arts (1924), which would establish his critical credo for the decades to come.
4.4 Seven Lively Arts

In 1922, Gilbert Seldes’ reputation as a critic in the popular arts was established enough that he was commissioned by Frank Crowninshield and Edmund Wilson to write a series of essays on the popular arts for *Vanity Fair*. That same year, Henry Seidel Canby, the editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, commissioned Seldes to write a book on the popular arts for Harpers. The shape of that book was clear in Seldes’ mind by November 3, 1922, shortly after his tenure at the MacDowell Colony (and perhaps because of his respite there). He wrote of his plan to Canby:

The idea of my book is a series of essays on The Seven Lively Arts—among them, and the number need not be exactly seven—will be

- Slapstick Moving Pictures
- Comic Strips
- Revues
- Musical Comedy
- Colyums
- Slang Humour
- Popular Songs
- Vaudeville

and such things. There will also be at least one article on the admittedly “supreme” people, such as Chaplin, Jolson, Brice, in which the quality of supremacy will be analyzed. In each of those I try to characterize the quality of the art and to do something with its more notable practitioners. Some are written or will be written around one outstanding figure, some on the general practice involved.

In addition there will be an essay to be published in the middle or toward the end of the book, showing the relation of the minor or lively arts to the major arts; and further, there will be two or three pieces dealing with the pretentious fake which passes for high art and which I shall distinguish only as bogus art—classical dancing and probably grand opera.

These are the subjects. Behind them is one general idea to which I propose not to devote an essay, namely an examination of the genteel tradition, as Mr. Santayana calls it, in the way Americans assume that which is serious and pretentious is by nature high art and that which is simple and cheap cannot possibly have any artistic value. That is, I propose the book to have a sound and entirely unobtrusive critical basis.
The Seven Lively Arts, published in April 1924, closely follows Seldes’ original outline. However, his desire to construct the book with a “sound” but “entirely unobtrusive critical basis” would hamper its efficacy.

Seldes famously claimed, in the preface to the first edition, that he had composed the book, whilst in France, from memory, with no notes, clippings, or books at hand. This is, it seems, essentially true. However, of the twenty two chapters in The Seven Lively Arts, eighteen were previously published between May 1922 and January 1924 in their entirety, with only minor revisions for their reincarnation in the book. These include full articles from the Dial as well as the majority of his commissioned series on the popular arts for Vanity Fair. Seldes double-dipped: using the same material, he satisfied his contract to Harpers for the book, as well as fulfilled his commission from Crowninshield at Vanity Fair for a series of articles. The sometimes disjointed and uneven quality of the writing in the book makes sense when one considers the fact that its contents were composed as discreet essays. And by having these articles released in the Dial and Vanity Fair before publication of Seven Lively Arts, Seldes publicly laid the critical groundwork for his coming book. At the same time, he established his reputation as an iconoclastic expert in the material in the months just prior to the book’s release. He both cleared the field and established his preeminence within it.

The title Seven Lively Arts is a playful reference to the classical “seven arts.” Critic J.G. Hunecker had already played on the phrase as the “seven deadly arts,” which he applied to poorly crafted versions of the classical seven. For his part, Seldes never pretended that he had exactly seven popular arts in mind: “There were those who thought (correctly) that you couldn’t find seven and there were those who felt (stuffily) that the
seven were not arts.” Seldes wasn’t counting; he was more interested in shaking up the hallowed seven by introducing them to their lively counterparts. In that respect, the title was not playful at all.

The coinage caught on; it has since become a permanent part of American parlance. Seldes himself was well aware that, sometimes, “the history of The 7 Lively Arts is largely the history of its title.” In fact, it seeped out into the general culture at large:

Five radio programs, two magazine departments, and other enterprises used the name (the last try was for a charm bracelet)—and in most cases the title was abandoned when I muttered something a bout using it myself, which I did in Esquire and elsewhere. Some years later Billy Rose bought the title for a revue and then gave it back to me. In 1956 the Columbia Broadcasting System leased the title, without reference to the book, for a television program.33

The phrase filled a gap in the language, providing an umbrella term that is still useful today.

Beyond the popularity of the title, critical response to the book was mixed. Early reviews were quite positive, in a generic recognition of the fun inherent in Seldes’ book. But two lines of attack against the book stand out as both incisive and illuminating. The first comes from Ernest Boyd at the Independent. Seldes’ book was little more than “aesthetic vaporing,” Boyd yawned.

[It] turns out to be nothing more revolutionary than the periodical discovery that there are virtues in vaudeville undreamt of in the philosophy of those who restrict their pleasures to symphony concerts and classical drama. The normal critic of diversified and civilized tastes has always taken these things in his stride, feeling no compulsion to explain himself, beyond the fact that performances of genuine excellence, whether in vaudeville, musical comedy or opera, must be the work of genuine artists, and deserving of comment for that reason.34
Boyd waved away the book as a simple compendium of appreciations of popular performance written by a slightly immature and overzealous critic.

The other line of attack comes from Edmund Wilson, the *Vanity Fair* commissioner of the original series of articles and Seldes’ friend. The review was presented in the pages of the *Dial*, Seldes’ home turf. In it, Wilson pointed out Seldes’ tendency to hyperbole: “In his most ecstatic moments he is given to making extravagant claims for his heroes—as when he asserts that Herriman and Charlie Chaplin are the only two ‘great artists’ in America.” But unlike Boyd, Wilson focused his review on Seldes’ vision of the lively arts as intrinsic to American culture. And though Wilson praised the fact that Seldes accomplished a “feat of some daring in bringing [the popular arts] within the field of criticism,” he disagreed in significant measure with Seldes’ basic belief that those popular arts constituted an American artistic lineage. Wilson argued that America has “no homogeneous culture…. We have a whole race that arrives at maturity with practically nothing that can be called genuine contact with the classic Anglo-American culture which is all we have for a heritage.” Therefore, Wilson continued, those with artistic ability within such a culture-starved race, “speaking no other language but the common slang” are “obliged to turn their gifts to account in the practice of some slapstick form of entertainment.” They may achieve “extraordinary brilliance,” but their work remains, Wilson implies, derivative and not quite legitimate.  

Though Boyd and Wilson came at their critique of Seldes’ book from differing perspectives, they together underscore the prime assumption about American culture that Seldes sought to undo. Neither Boyd nor Wilson were willing to grant popular American entertainment the status of the full flowering of American culture. Boyd was right to note
that critics before Seldes had turned their attention, at least periodically, to the popular arts. However, Seldes’ purpose in Seven Lively extended beyond demanding that critics address, and enjoy, popular and elite art forms. And Wilson was correct in noting that popular performers were, often, brilliant. But Seldes wanted to push critical understanding of such performers beyond acknowledgment of their artistry. He wanted, in short, to demonstrate how the popular performers that critics have enjoyed, and sometimes written about, were in the process of creating a distinctly American, and a distinctly modern, art and, therefore, culture.

But it must be admitted that, sometimes, Seldes does overdo it in Seven Lively. At points, the writing has a touch of the breathless guidebook about it. Heavy on description and full of examples, the book feels addressed to an audience that is unfamiliar with the performer described (a presumption of ignorance on Seldes’ part that explains some of the rankling of critics like Boyd). Yet, as Edmund Wilson later wrote of Seldes in 1926, the descriptive passages are evocative and well-constructed: “In my opinion, he is seen at his best in passages of straight description of some movie or vaudeville act which has aroused his imagination.” Ultimately, the point Seldes is straining to make about American culture is difficult to discern through the book’s disjointed structure, a problem which stems from its origination as discrete articles.

The biggest problem, however, comes down to Seldes’ first sense of the book’s organization, as cited earlier. It should have, he wrote, “a sound and entirely unobtrusive critical basis” to which he would not “devote an essay.” This meant that his basic argument ran the risk of getting swamped beneath a tidal wave of detail. And though Seldes was aware, by the time he composed a revised preface to the book in 1957, that
the book “did not sufficiently name an enemy.” Certainly, as he noted in his *The Public Arts* (1956), he had pushed too hard in some directions and not hard enough in others:

I know that I wanted to be effective, I wanted to prove my points, and I probably exaggerated the indifference of some intellectuals and the hostility of others, as if there had been a conspiracy of silence which I had to break into. Of one thing I then felt certain: my enemies were not the college professors and the pedants; they were the bright young generation ready to accept any novelty in the arts provided it was not native to America and not popular among the lowbrows.

Despite this, it is possible to pull Seldes’ buried argumentative framework to the foreground. In doing to, the following five key elements of his view of the interrelation of American culture and performance emerge.

1. Contra Brooks and Mencken, America has a culture in its popular entertainments, which rise to the level of art. Because the popular arts constitute America’s culture, there is no shame in enjoying them.

2. The popular arts, because they are art, are not in conflict with the classical arts. Rather, both are in opposition to what Seldes calls the *faux bon* or “arty.”

3. Unlike a folk culture, which Seldes does not always believe America has, the popular arts provide the basis for future development of American art. They constitute a kind of “useable present.”

4. At their best, the popular arts evince an impeccable and accomplished technique, as well as a “fantastic” or “demonic” aesthetic that leaps beyond realism.

5. Undergirding, and shadowing, this set of arguments is an implied fifth idea. Race and ethnicity—particularly, for Seldes, the African American
and the Jew—are essential to any evaluation of both the lively arts and American culture itself. Seldes approach to this point of view is complicated enough to warrant examining it on its own.

1. Contra Brooks and Mencken, America has a culture in its popular entertainments, which rise to the level of Art. Because the popular arts constitute America’s culture, there is no shame in enjoying them.

This argument is the bedrock of the motivation behind the entire book. First, Seldes asserts that popular entertainments provide the essential qualities of American culture and that these entertainments are art. For example, in “Toujours Jazz,” the first of three articles for the *Dial* that would reappear in *Seven Lively Arts*, Seldes offers a vibrant definition of jazz that hinges on its Americanness:

Jazz is a type of music grown out of ragtime and still ragtime in its essence; it is also a method of production and as such an orchestral development; and finally it is the symbol, or the byword, for a great many elements in the spirit of the time—as far as America is concerned it is actually our characteristic expression.39

By naming jazz as America’s “characteristic expression,” Seldes establishes a popular entertainment as a key element of an American culture. But it is also, as he defends later in the article, *art*.

I have always used the word art in connexion [sic] with jazz and jazzy things; if any one imagines that the word is belittled thereby and can no longer be adequate to the dignity of Leonardo or Shakespeare, I am sorry…. I suggest that people do what they please about the gay arts, about jazz; that they do it with discrimination and without worrying whether it is noble or not, or good form, or intellectually right. I am fairly certain that if they are ever actually to see Picasso it will be because they have acquired the habit of seeing without arriere-pensee, because they will know what the pleasure is that a work of art can give, even if it be jazz art.40
Jazz (good jazz, that is) is art, and learning to take pleasure in art of whatever sort only enhances one’s ability to apprehend art more broadly. Though highbrow critics might imply otherwise, there is nothing to be ashamed of in enjoying jazz. Thus, in his analysis of the form, Seldes laid out, in miniature, the entirety of his argument on popular art as American culture.

In an article in *Vanity Fair* that ran as *Seven Lively Arts* was hitting the bookstores, Seldes underscored the right of the American audience to choose to enjoy what their culture has created:

> What I am suggesting is not an *excuse* for liking jazz or the slang of Ring Lardner, or the comic strip or Fannie [sic] Brice; I am suggesting a clean conscience and an open mind in regard to them. If you need an excuse, you are probably too far gone to be helped, and are exactly in the situation of those who care nothing for symphony concerts, but go because they are socially correct. Those who can and do like the Seven Lively Arts need only throw out of the window the inherited social prejudices against them—and they will discover that these arts are capable of giving actual pleasure, of a singularly attractive kind.41

Clearly, pleasure is a key word of approbation for Seldes. The lively arts give pleasure, good art gives pleasure; it is false art only that bores and benumbs.

The “social prejudices” that the American audience had “inherited” had been bequeathed to them by critics like H.L. Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks. They, and their compatriots, not only doubted the capacity of American culture to produce art, but they themselves were so pessimistic, Seldes declares, that they could not enjoy the work around them. In an essay for T.S. Eliot’s *Criterion*, Seldes noted:

> Brooks is a moralist without any profound aesthetic pleasure, and is a good parallel to Mencken, a moralist in a rather vulgar Nietzschean mode, who equally lacks aesthetic interests and has even less aesthetic perceptions. Where Brooks seeks a good life, Mencken derides a stupid State; they have both been pioneers after whom hundreds of young men have followed, some to definite aesthetic ends. That is the measure of their importance; it is remarkable that Brooks with
his passion for the creative life should be so shut off from enjoying it and that Mencken, so homogeneous, so undistracted from wayward impulses, should be so careless of it.  

Pleasure itself, the exuberant joy that popular entertainments provided, was not, for Seldes, suspect. Rather, the astringent moralism that the ironically anti-Puritan critics like Brooks and Mencken embodied stunted the development of American culture along its native lines.

Such critics routinely compared American culture to European culture and found the former lacking, for precisely the qualities that its popular entertainments embodied. It was too rough, too vulgar, too comic. Yet Seldes declared that these popular entertainments were not only America’s culture, but America’s modern culture. The fact that this American modernism might not look like European modernism did not perturb Seldes. He noted that there was “an explosion of creativity” throughout both continents after World War I: “The Keynes-Strachey axis in London, the Joyce-Pound-Eliot international, Dada in Paris, Der Sturm in Berlin which ultimately created Caligari, were parallel manifestations. Where should the lightning strike in the United States,” he asked, “if not where the native art flourished?”  

Where, that is, except in its popular entertainments?

2. The popular arts, because they are art, are not in conflict with the classical arts. Rather, both are in opposition to what Seldes calls the faux bon or “arty.”

In “Before a Painting by Picasso,” the third article he provided the Dial and reproduced in Seven Lively, Seldes stressed the notion that the popular arts and modernist art are not opposed to each other; rather, both are opposed to bad art, false art, and fake
art. The title of the article flags its point. While examining a painting by Picasso, already at the time a darling of the modernists, Seldes saw a connection between great works of high art and great works of popular art. They stood on the same side of a battle he was attempting to frame: “there exists no such hostility between the two divisions of the arts which are honest—that the real opposition was between them, allied, and the polished fake.” He proceeds to take the “great arts” and the “minor arts” and tie them together, writing, “The characteristic of the great arts is high seriousness…. And the essence of the minor arts is high levity.” Both should stand against “solemnity which is not high, against ill-rendered profundity, against the shoddy and the dull.” Seldes here creates, most overtly, the manifesto which was his credo for the arts:

That there is no opposition between the great and the lively arts.  
That both are opposed in spirit to the middle or bogus arts.  
That the bogus arts are easier to appreciate, appeal to low and mixed emotions, and jeopardize the purity of both the great and minor arts.  
That the lively arts as they exist today are entertaining, interesting, and important.  
That with a few exceptions these same arts are more interesting to the adult cultivated intelligence than most of the things which pass for art in cultured society.  
That there exists a “genteel tradition” about the arts which has prevented any just appreciation of the popular arts, and that these have therefore missed the corrective criticism given to the serious arts, receiving instead only abuse.  
That therefore the pretentious intellectual is as much responsible as anyone for what is actually absurd and vulgar in the lively arts.  
That the simple practitioners and simple admirers of the lively arts being uncorrupted by the bogus preserve a sure instinct for what is artistic in America.  

It’s important to note that, in this distilled credo, Seldes continues to embrace a divide between “great” and “minor” or “lively” arts. In these formulations, he does distinguish between certain aspects of the traditionally divided “elite” and “popular” arts, between
Picasso and Chaplin. Yet, by aligning them against the “bogus” arts, which is his terminology for the “genteel,” he holds to some familiar distinctions while still realigning them.

For example, in a companion listing to his philosophical manifesto, Seldes offers concrete examples of that which he believes is great or lively art and that which is merely a bogus counterfeit of either. Here he draws distinctions of quality within both the great arts and the lively arts. “If there were an Academy,” Seldes-as-Luther declares, “I should nail upon its doors the following beliefs:”

That Al Jolson is more interesting to the intelligent mind than John Barrymore and Fanny Brice than Ethel;
That Ring Lardner and Mr. Dooley in their best work are more entertaining and more important than James B. Cabell and Joseph Hergesheimer in their best;
That the daily comic strip of George Herriman (Krazy Kat) is easily the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America to-day;
That Florenz Ziegfeld is a better producer than David Belasco;
That one film by Mack Sennet or Charlie Chaplin is worth the entire oeuvre of Cecil de Mille;
That Alexander’s Ragtime Band and I Love a Piano are musically and emotionally sounder pieces of work than Indian Love Lyrics and The Rosary;
That the circus can be and often is more artistic than the Metropolitan Opera House in New York;
That Irene Castle is worth all the pseudo-classic dancing ever seen on the American stage; and
That the civic masque is not perceptibly superior to the Elks’ Parade in Atlantic City.

Only about half of these are heresies, and I am quite ready to stand by them as I would stand by my opinion of Dean Swift or Picasso or Henry James or James Joyce or Johann Sebastian Bach.\(^ {45} \)

In this listing, Seldes sometimes juxtaposes two obvious extremes from high and low culture, as he does the circus and the Metropolitan Opera. But mostly he draws distinctions within the broad category of popular entertainment, asserting that Ziegfeld is art and Belasco is bogus, or that Mack Sennet’s Keystone Kops films are art where the
Cecil B. DeMille’s film epics are bogus. In this way, Seldes asserts a distinction of quality within popular entertainment that breaks along the “lively art” and “bogus” divide he is establishing. And Seldes ties the quality works in popular entertainment into the lineage of classical art like that of Swift and Bach, as well as into the lineage of modernist art, like that of Picasso and Joyce, by asserting that he would “stand by them as I would stand by my opinion” of the more traditional arts. Seldes does not, in short, make the totalizing (and diminishing) move of inverting the highbrow/lwbrow divide. Rather, he links together quality in both.

So, in “Before a Picture by Picasso,” Seldes took pains to make it clear that he did not believe that the popular arts were better than the traditional arts, nor did he have a desire to elevate one over the other. He addressed his argument to Van Wyck Brooks’ highbrow vs. lowbrow dichotomy, in an attempt to circumvent its unhelpful dominance:

And now a detour around two of the most disagreeable words in the language: high- and low-brow. Pretense about these words and what they signify makes all understanding of the lively arts impossible. The discomfort and envy which make these words vague, ambiguous, and contemptuous need not concern us; for they represent a real distinction, two separate ways of apprehending the world, as if it were palpable to one and visible to the other. In connection with the lively arts the distinction is clear and involves the third division, for the lively arts are created and admired chiefly by the class known as lowbrows, are patronized and, to an extent enjoyed, by the highbrows; and are treated as impostors and as contemptible vulgarisms by the middle class, those who invariably are ill at ease in the presence of great art until it has been approved by authority.

However, rather than making a detour, Seldes has furthered what he clearly believes is a false divide. His rhetoric is unfortunately garbled here, for his point seems to be that the words “highbrow” and “lowbrow” are class markers in a Marxist sense, put into practice by the bourgeoisie. However, his definition of the “middle class” as “those who invariably are ill at ease in the presence of great art until it has been approved by
authority” is an aesthetic, not an economic, critique: he is articulating a kind of Shavian
disgust with Philistines. (It’s not for nothing that one of Seldes’ nom de plumes was
“Vivian Shaw.”) Yet, as his career progressed, Seldes would evince a real affection for,
and a profound faith in, the American middle class. So it is unfortunate that Seldes seems
to ally himself here with Mencken in a sweeping critique of mainstream Americans. In a
more indicative passage, Seldes states that the ideal road, “if one is going to live fully and
not shut oneself away from half of civilized existence,” is to take delight in excellent
examples of both “highbrow” art and “lowbrow” entertainment: “one must care for
both.”

3. Unlike a folk culture, which Seldes does not always believe America has, the
popular arts provide a contemporary basis for the future development of American
art.

The terms are slippery, but in general, popular (or mass) culture has been
juxtaposed to folk culture as far back as Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)
or Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871). Folk culture is usually considered to
consist of song, dance, stories, crafts, and customs associated with pre-industrial life,
while popular culture is made up of diversions engendered (and engineered) by an
industrial society. In any case, because the United States is a young country, Seldes
suggests that it has no folk culture:

It happens that what we call folk-music, folk-dance, and the folk-arts in general
have only a precarious existence among us; the “reasons” are fairly obvious. And
the popular substitutes are so much under our eyes and in our ears that we fail to
recognize them as decent contributions to the richness and intensity of our lives.
The result, strange as it may appear to devotees of culture, is that our major arts
suffer. The poets, painters, composers who withdraw equally from the main stream of European tradition and from the untraditional natural expressions of America, have no sources of strength, no material to work with, no background against which they can see their shadows. 49

Seldes, in short, makes the case for American (modern) popular arts as its only real folk art. Here, of course, Rourke would demur. Yet, in April 1924, when Seldes penned an article for *Arts and Decoration* in which he reiterated the above point, he made a crucial modification. “The position of jazz,” he writes, “and its capacity to interest intelligent people, will be more easily understood if we concede at once that America has no separate tradition of culture; except for architecture, I can think of no art in which we have a specific mode of our own.” He seems, with such an argument, to be slyly conceding ground to Brooks’ search for America’s useable past and Mencken’s disgust with bourgeois gaucherie. But then Seldes makes a turn:

This is neither a fault nor a disgrace; it even has large advantages. Nor have we, strictly speaking, any folk arts of our own. The result is that the creative artist, fulfilling the normal desire to take root, falls back on European tradition and it is only in the case of a great genius that this adventure succeeds. It is now suggested that he link his spirit with the thing which in our country takes the place of the folk arts and, in a slender way, is art itself. This is in music, popular ragtime: generally it is the minor arts, what I have called “the seven lively arts.” 50

By modifying and challenging Brooks, Seldes is arguing, in sum, for a comprehension of the popular arts as a “useable present.” Seldes denies what Rourke is so certain exists, yet at the same time acknowledges the necessity of a tradition from which artists can both draw and react. To that end, Seldes can say, for example, that jazz “isn’t a last feverish excitement, a spasm of energy before death. It is the normal development of our resources, the expected, the wonderful, arrival of America at a point of creative intensity.” 51
4. At their best, the popular arts evince an impeccable and accomplished technique, as well as a “fantastic” or “demoniac” aesthetic that leaps beyond realism.

Seldes’ first three key arguments in *Seven Lively* are really political positions. They focus on asserting that America has its own culture of quality in its popular arts, and that these popular arts pave the way for further development in American work. His fourth argument, however, is an aesthetic declaration. Here, Seldes asserts what he believes makes great art. It achieves something more than the basic and abiding task of art to represent the world, as the Aristotelian idea of mimesis requires. In addition, and perhaps in opposition to delivering the real and recognizable aspects of human life and action, art taps a vital energy, a burning flame, that possesses the qualities of fantastic, even demoniac, creativity. This performance exceeds any of the constraining limits of a realistic or representative code of artistic expression. What Seldes sought was “The essential distortion, caricature, or transposition which you find in a serious work of art or in a vaudeville sketch.”

His purposeful linkage of “a serious work of art or in a vaudeville sketch” is crucial: for Seldes, the leap beyond realism required something antic. It could be found “with Alice in Wonderland, at a dada cabaret or with the terribly logical clowns of Shakespeare.”

It could also be found in the American lively arts. “There is a definite type of American humor,” Seldes wrote in the *Criterion*, for a British audience, “which seems wholly lunatic, and is insanely funny; it exists in vaudeville, and flashed, on the side of the grotesque and fantastic, in our newspaper comic strips.” Lunatic, grotesque, fantastic: these are larger-than-life qualities of extremity. They border, at times, on the
surreal. Warren Susman pointed out in his *Culture as History* that the quality is endemic to the lively arts, and noted that “the full import of the surreal tendency in the popular arts has never been assessed.” But Seldes saw it as essential to American art; Rourke, of course, found it fundamental to the American character as well.

Throughout *Seven Lively*, Seldes looked to the caricatured and the surreal for his best examples of popular art. From the mechanical violence of Keystone Kops films to the zany chaos of Ed Wynn’s solo act, Seldes celebrated off-kilter presentations of the world. Even jazz fit his model, giving American culture “a wholly unrealistic, imaginative presentation of the way we think and feel.” But Seldes had his favorites. Two worked in print: George Herriman and Ring Lardner. And two worked the stage: Al Jolson and Fanny Brice. All four worked in some way in the fantastic or surreal.

George Herriman, whom Seldes called “our great master of the fantastic,” drew “Krazy Kat,” a weekly comic strip about an eternally inexplicable relationship between the Kat and his nemesis (and beloved) Ignatz the mouse. The strip, which ran from 1913 and 1944, was a distillation of Seldes’ belief in the necessity of the fantastic:

> It is rich with something we have too little of—fantasy. It is wise with pitying irony; it has delicacy, sensitiveness, and an unearthly beauty. The strange, unnerving, distorted trees, the language inhuman, un-animal, the events so logical, so wild, are all magic carpets and faery foam—all charged with unreality. Through them wanders Krazy, the most tender and the most foolish of creatures, a gentle monster of our new mythology.

The fantasy Herriman constructs in of the Kat is something “monstrous” yet magnetic. It is grotesque and surreal, and it is patently non-realistic.

Seldes maintained a deep fondness, throughout his entire career, for Ring Lardner. Lardner gained fame as author of the satirical “You Know Me Al” columns in the
Saturday Evening Post in 1916. He went on to write a variety of short humorous stories, as well as several collections that extended the story of Jack Keefe, the narrator of “You Know Me Al.” He also dabbled in the theatre, writing twenty plays, several of which were decidedly surreal in tone. The best known of his theatrical work, June Moon (1929) was, however, a straightforward comedy completed in collaboration with George Kaufman. Seldes would, in his career, edit two volumes of Lardner’s comic writing, suffused with slang and gentle kidding of sports culture. Though less grotesque than the “Krazy Kat” strips, Lardner’s work still evinced, for Seldes, both “clear-eyed observation of America” and “a gift for the fantastic.”58 Throughout the chapter in Seven Lively that focuses on Lardner, Seldes praises him for his fantastical comic flights.

Though Seldes can find examples of his grotesque and fantastic in print media, the preponderance of his examples come from the stage. It seems, in fact, that the stage is somehow uniquely fitted for expression of this particular style. Seldes found fantasy in the extravagant, spectacular Follies, from Zeigfeld to Greenwich Village, and in the various American musicals that were flowering in the period. But the vaudeville stage, Seldes declared, was the crucible out of which the grotesque was formed. There, Seldes, noted, there was but “One man on the American stage, and one woman” who were “possessed”: Al Jolson and Fanny Brice.

Solo performers both, Jolson and Brice rated an essay all their own in Seven Lively, entitled “The Daemonic in the American Theatre.” Jolson became known in the 1910s and 1920s for his blackface rendition of songs like George Gershwin’s “Swanee.” Brice got her start in the Zeigfeld Follies in the 1920s singing “My Man” and “Second Hand Rose.” Both maintained commanding stage presences and large fan followings.
Ironically, both stars would reach their peak of fame after the publication of *Seven Lively*, and off of the stage. Jolson starred in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first talking picture; Brice took her character, Baby Snooks, to the airwaves in 1936 for CBS, and then for NBC, radio.

But in 1924, Seldes declared, the electricity of their performances, the sheer force of will with which they controlled their audiences, created a popular theatrical style that moved beyond the real: “I use the word possessed,” he wrote, “because it connotes a quality lacking elsewhere on the stage, and to be found only at moments in other aspects of American life—in religious mania, in good jazz bands, in a rare outbreak of mob violence.” He’s talking about the ecstatic, in all of its untidy, sometimes intimidating, larger-than-life excess. And Seldes anchors this quality, found primarily in the popular theatre, to core defining elements of American culture. Rourke, of course, would name this same phenomenon “bombast,” “magnitude,” or “theatricality.” Both agreed that it was essentially non-realistic, and that it came to its clearest fruition on the popular American stage.

5. Race and ethnicity—particularly, for Seldes, the African American and the Jew—are essential to any evaluation of both the lively arts and American culture itself.

To write about Jolson or Brice, to write, in fact, about the popular arts in the 1920s at all, including popular music and live performance, is to write, implicitly or explicitly, about race and ethnicity in America. From Bert Williams to Al Jolson, from Florence Mills to Sophie Tucker, from Fats Waller to Paul Whiteman, a complex interchange of racial “love and theft,” to invoke Eric Lott’s evocative title, was enacted
on stages across the country. To write about those interactions is to attempt to explain an almost-inexplicable cascade of mockery, imitation, inspiration, masquerade, envy, adulation, and emulation. The path is fraught with peril, and certain pitfalls. And for all his insights on the popular arts, Seldes stumbled along the way.

For example, when Seldes wrote about jazz, he was eloquent on the subject of its aesthetics: its structure and potency as an art form. But when he turned to its politics, to the core issue of race that jazz raises, he embraced the most basic of prejudices. Jazz, he wrote, might “divide and follow two strains—the negro and the intellectual.”

In words and music the negro side expresses something which underlies a great deal of America—our independence, our carelessness, our frankness, and gaiety. In each of these the negro is more intense than we are, and we surpass him when we combine a more varied and more intelligent life with his instinctive qualities…. [He is] only a little more simple and savage than we are.60

Savage, nonintellectual, carefree, and simple: in a passage which starts out allying the African American with American culture as a whole, Seldes ends up cataloging four racial stereotypes, espousing them as fact. In his notes to the 1957 edition of the book, Seldes acknowledges the inflammatory nature of the words he chose. Yet, he does not exactly attempt to take them back:

Some fifteen years later, this passage was unearthed as proof—not of my ignorance of the best Negro music, but of a prejudice against it, with implications of grosser prejudice still. By that time I knew several of the great Negroes in music, Paul Robeson, Fats Waller, Taylor Gordon, and others. I can’t be sure with which of these I discussed the supposedly offensive wording, but I know they went far to reassure me. The simple fact is that the qualities of Negro music exploited at the time were the anti-intellectual ones, and this happened over and over again in the years that followed.61

The fact that Seldes offers neither an apology nor a retraction by the late 1950s is regrettable. And yet, it would be a mistake to dismiss Seldes on the topic of race because
of the undeniably problematic assumptions about African American intellect he makes. Mixed in with these statements are an important, and (for the period) iconoclastic assertion of the value of the contributions of African American art to American culture as a whole. In the same article in which Seldes dismisses “Negro intellect”, he also writes:

I do feel that the treatment of a negro melody, by negroes, to make a popular and beautiful song for Americans ought not to be always neglected, always despised. I say also that our serious composers have missed so much in not seeing what the ragtime composers have done that (like Lady Bracknell) they ought to be exposed to comment on the platform.... I do not think that the negro...is our salvation. But he has kept alive things without which our lives would be perceptibly meaner, paler, and nearer to atrophy and decay.62

Clearly, Seldes recognized the immense contribution of African Americans to American culture as a whole. Yet his presentation of that insight foundered, as did Rourke’s on minstrelsy, on the shoals of his own period’s endemic racism.

Making matters more complex, Seldes also addressed the peculiar synchronicity of African American and Jewish contributions to popular entertainment.63 In a review of three collections of spirituals (Dorothy Scarborough’s On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs, R. Emmet Kennedy’s Mellows, and James Weldon Johnson’s The Book of American Negro Spirituals), Seldes spent most of his article theorizing about the relationship of African Americans and Jews to American culture as a whole: “The American popular song, at this moment a significant part of American music, is composed almost entirely by the descendants of African Negroes and Russian Jews.” From the Johnson brothers to the Gershwin brothers, American popular music did indeed have strong roots in both cultural groupings.

Yet, despite its popularity, such music, especially that composed by Jewish musicians, sometimes became watered down and derivative of its original significance:
The Negro, accepting Christianity, discovered for himself the parallel between his own and the bondage of the Hebrews and among his more poignant songs are those drawn out of Exodus. If the Russian-Jewish-American composers were at all affected by the poetic themes of the Negro, the circle would be complete; but the typical American composer of this type attaches himself almost exclusively to the negro rhythm and, a little obviously, to his melody. The longing which in the spirituals is a longing for Heaven and salvation is changed in American popular terms to a nostalgia for backdrop “Sunny South” and Mammy.

Acknowledging the diminishment that can occur in the hybridizing of culture, Seldes pressed to the underlying question: what, then, constitutes American culture? He writes,

But even if you combine the Negro and the Jew, where are you to find the unbreakable bond between them and the Anglo-Saxon American, or even the American of mixed descent who has been here for generations? Can the Negro and the Jew stand in the relation of a folk to a nation? And if not, can the music they make be national music?

This question (like many of the questions Seldes poses) remains unanswered. But the asking of it is provocative, and productive, as is Seldes’ ultimate observation:

…we have in the negro songs, as collected above, as sung in concert and on records, a body of beautiful music. It has been neglected, distorted, made pretty, made tawdry, and now is being presented in various approaches to its native beauty…. And, possibly, when the present wave of enthusiasm subsides a little, we shall discover that these songs, like everything else brought to our shores, are part of the body of our arts, not the only possible source of our music, but one of inestimable value.

For all his flippant reference to the African American as “savage,” Seldes clearly saw the music that came from the culture—spirituals, ragtime, and jazz—as a key piece of American culture as a whole.

Seldes was well aware that much of the searching for the roots of American culture so prevalent in his time involved a look towards the Anglo-Saxon constituents of New England (in Brooks’ case) or the Germanic culture that came with its immigrants to America (in Mencken’s). The artistic works of more recent immigrants, especially those
of Italian, Slavic, Irish descent, as well as that of African Americans through their
eritage as slaves were presumed to be of lesser significance, relevance, and quality, as
were the people who created such works.

In a December 1924 article for *Vanity Fair*, released seven months after *Seven Lively Arts*, Seldes addressed the presumption of cultural homogeneity directly: “If America to-day is racially a unit (an Anglo-Saxon unit) without taint of Latin, Slav, or Jew, an American art may develop as “pure” as the French, for example.” However, Seldes dryly points out, “there has been an immigration into the United States of millions of non-Nordics, and if the K.K.K. does not expel them,” our art, our American art, has become “the richer for it.” There is no pure American, Seldes reminds us, and searching for a pure American culture is a fool’s errand: “We are all of us, even the Ku Kluxers, the results of thousands of generations of mixed cultures. We can add another generation to our sum, but we can hardly subtract ourselves from the past.”65 And that’s a good thing, indeed, for the creation of a vibrant American art. Its hybridity is its strength. Seldes noted that Fanny Brice and Al Jolson, Jewish both, “bring something to America which America lacks and loves—they are, I suppose, two of our most popular entertainers—and that both are racially out of the dominant caste. Possibly this accounts for some of their fine carelessness about our superstitions of politeness and gentility.”66

In this observation, Seldes brings his understanding of the essential nature of American racial and ethnic diversity around to his understanding of performance as central to modern American culture. The popular American art (like jazz or like the performances of Brice and Jolson) that Seldes has declared to be America’s “lightning strike” of modernism is often created by the blacks, Jews, Slavs, Poles, Italians, and Irish
that make up America’s hybrid social fabric. The very variety these groups provide is intrinsic to the vibrant popular entertainment that is America’s cultural heritage. And its modern character.

4.5 On the Theatre, 1924-1932

In January 1924, shortly after returning to the United States from his time in France creating Seven Lively (where he also wedded Alice Wadhams Hall), Seldes edited his last issue of the Dial. He continued to write for them, however, maintaining his monthly column on the theatre through May 1929. During this span of years, Seldes used his column in the Dial to argue for live performance, both in the dramatic theatre and in vaudeville, as a key source of fantasy in American art. Even when his column at the Dial ceased, Seldes continued his campaign for serious criticism applied to the lively arts in publications as varied as Harper’s, Saturday Evening Post, and the New York Evening Journal. He also took the proponents of the new stagecraft and art theatre to task for their puffed-up belief in their own modernist import. In the process, he explored the reasoning behind his own predilection for the light over the serious. And he tried his hand at writing and producing his own theatrical work, to mixed results. Throughout, he attended to how the theatre was an index and a reflection of American culture.

Of the myriad subjects Seldes wrote about over the course of his prolific career, he returned with the most frequency to the theatre. He loved film and radio, he enjoyed jazz and great fiction, but the theatre was where he found fertile ground for the creation of American culture. Because he was so taken by the form, it naturally caused him great critical pain when it went, for him, astray. In the first half of the 1920s, Seldes was an
outspoken proponent of vaudeville and musical comedy over the art theatre. In a climate of theatrical criticism that either praised the work of the Theatre Guild as revolutionary or fell in step with general satisfaction with a mediocre *Abie’s Irish Rose*, Seldes fashioned himself an iconoclast of the third way: neither the modernist highbrow nor the arty middle ground, but the saucy technical mastery of the popular stage. He threw down rhetorical gauntlets:

> I am going to establish a lyric theater in America. Not an art theater and not a temple of the drama, and not an experimental theater. A lyric theater where there will always be Mozart and Jerome Kern, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Lehar—and *never* by any chance Puccini, or the *Ring*, or Ibsen. I will avoid the good things and the bad alike in the serious forms; I shall have Russian Ballets and American Ballets. It will be a theater devoted to *all* the forms of light musical entertainment and to nothing else.”

He would declare with confidence, “George M. Cohan’s mastery of his instrument is as complete as Ibsen’s of his.” Or he would scold, “You may be indulgent to a bad performance of Ibsen, because it is Ibsen. You are not indulgent to a second-rate production of a musical show.”

In fact, Ibsen (and all he represented) was a subject of particular irritation for Seldes. Throughout his theatrical criticism, Ibsen’s plays (especially in “arty” productions) rankled Seldes. In May 1925, he went to see Alla Nazimova in the Actor’s Theatre production of *The Wild Duck* with trepidation, as the play itself, he said, was what had “turned [him] against Ibsen.” Yet, Seldes found that this particular production succeeded because it played against the heavy-handed elements of Ibsen’s realism that he so despised. Never one to become entrenched in his views, when Seldes saw *Rosmersholm*, a few months later he noted,
I have held off from Ibsen a long time, and I am afraid I may have sneered at him. His interests and temperament, as shown in his work, still do not enchant me. But when he is presented as a dramatist and not as a philosopher—which has been his fortune twice this year—I yield entirely and pray Heaven that my stupidity was not too publicly made known.70

Seldes saw a distinction between the theatre as an art and as a platform for ideas. He firmly believed that a play with a message still needed to be produced well. And so his preference leaned toward slim ideas produced well over rich ideas produced poorly: “It is hard to be indifferent to the passion of Heartbreak House or untouched by the humours of Meet The Wife;” he wrote, “but it has for long seemed to me that if you isolate these things from the way of their presentation, you make the theatre a dull and ignoble place.”71

In November 1925, Seldes wrote a short history of the theatre with this distinction in mind. One line of the theatre’s history belonged to the playwright, he said, and the other to the players:

The zealot of great theatre tends to forget that we have on the contemporary stage two separate developments, from almost entirely separate sources. There is the serious theatre developed out of the religious drama (Greek or Miracle Play) and the light theatre developed out of the make-up box (the commedia dell’arte, according to Dr. Winifred Smith). This second theatre is the theatre of technique; it is the player’s theatre as the other is the playwright’s; it does not deal in ideas, and does not try to exalt, but to divert. From it we get, if not genealogically, at least in a spiritual descent, our vaudeville, and vaudeville to-day penetrates into all the other forms of light entertainment. As in the Italian professional comedy, there is improvisation in vaudeville; I have heard Joe Cook outline a brief scene to his company and then watched the scene being made up on the stage in accordance with the general scenario and leading up to the resumption of the text. This whole theatre, divorced from emotion and almost free of intellectual content, is supremely satisfactory in its form; it has a grease-paint technique which often is superb. It is pure theatre and depends for its success on its theatrical value, not on the presentation of acceptable or startling ideas. That is why it is so interesting aesthetically.72
And it was the aesthetics that interested Seldes. In particular, he saw in the theatre’s aesthetics a movement towards the fantasy that he found so striking in American art. “Illusion,” he wrote “is the object of the theatre’s existence.” To object to it is “as puritanical as the objection to the artifice by which the theatre creates its effects.” 73 Yet for Seldes, the theatre was at its best when it stepped away from realism and into a world of delightful implausibility.

It is usually in fantasy that we experience specifically the existence of a world created by laws other than our own, existing under a logic we cannot grasp, having a flow and ebb which perhaps do not correspond to the courses of our blood, and a pulse which we cannot relate to our own, yet which we feel to be intrinsically right.

This creation of a world not ours is to me the grandeur of the theatre…. [onstage] a clerk might walk like Napoleon and yet be all clerk, without offense to our apprehension, because in that theatre the milieu in which the clerk moved would have already created its own laws, and so long as the clerk existed in accordance with those laws, however different from our own, we should accept him, as we accept poetry in the theatre or magic. 74

That is, the theatre operates on a level magically beyond the real. Similarly, in a 1929 review of The Front Page, Seldes praised the play not for its rollicking farce or satire, but because, “The play is mad and rowdy and Messrs MacArthur and Hecht have added fantasy both in the run of the plot and in the language and ideas of their characters. If this is what comes of living in Chicago, I propose that a lot of our dramatists make the supreme sacrifice and try it.” 75 What Seldes appreciated about the immensely popular production was the way it leapt (as American comedy does, Rourke would note) into the realm of the fantastic.
Seldes tried, in December 1925, to put his theatrical criticism into action, when he wrote his first play, *The Wisecrackers*. Staged at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, the play was a satire on the acidic wits of the Algonquin circle, including Dorothy Parker and Alexander Woollcott. Although the players may have been charming, the playwright’s play was not a success. *Time* magazine described it as “courageous at least.”

The author deliberately attacked the shrewd, irreverent group that eats luncheon at the Algonquin Hotel, Manhattan, jests bitterly at life and works. Mr. Seldes, though much in their line of work, has never been a member of the group…. The hero [of *Wisecrackers*] was the wittiest man in Manhattan. His wife left him because he was so witty that he never had time to be serious. All of which fell pretty flat, as Mr. Seldes neglected to supply him with one real witticism during the evening.

The review summed up *Wisecrackers* as “one of the most astoundingly inefficient that the oldest inhabitant can recall from the pen of a presumably intelligent person.”

Seldes seemed to take the failure in good humor. In his February 1926 column on the theatre in the *Dial*, he noted, with irony:

> With this report I lose my hitherto unquestioned amateur status and, at the moment, am questioning whether the loss will be compensated by any adequate gain. The unanimous displeasure of the critics of the daily papers in their reviews of *The Wise-Crackers* startled, without pleasing, me. I can assure you that it isn’t as bad as all that; and if by a miracle it should still be current when these pages are printed, I cordially urge all sound citizens to see it. But not preferentially. I’d much rather see *The Cocoanuts* myself.

Seldes here refers to the Marx brothers comedy he had glowingly reviewed one issue prior. *Wisecrackers* would be Seldes last original play, though he would adapt two other classics for the stage. One would succeed; the other, like *Wisecrackers*, would not.

Seldes also examined the way the burgeoning field of theatre history addressed itself to popular entertainments. In February 1928, Seldes wrote a review, entitled “Theatre, Show-Shop, and Drama,” of two books on American theatre: *Theatre: Essays*
on the Arts of the Theatre edited by Edith Isaccs and A History of the American Drama

written by Arthur Hobson Quinn. While noting the great differences between the books (Isacc’s work is focused on the art of the contemporary theatre and Quinn’s is a chronological history focused on names, dates, and productions), Seldes points out that they share in common one conspicuous lack:

It does not seem to me that either of these books is sufficiently aware of the showshop: our commercial theatre with its outstanding technical virtuosity, our vaudeville, musical shows, and burlesque where a technique is constantly in development. I am not riding a hobby to death; when I worked on the seven lively arts I was interested in them purely for themselves and remain so; but I am aware of a life in them which can do many things for both the theatre and the drama. The second needs to be made more fruitful, the first more native and less arty. It is not enough to say, generously, that burlesque is good theatre, and I fear that the virtue of vaudeville will be a little dissipated if we go on for ever calling it commedia dell’arte…. [P]arallels between our cheap theatre and the Venetian comedy are accurate enough; but there is something else in vaudeville and burlesque which the art theatre ought to study. For this is a theatre of actors and of masks, of players and of characters, in a sense almost unknown in the serious theatre.  

In the very first stages of the writing of theatre history in America, Seldes observes the problem which besets the field to this day. Studies of theatre, as an art, tend to rush past popular entertainment. Modernist and avant-garde theatre are usually separated from popular theatre. Scholars have become specialists on one or the other. And though the “art theatre ought to study” the virtuosity and approaches of comedy and burlesque, for example, such scholarship tends to confine itself to safe parallels with the commedia dell’arte.
4.6 In the popular press, 1927-1932

*Seven Lively Arts* was Seldes’ first major book, published when he was 31 years old. It became, in many ways, the defining credo for the rest of his career. The judgments Seldes passed in *Seven Lively Arts* would echo, and mutate, throughout his subsequent journalistic work, as well as in his subsequent book-length studies. Constance Rourke worked differently. She slowly and steadily built her early historical work towards her major thesis about American culture in *American Humor*. But Seldes exploded out of the gate with a thesis, a manifesto of sorts. Rourke began by looking at American culture, and moved towards analyzing it as intimately tied to a theatrical impulse in the native character she was examining. Seldes began with the theatre as his proving ground, and he moved outward, over the course of his career, into examining American culture more broadly. Their trajectories, that is, are opposite but complementary.

In 1927, Seldes’ critical work began to shift away from the aesthetic agitation and advocacy of his *Seven Lively Arts* columns and essays and towards a broader concern with American culture itself. Undoubtedly, Seldes’ own interests began to move towards the more playful polemics he created in the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post*. But the venue itself for which he was writing was also a significant part of the shift. During these years Seldes wandered from publishing in the *Dial*, one of the highest of highbrow journals, to the *Saturday Evening Post*, the quintessential middlebrow magazine, to the New York *Graphic*, one of the city’s most lowbrow publications. And he moved back again. This formal migration reflected Seldes’ own commitment to reach as wide an audience as possible. That is, Seldes moved, quite purposefully, from writing *about* popular culture to writing *for* popular culture.
Throughout, Seldes maintained his engagement with the theatre. He simply shifted his publication venue. In a letter to Edmund Wilson dated 14 August 1929, Seldes writes, “To your—and my surprise—I shall be a dramatic critic this winter—as befits the critic of the late Dial. I shall write for the Graphic. Don’t laugh.” In fact, Seldes had accepted a position reviewing the theatre for “Bernard McFadden’s bizarre New York Graphic.” The Graphic was widely referred to as a newspaper of fakery, whose bread and butter was constituted of cut-and-pasted photographs intended to shock and titillate. According to Seldes, the flyers advertising his arrival at the paper read: “From The Dial to The Graphic in One Flying Leap!” In fact, the division in tone, content, style, and concern might have given pause to any other writer. But Seldes had prided himself on the comparatively breezy style of writing he maintained at the highbrow Dial; he took equal pleasure in the comparatively lofty tone of his writing for the Graphic. Yet, his style and approach to his subject matter remained consistent. Similarly, when he began his daily column for the New York Evening Journal in 1931, he was touted in advertisements in the paper as a hybrid high/lowbrow:

Who is this Gilbert Seldes whose name is mentioned in so many connections, whether it is the vulgarity of the Athenian dramatists or the art of Jimmy Durante? The answer is that he is a highbrow, a man of amazing cerebral altitude. The explanation of his popularity is that he is regular. From the critical eminence of the editorship of the most highbrow publication this continent has yet seen (The Dial), he wrote “The Seven Lively Arts,” a book of appreciations on comic strips, the movies, dance music and other indigenous flowerings of genius not before dignified by the term art. (At least not by the highbrows.).... He writes a column of whatever occurs to him daily for the Journal, and, believe us, it always is interesting.
More and more, Seldes occupied a middle ground, in which he demanded quality from the popular arts, open-mindedness from the highbrow critics, and a platform to speak from in the mainstream press.

Of course, the case could be made that the shift in print venue from the *Dial* to the *Graphic, Evening Journal, and Saturday Evening Post* was financially expedient for Seldes. According to Michael Kammen, Seldes got involved with the *Saturday Evening Post* when he returned from Europe, cash-strapped, with his wife in the summer of 1926. His agent suggested that he submit something to the *Post*, which paid exceptionally well. Although Seldes thought that they would not be interested in his work, his reputation from *Seven Lively Arts* preceded him. His first article proposal was accepted, inaugurating a six-year period in which the *Post* became Seldes’ major source of income. A short story in the magazine was reputedly worth $1750; Seldes said he was paid about $850 for a one page, with continuation, article.

When Seldes began at the *Post*, the circulation of the magazine was close to two million; by 1929, it had spiked to three million.82 When the stock market crash came that October, Seldes noted that the “size of the magazine diminished (it seemed) over night.”83 But by then, several of Seldes’ articles were already “in the vault,” so to speak, and so he continued to draw a healthy income through 1932. The editor of the *Post* during these years was George Horace Lorimer, an affable fellow of whom Seldes was fond. Though onlookers (including Seldes’ friend, Edmund Wilson) questioned whether Seldes had freedom akin to his editorial latitude at the *Dial*, Seldes was adamant that Lorimer gave him free rein: “I look back at some of the work with grave doubts; but the *Post* itself was irreproachable. I always submitted an outline of major articles. If the
outline was approved, the Post never changed nor asked me to change a word of the text.”

So it is safe to assume that Seldes’ selection of subject matter for the pages of the Post was his own choice. Clearly, Seldes knew he was reaching a broad audience: the very audience, in fact, that critics like Mencken, Brooks, and the other young intellectuals had argued (and were continuing to argue) were the cause of American failure to produce a rich culture on par with Europe’s. Seldes would make this critique the subject of every article he wrote for the Post. It became Seldes’ mission to address the “common man” who had been dismissed as a hayseed, a Babbitt, and a boob. Seldes wanted, as the title to one of his articles read, to use his space in the Post (and, later, in the Graphic and the Evening Journal) to “debunk the debunkers.”

Sometimes Seldes’ approach at the Post was to satirize or mock the “intelligent” classes of which these critics were a part. So he wrote an article like “Park Avenue Voodoo” (24 November 1928), in which he critiqued out the upper class predilection for astrology as expensive voodoo. In “Complaint Against Critics: They Tell You What You Are and Where You Get Off” (1 June 1929), Seldes laid out a long series of cultural dichotomies that “critics” trap the general reader into accepting and, in the process, implicate them within. In “The City’s Giddy Whirl” (31 May 1930), Seldes claimed that city-chauvinists suffer from “agoraphobia” and an unwillingness to conceded that the radio and the automobile have made life in other locations far more pleasant.

So part of Seldes’ approach is to “debunk the debunkers” by exposing the foolishness that they, too, espouse. But three key articles in Seldes’ Post collection more directly take on the criticisms these debunkers had leveled at the Post’s audience. In these
three—“A Super-American Credo” (1 July 1928), “The Art Bogy” (12 January 1929), and “The Better Americans” (20 April 1929)—Seldes more clearly articulated his critical beliefs about American culture than he did at any other place in his body of work. Surely, he played out his animus towards Mencken, especially, more directly than in many of his other writings. In these articles, Seldes would set out to prove, ultimately, that “The boob haters, with a few exceptions, are only boobs with a superior vocabulary.” Turnabout, for Seldes, was fair play. And it was a logical extension of his work on the popular arts in *Seven Lively*. Therefore, these articles warrant closer analysis.

“A Super-American Credo”

In “A Super-American Credo,” one of the first articles he wrote for the *Post*, Seldes created a mock version of H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan’s *American Credo* (1920). Its sequel, *The New American Credo*, had been published in 1927, just a year before Seldes’ article ran. Mencken and Nathan’s *Credo* claimed to merely catalogue the things which every average American believed—silly simplicities like “the farmer is an honest man and greatly imposed upon.” In Mencken and Nathan’s *Credo*, the average American becomes a credulous gawper of below average intelligence with little knowledge of culture and even less taste.

In his satirical skewering, Seldes never names the *American Credo* directly, though the title to the article clearly refers to it. Here, he notes that, though “the scientists” have anatomized the average American, there is, however yet still “a field untouched. Superior in intelligence and experience to all other Americans, the investigators of the boob mind have so far failed to supply a body of beliefs held by the
super-American himself. I submit that this is unfair to the superior people.”87 Poking at
Mencken’s predilection for the Nietzschean Superman, Seldes proceeds to chronicle the
things the superior “super-American” believes. These include:

That there is a great difference between six lowbrows telling dirty stories in a
Pullman smoker and six intellectuals telling dirty stories in a New York speakeasy….
That shocking and making fun of the middle classes is a new and effective way of
indicating a superior attitude toward life and differs from the activities of the
French romanticists in every way….
That nothing essentially fine was ever popular….
That if you join a lodge you are a herd man; but if you join a literary group and
lunch with the same people every day you are a man of force and originality….
That America has no history, no historical sense and no traditions….
That no great novel can be written in America because the background is thin,
because American social life is not based on class distinctions, and because
Americans look down on the arts….
That small-town people are dying with envy of smart New Yorkers. Or ought to
be….

In a space of three pages, Seldes calls out every one of the basic presumptions that
undergird the critique of American culture set into motion by Brooks and Mencken in the
late 1910s and early 1920s. Seldes undercuts the notion that there is a great divide (a
divide that should be, in Mencken’s view, policed by a protective aristocracy) between
the hoi polloi and the artist: both engage in the time-honored lowbrow pastimes of telling
dirty stories and joining clubs. And, by distilling Brooks’ argumentation in America’s
Coming of Age down to two pithy sentences—“America has no history, no historical
sense and no traditions” and “no great novel can be written in America”—he exposes
them for the sweeping, impossible generalizations that they are. And anyway, he notes,
“small-town people” and the “middle classes” aren’t “dying with envy” of the
intelligentsia anyway. Who cares what they think? One is reminded of Constance
Rourke’s assessment of the American comic character, which defended itself thusly:
“first that all refinements might be found at home; then that they didn’t matter.”89

This point of view is echoed, in more negative terms, in an article entitled “Debunking the Debunkers” for the New York Herald Tribune. Published 28 October 1928, the article sported a subtitle (“The Attack of the Intelligentsia on the Small Town Is Based on False Standards, an Inadequate Knowledge of American Life, and the Intimation That Bunk Does Not Exist Elsewhere, in Both Business and Art”) that more or less summed up Seldes’ entire set of concerns in this period. He was aware that such a point of view was destined to rankle: “If I should say,” Seldes wrote in the article, “that the fault of all the debunkers is that they are destructive, instead of constructive, critics, a loud hoot would rise behind my left ear and I would be accused (I have heard it already) of having sold out to the capitalists since I began to write for ‘a magazine of national circulation.’” Of course, the “magazine of national circulation” was the Saturday Evening Post.90 Certainly, the fact that Seldes had begun writing for them, hot on the heels of his work for the Dial, made his critique of the debunkers if not suspect, then at least easy to, well, debunk. Yet, Seldes’ basic point is salient: the critique of American culture raised by Brooks and by Mencken was, in the main destructive without hope (in Brooks’ case) or desire (in Mencken’s) to perceptibly improve the situation.
“The Art Bogy”

In “The Art Bogy” (12 January 1929), Seldes continued his defense of the critically put-upon American middle class. In the article, Seldes suggested that the American business man should no longer feel bad for not liking what the critics tell him is Art.

The American business man, known in cultural circles as “that worm,” has managed to put up a respectable fight against most of the attacks on his character. By definition, he is a thick-skinned animal—which is unusual in a worm—and the thump of a critical brick on his hide is like the falling of the leaf. Let him be told that he does not know how to enjoy life or make his wife happy or bring up his children: he shrugs his shoulders and goes on his way. But he is vulnerable in one spot. Whisper in his ear, “You hate art,” and he breaks into unmanly sobs. Art is the mouse which sends this elephant into fits of impotent rage and shame.

The problem, Seldes declares, is not that which critics have suggested: that his straw-man “business man” was too materialistic or dumb to appreciate art. Rather, the problem was threefold, and it was the critics’ problem. First, “art was offered to the American man as something dead.” Second, it “was remote” in time and space and “what was done today could not by any chance be as worthy as what was done yesterday, and a painting three hundred years old was obviously better than one three weeks old.” Third, and damningly, critically sanctioned art “had nothing to do with the American man’s life.” The artist, Seldes writes, was treated as “something sacred, and to be protected. He was not be bothered with money affairs, nor with crass details of trains, food, clothes, barbers, servants, marriage vows, and the like.” Clearly, Seldes is again here taking on Mencken’s suggestion that the artist should be protected from the mob as well as Brooks’ opinion that American materialism spoils the artistic temperament. Even the theatre, the “[o]ne form of art the business man traditionally cared for,” was ruined by the critics. It “was
promptly taken away from him. The common theater had to be transformed into the art theater before he could get any credit for liking it." And, of course, Seldes’ businessman did not like the emotings of the art theatre’s experimentations. He preferred the jovial entertainments of the *Follies* or of the vaudeville stage—forms which Seldes had already argued in *Seven Lively Arts* were particularly American, and modern, art.

Seldes is on a tear. But he makes a peculiar move near the end of the article. In defending the American business man’s taste as legitimate, he embraces Santayana’s conflation of gentility and feminized culture. Seldes writes:

> In a strange way the business man has had his revenge. For a century, art was specifically a feminine interest in America; it meant to the average man a crowd of idle women clustering around a rather unkempt faker who gave them a sort of foolish thrill, either by talking about things they did not understand or by being mildly improper. And generation after generation the man stood aside and saw the things his women had praised go sliding down the chute to oblivion.  

Seldes moves away from his focus on condescending critics and towards silly women as he recounts the sorry state of aesthetic affairs. Art became removed from daily life when women had too much leisure, he writes, and it is becoming more vibrant with the “emergence of what used to be called ‘the new woman’—the woman who went in for sport instead of maladies, and for business, who was self-reliant and created a life of her own, with its own interests and excitements, whether she remained at home or went to an office.” Ultimately, Seldes brings the two threads of argumentation together, however tenuously, by asserting, “The misunderstood artist is as outmoded as the misunderstood woman.”
More and more, it becomes clear that Seldes’ work for the *Post* is motivated by a very real frustration with the state of criticism in American and by a very real desire to reach out to the broadest audience possible to stand up against it. However, his argumentative approach is sometimes built on straw-man oversimplifications and overheated rhetoric. The object of the articles is clearly not to prove his point of view, but to defend and to excite.

“The Better Americans”

“The Better Americans” (20 April 1929) continued Seldes’ critique of the critics of American culture. He began the article by dismantling the meanings behind the phrase “the better Americans,” which he asserted was a condescending code used by “those who despised America” during WWI. “Better Americans” sided with the British, and as such were less unruly than their fellow colonists. More importantly, “better Americans” believed that European culture was superior to their own. So, for example, “The average high school student learns that Whitman and Poe enjoy European reputations and therefore are our greatest writers; the standard of measurement is always outside the country.” Placing the standard of judgment outside of American culture itself had rankled Seldes for years: in “Debunking the Debunkers,” for example, Seldes had noted that “the debunkers have almost invariably applied European standards of culture to an American product.” But in “The Better Americans,” Seldes imputes the causes of the problem mainly to expatriates, who complain loudly in Europe, and to their allies (like Mencken, though he does not name him) who stay behind on “the Atlantic Seaboard…. They are city people, rich people, people of some prestige; they have natural access to
organs of publicity. They are vocal!.... From them never comes any suggestion that America is worth studying, observing and developing along its own natural lines.”

Seldes is aware of the dangers that attend such statements. If the “better American” rejects out of hand American literature and entertainment because it is American, there is, at the other extreme, “the jingo, who believes that nothing is done right in this world unless an American does it. Obviously the two types are related—one is the other turned inside out.” Seldes sides with neither: though his rhetoric is pointed and his argumentative style pugnacious, he himself believes in taking a middle road. American culture is neither perfect nor hopeless. But it is, he asserts, a culture.

Seldes paints with a broad brush in his Post articles. He’s aggressive, and he overstates. He works at the level of polemic. Periodically, he implicates himself in with the hotheaded critics he is rejecting: “If I seem to be a little unsympathetic in this restatement of what young people felt in 1919 and 1920, it is not from any sense of superiority. I was one of them myself.” Yet, beneath his rhetoric, his deep belief in a middle road is often apparent. Certainly, his desire to defend American culture against its detractors is, when it’s well written, refreshing. But Seldes, no doubt about it, has an axe to grind. He tries to out-shout Mencken, to counter his complaints. He even sees Mencken when he is not there. In a December 1928 Bookman review of a series on American faith, Seldes can’t resist a quick, though unnecessary jab. In a parenthetical to his analysis of the books, Seldes writes, “it remains only to discover at what church the Menckenites worship every Thursday.” Mencken haunts Seldes’ thinking and shadows
his work. So it should come as no surprise that Seldes’ next book, composed while he was writing his *Post* polemics, again spars with a spectral Mencken.

### 4.7 *Stammering Century*

In *Stammering Century* (1928), published the same year as Constance Rourke’s *Troupers of the Gold Coast*, Seldes too looks back to the nineteenth century to find the roots of the American character. “This stammering century,” Horace Greeley reputedly called it, in which voices were heard and repeated, was one of evangelism, cults, and fads. In his introduction, Seldes suggests that the book gives “a background in American history for the cults and manias of our own time: the Prohibitionists and Pentecostalists; the diet-faddists, and dealers in mail-order Personality; the play-censors, and Fundamentalists, and Point Loma theosophists; the free-lovers and eugenists; the cranks and, possibly, the saints.” So Seldes wanted to look back to the nineteenth century to find the continuities in the contemporary American reformist character. That is, he wanted to

…compose a sort of anatomy of the reforming temperament and to follow it, by winding roads, to the spiritual settlements it made for itself. What the man thinks who sets himself apart from humanity and expects humanity to follow him, how such people acted, what they did, where they found strength to struggle and consolation in defeat, what victories they won, how they held their faith or lost it, why the ended in all-embracing disaster—these things seemed to me exceptionally interesting. The facts became my actual subject—not debunking, not analyzing, not interpreting—only the facts themselves. ¹⁰¹

The move into the writing of history was a new one for Seldes, though he had begun publishing pieces of what would become *Stammering Century* in various publications as early as 1927.
The topic of fads, cults, and other assorted bunkum on the surface seems precisely the subject matter that might be fodder for Mencken’s “Americana” column in the *American Mercury*. “It is, however,” Seldes demurs, “nothing of the kind.” Seldes calls out Mencken by name in the first page of his preface to *Stammering*:

In private conversation—and possibly also in print—Mr. Mencken maintains that no quackery has ever been given up by the American people until they have had a worse quackery to take its place. He holds, explicitly and implicitly, that the difference between intelligent and unintelligent people is the gullability of the boobs, their irremediable tendency to believe anything sufficiently absurd. The distinction is one of the reasons for Mencken’s distrust of democracy and the history of manias and crazes in America annihilates this distinction entirely.

In Seldes’ assessment, quackeries “were first accepted by superior people, by men and women of education, intelligence, breeding, wealth, and experience. Only after the upper classes had approved, the masses accepted each new thing.”¹⁰² This is a stretch of logic for a book ostensibly only about “the facts themselves.” And although some of the evidence Seldes marshals seems to bear out his conclusion, all of it does not. Rather, Seldes seems driven to both distance himself from Mencken’s ill-temper and, at the same time, silence his critiques.

In the 1965 reissue of *Stammering Century*, which featured an appreciative introduction by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Seldes expanded his prefatory note to acknowledge that “The anti-influence of—or the reaction against—Mencken is explicit from the first page of this book.” Indeed. And why?

He was the energy in the whole decade of debunking; he was the worst judge of fiction even in that rather backward time—he thought Joseph Hergesheimer was a great writer, he thought Joseph Conrad was one, too, for all the wrong reasons. He was intellectually a *bourgeois gentilhomme*—and he was the most invigorating, the most exciting man of our time. In his expressed contempt for the common man you could, by a vigorous effort, detect a trace of Fascism—but it was only the residual effect of his own partial and superficial reading of Friedrich
Nietzsche (about whom he wrote the worst book—certainly in English—ever written)…. He never gave the impression of wanting to enlighten the ‘booboisie’—it would have spoiled his fun…. What was zestful in Mencken turned peevish in many of his followers, and he supplied them with handy ideas which they turned into catchwords as silly as any appearing in the “credo” which he ascribed to Americans. He helped in blowing up the few bridges between the educated and the ignorant, the intelligent and the indifferent. His followers were not bright examples of the independent thinking man.103

Through all of Seldes’ implicit critique of Mencken in his work for the Post, and even in Stammering Century itself, Seldes was never as directly ad hominem as he was in this revision to his introduction. The critique of the serious flaws in Mencken’s work—the pugilistic debunking, the cynical judgmentalism, the overheated rhetoric, the nearly Fascist certain superiority—are intermixed by Seldes with tangential critiques of his bad taste in literature and his poor philosophical writing. It’s clear that, decades on (and nearly ten years after his death), Mencken still roused Seldes’ ire. It is also clear that Seldes had profound respect, and even affection, for “zestful” Mencken, “the most invigorating, the most exciting man of our time,” that he patently did not hold for the Menckenites, younger critics who aped Mencken’s style. The nub of the problem was, ultimately, that Mencken served more to divide than to bring together. If Mencken blew up bridges, Seldes (especially in his later years, when he moved into radio) strove to build them, in order to create a truly American culture.

Other forms of intellectual extremism were equally irritating to Seldes. They were, in fact, irritating enough that three basic categories of thought—communism, psychoanalysis, and Prohibition—motivated his explorations in Stammering Century. He found all three, in great currency during the late 1920s, to be the grandchildren of the quackeries and utopias espoused in the mid-1840s. He writes, “In the third decade of the
twentieth century, we are living in a spiritual world they helped to form. Our radicals, and reformers, and faddists, and charlatans, are all descendants of the ‘ultraists’—the radicals—of the 1840s…. There is a continuity in our mental habits.”

So the motivating influence behind *Stammering* was twofold. First, by demonstrating that foolishness and gullibility is not confined to the common man alone, Seldes wanted to debunk Mencken’s persistent critiques. Second, Seldes wanted to demonstrate that the roots of what he found to be extreme revolutionary thought (as in the case of communism and Prohibition) or faddish totalizing philosophies (as in the case of psychoanalysis) were to be found in the cults and quackeries of the American mid nineteenth century. Here Seldes is an equal-opportunity offender. While communist rhetoric and psychoanalysis were popular amongst the New York intelligentsia of the period, Prohibition was, to most of them, anathema. By drawing together popular and unpopular extremes, Seldes tacitly underscored the notion that noting separated the critic from the criticized but, as he had previously noted, “a superior vocabulary.”

In *Stammering Century*, Seldes is treading the same territory worked by Constance Rourke in her *Trumpets of Jubilee*, published one year earlier. In that book, Rourke had pushed aside the “major” figures of the mid-nineteenth century in order to chronicle the popular and influential social and religious evangelism of the Beecher dynasty, along with the politics of Horace Greeley and the entertainments of P.T. Barnum. Seldes had reviewed the book, quite favorably, in the *Dial*. In *Stammering*, Seldes similarly emphasizes the narrative of popular interest over that of the more elite. And both studies do so to get at the core of what the American character, and the American useable past, might be.
So it is not surprising that Seldes names Rourke’s work directly in his study. He is not always in agreement with her interpretations. For example, he takes issue with Rourke’s explanation of the clash between Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney over the use of revivals. Yet, in the main, he finds much to respect in her work: “Impeccable in taste and judgment throughout her *Trumpets of Jubilee*, Constance Mayfield Rourke is again perfect in her attitude toward bibliography. ‘To end a book,’ she says, ‘with a display of the machinery by which it has been assembled is to stress the toil which has gone into its making, not the pleasure.’” Like Rourke, Seldes keeps his bibliography brief and descriptive.105

The praise went both ways. In her review of *Stammering Century*, Constance Rourke praised Seldes for standing up against Mencken. She stressed that Seldes did not “reach smug conclusions as to the American character. The virtue of the book is that it temperately describes strange people and bizarre movements with an acute discernment.” However much she appreciated Seldes’ overall approach, she wanted more clarity and specificity from his writing. In response to Seldes’ overtly anti-Mencken argument that fads were first accepted by what he called “superior” people and only later picked up by the general populace, Rourke writes, quite rightly, “We would relish also more definite proof than Mr. Seldes offers as to the extent to which our superior minds have been engaged in fanaticism…. And the question arises, who are superior people?” Seldes, she observes, often goes in for “extremes” in his writing; however, she declared the book as a whole to be a worthwhile contribution to the study of the American character.106
Rourke’s criticism was insightful, and gets to the heart of the most fundamental power, and excess, of Seldes’ writing. Later, Seldes would articulate his penchant and style in this way:

Every writer has, I suppose, a book for which he has a special feeling because it seems unjustly forgotten. The Stammering Century is mine. It was my first book after The Seven Lively Arts…. The two books represent my major professional interests. One is the popular arts as they developed into the mass media and are still developing into something that needs a more definitive title than I have found for them; the other is the nature, the essential character of America. In this, it was wise of me to start at a tangent. If I had tried to reach the center, I should have become hopelessly lost and perhaps never have returned to the work for which I was temperamentally more suited. I tried again in the depression of the early 1930’s and found that I was essentially a pamphleteer; I wrote because I wanted a result, an action. It is not the attitude of an historian.  

Seldes’ criticism of his own work is by far more incisive than any other. Indeed, though he made a foray into the field of history with Stammering, he is, as he notes “essentially a pamphleteer.” He goads, he incites, he disturbs: Seldes is a rhetorical rabble-rouser. Indeed, it is not the attitude of an historian. At least, not that of a measured historian like Constance Rourke. Yet, as Seldes’ work matured into the 1930s and 1940s, especially as he delved into the mass media, his twin concerns of the popular arts and the American character would more fully dovetail. Seven Lively Arts and Stammering Century were just the beginning.
Endnotes

1 Kammen, *The Lively Arts*, 21. I am indebted to Kammen’s work on Seldes, not only for its thoroughness and insight, but also because Kammen was granted full access to Seldes’ papers, in Marion Seldes’ possession.


4 Kammen, *The Lively Arts*, 33.

5 Ibid., 33.

6 Ibid.

7 And he undertook a complicated love affair. See Kammen, *The Lively Arts* 35-38.


9 Ibid., 79-85

10 Emory Elliot, ed. *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, 744


Endnotes

18 It’s amusing to note that two of the Bookman slate of critics—Floyd Dell and Louis Untermeyer—had been themselves rated in the Vanity Fair matrix. Dell averaged +.1 in the first go-around. Untermeyer earned a respectable +4, though Seldes had given him a 0.


21 Seldes, “Vaudeville” 238.


24 Kammen, The Lively Arts 77.

25 Ibid.

26 Colony records in the early years indicate only year of attendance and, sometimes, which studio a colonist used. I have relied for dates of attendance for Rourke and Seldes on contextual clues in Rubin and Kammen respectively. Without access to the private papers of Rourke and Seldes, I have been unable to ascertain whether or not the two interacted at the Colony.


28 Seldes, “Diplomat’s Delight: Detective and Mystery Stories, Good and Bad, Passed in Review.” Bookman 66 (September 1927): 91-93.

29 “Colyums” was Seldes’ word for newspaper columns written in character, like Mr. Dooley or Ring Lardner’s “You Know Me, Al” series.

30 Quoted in Kammen, The Lively Arts 88.

31 Fifteen articles ran in Vanity Fair; three ran in The Dial. In chronological order, they are:

“Golla, Golla, The Comic Strip’s Art,” [renamed “The ‘Vulgar’ Comic Strip” in Seven Lively] Vanity Fair (May 1922)
“The Damned Effrontery of the Two-A-Day” Vanity Fair (October 1922)
“Darktown Strutters on Broadway” Vanity Fair (November 1922)
“A Revue Reviewed” [renamed “A Tribute to Florenz Ziegfeld in Seven Lively] Vanity Fair (January 1923)
“The First Merryandrews of Europe” [renamed “The True and Inimitable Kings of Laughter” in Seven Lively] Vanity Fair (July 1923)
“Say It With Music” Vanity Fair (July 1923)
Endnotes

“The One-Man Show” *Vanity Fair* (August 1923)
“Toujours Jazz” *Dial* (August 1923)
“The Daemonic in the American Theatre” *Dial* (September 1923)
“The Newspaper Columnists” [renamed “St. Simeon Stylites” in *Seven Lively*] *Vanity Fair* (September 1923)
“Before a Picture by Picasso” *Dial* (October 1923)
“For a Lyric Theatre in America” [renamed “Plan for a Lyric Theatre in America” in *Seven Lively*] *Vanity Fair* (October 1923)
“I Am Here To-Day” *Vanity Fair* (November 1923)
“Some Makers of Ecstasy in the Theatre,” [renamed “These, Too” in *Seven Lively*] *Vanity Fair* (January 1924)

Under his pseudonym Vivian Shaw, Seldes published the following four articles that appeared in *Seven Lively Arts*:

“The Great God Bogus” *Vanity Fair* (August 1923). This article constitutes the book’s philosophical core.
“A Letter to the Movie Magnates” [renamed “An Open Letter to the Movie Magnates” in *Seven Lively*] *Vanity Fair* (September 1923).
“They Call it Dancing” *Vanity Fair* (October 1923)
“Tearing a Passion to Ragtime” *Vanity Fair* (November 1923)

Seldes seems at pains to brush past the fact that it is a collection. In the introductory matter to the revised 1957 version of the book, Seldes refers to his “phobia about reprinting magazine articles” (7). In fact, in the book, the only place in which he acknowledges the use of previously published material is in a footnote, included in the revised edition, that was originally placed in the 1924 version. Seldes disparages, “This review [Darktown Strutters] appeared in *Vanity Fair* sometime in the summer of 1922 [it actually ran in November 1922]. I allow it to stand with nothing more than verbal corrections in spite of my dislike of books which collect articles expressly written for magazine publication…” (145).

In the 1924 edition, he thanks John Peale Bishop, Edmund Wilson, and Frank Crowninshield, saying, “they published several essays which later served as the raw material for chapters here, published portions of other chapters written expressly for this book, and otherwise encouraged and prospered me—to such an extent that I owe to them and to my fellow-editors of the *Dial* the holiday which made it possible for me to write at all” (391). But in comparison, the previously published articles and the chapters of *Seven Lively Arts* bear very little difference.

Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts*, preface to the 1957 edition, 8.


Endnotes

36 Anonymous (Edmund Wilson). “The All-Star Literary Vaudeville,” New Republic (30 June 1926). See Michael Kammen’s analysis of the disagreement; Seldes appeared, at least on the surface, not to know where the criticism was coming from.

37 Seldes, Seven Lively Arts 5.

38 Seldes, Public Arts 288.


40 Ibid., 165.

41 Seldes, “Cakes and Ale Return to Favor,” Vanity Fair (May 1924): 49, 108


43 Seldes, Seven Lively Arts, 301.


45 Seldes, Seven Lively Arts, 264.


47 Ibid.


51 Ibid.

52 Seldes, Seven Lively 268-269.

53 Seldes, Seven Lively 228. Seldes, “Damned Effrontery” 102.


55 Warren Susman, Culture as History xxvii.

57 Seldes, Seven Lively 208.


60 Seldes, “Toujours Jazz,” 158.

61 Seldes, Seven Lively Arts 99.


63 For an early example of Seldes’ thinking through of the issues of Jewishness on the American stage, see his article “Jewish Plays and Jew-Plays in New York” for the February 1922 The Menorah Journal.


66 Ibid., 308.

67 On June 21, 1924, Seldes married Hall in Paris; they honeymooned on the Riviera, at the home of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. They had met in June 1923 at the wedding of John Peale Bishop. Seldes always called Hall “Amanda.”

68 Seldes, “For a Lyric Theater in America,” Vanity Fair (October 1923): 71. The essay can also be found in The Seven Lively Arts. In his preface to the 1957 reissue of the book, Seldes suggested that he had, perhaps, been a bit dismissive: “I’m not sure I chose the best examples at the time and poor Puccini, for whom I now have an almost apologetic liking, seems to have been an obsession of mine. But the thing remains.” (5).


Endnotes


74 Ibid., 110.

75 Seldes, “The Theatre,” January 1929, 82.


78 Seldes, “Theatre, Show-Shop, and Drama” 158-159.

79 Gilbert Seldes to Edmund Wilson, 13 August 1929, Edmund Wilson MSS.

80 Yoder, “Gilbert Seldes and the Criticism of Mass Culture” 21.

81 Undated newspaper clipping. Ruth Draper MSS.

82 Kammen, *The Lively Arts* 146.

83 Quoted in Kammen, *The Lively Arts* 147. From the *As in My Time* manuscript, in Marian Seldes’ possession.

84 Quoted in Kammen, *The Lively Arts* 125. From the *As in My Time* manuscript, in Marian Seldes’ possession.


88 Ibid., 45-46.


90 Seldes, “Debunking the Debunkers” 21 October 1928, 2.

91 Seldes, “Art Bogy” 33.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.
Endnotes

94 Ibid., 130.


96 Seldes, “Debunking the Debunkers” 21 October 1928, 3.

97 Seldes, “The Better Americans” 93.

98 Ibid.


100 Seldes, “The Degradation of Dogma” 469.

101 Seldes, Stammering Century xiv, xxi.

102 Ibid., xiv.

103 Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

104 Ibid., 5.

105 Ibid., 109-110, 412.


CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

ROURKE, SELDES, AND A VISION OF AMERICAN CULTURE

5.1 Continuities and changes

Bracketed by their two most important works of cultural criticism and anchored by a trio of historical studies of popular culture in the nineteenth century, the years between 1924 and 1931 were for Constance Rourke and Gilbert Seldes a declaration of intellectual independence. In these eight years, Rourke and Seldes undertook a strong counterattack to the prevalent “debunking” of their contemporaries. To do so, they embraced popular performance as the locus of American identity, especially as the foundation and identity of the modern artistic movements. In this, Rourke located the historical and Seldes celebrated the contemporary.

Of course, Seldes and Rourke differed in significant (and productive) ways in their writing methods, voices, and ideas. For example, between 1924 and 1928 Seldes produced over 200 articles; Rourke wrote two long book projects which would also be serialized. If Seldes wrote with scattered enthusiasms, Rourke maintained a steady focus. So Seldes’ work was all loquacious ebullience. Rourke’s was all taciturn reserve. Seldes had a passion; Rourke had a strategy.¹ Seldes seemed to relish publicly bantering with
and baiting the other young (male) critics of his day. His criticism—usually first-person, often tongue-in-cheek, always saucy—tilts towards the self-consciously provocative. Rourke’s work is more detached: she rarely calls out opponents by name, almost never uses the first person, and is reserved in rhetoric. On *American Humor*, she noted, “in the main I had decided not to take on all the known antagonists of whom I was aware, since to do so and to include my rebuttals would be immensely to complicate the outlines of the book. I felt that my materials were in themselves very full and complex and many of them new.” So Seldes sets Eugene O’Neill against George M. Cohan and declares a winner and a loser; Rourke sets Henry James alongside Davy Crockett and lets the reader decide. In short, Seldes was a polemicist and Rourke was a historian. Their temperaments guided their selection of material and their argumentative approaches.

Still, Seldes’ belligerence and Rourke’s reticence presented each with problems. Seldes enthusiastic work at times devolved into straw-man special pleading as he ground his axe against Mencken. And Rourke’s consistent choice to suppress overt argument left her work feeling, at times, vague and detached; Alfred Kazin suggested that Rourke’s work in these moments is but “an image, a story told, not ready ground on which we can stand.”

Despite these rhetorical and argumentative flaws, between 1924 and 1931 Constance Rourke and Gilbert Seldes established the prime critical concerns and basic working method that each would sustain through the remainder of their careers. The period is bracketed by their career-defining studies of American popular entertainments and culture: Seldes’ *Seven Lively Arts* (1924) and Rourke’s *American Humor* (1931). It is anchored in the middle by their trio of revisionist and reclamatory studies of the
American nineteenth century: Rourke’s *Trumpets of Jubilee* (1927) and *Troupers of the Gold Coast* (1928), and Seldes’ *Stammering Century* (1928). Together, Rourke and Seldes make an effectual pair, their work proposing an alternative to the pessimistic debunking approach to American culture propounded by the majority of the young intellectuals of the 1910s and 1920s. As Seldes would put it in *Mainland*, his 1936 cri de coeur:

Between 1914 and 1929 the dominant tone in American literature was dislike of America. Cynical in Mencken, satirical in Sinclair Lewis, mystic in Waldo Frank, idealist in Lewisohn, stupid in Dreiser, emotional in Sherwood Anderson, aesthetic in the writers for *The Dial*, indignant in *The Nation*, more reformist in *The New Republic*, abusive in symposia, tragic in O’Neill, actually gay in the plays of Kaufman and Connolly, the literature of this period is a long sustained attack on the outcome of a century and a half of American life. From sex to scenery, nothing in American life was good.  

The debunkers’ voices were pervasive. Their urgency and their disdain have sustained them into the present moment, where standard approaches to the period still take them at their word. Of course, modernist art and sensibilities were pervasively critical of bourgeois society and values, so not surprisingly many of the American modernists and their advocates took a negative, often dark perspective. Optimism and progressivism were in short supply. But both Rourke and Seldes argued that this understanding of modernism was incomplete as an explanation of key aspects of modern American identity and culture.

So Rourke and Seldes stood outside this now-canonical approach, critiquing it as it unfolded in three major ways. First, they had little to do with the Greenwich Village and bohemian crowds that most commonly are evoked to typify the 1920s in the United States. Seldes might have had Dorothy Parker to his home as a dinner guest, but he was
never a member of her witty (and often cruel) Algonquin Round Table. Rourke maintained a strong circle of friends in Grand Rapids, Michigan, but she didn’t hold forth at Mabel Dodge’s bohemian salons. Though Seldes was a longtime editor and contributor to the Dial, neither he nor Rourke wrote for the little journals like Broom, Secession, Masses, Crisis, or, especially, The Little Review, whose subtitle—“Making No Compromise with the Public Taste”—was assuredly at odds with their catholic embrace of “the people.”

Second, despite their profound and abiding interest in the theatre as the chief expression and reflection of the American character, neither contributed to art theatre organs like Theatre Arts Monthly. Neither, in fact, was a strong supporter of the art theatre movement in general. While Seldes adored E.E. Cummings’ him, he was in general mistrustful of the “arty” work by the Theatre Guild or Eugene O’Neill. He preferred designs by Lee Simonson to those by Robert Edmond Jones, and he preferred the spectacle of the Ziegfeld Follies to both of them. He found the psychological and understated productions of Arthur Hopkins generally banal and self-indulgent in comparison with the power and control of Fanny Brice’s vaudeville act. While Sheldon Cheney was campaigning for an art theatre purified of its commercial and entertaining elements, Seldes was campaigning for a popular theatre that had commerce and entertainment as its defining mission. He praised a kind of popular entertainment that could be embraced by intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike for its vibrant Americanness. Throughout, Constance Rourke was steadily making the case that the very entertainments that Cheney wanted to purify—minstrelsy, burlesque, and rough frontier comedy—were the crucible out of which the American character had been formed.
Seldes would note, ruefully, that the art theatre approach was hardening into doctrine in the texts written by figures like Edith Isaacs and taught in the newly-formed departments of theatre across the country.

Third, though both Rourke and Seldes regularly traveled to Europe, they were never part of the Lost Generation expatriates. Both traveled to Europe for the solitude it provided them. It’s telling that Seldes wrote *Seven Lively Arts* in France and Rourke wrote *American Humor* in England. Seldes regularly vacationed in Europe, visiting with friends like Gertrude Stein, John Dos Passos, and T.S. Eliot. But he never sympathized with or considered expatriation for himself. In fact, Seldes was stridently opposed to the belief that culture was better, purer, more refined, or more elevated in Europe. Such views, he insisted, revealed silly post-colonial insecurity. Rourke did Seldes one better on this count, refusing even to move to cosmopolitan New York. She sustained, by choice, her entire career from the middle of Michigan, where she lived her life fully amongst lumberjacks, school teachers, and paper merchants.

As Rourke and Seldes moved into the 1930s and beyond, their basic philosophical approach to American culture remained consistent with their original observations in their major works from 1924 to 1931. But they would also bloom in new directions.

### 5.2 Rourke to the future

Following the publication of *American Humor* in 1931, Constance Rourke embarked on a decade of intense productivity. Building on her discoveries about and insights into American folk culture, Rourke published three biographies. Each of these would take her work further away from the literary bias she detected in the mainstream
studies. Davy Crockett (1934) expanded on her work on the Crockett almanacs in American Humor, taking Crockett seriously as a literate and effective statesman as well as reevaluating his status as one of her backwoodsman types. Her next two books, Audubon (1936) and Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition (1938), both moved her into closer study of the visual arts. For years, Rourke had been collecting American crafts during her travels in search of the ephemeral, popular materials on which her books like Trumpets of Jubilee or Troupers of the Gold Coast had been based. In Audubon, Rourke examined the naturalist’s paintings of native flora and fauna as art rather than “mere” illustration. She begins making the case, persuasively, that a divide between art and illustration is anchored in an imposed, and false, boundary between that which is useful that which is not. Rourke would continue this campaign in her work with the first National Folk Festival (1934), for which she gathered Michigan lumberjacks to perform camp songs. She would also contribute to the Federal Arts Project as an editor for the Index of American Design (1936-1938), traveling the country to collect and organize materials that documented the rich heritage of American folk arts. This work brought her into connection with American painter and photographer Charles Sheeler, on whom she completed a biography in 1938. In her first full-length work on a living person, Rourke examined Sheeler and his work as rooted in and reflecting on the long tradition of American folk arts. About this work, poet William Carlos Williams wrote to Sheeler on 17 July 1938, “It is something for us all that Rourke has grasped so much of what we have been thinking and saying for the past twenty years and objectively summarized it in you. She seems on the way to becoming our Moses.”5
The praise is high, and it was prescient. Throughout all her work, from *American Humor* forward, Rourke was slowly building the evidence and the argument for what was to be a major study on American culture. As she continued to take magazine work for pay, Rourke regularly applied for (and was regularly rejected from) a series of major research grants from organizations like the Carnegie Corporation and the Guggenheim Foundation. Her letters are sprinkled with enthusiasm for the massive project she was nurturing. She wrote to Lewis Mumford that the book “goes along insurgently, still strongly cleaving its own way, not always permitting as methodical a line of work as I have intended, which is a good sign, I think.” Several months later, she would admit to Margaret Marshall that “my old man of the sea of a book continually reminds me how [much] remains to be done before the book can materialise.”

In an undated two-page document headed “A History of American Culture by Constance Rourke,” collected in a file of Rourke’s letters to Lewis Mumford at the University of Pennsylvania, Rourke laid out the plan, probably for a grant application, for what her study was to become. She wrote at length:

This study proceeds chronologically, and is divided into five broad sections. My approach has been governed by a deep-seated conviction that understanding of popular and folk materials is essential for an interpretation of American culture. I do not by any means exclude the fine arts; but I am convinced that in a country such as ours, developing with a strong admixture of folk elements and popular strains, these must be defined in expressive terms if our creative forces are to be fully understood. The book has expanded from what I first planned as an interpretation of American literature in these terms. I had expected to use materials relating to music and the space and graphic arts as background. They have become foreground, and the purely literary interest is somewhat diminished. My concern is with the full fabric. The emphasis of the book is regional, but the regional structure is not rigidly sustained, giving way to broader passages as these seem required.
With so wide a scope, the problem has been not only that of research but of synthesis. I believe I have been able to solve this problem by presenting typical clusters of material in successive periods and by establishing inter-relations between them. The entire book is outlined. Some sixty or seventy thousand words are in draft, with other portions in approximate draft or close outline. I have an extensive and thoroughly organized bibliography which is particularly rich in monographs and articles. The book will run to approximately two hundred thousand words, and will contain sixty four pages of illustrations, exemplifying the crafts and the graphic and space arts. The groupings on each page will be planned for simple effects and for integration with the text.

Since my other books have centered on related materials, work on them has afforded a long preparation for this study, involving travel, research in widely scattered collections, and a generous experience in known the American arts, popular or otherwise, at first hand. For the special purposes of this study I have worked extensively at the American Antiquarian Society Library, the Frick Art Reference Library, the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress. For its completion I need further work in these collections, at the Western Reserve Historical Society, at the University of Kentucky. I should like to see a voluminous collection of Louisiana material, now being indexed, at Melrose, Louisiana, and to collect photographic material from near St. Francisville. I should like a first hand view of materials at Taos and Santa Fe, I must stress the fact that groundwork for research in these places and institutions has been thoroughly prepared and that what I need to accomplish in this respect is not extensive, though it is essential. Travel for illustrative materials will dovetail with travel for research. The photographic material which I require is not altogether for illustration but also for comparative purposes and for conclusions within the text. In many instances, paintings and other objects which I have already located will be presented for the first time.8

The project was ambitious, and it promised to be significant. It was also constantly evolving. In March 1940, she wrote to Lewis Mumford of a developing plan to divide the book into two volumes, with the first being “an introductory volume which I have decided to split off from the main stem and am enlarging to small book length since I think the materials warrant it. This first would study the fraught usage of the term “culture;” the second volume was to be a series of case studies.9
Amidst Rourke’s other commitments, the book developed steadily, yet slowly. Its progress was further hampered when the United States came to the brink of entry in World War II. In accord with Lewis Mumford, who would title his 1939 book *Men Must Act*, Rourke threw herself into the war effort. In a January 1938 letter to Mumford, Rourke chronicled her efforts, detailing her myriad speeches to local Grand Rapids groups, including Calvin College, Rotarians, Episcopal churches, and a woman’s club. Not surprisingly, Rourke believed that local political action was essential. However, she lamented:

This was the year when I was to do no public speaking! It’s been a very driving effort because we worked within no established organization but set up a committee of our own. It has meant hundreds of ten minute personal speeches to individuals on the part of the rather small number who did the actual work, because we were doing an unprecedented thing. But I can’t think of anything I’ve done that has brought a greater sense of rightness and satisfaction….American culture has been substituted for American Culture: I’ve done next to no work on the book, but I’m sure I have more for it: there’s no doubt of it. I’ve always through that in spite of some obvious losses I’ve gained a good deal by living in a fairly complex community. This immediate and rather drastic plunge seems very much an extension. One’s personal gain at such a time of course matters very little, yet certain ideas which I hope to develop in the book have become all the more urgent.10

Rourke had in fact set aside her book, temporarily. And she always thought she could come back to it, enriched from her work in the world. But when she returned home from a meeting of the local branch of the Committee to Defend American by Aiding the Allies late one winter evening in 1941, she slipped on her icy front porch and broke a vertebra. She was hospitalized for the injury and made good progress towards recovery. She was discharged several days later, and, as she was preparing to return home to convalesce, she
suffered an embolism and died, quite by surprise, on March 23, 1941. She was 56 years old, survived only by her mother. Rourke’s unfinished book remained behind, in scattered notes and draft pages.

What happened next was an extraordinary bit of turnabout. Van Wyck Brooks, whose pessimistic vision of American culture Rourke had countered so vehemently, stepped forward to organize, edit, and publish Rourke’s planned study posthumously. In 1942, her last work, *The Roots of American Culture*, was published, in one volume. In his introduction, Brooks praised her mightily:

> When Constance Rourke died in 1941, she had gone far in a work that would have given her a unique position among the American writers of her day. This work, a History of American Culture, was to have filled three volumes, presenting a point of view that was wholly her own. It was to have been the expression of thirty years of exploration during which she had published a series of preliminary volumes…. There was no phase of American culture that she had not planned to include in this monumental survey.\(^{11}\)

Despite this praise, Brooks maintained doubts about the project. In February 1942, he wrote to Donald Brace, the book’s publisher, noting:

> I have now done what I can with the Constance Rourke MSS and am sending you the results today…. As you will see, this MS runs to about 70,000 words. I am sorry it could not have been longer. There were two or three other papers that might have been included, but it seemed to me best to omit them. In the big cartons of MSS there was astonishingly little that could have been used in any way. I had to do a good deal of rewriting and combining but I think the results are solid. I found I could make no use of the suggested outline which someone had worked out on the two yellow foolscap sheets.\(^{12}\)

It seems that the work Rourke left behind was far from being fully drafted. She had assembled her materials, but she had not yet fully organized them. However, considering Brooks’ own consistently literary bias and his perennially highbrow tastes, it also seems possible that he was unable to see the work she had undertaken for what it was.
Brooks would, in 1957, acknowledge Rourke’s influence on him, writing in *Days of the Phoenix*, “my horizon was indefinitely broadened by Constance Rourke’s eager and eloquent studies. She was already preparing for the general history of American culture of which she finished parts before her death; and she wrote, from time to time, to tell me of the proofs she found that America had its own definite aesthetic tradition.”

Yet, fifteen years earlier and immediately following the publication of *Roots of American Culture*, Brooks seemed less ready to give Rourke such credit. In August 1942, John Chamberlain reviewed *Roots* quite positively for the *New York Times*, noting that Rourke’s work had consistently acted as a tonic against the “Brooks-Mumford generation” whose criticism was “sterile” and “pessimistic.” Mumford took great issue with the suggestion, composing a letter to Chamberlain that attempted to paint their work as embracing pluralistic American culture as far back as 1925. Mumford sent a copy of his letter to Chamberlain to Brooks, and in response Brooks wrote, “Of course Constance Rourke did not influence either of us, though she was a fine companion on the way. My own reorientation came with my breakdown, when I cleared a huge neurosis out of my system, and recovered my original temperament.”

Here, thirteen years before *Days of the Phoenix*, Brooks gives more credit to his 1926-1931 nervous breakdown than to Rourke’s revolutionary studies.

Rourke’s reputation would languish after 1942. Margaret Marshall’s planned biography on her never materialized. And subsequent attempts to study Rourke were hampered by the inaccessibility of her personal papers. Though her work was regularly “rediscovered” by critics and thinkers as diverse as Ralph Ellison, Margo Jefferson, or Greil Marcus, it never really surfaced as a cohesive whole.
5.3 Seldes to the future

Gilbert Seldes would outlive Constance Rourke by three decades. Over the course of his relentlessly productive career, he would move, with the culture at large, from a strong interest in stage entertainment to a fascination with broadcast and televised media. That is, his critical purview would shift from popular culture to mass culture. Throughout, his perspective on the utility and aesthetics of the forms would remain consistent. As Seldes stood against Mencken’s mistrust of popular culture in the 1920s, so too would he reject Dwight Macdonald’s disgust with mass culture in the 1950s. In both cases, Seldes made his points of view abundantly clear in print and, eventually, over the airwaves.


He would also publish eleven more books, varied in content, form, and approach. Two of these were works of history. In Years of the Locust: America, 1929-1932 (1933), Seldes attempted to study the causes and the effects of the Great Depression. In Mainland (1936), he composed a polemic which, in its analysis of a broad sweep of American culture, argued for seeing the United States as a special historical case. Another book,
This is New York (1934), was a coffee-table book of glossy photographs of his adopted home. Two other works overtly called for political action. Your Money and Your Life (1938), masquerading as a self-improvement book, attempted to push the American middle class to engaged, liberal citizenship in order to defend the nation against both Fascism and Communism.\textsuperscript{16} This was followed in short order by Proclaim Liberty (1942), a war-era assertion of the core significance of stage, screen, and radio performance to the war effort, in which Seldes wrote, “the radio, the movies, and popular print are the three tools by which we can create democratic action.”\textsuperscript{17} And Seldes’ abiding interest in popular entertainment led to six diverse works on the topic. The Movies Come from America (1937) chronicled the development of the moving picture; it was renamed, less nationally, Movies for the Millions for its British release. The Great Audience (1950) synthesized Seldes’ vision of popular entertainment in The Seven Lively Arts (1924) with the mediatized shift in the entertainment landscape; The Public Arts (1956) would expand and revise this work, drawing together popular and mass entertainment under the rubric “the public arts.” In the same vein, with Previews of Entertainment (1952), Seldes provided a guide to television, film, radio, and stage entertainments for a full year. That same year, Writing for Television (1952) codified much of what Seldes had learned about the medium. And The New Mass Media: A Challenge to Free Society (1957), while critical of the television industry, retained the optimism and faith in the audience that Seldes had always championed. In the book, Seldes noted that the critics of the medium were “unlikely to be effective if we begin with
contempt for the product and a sense of superiority to those who enjoy it.”18 Throughout these works, Seldes can be seen moving steadily more fully into the political ramifications of his vision of American culture.

In addition to his print work, Seldes would write, produce, and, sometimes, perform in a variety of film, radio, television, and stage productions. In 1933, he produced a documentary film, *This is America*, culled from key newsreels from the previous decades. Seldes forays into script doctoring were unsatisfactory: in 1936, he spent the fall in Hollywood, and from 1946 to 1947, he served an ill-fated term as a scriptwriter and consultant for Paramount Pictures. His work in live theatre, however, swung wildly between great success and profound failure. For example, his bawdy and modern 1930 update of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* was a sensation, running 252 performances.19

But in 1939, Seldes mounted *Swingin’ the Dream*, an ambitious, but unsuccessful, restaging of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It ran a scant thirteen performance at the Center Theatre in New York. The failure took Seldes by surprise; in many ways, *Swingin’ the Dream* was a concrete representation of the cohabitation of popular and elite art that Seldes had always propounded. In his revision, created in collaboration with Erik Charell, Seldes retained much of the original text of Shakespeare’s comedy. However, he shifted its location and genre: it became a musical set in jazz-hot New Orleans in 1890. *Swingin’* featured music by Felix Mendelssohn conjoined with jazz from a sextet conducted by Benny Goodman and also from Bud Freeman’s Summa Cum Laude band. It sported juke joint dancing as well choreography by Agnes De Mille. Its design was “inspired” by Walt Disney. It starred Louis Armstrong
as Bottom, Butterfly McQueen as Puck, Maxine Sullivan as Titania, Jackie “Moms” Mabley as Quince, the Dandridge Sisters as pixies, and a tap dancing Bill Bailey. Such a conjunction of performers and material is tantalizing in its rich sweep. Photographs, as well as Hirschfeld caricatures, seem to show a vibrant reimagining, in an American idiom, of a classic dramatic work. But reviews were scathing. Some reviewers suggested that the problem was that Benny Goodman’s skillful jazz was simply far more interesting than the generally untrained actor’s performances in Shakespeare’s comedy. Others noted that the piece was too busy: it was “overcrowded, over-elaborate, too much of a good thing.” Surprisingly, perhaps, none of the reviewers complained about mistreatment of the classic text, as Seldes might have expected.

Seldes work in radio and television was more successful. In 1937, he became the first director of television for CBS. There, he would experiment with the possibilities of the new medium through 1945, producing short, live broadcasts. Later, Seldes would joke that the television department “consisted then of myself and a secretary, neither of us with any work to do.” Possibly this is why, in 1938, he was tapped by the same network to write, produce, and perform in a series of educational programs on American culture for its radio wing. Here Seldes continued his populist approach, creating programs that celebrated the contributions of everyday people to American life. He produced Americans All, Immigrants All, a program created in conjunction with the United States Office of Education, the Department of the Interior, and the Service Bureau for Intercultural Education to highlight the contribution of various ethnic groups to the overall fabric of American culture. He also spearheaded Living History, a fifteen-minute weekly series addressing American history that took as its mission the desire to “take history out of the
text-books and into your lives.” His longest-running series was *Americans at Work*, which traveled to various job sites, including those of the steelworker, department store buyer, milkman, song writer, and meat packer. There, Seldes would interview workers as well as describe what they do, producing programs that would run with recorded audio of the person at work.22

In recognition of his pioneering work in the mass media, Seldes was named the founding Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication in Philadelphia in 1959. He served in that capacity through 1963, when his health began to deteriorate. He died at home seven years later, with his daughter, actress Marian Seldes at his side, on September 29, 1970. His planned autobiography, *As in My Time*, remains in draft form.23

5.4 An argument sustained

As they moved into the years beyond 1931, Rourke and Seldes sustained, and sharpened, four key observations about American culture and character. They stressed, both in argument and in their selection of subject matter, the following:

1. American culture, including modern culture, is tethered to popular culture. This popular culture is, in fact, America’s “useable past.”

2. American culture, especially as it is expressed in its popular culture, is demonic, grotesque, excessive, multiple, diverse, wasteful, and antic. In this, it does not fit a European model for high culture.

3. American culture, because it is linked to its popular culture, is expressed, and should be critiqued, in the commercial arena.

4. American culture is, fundamentally, performative.
1. American culture, including modern culture, is tethered to popular culture. This popular culture constitutes, in fact, America’s “useable past.”

Throughout their careers, both Rourke and Seldes gave serious historical and critical attention to the entertainments of the general American population, proposing these entertainments as essential to the fabric of the culture at large. Rourke made the case, most overtly in Trumpets of Jubilee and in American Humor, that key figures from popular culture provided the foundation of America’s unique culture. These uniformly theatrical figures included performers (like Lotta Crabree), clergymen (like Henry Ward Beecher), and impresarios (like P.T. Barnum). But they also included the fictionalized inventions of a growing nation, like the stage Yankee, backwoodsman, and minstrel. For his part, Seldes turned to his contemporary entertainments, including vaudeville, film, jazz, and radio, to find proof of America’s unique, and uniquely indicative, contributions to world culture.

Moreover, against the prevailing critical opinion of the American nineteenth century as a sterile wasteland of pioneering, pragmatism, puritanical ill-temper, and strained feminine gentility, Rourke and Seldes described a creative and downright iconoclastic milieu that was the very foundation of an American “useable past.” After his Stammering Century, Seldes would continue to demonstrate the vigor of the period in his CBS radio histories, in books like Mainland and Proclaim Liberty!, and in many of his journalistic essays. And though Rourke’s work remains unfinished, her intention to survey the entirety of American cultural history in Roots of American Culture signals her continuing interest in the period. Certainly, if Trumpets, Troupers, and American Humor are any indication, she believed with fervor that the reclamation of the vibrancy of the
The nineteenth century was an essential project to undertake in the articulation of a particularly American culture. This culture, as Rourke would assert in *Roots of American Culture*, should be understood as “tillage, a fertile medium, a base or groundwork including germination and growth. Surely a culture is the sum of such growth in terms of expression. Not the separate arts but the whole configuration will tell the story.” That is, the American culture she (and Seldes) uncovered in nineteenth and twentieth century popular entertainments served as the very “useable past” that Brooks and Mencken doubted American could ever possess.

2. *American culture, especially as it is expressed in its popular culture, is demonic, grotesque, excessive, multiple, diverse, wasteful, and antic. In this it does not fit a European model for high culture.*

The popular entertainments that Seldes and Rourke examined were often comic and usually nonrealistic. So Seldes had his “daemonic” Al Jolson and Fanny Brice as touchstones of exceedingly fine popular performance. Rourke proffered Lotta Crabtree’s exuberant antics, the tall talk of the backwoodsman and Yankee types, the bombast of nineteenth century oration, the myth of Davy Crockett, and the outsize claims of P.T. Barnum as more indicative of the American character. In all of these, Rourke and Seldes found touchstone examples of a vibrant, unruly America. And they knew that, in embracing these as positive models, they were proposing an audacious alternative portrait of the American people.
Like other critics of their day, both Rourke and Seldes stood against the limiting constraints of polite, genteel culture. However, they both saw the turn towards European standards of culture, including European modernism, as an option that was as invested as gentility was in rejecting the roughness of American popular culture. That is, the genteel tradition and the new modernists had in common one thing only: their distaste for American popular culture. So, in *Mainland*, Seldes would savvily fuse the two when he critiqued Lewis Mumford’s “positively Puritan rage” at the obstreperous American pioneers who “did not heed Wordsworth’s advice to seek Nature ‘in a wise passiveness’” as “advice based on the poet’s love for the English lake district, about as uncivilized then as Northern Vermont is today.” In response to Mumford, Seldes argued in *Mainland* that it is undeniable that American pioneers were wasteful and aggressive. However, this wastefulness and aggression stemmed from, he says, the fact that the seemingly limitless physical expanse of the nation meant that Americans did not have to carefully squeeze every last drop of possibility out of a tiny European tract of overworked land. “This may be morally reprehensible,” Seldes writes, “but politically it had a satisfactory result: the American farmer exhausted the soil, but did not let the soil exhaust him; so that we established the tradition of waste, but escaped the worse tradition of a stingy, frightened, miserly, peasant class. The more aesthetic American critics of America never quite forgave us for not having peasant arts and crafts, the peasant virtues, the peasant sturdiness, and all the rest of the good qualities which go with slavery to the soil.”25 That is, American critics craved, erroneously, a recreation of European culture in the United States.
Rourke would more carefully sum up the habit of mind in her *Roots of American Culture* this way:

Gross materialism is said to have blocked the arts…. Life on our successive frontiers has been declared destructive of these concerns…. Puritanism is said to have repressed the fine arts…. Sometimes these charges have become links in a chain: Puritanism created materialism, both forces were strengthened on the frontier, and none of them permitted leisure. These arguments have culminated in the theory of cultural “lag.”

In short, critical pessimism where American culture was concerned was intimately bound up with a misguided desire to replicate visions (real or imagined) of European culture. The prolific, but unquestioned, notion that American culture “lagged” behind was, Seldes and Rourke state clearly, flawed in the extreme. So Seldes wrote:

What did the critics want their country to be? Noble, idealistic, sophisticated, delicate, moved by sense of tragic destiny, philosophical, artistic, devoted to the mind and the soul, all beauty and refinement and spirituality—from the contemplation of what society did they derive these ideals? From no actual time and place, for the most part, but from an idealized picture of an aristocratic Europe, from the literature of Europe.

And in fact, the European model for high culture was also, often, intrinsically tied to literary culture as its core manifestation of excellence. Both Rourke and Seldes rejected this proposition. Seldes stated unequivocally, “Mr. Mumford, and a hundred others, start from literature and end in literature, and dismiss, as they pass, the creation of the New World as the corruption of one literary ideal, proved by another.” This habit of mind, for Seldes, was fused with the pessimism he detested: “The literary approach to America is almost always negative.” In *Roots of American Culture*, Rourke was characteristically more gracious in her statement of the same point: “Indeed to this day the word culture in this country is practically synonymous with literary culture, with an emphasis upon belles lettres, the more refined and recondite levels of literature, the peaks of achievement.”
In place of this emphasis on the literary and on the European, Rourke and Seldes turned to American popular culture, in all of its rough, messy, and vibrant glory. And though they did not argue that everything that sprang from the shores of the New World was perfect, or good, or worthwhile, they did insist that it was ineffably, not derivatively, American. According to Rourke, “Whatever the gaps, the mischances, the downright inferiority of some of our early arts, they cannot be considered in the main as the first fumblings of mere ambitious imitation. They sprang from a life peculiar to these shores; they were part of a fresh configuration.”

They were, in short, not European. And they should not be evaluated as such.

3. *American culture, because it is linked to its popular culture, is expressed, and should be critiqued, in the commercial arena.*

For many critics, including especially Van Wyck Brooks and his “beloved community,” the most damning aspect of American popular arts was their unabashed commerciality. So, Brooks would declare that Mark Twain failed to become a great writer because he capitulated to the commercial marketplace by writing charming comic stories. Lewis Mumford asserted, in *The Golden Day*, that America had the opportunity to create a new utopian civilization but instead succumbed to capitalism. And even though Randolph Bourne embraced America’s “trans-national” and hybrid status, he rejected the popular entertainments of that hybrid as “lowbrow snobbery.” In fact, the credo of many of the bohemians and radicals of the 1920s was, at least overtly, an explicitly anti-capitalist (sometimes communistic) philosophy.
To assert without irony, as Rourke and Seldes did, that the popular entertainments of the American capitalist marketplace were, in fact, its most indigenous and indicative expression, was a radical move. More radical still is the fact that Rourke and Seldes not only embraced such arts, but they also embraced the consumers of those arts. They produced their own critical work for the very audience decried as foolish philistines by mainstream critics. Throughout his career, Seldes wrote for publications as varied as the *Dial* and *Vanity Fair* to *TV Guide* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. In this mobility, Isaac Golberg noted, Seldes always “skillfully adapt[ed] his style but never lower[ed] his standards.” Indeed, Seldes rejected wholeheartedly the notion that “the audience” was of a significantly different caliber amongst the publications for which he wrote. In *The Public Arts* (1956), Seldes noted with disdain, “The concept of the audience as boobs is satisfying to hucksters and to highbrows. It is not accurate, nor is it permanently acceptable to democrats.” Moreover, Seldes always believed that any critic worth their salt had a responsibility to the audience at large: “There grows up in critics a contempt for what the public likes, and this contempt is itself contemptible, for it is part of the duty of the critic to guide the public taste.” On this issue, Constance Rourke would note, simply, in a 1939 letter to publisher Alfred Harcourt that “It seems to me that there would be no point in centering upon popular culture, and it would be odd to have a great belief in it, without making an attempt to write for those who in some way belong to it.”

In important ways, both Rourke and Seldes stood for the most positive interpretation of the middlebrow, as what Brooks named in *America’s Coming of Age* as a “genial middle ground.” Both had very real, if possibly idealistic, faith in “the people” as intelligent readers. Both distrusted, and disliked, the coterie of intellectuals with which
they never really fit. Both mined popular material to construct their histories and theories of American culture. Neither Rourke nor Seldes suffered from boosterism, though both did, from time to time, especially as they strained to make their point against the general critical consensus, lapse into exceptionalism and chauvinism. And their work roamed, by choice, amongst genres, publications, and disciplines. In building careers that bridged the “brows,” Rourke and Seldes embodied the American audience and the American culture they were advocating. In this, their careers may be the single strongest argument against Lawrence Levine’s dichotomous vision of American culture in his *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988).

4. *American culture is, fundamentally, performative.*

Between 1924 and 1931, Rourke and Seldes turned, in large measure, to the theatre and to the theatrical as the prime location of the American character and American culture. Rourke asserted, in *American Humor*, that the theatre “was closely interwoven with the American character and the American experience” and that Americans were a “theatrical race” whose tendencies were “heightened by a long intimacy with the stage.” In *Troupers of the Gold Coast*, performer Lotta Crabtree became for Rourke emblematic of exactly that American character and experience. And in *Trumpets of Jubilee*, P.T. Barnum loomed large as a key example of American bombast, magnitude, and inherent theatricality.

So Rourke’s first three historical studies were suffused with the theatre, and worked the theatre as a key metaphor in American culture. Seldes, on the other hand, wrote about specific contemporary performances. Beginning with theatrical criticism for
the *Dial* in 1921, Seldes consistently wrote, throughout his career, about and for the stage, screen, radio, and television. And against a climate of criticism focused on art theatre experimentation, he advocated for a sophisticated and incisive understanding of popular performance. His landmark work, *Seven Lively Arts* (1924), established such popular performances as crucial not to the American character (as Rourke’s studies did) but rather as essential to American modernism. They were, he said, its “lightning strike” of revolutionary creativity.

In turning to performance, both Rourke and Seldes grappled with the problems of race and ethnicity (and the representations of these) in American culture. Minstrelsy was fundamental to Rourke’s study of the American character; the contributions of Jews and blacks was implicated in Seldes’ analysis of American modernism. There were, to be sure, flaws in both of their assessments. However, the fact that they placed race and ethnicity so squarely at the center of America’s unique culture was an important critical move.

It is crucial to understand that both Rourke and Seldes would sustain their interest in the theatre and in performance. But neither, ever, limited such analysis of American culture to the theatre alone. Seldes had always, and would continue, to study film, radio, and television as part of the performance of the American character. But from the 1930s forward, his work became increasingly political. More and more, in books like *Mainland* and *Your Money and Your Life*, as well as in his essays for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Seldes shifted his critical attention from the entertainments enjoyed by American audience to the American audience itself. Throughout, Seldes remained consistent in his
advocacy for the intelligence of the general populace, which was, in fact, the underlying argument that animated his desire to advocate for popular performance in the first place.

In addition, though Rourke would devote fully a third of *Roots of American Culture* to the stage, she too turned her critical attention away from the theatre exclusively. She embraced, more and more, popular American visual arts. So Rourke would study figures like John James Audubon, Charles Sheeler, and, for the Index of American Design, a wide swath of folk artists. She continued to find theatrical elements in much of this work. But she primarily evaluated it on its own terms: as an example of a vibrant popular art that, like the theatre, provided an alternative creative lineage to the literature examined by so many of her contemporaneous critics.

Ultimately, then, both Rourke and Seldes discovered a unique American culture in their analysis of the stage. But both, to their credit, were able to extend their analyses and employ their insights beyond theatrical criticism alone. The theatre engendered and undergirded their studies. But it was not the limit of them. Perhaps their most radical act, for those working the field of theatre studies, was to assert that the theatre is not an end in itself. Rather, they show us how the theatre can be an intrinsic element of, and a key trope for the apprehension of, American culture at large.
Endnotes

1 Though Seldes comes through to us, in his writing, as more playful and ebullient than Rourke, it would be a mistake to imagine that she was a stick in the mud. For example, On January 26, 1937, Rourke wrote of her time in New York: “Friday night I went on a long bat…. We went first to ‘The Country Wife’…. As a rule I don’t like 18th century revivals but this was acted very fast and very amusingly. Then to a nightclub called ‘Hickory House,” then to the Onyx Club, which has a ‘swing’ band led by a darkey called Stuff Smith…. We stayed until five and then went to a restaurant and had some breakfast. Appt. at 9:30 which I kept promptly. Then to bed for the rest of the day.” Margaret Marshall MSS.

2 Constance Rourke to Bernard De Voto, 3 March 1932, Bernard De Voto MSS.

3 Quoted in Rubin, Constance Rourke 156.

4 Seldes, Mainland 13.

5 Williams to Sheeler, 17 July 1938, Rourke MSS. Quoted in Rubin, Constance Rourke xii.

6 Constance Rourke to Lewis Mumford, 14 January 1939. Lewis Mumford MSS.

7 Constance Rourke to Margaret Marshall, 24 October 1939. Margaret Marshall MSS.

8 Rourke, “A History of American Culture by Constance Rourke,” nd. Lewis Mumford MSS.

9 Constance Rourke to Lewis Mumford, 22 March 1940. Lewis Mumford MSS.

10 Constance Rourke to Lewis Mumford, 1 January 1938, Lewis Mumford MSS. Emphasis mine.


12 Van Wyck Brooks to Donald Brace, 2 February 1942. Van Wyck Brooks MSS.

13 Qtd in Rubin, 59. The statement comes from Brooks’ Days of the Phoenix (1957).

14 Mumford wrote to Chamberlain on 6 August 1942:

Dear John Chamberlain:

I was delighted with your warm-hearted and generous appreciation of Constance Rourke’s book: you did justice to a writer whose work was always rather under-valued; so much so that it took endless struggles to get any of the foundations to give her even a modest backing for the writing of the now-unwritten book.

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Endnotes

But in giving her the praise that is due her and more than due her, you fell quite naturally into an error which I am tempted, for the sake of history, to correct: this has to do with her influence upon Brooks. He had known her back in the Freeman days, if not before, and when he was at Harcourt’s he was zealous in getting them to take her first book. That came out in 1927, and if one didn’t check oneself on dates one might easily take Brooks’ affirmative attitude toward American culture as the result in part of this and later books by Constance Rourke. I have no doubt that he was affected by her, as was I: we all maintained a fairly close relationship by correspondence. But that fact is it was not Miss Rourke, but Emerson, that effected a great change in Brooks: it was in the midst of writing the Emerson in 1925 and 1926 that he fell in love with America, as his letters to me then, ecstatic, glowing letters, plainly show.

In giving Constance Rourke a formative part in Brooks’ change you have merely overlooked the actual dates. But I think you do something a little less just in your suggestion that she turned the “Brooks-Mumford generation from an increasingly sterile pre-occupation with American artistic failure”—at least if by that you mean Brooks and Mumford themselves. It is probably a long time since you looked at The Golden Day (published in 1926—a year before C.R.’s first), and the chances are ten to one that you remember it, not for what it was, but for what unsympathetic critics like Farrell and DeVoto have sought to make of it. If that can happen to you, dear John, it must be even more true for the young who have never even heard of The Golden Day; and for that reason I call your attention to the injustice of this sentence.

[Here Mumford goes on to defend, strenuously, The Golden Day, for a full paragraph.]

By now you probably believe that I was one of the querulous, nay-saying spirits of the 1920’s. Constance Rourke, who backed me up in 1938 on my publication of Men Must Act, when all the clever people knew I had gone crazy, never made that mistake about my contributions to our cultural history. (see pages 218-219 in The Van Wyck Brooks / Lewis Mumford Letters)


16 Your Money and Your Life is a striking, peculiar book. It is suffused with a real desire to rectify the inequities of the American capitalist system, thrown into particularly stark relief by the Depression, without retreating to a Marxist utopia. Seldes seems in earnest: he wants the middle class, with which he identifies, to become the agent of prudent, rational change. It would be easy to assume that the book would berate the Babbits, but, in keeping with Seldes’ consistently optimistic approach on this count, it does not. Seldes writes, “But in writing this book and several others about America of the past and present, I have become more than ever aware of the dangers through which the unorganized middle class must pass. I have never accepted the idea that the man in the middle class is unintelligent and contemptible; but I see in him a kind of weakness of the will brought on by years of prosperity, by a fatalistic belief in ever-expanding wealth and by the surrender of his political rights in order to relieve himself of his political duties”(292-293). And then Seldes sets about showing the middle class man why he must act on behalf of the poor. The book is oddly affecting, and warrants re-reading.

17 Seldes, Proclaim Liberty 166.

18 Seldes, The New Mass Media 97.
Endnotes

19 Lysistrata, directed and designed by Norman Bel Geddes, opened in Philadelphia on April 28, 1930 at the Philadelphia Theatre Association. It moved to Broadway in late May to run 252 performances. Later, the text was published (both in Theatre Magazine and as a book) as well as restaged around the country. According to Kammen, “Measured in purely financial terms, it ranks as the most successful project—book, play, or radio series—that Seldes ever undertook.” See Kammen, The Lively Arts 162-165.

20 Time 34 (11 December 1939): 50. Quoted in Kammen, The Lively Arts 205. For a thorough analysis of Swingin’ the Dream, which makes strides towards reconstructing it, see Frances Teague’s Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage, 120-130.

21 Seldes, Seven Lively Arts, 9-10.

22 Incomplete, but fascinating, runs of Seldes’ radio scripts can be found in the CBS radio scripts collection at the Library of Congress. Living History (which ran from 4 June to 28 September 1938) can be found in box 28. Americans at Work (which ran, with short hiatus, from 5 May 1938 to 7 May 1940) can be found in boxes 28-30. Americans All, Immigrants All (which ran from 19 July 1938 to 25 March 1939) can be found in box 32. The scripts give a good sense of the conversational, spontaneous-sounding style that Seldes crafted for his on-air persona. He also contributed a “Headlines and Bylines” piece periodically. These are not collected at the Library of Congress; however, the text of a lone broadcast, from 27 November 1938, can be found in box 124 of the Gertrude Stein collection at Yale’s Beinecke library. The feature was clearly eclectic: Seldes mentions her forthcoming version of Faust, along with an Emporia, Kansas newspaper, a film version of Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion, Pins and Needles, and Thomas Mann.

Seldes also worked in early television for CBS. Caches of scripts for his experiments do not seem to be in the archives; however, a 2 March 1942 letter to Henry McBride in the McBride collection at the Beinecke library at Yale University gives a sense of what kinds of projects Seldes was undertaking. In this instance, he was pulling together a panel of art historians and critics to discuss a collection of paintings live on TV.

23 Seldes’ personal papers are held by his daughter, Marian Seldes.

24 Rourke, Roots of American Culture 47-48.


26 Rourke, Roots of American Culture 46-47.


28 Ibid. 15, 17.

29 Rourke, Roots of American Culture 49.
Endnotes

30 Ibid. 51.


32 Seldes, Public Arts 293, 294.

33 Quoted in Rubin, Constance Rourke 157.

34 Rourke, American Humor 92, 93.
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(listed chronologically)

1907


1909


1914

“Changes at Vassar.” Vassar Miscellany, November 1914: 37-42.


1916


1918

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1920


1921


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1925


1926


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1932


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**1934**


1935


1936


1937


“Index of American Design.” *Magazine of Art*, April 1937: 207-211


1938


1939


“Voltaire Combe.” *Nation* 7 October 1939: 379-381.


1940


1942


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1959


1973


2004

APPENDIX B

WORKS BY GILBERT SELDES
Works By Gilbert Seldes

(listed chronologically)

1913


1914

**Following his graduation in May from Harvard, Seldes began writing a regular column as the music critic for the *Philadelphia Evening Ledger*. 1914-1915


1916


1917


“The United States and the World” *The Living Age* 292 (3 February 1917): 304, 308.


1918


1920

**In 1920, Seldes became an editor at the *Dial*


“In the Smoker.” *Collier’s* 65 (14 February 1920): 47.


“Mr. Mackenzie’s Jest.” Review of *Poor Relations* by Compton Mackenzie. *Dial* 68 (May 1920): 611+. 247
“Making Books as Plentiful at Home as They Were at the Front.” *Collier’s* 65 (15 May 1920): 76-77.


“The Theatre.” *Dial* 68 (June 1920): 808-809.


**1921**

“The Theatre.” *Dial* 70 (January 1921): 120.


1922


“The Theatre.” Dial 72 (February 1922): 230-231


“Golla, Golla, the Comic Strip’s Art.” *Vanity Fair* 18 (May 1922): 71.


Lucien Bluphocks (Gilbert Seldes). “Twas Brill-ig and the Slith Freuds.” *Vanity Fair* 18 (July 1922): 59, 106.


“The Theatre.” *Dial* 73 (September 1922): 356-357.


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1923


“The Demoniac in the American Theatre.” *Dial* 75 (September 1923): 303-308.


“I Am Here Today!” *Vanity Fair* 21 (November 1923): 47.


1924


“George M. Cohan: The Song and Dance Man.” *Vanity Fair* 21 (March 1924): 59, 82.

Vivian Shaw (Gilbert Seldes.) “The Old Fashioned Menace of the Screen.” *Vanity Fair* 21 (March 1924): 40.


“The Theatre.” *Dial* 76 (June 1924): 563-564.

“Art and ‘Artiness’.” *Arts and Decoration* 21 (June 1924): 13.


“Letter to the Editor.” *The Independent* 113 (16 August 1924): 112.


“The Cult of the Second Rate.” *Vanity Fair* (October 1924): 68.
“Notes and Queries.” *New Republic* 44 (21 October 1924): 231.


“Thompson’s Panorama, the Woolworth Building, and Do It Now.” *Vanity Fair* 23 (December 1924): 39, 108, 118.

1925


*The Wisecrackers* (ms only) play by Seldes. Produced late 1925.


“Some Premature Reviews of Our First Jazz Opera.” *Vanity Fair* 24 (March 1925): 42, 94.


“Path of the Movies.” *Nation* 120 (29 April 1925): 498, 500.


“The Singular—Although Dual—Eminence of Ring Lardner.” *Vanity Fair* 24 (July 1925): 45, 94.


“‘Art’ in the Movies.” *Nation* 121 (29 July 1925): 148.


“Jazz and Ballad.” *New Republic* 43 (5 August 1925): 293-294.


“Salvation and 5 Percent.” *New Republic* 44 (9 September 1925): 70.

“Plot and the Picture.” *New Republic* 44 (15 September 1925): 97-98.


1926

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“Jazz Opera or Ballet?” *Modern Music* 3 (January 1926): 10.


“Posters and Billboards.” New Republic 46 (10 March 1926): 74-75.


“Joe Cook—Broadway’s Funny Man.” *Theatre* 44 (September 1926): 12.


“Jerome Kern.” *New Republic* 48 (20 October 1926): 244-245.


1927


“Listening In.” New Republic 50 (23 March 1927): 140-141.


“Rx for Revolution.” *Saturday Evening Post* 199 (21 May 1927): 22-23, 62, 64.


“The Theatre.” *Dial* 83 (July 1927): 81-84.


“Diplomat’s Delight: Detective and Mystery Stories, Good and Bad, Passed in Review.” *Bookman* 66 (September 1927): 91-93.


“Boob Haters.” *Saturday Evening Post* 200 (1 October 1927): 43-44.

“Les Americains Toujours Presses.” *Saturday Evening Post* 200 (22 October 1927): 41

“Outlaws from Parnassus.” *Saturday Evening Post* 200 (5 November 1927): 35.


“Complex of Radicalism.” *Saturday Evening Post* 200 (19 November 1927): 35.


“The Theatre.” *Dial* 83 (December 1927): 529-531.

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“American Chronicle.” *Criterion* 7 (February 1928): 169-175.


“The Theatre.” *Dial* 84 (June 1928): 528-532.


“An Outline of Mystery.” *Bookman* 68 (September 1928): 100+.


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“Be Yourself.” *Saturday Evening Post* 201 (6 October 1928): 42.


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“American Satire.” *New Republic* 60 (28 August 1929): 52.


“Form and the Novel.” *Bookman* 70 (October 1929): 128.


“Mobile Camera.” *New Republic* 60 (30 October 1929): 298-299


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1930


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“Big, Little, and Good Shows.” *New Republic* 64 (5 November 1930): 323-324.


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*Love of Two Oranges.* Unpublished MSS. Dorothy Lockhardt papers. 1931.


1932


“True to Type.” New York Evening Journal, 15 March 1932: 17


“Industrial Design.” *Saturday Evening Post* 204 (28 May 1932): 34.

“True to Type.” *New York Evening Journal*, 31 May 1932: 17

“True to Type.” *New York Evening Journal*, 2 June 1932: 13


“Tramps—Are We?—Abroad.” *Saturday Evening Post* 204 (11 June 1932): 65.


“True to Type.” *New York Evening Journal*, 22 June 1932: 13


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“Have Americans Lost Their Nerve?” Scribner’s 92 (September 1932): 149-152.

“True to Type.” New York Evening Journal, 1 September 1932: 12.

“True to Type.” New York Evening Journal, 3 September 1932: 15.


“True to Type.” New York Evening Journal, 8 November 1932: 5.

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“True to Type.” New York Evening Journal, 10 November 1932: 15.


1933


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“Sugar and Spice and Not So Nice.” Esquire 1 (March 1934): 60, 120.


“Men are Funny.” Esquire 1 (May 1934): 48, 121.


“True to Type.” New York Evening Journal, 8 May 1934: 19.


“Stage Door Johnny, Pro-Tem.” Esquire 2 (July 1934): 134.

“Was Ring Lardner a Humorist?” Esquire 2 (July 1934): 44.


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“Stage Door Johnny, Pro-Tem.” *Esquire* 2 (September 1934): 137.


“Is Sport an Art or an Orgy”? *Esquire* 2 (December 1934): 71, 144.


1935


“Professor, I’m Through.” *Esquire* 3 (February 1935): 64.


“Advertisement for Angna.” *Esquire* 3 (March 1935): 78.


“Also Selected Shorts Subjects.” *Esquire* 4 (October 1935): 86.

“They Did It For Money.” *Saturday Evening Post* 208 (12 October 1935): 16-17, 94, 98.

“No Decameron?” *Publisher’s Weekly* 128 (19 October 1935): 1460.


“Production No. 5.” *Esquire* 4 (November 1935): 94.


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“To Hell, in a Word, with Art.” *Esquire* 5 (January 1936): 94.


“Before It’s Too Late.” *Esquire* 5 (March 1936): 72.


“Over the Tops.” *Saturday Evening Post* 208 (25 April 1936): 85.


“Buckshot and Beauty.” *Esquire* 5 (June 1936): 89.


“Bing Crosby, Marcel Proust….and Others.” *Scribner’s* 100 (October 1936): 78-79.


“No More Swing?” *Scribner’s* 110 (November 1936): 70.


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“Rabbi Ben Advertise.” *Esquire* 7 (March 1937): 85, 137.


“Your Money and Your Life.” *Saturday Evening Post* 209 (22 May 1937): 27+.

“Apology to Crooners.” *Esquire* 7 (June 1937): 103, 168.

“People and the Arts.” *Scribner’s* 101 (June 1937): 61-62, 64.


“No Art, Mr. Disney?” *Esquire* 8 (September 1937): 91, 171-172.

“The People and the Arts.” *Scribner’s* 102 (September 1937): 63-64.


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“Don’t Tread on Me!” *Esquire* 9 (February 1938): 75, 126.


“From Chicken Shack to Casino.” *Esquire* 9 (March 1938): 75, 135.


“The People and the Arts.” *Scribner’s* 103 (May 1938): 63-64.

“So They Got a Plot.” *Esquire* 9 (May 1938): 78, 138.


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“The Best Pictures of Last Tuesday.” *Esquire* 10 (August 1938): 72, 90.

“First Aid to Producers.” *Esquire* 10 (September 1938): 89, 134.


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“Ten Cents from Times Square.” *Esquire* 12 (September 1939): 75.

“Fun for One and All.” *Esquire* 12 (October 1939): 65, 146.


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“After All These Years.” *Esquire* 13 (January 1940): 70, 165.

“Tots Save the Show.” *Esquire* 13 (February 1940): 75, 99.

“A Chance to Make Money.” *Esquire* 13 (March 1940): 65

“Mr. Abbott and Mr. Costello.” *Esquire* 13 (April 1940): 80, 156, 157.

“Poets Can Learn from Acrobats.” *Esquire* 13 (May 1940): 140.

“Television in Education.” *Education* 60 (June 1940): 653-655.

“Who’s Running Away?” *Esquire* 13 (June 1940): 92, 156.


“Mr. Garner and Thelma Oonk.” *Esquire* 14 (September 1940): 79, 161.

“Composer with a Light Touch.” *Esquire* 14 (October 1940): 85, 156.

“And Twice as Natural.” *Esquire* 14 (November 1940): 84, 156.

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“Retreat from the Undecorated Age.” *Esquire* 15 (April 1941): 72, 144, 146.


“This Can’t Be Corn.” *Esquire* 16 (October 1941): 51, 160.

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“Cartoonists’ Ups and Downs.” *Esquire* 16 (December 1941): 143, 281.

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“What Every Woman Hater Knows.” *Esquire* 17 (June 1942): 54, 164.


“Highbrows Hate Sport.” *Esquire* 18 (September 1942): 65.

“Not Quite Beyond Recall.” *Esquire* 18 (September 1942): 49.


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1944

“Esquire on the Record.” Esquire 21 (January 1944): 140.

“Sing Us a New Song.” Esquire 21 (January 1944): 88.


“Singing and Dancing and Fun.” Esquire 21 (March 1944): 70.


“Mr. Seldes on ‘Bias’ and ‘Opinion.’” New York Times, 23 April 1944, p. 28.


“Great Big Beautiful Thoughts.” Esquire 21 (May 1944): 92, 156.


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“Should the Movies Tell?” *Esquire* 23 (January 1945): 105, 122.


“The Old Hokum Bucket.” *Esquire* 23 (February 1945): 68.


“Miss West and Mr. Proust.” *Esquire* 23 (April 1945): 75.


“How to Laugh on the Air.” *Esquire* 23 (May 1945): 88, 156.

“Esquire on the Record.” *Esquire* 23 (June 1945): 122.

“MacLeish: Minister of Culture.” *Esquire* 23 (June 1945): 103.


“Sam Goldwyn and the Movies.” *Esquire* 24 (September 1945): 60, 151-152.


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“How Dense is the Mass?” *Atlantic* 182 (November 1948): 25, 27.

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“The Lively Arts.” *Park East* (June 1951): 42.


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“Mr. Elmer Davis.” *Saturday Review of Literature* 36 (4 April 1953): 44-45.


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1959

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1960


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1962


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APPENDIX C

REVIEWS OF WORK BY CONSTANCE ROURKE
Reviews of Work by Constance Rourke

Trumpets of Jubilee (1927)


Review of Trumpets of Jubilee. Cleveland Open Shelf. (September 1927): 110


Schriftgiesser, K. Review of Trumpets of Jubilee. Boston Transcript, 7 May 1927, p. 5. 300


**Troupers of the Gold Coast (1928)**


**American Humor (1931)**


*Davy Crockett* (1934)


**Audubon (1936)**


Review of *Audubon. Springfield Republican*, 1 November 1936, p. 7E.


Charles Sheeler (1938)

Roots of American Culture (1942)


APPENDIX D

REVIEWS OF WORK BY GILBERT SELDES
Reviews of Work by Gilbert Seldes

*Seven Lively Arts* (1924)


Bell, Clive. Review of *Seven Lively Arts. New Republic* (30 April 1924): 263.

- - - - . Review of *Seven Lively Arts. Nation and Atheneum*. 35 (10 May 1924): 179.


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Review of *This is New York*. *Springfield Republican*, 19 September 1934, p. 10.

**Mainland (1937)**


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**The Public Arts (1956)**


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APPENDIX E

WORKS ABOUT CONSTANCE ROURKE
Works About Constance Rourke

(listed alphabetically by author)


Obituaries

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*Nation* 152 (29 March 1941): 368.


*Publishers Weekly* 139 (5 April 1941): 1467


APPENDIX F

WORKS ABOUT GILBERT SELDES
Works About Gilbert Seldes

(listed alphabetically by author)


Obituaries

New York Morning Telegraph (1 October 1970)


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Bernard De Voto papers. Special Collections.

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Autograph file, Constance Rourke.
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**Dissertations**


