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INTRODUCTION

THE SOPHISTICATION GAME

THIS IS how the "sophisticated" talk about sophistication: they don't. The first rule of the game. When the topic comes up, one meets blankness, denial, or a request to change the subject. When I asked Robert Gottlieb, the former editor of *The New Yorker*, author of books on ballet as well as on Greta Garbo and Sarah Bernhardt, and once head of the esteemed publishing firm Alfred A. Knopf, about sophistication, he dismissed it, had nothing to say about it. His friend Janet Malcolm exhibited equal bafflement. The most Gottlieb would concede of a famously sophisticated personage and good friend of his—Irene Mayer Selznick—was that she was "classy." When his interlocutor presented him with Kenneth Tynan's verdict—that American sophistication is an oxymoron—he agreed. Sophistication is Noel Coward, Gottlieb added, a British thing. But one might reply—*l'esprit de l'escalier*—there are *kinds* of "British things." More in the flamboyant mode of Oscar Wilde than of the cool Coward with his "mask of amused indifference," Tynan was an English bon vivant, drama critic, and essayist; in the spartan postwar 1940s at Magdalen College, Oxford, his rooms were a floor above where Wilde lived in the 1870s (Tynan, *Sound*, 60). Tynan wore a mink tie, noting, "It looks like a raccoon at my jugular; people ask me, 'who's your friend?'" (Kathleen Tynan, 152).

The American Way

The saucy Tynan's rendition of the "game" is English condescension. In 1971, Tynan wrote,

> American talent does not survive sophistication. It needs to preserve a certain *naivete*, a hayseed element, even a touch of the child, and the primitive,

> if it is to retain its juice & energy. This is true of Huckleberry Finn, of Scott Fitzgerald (always an outsider in Paris & the Cote D'Azur), of [Ernest] Hemingway (with the boyish braggarty of his virility cult), of the *out-of-towners* who founded and wrote for *The New Yorker* [Harold Ross et al.], of Ring Lardner's ingrained & obsessive provincialisms, of Whitman, Sherwood Anderson, Runyon, John Ford. . . . When urban sophistication lays its hands on the American artist, it is like frost on a bud. . . . When US talent goes elegant, NY really becomes . . . a "road-company Europe." Exception: Cole Porter is about the only one I can think of. (*Diaries*, 74)

"Hayseed" "American talent" seems to suffer the effects of the country's anti-intellectualism—a chronic condition hard to separate from a consideration of American sophistication. When we ponder why in America, sophistication is "frost on the bud," the most obvious suspect is our native Puritanism. Its unease with and suspicion of art—indeed with subjectivity unregulated by biblical precedent—encouraged a "plain style" that by the late nineteenth century, helped inspire the reign of literary "realism," a genre that has often minimized artifice and maximized fidelity to facts.[1] H. L. Mencken, the most influential critic of the 1920s, made "the Puritan" his all-purpose epithet to describe American culture's obedience to "Boston notions of English notions of what is nice" (*Smart Set*, 6).

And yet Tynan's breezy remarks put their finger on something important: sophistication is not native to our shores. But this defining fact proves not what Tynan thinks it does: that the real American art is naive and primitive, a "bud" blighted—sophisticated—by pretensions to the urbane. In fact, American sophistication, I will argue, is compelling and distinctive not because of some original rustic purity that stubbornly persists even after losing its way in the big city but rather because from the start, it is mixed and improvised, shape-shifting—guilty and smooth, game and anxious, vulgar and poised. American sophistication possesses a knotty density that reflects the nation's dependence on and disdain for its British parent, importing its hierarchized manners while creating a democracy hostile to the very idea of manners. Hence there is an uncomfortably small distance here between manners and *being mannered*, with the latter an excess that is a must to avoid in America, as Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to observe (*Democracy*, 713). Or as a character in Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* puts it, "That's always the charge against a personal manner: if you've any at all people think you've too much" (154).

"Exception: Cole Porter." I concur with Tynan. The arena of popular song, the "great American songbook" of the postwar years (flourishing until the 1980s), is one of the few places—along with screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s—the magic world of Carole Lombard, Myrna Loy, and Barbara Stanwyck—where *being mannered*, style's "too-much"-ness, takes unapologetic command. Of scores of possibilities, let two suggest the wealth of inventiveness. "These Foolish Things (Remind Me of You)" is a song *about* a sophisticate in the aftermath of romance, and their reliance on restraint and reverie. Ella Fitzgerald's voice of Apollonian clarity renders even more piercing her memories of enchanted objects—be it a "cigarette that bears a lipstick's traces," a "tinkling piano in the next apartment," or "an airline ticket to romantic places." She imbues each absent thing with a halo of musing melancholy that in her live "scatting" Carnegie Hall version, turns into pain, loss, and even despair. Or recall the Dionysian four-octave grandeur of Sarah Vaughn in "My Funny Valentine," with her contralto soaring and dipping, her lower register transforming the familiar melody and lyrics of the Rodgers and Hart ballad into sonic drama as she "turns the bridge into an escalator-arpeggio, her voice beginning as a cello and ending as a flute," as critic Gary Giddins remarks. "Voluptuous virtuosity" indeed (299). They, Fitzgerald and Vaughn, are two of the "great italicizers; no phrase is left solely to its own devices," to borrow Glenn Gould's remark about Barbra Streisand's art of lush inflections.

The luxuriant, sensuous soundtrack of the "American Songbook" plays in ironic counterpoint to the monotone of the frugal gospel of American virtue, reminding us that ours is a land of straight talk, plain speaking, and the simple truth.[2] All of these qualities seemed embodied in "homespun"—the coarse and tasteless product of domestic labor—which became a useful symbol by the 1760s, with its spinners and wearers hailed as virtuous American patriots defiant of fashion, Europe, and luxury imports.[3] These foreign elements belong to the world of the sophisticate, and if this noun were not bad enough, consider the verb "to sophisticate": "to mix with some foreign or inferior substance," "to render impure," and "to render artificial, to deprive of simplicity, in respect of manners or ideas," reports the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*); and as noun, "sophistication": "the use or employment of sophistry . . . falsification; disingenuous alteration or perversion *of* something; conversion into some less genuine form."

Could one find a more concise summary of a demon seed ready to breed chaos in nature's nation? The sophisticated smile at such provincial asceticism. Only by the mid-nineteenth century does sophistication finally shed, though

never definitively, sophistry's fraudulence and deception, and instead acquire positive qualities. But the earliest positive use the *OED* lists—a sentence from Leigh Hunt's *Autobiography*: "A people who . . . preserve in the very midst of their sophistication a frankness distinct from it"—is full of ambivalence. This debut sentence suggests the indelible stain of sophistication.[4] Indelible, that is, from the perspective of Christian doctrine, which sanctifies private conscience, opposing the treachery of appearances to the transparency of being. Sophistication is always on the side of appearances, the realm of masks and deception that in light of the Christian assumption, hides true causes, intentions, and goals (Starobinski, "The Motto," 368).

By 1850 appears "the quality or fact of being sophisticated; especially (a) worldly wisdom or experience; subtlety, discrimination, refinement; (b) knowledge, expertise, in some technical subject." But here "it is not so much that the meaning of the term shifts from negative to positive as that the negative meaning *persists within* the positive, with the result that even the most celebratory invocations of sophistication as worldliness remain haunted by the guilty sense of sophistication as a deviation from, even a crime against, nature," as Joseph Litvak observes (*Strange*, 4). This makes sophisticated behavior a threat to the trust that keeps taut the moral fabric of society and cements the normative expectancies that ensure social order.

Under permanent suspicion, sophistication never benefited from the upturn in historical fortunes enjoyed by another perennial byword for moral decay. "Luxury," from the Latin, "luxus," "effeminate sensuality, is a passion for splendor and pomp" that (according to a 1783 treatise) "softens the tough, makes cowards of the brave," invites doom, and was said to precipitate the decline and fall of empires. But by the mid-eighteenth century, thanks to the rise of the free market, luxury "underwent a radical transformation from generic vice to useful marketing tool of the new capitalism . . . a palpable virtue available to everyone everywhere" (Adams, *Luxury*, 143). Philosopher David Hume, in the next chapter, will be a key catalyst in conceptualizing the change. On its way up, luxury elevated consumption from a word suggesting a fatal wasting away (as in tuberculosis) to a means of social ascent, of living in fashion and style.

Sophistication remained stalled, in a famous case even flirting with inertia. George "Beau" Brummell, the legendary early nineteenth-century dandy—a "Regency buck" as the encyclopedias say—was famed for sitting, staring straight ahead, and asking his manservant to identify the man on either side of him because "the least deviation from that select posture was not to be supposed possible." Brummell's mockery of civility, wrote the critic William

Hazlitt, "preserved the perfection of an attitude—like a piece of incomprehensible *still-life*—the whole of dinnertime." Only the initiated should be able to discern and appreciate his rigorous display of indifference. Hazlitt found that "his jests hover on the very brink of vacancy. . . . It is impossible for anyone to go beyond him without falling into insignificance & insipidity; he has touched the *ne plus ultra* [nothing beyond] that divides the dandy from the dunce" (Hazlitt, 159–61). Reducing interaction to spectatorship, the Beau's mute tableau anticipates the chilly hauteur of the fashion model before the modern (postwar) era: "as vivacious as a marble statue and appealing as a mummy" (Sargeant). Hovering on "the brink of vacancy," Brummell offers nothing but "impertinence," which "does not rely on words to display itself," as Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly noted in 1845 in the first treatise on the dandy (Barbey, 115). At once indolent and insolent, the Beau flirts with a melancholy world-weariness, the flipside of worldliness; both will be basic moves in sophistication's stylistic repertoire.

Ease seems to congeal into rigidity in Brummell's cold opacity—typically British in its severe simplicity. The Frenchman Barbey d'Aurevilly detected a touch of "Puritanism" in the dandy type: "however well protected they are against it," they "inhale" its "ghastly germs" (114). This version of the "game"—sophistication as radical detachment or remoteness—will remain a marked aristocratic style. Virginia Woolf salutes it as liberating insouciance in "Am I a Snob?" but mocks it in her essay on Brummell: "Empires had risen and fallen while he experimented with the crease of a neck-cloth" (Woolf, *Common*, 151). Of blasé "old-money" aristocrats in America, the hard-charging parvenu says, "Their complacency is maddening" (Wecter, *Saga*, 10).

Sincere Actors

While the self-absorbed Beau ends up hollowing out sophistication, Hazlitt's emphasis that he seems as if a still life, nothing "behind" or "inside," catches something important: sophistication insists that being and appearing coincide.[5] We do not express sophistication; we appear sophisticated. To express, press out, implies something inside, a feeling, an emotion, that moves from inner to outer. "The expressiveness of an appearance, however," notes the political theorist Hannah Arendt, "is of a different order: it 'expresses' nothing but itself, that is, it exhibits or displays." "Expression," moreover, is "rooted in metaphysical assumptions and prejudices" that devalue the surface as merely "superficial." Yet we make our appearance "like actors on a stage"; the "urge

toward self-display" is "spontaneous," one we share with animals. "Seeming . . . is the mode . . . in which an appearing world is acknowledged" (Arendt, *Life*, 29–30, 21).

In this world of appearing and surface, sophistication makes insincerity irrelevant while redescribing sincerity as "sincere acting," to borrow a phrase from George Eliot. It concerns one of her characters, a professional actor in whom "all feeling . . . immediately became matter of conscious representation: experience immediately passed into drama, and she acted her own emotions," observes Eliot in *Daniel Deronda*, adding that "this is nothing uncommon" save its "rare perfection." "It would not be true to say that she felt less because of this double consciousness" (Eliot, 629). Given the distance that separates us, we rely on exterior signs to convey emotions to other people.[6] And given the need for emotions to be acted, to be represented as we face each other as actors and spectators, the sophisticated accept as a condition of social life the impossibility of knowing others' inner thoughts and feelings. Sincerity—"sincere acting"—lives *within* this theatrical frame, recognition of which requires a delicate "double consciousness." But in the United States, this subtle seeing often is trampled on in the imperative to absolutize sincerity—as if to dispel the shadow of counterfeit that inheres in "seeming" and its cohort—"acting," "role," "persona," and "appearance." This vocabulary gathers around the venerable trope *theatrum mundi* (all the world's a stage). The inscrutability of behavior in the public world flies in the face of our belief in an epistemological security that posits a ground of truth—immutable and transparent knowledge—on which we stand.

Does that make sophistication the province of ironists, of skeptics smugly deflating earnestness? Any answer needs to reckon with the widespread sense that our "epistemological security" noted above is a notion that by now sounds a bit quaint to postmodern ears, that seems more a frail, if useful, fiction than an actuality. In other words, many of us are ironists now, if not sophisticates; that is, we accept the "contingency" (things could always be otherwise) of our "most central beliefs and desires," as Richard Rorty influentially redescribed irony in 1989 (xv). This bit of contemporary knowingness—a mandate for irony itself immune to irony—is the catechism of left liberal intellectuals, who ignore it at the risk of naivete.[7] The ungrounded status of "security" extends to another foundational concept, the authentic (I am, for the sake of argument, conflating it here with sincerity), ripe for deflation. By now we "hold onto authenticity, but by letting the word betray itself," the writer Adam Phillips has noted. One demonstrates authenticity by acknowledging that "the

authentic is not the true or the real or the fundamental; it is the relinquishing of such possibilities" (Phillips, "Authenticity," 41–42). Which inevitably provokes a backlash to satisfy our cravings for what we've relinquished. So in the 1990s, for instance, "The New Sincerity" emerged—a still popular yearning that novelist David Foster Wallace influentially articulated.[8] As this back and forth suggests, there is no easy way to extinguish the lure of the sincere and authentic; they seem bound up, says Phillips with "keeping our passions alive," our belief—or assumption—that "our passionate selves are our most authentic selves" (42).

Busy interrogating and redescribing grounds and foundations, the vertiginous, hip, mocking "scare quote" regime of postmodernism keeps naivete at bay; to demystify is all. This is one reason it thrives in the anxious groves of academe, where "distrust" is the reigning "muse" (Chaouli, 29). But in vanquishing naivete, the postmodern encourages a self-conscious knowingness that kills sophistication. Which is to imply—and value—a moment of the naive or unguarded in sophistication. We will begin to recover the naive by contrasting it to the self-congratulatory assumption of being in the know, those who by surrounding themselves with the right "artistic objects," acquire a "thin measure of sophistication," as James Baldwin noted in 1959 (*Redemption*, 4). This glimpses "the culture vulture"—a term coined in 1945—a kind of vernacular American rendition of Friedrich Nietzsche's culture philistine who fetishizes possessiveness.[9] In the late 1950s, we find a political version—condescending white liberals whose complacency passes for moral wisdom about the "Negro problem." To their Black "friends," they counsel patience, taking the long view, asking the hated to "philosophize disgrace." We will be encountering these two types—culture vulture and liberal paternalist—in chapters 6 and 7.[10]

But acts of sophistication are not only static advertisements of superiority. At their most compelling they are active and undefended ventures, open rather than dependent on the already known, willing to "doubt and go astray," to be buffeted by assaults in the moment (Nietzsche, *Untimely*, 8). This describes sophistication as not simply attitude but experience. Ex*per*ience, as its root "per" suggests, doesn't become experience unless attended by some degree of *per*il and risk. In this book, I am most keen to examine these latter enactments of sophistication, which require a poise flexibly responsive to shifting currents in the present and the (appearance of) effortless élan of thinking on one's feet. "A remarkable combination . . . of casualness and majesty," as Leonard Bernstein said of John F. Kennedy.[11] That is why the rigid and humorless are out of

step, imposing heaviness when suppler, understated moves are needed. Unlike our European counterparts, American sophisticates rarely seem as impeccably smooth in their self-representation, not least because the Romantic urge to be assertively authentic is as if bred in our bones. The urge can be modified, ironized, but seldom eradicated. And this tension gives savor to sophistication American style.

Undoing "metaphysical hierarchy," thriving in the domain of *seeming*, where appearance and surface display are the rule, and the equivocal and shifting have the last (uncertain) word, sophistication is the shadow on the wall of Plato's cave without an original outside. Eventually, the shadow on the wall would be replaced by the image on a screen; the sophisticate's poise appears before us in "radiantly shallow perfection," as Pauline Kael said of "an ideal of sophistication forever," Cary Grant: "That was all we wanted of him. . . . We didn't want depth from him" (Kael, 498–99). Or in Nick Carraway's famous words in *The Great Gatsby*: personality is "an unbroken series of successful gestures."

This book will bring out our anxious American sophistication, a richly complicated dimension of our cultural and personal conduct that has rarely, if ever, been examined directly. Perhaps because sophistication arouses in many of us anxieties that are tangled in matters of class, taste, and aspiration. And hypocrisy. Most Americans seem unsettled by the very notion of sophistication and may wonder, Am I sophisticated? I hope not, I hope so. Am I too sophisticated, unsophisticated? With our devotion to sincerity and plain dealing, we are suspicious of sophistication's playfulness and ease; it has always grated on a national nerve, at times fomenting political rage against elites. The sophisticate, frequently made synonymous with the snob, usually functions as grist in the mills of polemicists and moralists of all stripes, flattened into unsavory caricatures used as handy grenades in endless culture wars. The topic, once when pauses to think about it, always seems timely.

Usually sophistication is approached only glancingly by way of familiar topics such as manners or taste, sociability or social class.[12] Although I will be delving into its ethical ambiguities, my primary aim is to describe how it works. A new story this book tells is how the United States came to devise a homegrown nonchalance by turning native anxiety about style and elegance into a shaping force in our manners. The paucity of direct engagements with American sophistication is not, I argue, a sign of its insignificance but rather the opposite: its status as a national oxymoron, a standing embarrassment, with its aura of unpleasantly un-American notions of classism and elitism.[13]

So American sophistication has been stranded in plain sight, an empty phrase too often filled by a parade of stock characters and stereotypes—the kind of snide stuffed shirts, pompous dowagers, and pale gentile manikins supplied by central casting that Groucho Marx and company delightedly tore down in film after film.[14]

It might be that the sophisticated are different from most of us. Perhaps they have more money? There is no denying that the capacity and opportunity to exhibit ease is a class privilege; ease requires economic ease, and the freedom to defer the pressure of practical ends and develop, say, an eye for aesthetic nuance, which is a useful tool in achieving social ascent. Starting in sixteenth-century England, the template of the gentleman was centered on honor—a moral imperative of valor, prudence, and trustworthiness—grounded in disinterestedness. This quality was, in turn, founded on an idleness that meant freedom from a constrained life of dependency with its risk of servility.[15] But democracy revised this class privilege, severing gentlemen from honorable idleness and building movement into the very name; "gentleman" in America "point[s] at original energy . . . working after untaught methods" (Emerson, *Essays*, 515). The leap of transition, with no patience to stand on ceremony, is a quintessential American move. By the twentieth century, the equation of ease and economic ease is hardly an iron rule on either side of the Atlantic, for it ignores the upward class ascent of a number of famous figures, starting with Coward, Grant, and Fred Astaire, followed decades later by, for instance, Susan Sontag, Frank O'Hara, Baldwin, Cassius Clay, and Streisand. For the sophisticated, performance more than pedigree counts. Which puts sophistication improbably but squarely in the meritocratic American grain.

In an important sense, sophistication is an impossible scholarly project. To even call attention to it violates its nonchalant spirit. "You are not well dressed, but either too stiff, too tight, or too fashionable," remarked Brummell of the male dandy who makes an impression. Too sprawling, amorphous, pervasive, elusive, and indifferent to geographic boundaries, sophistication defies strict definition. Though often regarded as chilly, it has no preordained affect, does not taboo warmth (Bernstein's natural element) and joy (recall the many photographs of Charles and Ray Eames, the cutting-edge midcentury furniture designers, displaying their latest work).

More than most topics, sophistication is difficult to assess save through the analyst's subjective, indeed idiosyncratic lens. But not completely subjective, since as an American literature scholar, I am drawn to certain motifs, patterns, sources, or approaches distinct from what impels historians, say, or

anthropologists or sociologists. Given the human capacity for scene making, sophisticated performances are found in life and art, and indeed reveal the art of life; it is hard neatly to separate the two domains. Sophistication reminds us that unyielding distinctions are rare here; lacking traditional hierarchy, American surfaces have been slippery from the start. Unsurprising, then, will be the fact that though the majority of my examples will draw from "life," the claims of "art" will also be heard. Characters in novels, like people in life, are enmeshed in dramas of the everyday; they survive, prevail and enjoy by riffing on (and at times contriving) manners and masks, each in their own idiom. "And they called it our home," writes John Ashbery in the epigraph to this book of the panoply of living things driven by the urge to display, "calling attention to themselves" by simply doing what comes naturally—exploiting every "artifice."

To impose order, I have followed the advice of James: "The *whole* of anything is never told," he says; "you can only take what groups together" (*Notebooks*, 18). The present work seeks the "unity" (James) of what groups together—a unity that will be more variegated and wayward than seamlessly integrated. Hence the introduction functions as a kind of overture featuring an array of scenes and figures—snapshots of sophistication—untethered to chronology. Some of these figures—Wilde, Sontag, and Ralph Ellison, for instance—will serve as the book's leitmotifs or through lines. I value literary/cultural criticism that induces a certain sense of surprise via fresh juxtapositions and shifts of perspective, that asks the reader to be "game"—flexible—the better to be open to an aesthetic experience. While largely confining itself to the United States, the book tries to evoke something of the unexpected range of uses to which sophistication has been put, and via a variety of examples and episodes, to impart a feeling for the mobility of the titular concept and its cognates (style, manners, elegance, ease, urbanity, the dandy, hip, cool, refinement, worldliness, theatricality, and one can add others; snobbery is not a cognate I will argue below). In the spirit of my subject's aversion to hurry and briskness, I hope to impart a taste as well for pausing to dilate on examples.

Sophistication in America tends to be a vexing subject, generating what I am calling the sophistication game, among whose rules, noted above, is disavowal and faux naivete. It is a "game" because it depends on playing with a paradox—a savviness to preserve the cherished illusion of innocence—that permits one to enjoy a guilty pleasure in artifice and style. Yet this very indirection only affirms the fun of playing. In other words, the former editor of *The*

New Yorker was playing the game—that is, was something other than sincere—in denying American sophistication. The following example reports on the game in action—one that moves from denial to its more complex forms.

Lunch at Barneys

Courtesy of *The New York Times*, perhaps the most attentive observer of the liberal intelligentsia's efforts at social art, we are at lunch with a photographer and filmmaker (white, female, fifty-two) who specializes in "the perils of capitalism." Her latest documentary examines the grotesque behaviors of the filthy rich—what she calls "the excess of the new American dream." *The New York Times* reporter notes that Lauren Greenfield, "America's foremost visual chronicler of the plutocracy, and those who hope to join its ranks," seems "determined not to absorb the aspirational codes she has spent her life decrypting." Over lunch in July 2018 at Fred's, on the top floor of (the late) Barneys New York (not her preferred location), she ordered a salad with canned tuna in lieu of fresh. She dressed straightforwardly in a black T-shirt, her Gucci eyeglasses the only suggestion of status. When the salad arrived, Greenfield apologized and "used her fingers to flick a garnish of raw onions directly onto the table" (quoted in Soller).

As one of contemporary culture's most artful and relentless producers of status anxiety, the newspaper of record dangles some red meat—orgiastic wealth—then waits and sees if we, and the "chronicler," will be caught acting elitist or superior, envious or disgusted. Staging an elaborate game of social signaling, the reporter invites Greenfield to a chic restaurant at a famously trendy store. The reporter waits to see just how his subject will react. Will she take the bait and be too comfortable at this swank locale, and hence too cozy with, meaning insufficiently distant from, the ostentatious wealth she has become famous for showing us? The parenthetical protest ("not her idea she'd like to note"), the canned tuna and black T-shirt, furnish her answer, the perfect props of a requisite humility.[16] Not to mention the down-home gesture of using her fingers—a self-aware indifference to manners. A bit of genius.

A dab of biography soon clinches the point. We are told that her mother refused to buy her brand-name clothes, valuing education instead. But this "ignited her obsession with 'materialism and class,' she said, 'because my parents had rejected it so much.'" Happily, her "obsession" took the form not of rampant or addictive consumption but instead eventually making it her subject. Spending her junior year at Harvard "traveling around the world studying

film and anthropology," she returned to school deciding to major in visual studies. After training under a mentor who had published a photographic monograph on East Coast elites, her course was set. In short, she is one of us, blessed with the credentialed smoothness of the professional managerial class.

The gambit within the setup lunch is nothing less than an inquiry into sophistication. Who possesses it? What constitutes it? We, the eavesdropping reader, are under scrutiny as much as the filmmaker is. We are curious, but careful not to be too curious—we don't read *People* magazine, save in the dentist's office—about the trashy doings of some of our lavishly acquisitive compatriots. *The New York Times* lunch asks implicitly if we, and Greenfield, who specializes in shooting gross plutocrats, are immune to vulgarity. Her deft signaling affirms immunity. And one testament to her sophistication is that the very notion of being immune is way too simple; it will need revision in light of Greenfield's ease with a humbling "complicity." She acknowledges that "'we're all engaged . . . in wanting a little bit more," and adds that her own "complicity" consists in a workaholism that has angered her children. So not immune,indeed addicted, but not, like her subjects, to avarice; addicted instead to shooting the "truth," as a subject of her photography admits. And her knack for signaling humility extends to intellectual matters. She is well aware, we are told, of the unoriginality of her thesis that the current "unceasing pursuit of fame and fortune" has replaced the Horatio Alger bootstrap ethos. She quotes Fran Lebowitz, one of those who said it earlier: "Oh please, Americans do not hate the rich; they want to be them. Every American believes that they are the impending rich, and that will never change."

With this stroke of hard, demystifying truth now on the table, all of us—reporter, subject, and reader—can relax and enjoy lunch at Fred's, for we have achieved what has been at stake from the start: our precious shared goal of disabused *knowingness* and *taste*. We can raise the banner that declares we are endowed with nuance—the capacity to make the right distinctions. We can have it all: enjoy comfortable distance from the doings of the vulgarly rich and linger over brash images of their profligate ways, while also cheerfully granting our complicity as we affirm our distinction. Game, set, match.

Virginia Carelessness

Having grown up as (battered) believers in democratic equality as well as children of Puritan forebearers who counseled humility and the "plain style" (itself a complex artifact), we remain wary of sophistication even as we enact

it. In the very care we take choosing our plain-speaking signifiers—canned tuna and black T-shirt—we advertise our goal: to be naturally, unostentatiously—sophisticated. That was the antistyle of that "natural aristocrat" Thomas Jefferson. In his day, they called it "Virginia carelessness." "He had nothing of that firm collected deportment which I expected," noted a senator (quoted in H. Adams, 550, 126). Jefferson's "rambling" manner resonated with *sprezzatura*—the nonchalance mixed with disdain that sixteenth-century Italian courtiers studiously acquired—which remains the ideal of the American sophisticate.[17] Daring to mix a casualness flirting with vulgarity into his self-representation, Jefferson would prove a keynote of American sophistication. Trespassing against Puritan discipline and British formality, American "style has everything to do with excess—even when its excesses are those of austerity or self-denial," for it expresses "the wish to exceed and confound expectations," to borrow Lisa Cohen's words about style in general (L. Cohen, 6).

Sophistication is without a sell-by date; its quality of unrehearsed finesse remains transhistorical while always being revised into new shapes in response to new contexts. It can become a civic ideal able to discern new possibilities by refusing refuge in the already known and one straight path; its ease with pausing to experiment rather than pursuing an agenda makes it responsive in and to the historical moment, instigating reverberant change hitherto unforeseen.

Sophisticates Land in Houston

These elements came into play at a fraught moment: the emergency escape from Nazi-invaded Paris to Houston, Texas, in the early 1940s of Jean de Menil (anglicized to John) and his wife, Dominique, née Schlumberger, heiress to the transnational oil consulting corporation founded by her father. One of the most consequential acts of transatlantic elite migration, this unique example of improvising in desert places is worth pausing over, not least for a glimpse at how sophistication, even at its most rarefied, is able to bring aesthetics and politics together to make a difference. Houston, the US headquarters of Schlumberger, whose postwar expansion John would lead (ultimately becoming chair of the board) made sense as a stopgap move. But the couple decided to stay, shocking most of their friends and family. As they responded to their adopted land's frontier possibilities, stimulated by the very nullity around them, their European sensibilities acquired an American audacity; they would fill the blank slate with art. And politics. African sculpture, Byzantine frescoes,

surrealism, cubism, and abstract expressionism—and social activism for progressive left causes, especially race relations. In segregated, proudly racist Houston, there was scant encouragement for such ventures. The de Menils mentored the careers of several local Black activists and politicians.

Over four decades, Dominique—John died in 1973—amassed one of the great comprehensive art and sculpture collections while making major gifts to the Pompidou Center in Paris and New York's Museum of Modern Art and Dia Foundation. Gradually they turned their adopted hometown, hitherto a cultural backwater, into an outpost of cultural grandeur open to all. Comprising the de Menil art complex is the ecumenical sacred space Rothko Chapel (1971), eventually a hub of human rights advocacy, and the Menil Collection (1987), the museum built by Renzo Piano, including his galleries devoted to Cy Twombly (1995) and Dan Flavin (1998).

Grandeur may be the cumulative effect of this enclave, but "grandeur" is not a de Menil word. It lacks the tensions of paradox and the risk of the unexpected that animate their taste, starting with the decision to make Houston home. "Opulence denied" was one description of the low-to-the-ground, two-story white-steel-and-glass structure Piano built to reflect Dominique's double directive: "small on the outside but big on the inside"—with "big" housing over ten thousand artifacts (quoted in Middleton, 9). This restraint, so glaring amid the braggadocio native to Texas, was grounded in a personal modesty and simplicity Dominique never talked about yet lived; "sharing silence" was "the essence of what happened," as Piano said of their work together (quoted in Middleton, 365). In converting to her husband's Catholic faith, Protestant Dominique softened the asceticism she had grown up with amid a family skepticism of art as frivolous.

They would eventually focus on promoting dialogue between avant-garde modernism and religious experience, and how to reconcile the secular with the sacred and primitive. Solemnity and sublimity—the late, dark canvases of Mark Rothko, say—were only one strand of her taste; she also relished what the 1950s' art world largely ignored: the cool, disturbing wit of surrealists Max Ernst, Rene Magritte, and Marcel Duchamp, all of whom became friends of the couple and visitors to Houston, as did Andy Warhol. Her handpicked curator was Walter Hopps, since the late 1950s, an exuberant West Coast champion of the avant-garde, mounting groundbreaking shows on Warhol, Joseph Cornell, Duchamp, and Robert Rauschenberg. In approaching modern art as spiritually nourishing, the de Menils might make cool sophisticates squirm (in 1979, Rosalind Krauss said one is embarrassed "to mention *art* and *spirit* in the same

sentence"), but they were grasping affinities few had perceived (quoted in Dohoney, 3). Early on, for example, they were absorbed in the Catholic quality of Warhol's death-ridden images. The de Menils were trusting their developing aesthetic sensibility as an intuitive force unintimidated by received opinion. The unpredictable quality of their aesthetic sensibility defies simple definition and is not meant to add up in any obvious way; "the minute it's too easy you have to find something else," noted Dominique (quoted in Middleton, 341).

Consider perhaps the most dramatic instance of de Menil taste. After a young Philip Johnson built their low-roofed brick-and-glass Houston residence in 1948 and was eager to do the interiors in the same coldly rationalist style of his master Mies van der Rohe, John and Dominique balked. They infuriated Johnson by turning a startling 180 degrees into the arms of Anglo-American haute couturier Charles James. John, with his love of the "dangerous" idea, wanted the dress designer, a favorite of Dominique's, to try his hand at interior decoration (quoted in Middleton, 334). Invariably labeled a genius and holy terror for his high-strung perfectionism, luxurious fabrics, and intricacy of construction (Salvador Dalí called a 1937 white satin, down-filled evening jacket by James the first piece of soft sculpture), James was always going bankrupt, indifferent to his clients' and his own budgets. James came to Houston and replaced Johnson's straight lines with sensual curves, raised the ceiling, and added antique sofas and chairs along with a large Steinway (for its curves; no one played it) (Middleton, 315). With their pleasure in the unexpected and difficult, the de Menils loved James's interior. And they respected the feisty designer's trust in his own need for "confrontation, opposition, in order to give the best of himself" (quoted in Middleton, 318).

Art is "part of our life, our emotions and our delights. It can be deeply moving but never stuffy," said John (quoted in Middleton, 2). The "stuffy" had no chance against the couple's relish of the energy and excitement of cutting against the grain. John's buoyant stance was a legacy to Dominique. She remained in Houston, and it turned out to be the perfect partner to play against; in regard to the museum's construction, Renzo Piano recalled, "We were pleased to do something so magical, so quiet, so spiritual in the middle of the city of Houston . . . a symbol of growth. Power; money; building . . . taller, bigger, stronger! It was rebellious to work on so spiritual a job. It was small, simple and low, modest in size and modest in scale, yet so strong and powerful in spirit" (quoted in Middleton, 574). The de Menils were calm, venturesome, and receptive to transport; as if by a revelation "to be shaken into seeing and hearing that which we have not seen or heard before," is how Dominique

described the visceral impact of the spiritual and aesthetic sublime (quoted in Dohoney, 168).

The fixed point of their ceaseless activity—purchased with many tens of millions of dollars reaped from a petroleum multinational—was perhaps a redemptive one—to recover what Dominique regarded as the "essential"—having visitors sit and ponder the mystery of transcendent beauty, both for its own sake and to intuit how art and aesthetic experience model a colorblind, democratic inclusiveness.[18] This contemplative moment is in touch with the simple fantasy at the heart of sophistication—banishing labor for ease. A place apart for this aesthetic ideal is necessary to spare it the burden of cultural, theological suspicions.

Nothing that appears labored can be sophisticated, though an exception is the slight imperfections that attest to *hand*crafted high fashion where "the signature of painstaking labor must be legible to the discerning."[19] Like inherited wealth, wholly unearned, the abstention from labor (the privilege of idle rich aristocrats) offends in a culture where "dignity of labor" is still a revered ideal and bulwark of masculinity.[20] On both accounts—abstention and dignity—sophistication offends. Saddled with the scent of British decadence, the word has never entered the literary critical lexicon. Indeed, it has never been a contender, and likely will remain outside. The skittishness surrounding an acknowledgment of sophistication—a word that dare not speak its name too loudly—makes it a taboo far more enduring than same-sex love. Often, although certainly not always, it has been used as a silent synonym for homosexual. Listen to contemporary American poet and essayist Douglas Crase in his 2004 memoir of the mid-twentieth-century botanist/aesthetes Dwight Ripley and Rupert Barneby. They launched their pursuit of "plants in the North American desert" from what he—Crase—calls an "improbably sophisticated base":

> The baroque furnishings of Rupert's loft, the Surrealist paintings, the books in too many languages and especially those in English—not so much [W. H.] Auden and [Christopher] Isherwood, but [Ronald] Firbank and [Baron] Corvo, the three Sitwells, the whole privileged cohort of Harold Acton, Evelyn Waugh, Nancy Mitford, Henry Green and Anthony Powell—put me on guard. Prominent on one shelf was *Memoirs of an Aesthete*, perhaps the best known of Harold Acton's titles, which in those days stood out to me mainly for the awkward rhyme it cast from aesthete to effete, and which practically advertised that here was a library written by and for the frivolous, the highbrow, the undemocratic, and the epicene. (23)

Crase's version of the sophistication game is not dismissal but instead playing a kind of bemused Puritan visiting a den of iniquity (he may be "on guard," but knows enough about Acton to be discomfited). Though his unease speaks for itself, Crase also voices familiar American anxieties that "sophistication" triggers. From aesthete to effete is a short transit.

Camp in New York City

But something more than proximity to gayness charges the word with unease. When in "Notes on Camp" (1964) Sontag made public an open secret—that "homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard" of "Camp taste," and that the latter is "part of the history of snob taste"—what really struck a nerve was her candor about what this "taste" demands we abandon: "One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that 'sincerity' is not enough. Sincerity can be simple philistinism, intellectual narrowness" (*Essays*, 272). Such condescension to *the* sacred tenet of our national (moral) nature, our virtuous self-understanding, hurt, even as it was the basis of Sontag's sophistication. Accused of abusing high seriousness by taking the frivolous seriously, her deeper offense was rudeness toward sincerity.[21] Spending a few pages with Sontag and her tangled relation to sophistication will introduce us to some enduring paradoxes.

The American fear of aesthetic experience is not a "simple error," she says in "Against Interpretation," the title essay of her first collection, but "rooted in a passion, the passion of an entire culture" "pledged" to the "moral utility" of art; we ground our "ambivalence toward style" in "old ideas of truth, of moral rectitude, and also of naturalness," which reduce art to statement and conceptual knowledge (*Essays*, 24, 25, 28). Itself austere, imperious, and seductive, *Against Interpretation* embodies the American sophistication it hopes to see flourish. Holding "seriousness" sacred, Sontag described "the new sensibility" as "dedicated both to an excruciating seriousness and to fun and wit." Most readers, however, found "seriousness" more palpable on the page than "fun" given her canon of saintly European male "exemplary sufferers" who scorned "sanity" as bourgeois (*Essays*, 285, 47). To say that the book catapulted Sontag to global fame as an—soon *the*—American icon of sophisticated sensibility is to state a commonplace. She was featured in *Vogue*, and photographed by Irving Penn in 1966 and the year before by Diane Arbus for *Esquire*. By 1967, *The New York Times* declared, "Everyone knows who she is. . . . One need not have read her books, nor even heard of *Partisan Review*. The daily press, *Vogue*, *Time*, *Life*, the *Atlantic Monthly* have conspired to project an image: she writes,

she is uncommonly brainy and darkly beautiful, smart enough to tell America off and glamorous enough to make America like it." Noting she was reaping the rewards of an "establishment" while also "damning" it, *The Times* called this "the great American sport: have it and eat it too" (Heilbrun). This is the double move of entitlement—to proclaim and disavow—that we will see has long been animating American sophisticates.

What also makes her "Notes on Camp" especially American is Sontag's awareness of how social class and the exercise of taste connect; since "no authentic aristocrats in the old [European] sense exist today to sponsor special tastes," support must come from an "improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves aristocrats of taste" (*Essays*, 272).[22] Behind this statement is a biographical and historical resonance—her own achievement of intellectual stature reaffirms the Jeffersonian ideal of a self-constituting "natural aristocracy" whose members are identified—"raked from the rubbish annually," in Jefferson's notorious phrase, by competitive exams that send them to elite public institutions of higher learning (Jefferson, 272). Undistinguished by money or family, Sontag lived a "desert childhood" in Arizona and California, a "self-elected" sophisticate, the product of American public education—North Hollywood High and a semester at the University of California at Berkeley (before transferring to the University of Chicago). Sontag's view of camp joins democracy and aristocracy; its premise of the "equivalence of all objects" breathes "democratic *esprit*," and ultimately, camp is a testament, she insists, not to homosexuality but instead to the fact that the "aristocratic posture with relation to culture cannot die" (*Essays*, 273).[23]

Although a coterie topic by a thirty-one-year-old coterie author, appearing in *Partisan Review*, the little magazine of the New York intellectuals, "Notes on Camp" soon went mainstream when *Time* summarized her essay. The magazine coyly concluded, "And if this somehow suggests homosexuality, Miss Sontag is not one to deny it" (*Time*, "Modern Living"). The ambiguity around "this" and "it" gave a frisson of intrigue and scandal: Was *she* "it"? Add to this her severe beauty's affinity for the camera and her declamatory prose—a natural aristocrat's style, which can't be bothered to stoop to the labor of argument. The combination proved irresistible, inciting delirious free association: "When I first began reading about Susan Sontag I thought: My God, she *is* Marilyn Monroe, [their shared alliterative initials had evidently been commented on in the press] beautiful, doomed, successful," gushed Professor Carolyn Heilbrun in the 1967 *New York Times* article. It was not the first time Sontag ignited

free-floating fantasy. Joseph Cornell had already elected her as a muse, devoting several collages and boxes to her in the early 1960s.

"A variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it" is how Sontag introduces "Notes on Camp"; they both love "the unnatural . . . artifice" and the "theatricalization of experience," and each "incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy" (*Essays*, 259, 270). By now, six decades after her essay, camp's putting the world in scare quotes is mainstream, the wink of knowingness that cues others that one is savvy. But Sontag's essay proceeds not by winks to the cognoscenti but rather via a manifesto-like didacticism, instructing the un-campy to become comfortable with taste by first understanding that it is not "purely subjective" and corrected by "reason." "To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free—as opposed to rote—human response." "These are grave matters," she warns. Yet ambivalence defines Sontag's attitude: "I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended" (*Essays*, 259). We know now that behind her careful signaling of distance toward homosexual taste was more displacement; she kept her own homosexuality closeted for a number of reasons, not least because she wished to maintain legal custody of her son.[24]

Sontag's unease with camp acknowledges that "it's embarrassing to be solemn and treatise-like about Camp" for then one runs the risk of producing camp. (Her phrase "grave matters" above points in that direction.) This worry, doubtless sincere since she was not known for a sense of humor, concludes her prologue. She then adds a new paragraph of six words: "These notes are for Oscar Wilde" (*Essays*, 260). This dedication, in close proximity to her concern, crystallizes an implicit discordancy: an earnest apostle of "the frivolous"—"I was filled with evangelical zeal," she described herself years later—Sontag aligns herself with the lightness of Wilde. The irony of the juxtaposition exposes her absence of irony: on one side is the American missionary of and for sophistication, and on the other, the European apostle of playful campiness, enemy of the imperious. As he made his way across America in 1882, the young Wilde would be interviewed at each stop as he typically lounged indolently with his Turkish cigarettes, bearskin rug, velvet suit, and slippers embossed with golden sunflowers. The distance between solemn Sontag and relaxed Wilde is emblematic of a perennial dilemma of American sophistication: its belatedness can feed a defensive urgency to in effect catch up—an earnestness that plays havoc with sophistication's unhurried pace. Hence the sophisticate's reticence noted at the outset: it is better to wash one's hands of it—play dumb—than display earnestness.

Precarious Archive

There is a certain fragility built into the archive of sophistication—a point that James makes about "our social performances." In a preface, he observes, "We are condemned . . . whether we will or no, to abandon and outlive, to forget and disown and hand over to desolation [these performances] if only because the traces, records, connexions, the very memorials we would fain preserve, are practically impossible to rescue. . . . We give them up even when we wouldn't—it is not a question of choice" (*Novels*, 451). This ephemeralness acquires special poignance in the case of brilliant talkers, such as the "prolific conversation" of Esther Murphy, a well-connected literary figure of the 1920s who "produced a body of thought that was not and could not be worked out fully on paper," an "original voice that was at once alarmingly endless and bound to disappear," in the words of her biographer, Lisa Cohen. "Esther planned to write several biographies and had contracts from publishers to do so. Instead, she kept talking" (L. Cohen, 5, 144, 11).

An authoritative student of Louis XIV and his second, secret wife, Madame de Maintenon, Murphy would have known that the ephemeral and unsaid had its courtly uses. They helped to preserve the hermetic social codes of the drawing room, as historians of the *mondanité* of French court life stress.[25] François La Rochefoucauld, the seventeenth-century French moralist and master of the maxim, who served at the court of Versailles, "himself found it impossible to provide precise general definitions" of concepts such as taste, politeness, and gallantry, remarking, "Although several epithets for *esprit* [intelligence] appear to have the same meaning, the tone and the manner of pronouncing them makes the difference, but since tone and manner of speaking cannot be put on paper, I will not enter into details that it would be impossible to explain well" (quoted in Craveri, 46). Like James's acute awareness of the precarity of "social performances," La Rochefoucauld's sense of the resistance of tone and manner to being codified conditions the efforts of any study of sophistication.

Vigilant about privacy, James would have shuddered that so many not only would preserve but also profitably publish "memorials" of all sorts of "social performances." These acts of preservation are the basis of the present study: people and their behavior as represented, burnished, exposed, remembered, and misremembered in diaries, notebooks, letters, essays, journals, memoirs, biographies, oral histories, and newspapers. My twentieth-century archive includes, for example, Cecil Beaton, Ned Rorem, and Kenneth Tynan (diaries), Alfred Kazin and Edmund Wilson (notebooks), Albert Murray and

Ellison (letters and essays), Leo Lerman (journals), Virginia Woolf, Gore Vidal, Elizabeth Hardwick, Janet Malcolm, and Tom Wolfe, (essays), Irene Mayer Selznick, Anita Loos, Hilton Als, James McCourt, Mary McCarthy, Margo Jefferson, Muriel Draper, Virgil Thomson, Salka Viertel, Ben Sonnenberg, John Houseman, Michael J. Arlen, Darryl Pinckney, and Lincoln Kirstein (memoirs), Lisa Cohen and Francine du Plessix Gray (group biographies), and Jean Stein (oral narratives). These books afford precise, subtle textures of tone and manner, decor and clothing, furnishings and appurtenances, all summoning the presence of sophisticated behavior. Often revelatory are the small, fugitive details overlooked by more formal, sweeping history. Thomson, for instance, describes the "novel" "facial carriage" of Constance Askew, who with her husband, gallerist Kirk Askew, hosted an important New York cultural salon in the 1930s: "In a time when eyes still were tightly squinted and smiles were grins, Constance Askew's relaxed visage, as calm as that of Garbo, was deeply exciting to the young men of her generation" (*Virgil Thomson*, 215). All of these writers play their own versions of the sophistication game, and some would agree with Wolfe when he said in defense of his abundant notation of social detail, that it "comes from my belief that every conscious moment, except when we're in danger, we are thinking about our social status. . . . In my opinion the calculation never stops" (quoted in Green).

This book is comprised of the introduction, an interlude, and eight chapters. Save for the interlude, the chapters proceed chronologically. Here's a sketch of an itinerary. Chapter 1 starts with an overview of how the West's ambivalence about sophistication, with its roots in Platonic and Christian suspicions of classical rhetoric and sophistry, plays out in the New World. Two American founders, Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, themselves polymath cosmopolitans, inherited and revised the myth of the natural that animates a new Eden. A key source of the national fantasy was the romantic nature worship popularized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the eighteenth-century's most read author. He shared and shaped the rural-urban dichotomy so basic to Jefferson's dislike of cities and celebration of pastoral virtue. Providing a conceptual path to a more urbane direction was Rousseau's enemy and Franklin's friend Hume.

Chapter 2 tracks the journey of social manners from old-world aristocracy to American democracy. Ralph Waldo Emerson's mid-nineteenth-century esteem for casual skating on the surface of life offers an alternative to his contemporary Tocqueville's old-world pessimism about the fate of patrician manners in the New World. By midcentury, "cool" and the casual emerge,

eventually becoming enduring qualities of an American temper. Chapter 3 moves to the turn of the nineteenth century. Two self-styled immoralists, Wilde and Nietzsche, affirming Emerson's surfaces, are embraced by American readers and writers as harbingers of values and styles—indeed style itself as *the* preeminent value—that would break with a still regnant Protestant asceticism. Tocqueville's musings on leisure, license, and grandeur as missing pleasures in anxious bourgeois America puts him in unexpected company with these later iconoclasts. But as if rebutting the Frenchman's diagnosis, Gilded Age opulence comes to the fore. This hedonistic reign of excess shapes architecture, psyches, and personal style, each displayed in the era's most heralded builder, Stanford White. An aesthete who read neither the German nor the Irishman, he lived a version of their ideals. Soon after 1900, sophistication receives two crucial accounts—by Berlin sociologist Georg Simmel—one of the first in his discipline to examine the subtle art of sociability—and James in his memoirs. Their shared premises are that the metropolis and mental life are in reciprocal interplay, and manners in the modern world tap the human propensity for "scene making." Theater replaces nature as the frame for apprehending and participating in the urban spectacle.

Three chapters chart the flowering of American sophistication in two postwar epochs: the 1920s (chapter 4) and 1950s to 1965 (chapters 6–7). Each decade is a liberating eruption from prior restraint—Victorian gentility in the one, and triumphalist Cold War moralism in the second. To evoke these hectic transitions required making these three chapters the longest in the book. By the 1920s, sophisticated taste was being democratized thanks to new venues and forums. A new industrial economy, by 1900, had achieved an unprecedented distribution of globally produced luxury goods and their simulacrum. Department stores stocked them, intoxicating customers with possibility, making shopping a "ladies' paradise," a world made indelible by Émile Zola (in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, 1883). To *appear* sophisticated became as easy as wearing the right outfit, and picking up—as prop or guidebook, or both—*The Smart Set*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, or *The New Yorker*. Even George Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis's emblem of suburban mediocrity, is stirred to expand his horizons. Every Babbitt "read gleefully" the severest critics of genteel values "and pronounced his neighbor a Babbitt" (paraphrasing Kazin [*Native*, 203].

The 1920s marks sophistication's breakthrough decade, crowned by Duke Ellington—an era extended by Astaire, who brings us into the 1930s and concludes the chapter. Unlike these virtuosos, the key impresarios of 1920s'

urbanity were creatures of the Victorian seriousness of their childhoods and regarded sophistication as a straitjacket they donned with reluctance; it was strictly business. If used to describe them, the very word would have made a Mencken, Lewis, or Ross bristle. Founding editor in 1925 of *The New Yorker*, Ross employed raucous irreverence as his modus operandi. Which is the way American sophistication can work: under cover of loud, even boorish behavior, it slides under the radar of native suspicion. Lewis's alcoholic loquaciousness at social events in which he impersonated the aspiring American rubes he satirized made him a famous bore, but his performance of Babbittry, like Ross's philistinism, was a way to negotiate the oxymoron American sophistication.

The interlude at the center of the book pauses the historical chronology to bring to the surface what has hitherto been largely under it: sophistication's unsettling ease with contempt. Which asks us to face the moral ambiguities of refinement. Dorothy Parker, among the most famous sophisticates of the 1920s—her "Songs of Hate" win her early notoriety—makes vivid an affinity that gains visibility and violence during the decade and beyond. Urbane contempt takes various forms: from Hollywood's gallery of lethal dandies (1940s–50s), to a vaunted American "cool" made popular in late 1950s' jazz, to new styles of severity in social behavior and interior design (1970s–80s). The mid-century movies bring us to an arctic domain where dwells a figure I will call the psycho-sophisticate, whose impeccable surface holds in check a lethal rage . . . until it doesn't. Hannibal Lecter in the 1980s is the macabre end point of this type, with his monstrosity housing a national fantasy of the anxiety and allure of American sophistication.

Chapter 5, situated between the 1920s and 1950s, is a dual study: on connoisseur aesthete Bernard Berenson, a name that for decades summoned in its breezy alliterativeness the very sound of worldliness, and his late-in-life friend Mary McCarthy. One of the original New York intellectuals in the late 1930s, she grew impatient with the group's unworldliness and (by the early 1950s) political timidity. Both McCarthy and Berenson are outsiders who become insiders. A Lithuanian immigrant remaking himself at Harvard, Berenson sheds his Jewishness because his social aspirations require it. Starting out in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest, McCarthy dreams of leading a sophisticated East Coast life, which she achieves as a first-year student at Vassar (when she dates an actor, spending weekends in his Greenwich Village apartment) and never looks back. In the eyes of many ambitious women of her generation, she becomes a trailblazing inspiration.

American sophistication starts shedding its oxymoronic status in chapter 6. Cosmopolitan taste at last comes of age. So great is its appeal that a packaged bachelor urbanity, Hugh Hefner's *Playboy*, thrives, beginning in 1953. The Kennedy years culminate the shift in taste; an aristocratic couple, seductive in their very casualness and ease—their absence of pretension—compels the nation's attention. Many idealized the Kennedys, who were both gifted at image making, the shaping of graceful appearance. Yet what suspicion their commitment to style and surface aroused! This, combined with the discovery by the 1970s that the president had compartmentalized his life—itself more evidence of his sophistication—ignited a fury that seems chronic. The couple's achievements have been diminished, as if confirming the American need to equate the sophisticated and the deceptive. Inevitably the Kennedys could not avoid an equivocal status given their national assertion of sophistication in a nation where it remains *contra naturam*.

Chapter 6 looks at the early 1960s as a refreshing pause—a serendipitous moment when defensiveness waned, and knowingness was held at bay even as it was parodied and deployed by satirists such as Mike Nichols and Elaine May as well as the mocking wit of poet and curator O'Hara. They show the emergence of a rare sophistication: a knowingness flexible enough to undo itself when faced with the unprecedented. Without scripts and with the sketchiest preparation, Nichols and May rigorously improvised, ensuring each performance was unique. O'Hara also stayed within the tumult of the tentative, seeking, in his words, "a glamour we can relax with and use" (quoted in Gooch, 140). He means to bring glamour's static, timeless perfection down to earth, setting it in the immediacy of the everyday, where it becomes the ongoing dexterity of sophistication fashioned under the pressure of change. O'Hara injected a radical casualness into poetry; his fabled "lunch poems" register his midtown wanderings. The Eameses carefully engineered casualness into their furniture and indeed careers—their success allowed them to value the *process* of problem-solving more than its end point in production—in ways analogous to O'Hara's wariness about publishing. In a similar vein of the tentative is art critic Leo Steinberg's 1960 narration of his own messy response to the early work of Jasper Johns. Here groping, undefended judgment replaces smooth knowingness, and the former is of particular interest in this book. An O'Hara, Steinberg, and the Eameses, tacitly oppose the static self-conscious posturing of those in the know, armed with a prepackaged opinion—an attitude.

Chapter 7 will first look at Black sophistication in theory—the shadings of contempt that Ellison describes as an effective survival strategy of tense

forbearance. In practice, the antagonistic playfulness of Clay / Muhammad Ali embodies an alternative. An analogous move from patience to urgency informs Black celebrity glamour in the throes of revision by the early 1960s. Black show business celebrities recalibrate sophistication's unhurried ease by revising their status as "exceptional Negroes," those admired tokens of social progress who, above the fray, patiently embody uplift. From her Greenwich Village apartment, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, an acute analyst of sophistication as a cultural politics, emerges at a pivotal moment as a deft political actor when her friend Baldwin invites her to a meeting in 1963 with Robert Kennedy. The then attorney general seeks advice on how the government should respond to the national outrage at police barbarism inflicted on peaceful protesters for civil rights in the Deep South. As the meeting turned angry and contentious, Hansberry calmly helped shape the proceedings into an occasion for bitter truth telling that proved to have important consequences. Chapter 7 concludes with Eartha Kitt, who as an entertainer and self-satirist made sophistication her métier, embodying and parodying it while ignoring the bounds of racial, sexual, and political propriety to flirt with the forbidden.

Chapter 8 centers on Bernstein, a figure of exorbitant ambition, achievement, and appetite—intellectual, musical, sexual, and social—who made high culture a living adventure for an enormous audience. "Prodigally talented" was how he was described at his death, and this suggestion of the reckless, excessive, and "too much" counts as his signature in art and life—an affront to the "less is more" tact and tastefulness of much modernism (Henahan). All of which is to say that Bernstein flaunts a Jewish American style. His exuberance was hard to contain within any boundary. Composer, educator, writer, Broadway showman, and classical maestro of global fame, he offered to the world his range of gifts as an opening to intimacy. He devised with his wife a marriage that was a carefully choreographed open secret of silences and fictions, which improbably allowed him for almost two decades to flourish as both loving husband and father and active homosexual—even as "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named" created an aura around him.[26] Finally, a coda sketches sophistication as rendered by three recent presidents.

The Appropriation Game

Knowing but not too knowing, hip but not blasé, players of the "sophistication game" need a taste for nuance. My phrase echoes Ellison's "appropriation game," a concept central to his essential, if still underappreciated, idea (of

1978) that "in lieu of a usable cultural tradition" the "'Americanness' of American culture" is a matter of action rather than identity, of ongoing revisioning, and hence his scare quotes around "Americanness" to indicate what remains in precarious process. Ellison is riffing off the venerable "melting pot" to explore the "conscious or unconscious comedy" it "brews." "Everyone played the appropriation game," whites, African Americans, and Native Americans. Comedy is inevitable because when American culture melts, or rather, *sophisticates*—renders impure—the result is a vital mess, a "willful juxtaposition of modes" comprised of "elements of the many available tastes, traditions, ways of life, and values that . . . have been ceaselessly appropriated and made their own. . . . Indeed, it was through this process of cultural appropriation (and misappropriation) that Englishmen, Europeans, Africans and Asians *became* Americans" (*Collected*, 507, 510–11).

These unprecedented circumstances breed the vernacular impulse of a people who remake what they inherit, exhibiting "the American compulsion to improvise upon the given," as Ellison puts it. This breeds a taste for irreverence that encourages masquerade; one result is "man and mask, sophistication and taste hiding behind clowning and crude manners—the American joke," as he wrote to Murray (Ellison, *Trading*, 167). "That's Hemingway when he pretends to be a sportsman, or *only* a sportsman; [William] Faulkner when he pretends to be a farmer; Benjamin Franklin when he pretended to be a 'child of nature,' instead of the hipped operator that he was; even [Abraham] Lincoln when he pretended to be a simple country lawyer." These eminent bumpkin impostures tell us that "*any* American who's achieved his American consciousness knows" that "purity" is a "dream so he ain't never been innocent, he's been too busy figuring out his next move" (Ellison, *Trading*, 165, 167). To Ellison's examples above add a figure from our own time, Bob Dylan, the most influential crossover cultural presence in the United States since the 1960s and also the master shape-shifter. His "refusal to be fixed as a single self in a single voice" is a source of his American "freedom," says filmmaker Todd Haynes, whose polyphonic *I'm Not There* (2007) features six Dylans, including one played by a thirteen-year-old Black actor (Marcus Carl Franklin) and another by Cate Blanchett. As Haynes wrote in a notebook about his film's "governing concepts," "America obsessed with authenticity / Authenticity the perfect costume / America the land of masks, costumes, self-transformation, creativity is artificial, America's about false authenticity and creativity" (quoted in R. Sullivan).

"Never been innocent": Ellison's remark, like Dylan's example, has the happy effect of rendering irrelevant the quest for purity and accusation of hypocrisy. Free of this melodrama, itself dependent on proprietary assumptions that cultural productions are "owned," Ellison's "appropriation game" encourages us to treat social forms as in some degree plastic and fluid. A relatively neutral term applicable to all kinds of American cultural exchange within a variety of contexts, "appropriation game" provides the capacious conceptual frame of American sophistication. In recent years this neutrality has been lost and "appropriation" politicized, reduced to a synonym for white supremacy in action as it reinforces colonial power relations and underwrites the blithe seizure of native/tribal art. Ironically, Ellison's 1978 notion is not simply distinct from the reigning reduction of "appropriation" to imperialism but instead founded on an opposite idea: creatively elaborating on the given.

Undeniably tonic as a pungent rebuke to the pieties of American innocence and earnestness, Ellison's emphasis on culture and identity as entwined in "game" and "joke" (a stress he shares with his friend Murray and their acknowledged predecessor, Constance Rourke) places the pleasures of stylization against the killjoy imperatives of sincerity and the natural.[27] But Ellison's vision of America as in effect a land of masking jokers underestimates the legacy of unease and ambivalence for the white majority. American sophistication, as I argue, is marked by a particular history—the guilty tug of Puritan anxiety housed in *white* "American consciousness." To add the element of white ambivalence to Ellison's ludic orientation will equip us with a conceptual lens that also possesses empirical bite.

Should sophistication join sports and popular music as a preeminently Black American domain, while we acknowledge the vulgarity of such generalizations? The prominence of Black style in the twentieth century is obvious enough to tempt one to say "Black sophistication" is a tautology. But the temptation must be resisted since it would naturalize the concept. And turning nature into ideology is a move white US culture makes to arrest Blackness, often in a state of childlike innocence or its flip side—a brute primitivism. Whereas the endurance of Black sophistication is its skepticism of pastoral myths (nature as the locus of redemptive harmony)—a strength that has survived an avalanche of imagery that pervades the everyday as stereotypes, variously repellent, benign, and degrading. Recall the panorama of homey blackface caricatures and artifacts—Aunt Jemima and others—that concludes Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled*. How to outwit a world stocked with this fixed,

frozen imagery meant to pacify white anxiety? One way is to turn style into the flourishing of a mask to hide one's escape from the inertia of the "natural," the already known.

Ellison's midcentury novel makes vivid the subtle force of sophisticated style as a crucial strategy of survival—on an anthropological (he would say "cultural") level as much as a racial one. His premise, as always, is that "our life is a war," as "grandfather" says at the start of *Invisible Man*. A self-declared "spy in the enemy's country," the old man is the first of several gnomic Black sophisticates in the novel at once playing at and undoing obedience (the Vet and Tarp among them, but also the bantering folk figure Petey Wheatstraw). Inaugurating the trickster lineage is a seminal figure who mutely beckons at the edge of an epigraph that Ellison selects for *Invisible Man*: "What has cast a shadow upon you?" asks clueless, complacent Captain Amassa Delano of the stricken, ruined Benito Cereno in Herman Melville's story. The unspoken answer is "the Negro," and specifically, Babo, that "hive of subtlety" who masterminds the slave revolt. Until the plot unravels, Babo, barber and body man to Cereno, keeps him close in a tormented intimacy of control—in public mockingly obedient to Cereno's empty authority, propping him up with a parody of a servant's solicitude and self-effacement. Babo performs with such perfect aplomb that Delano remains undisturbed. He is innocent of wit or irony, this man of the year—a massa del Año. Ellison saluted Louis Armstrong as in effect a Babo of the trumpet, the master trickster, meeting "happy darkie" expectations by laughing, complying, mocking, and then winking at his audience. And in Ellington, "mockery speaks through his work and bearing," observes Ellison, a "creative mockery in that it rises above itself to offer us something better" (*Collected*, 683).[28]

When a later author outwitted the reign of cliché and stereotype, he let the poise of *self*-mockery emerge; Baldwin dispenses with the rituals of effacement when he finds himself in new territory, "a French living room" where "two lean cats, one white and one black, met." He describes himself in "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" as a "very tight, tense, lean, abnormally ambitious, abnormally intelligent, and hungry black cat," not at all a spy masked in humility as he faces Norman Mailer, at once his opposite and double, rival and friend (*Collected*, 269). As chapter 7 shows, what ensues from this playful and fraught Paris standoff in 1961 is unprecedented: a confounding of expectations distilled in the phrase "love letter," which Baldwin uses to portray his address to Mailer.

A Few Snapshots

Rounding out this introduction is a small cluster of images that glimpses our confounding American style. We discern an echo—though subtler, less programmatic—of Jefferson's challenging informality in the concocted insouciance of Walt Whitman's engraved 1854 portrait on the frontispiece of *Leaves of Grass*. Slouching posture, left elbow cocked, hand on hip, right hand thrust in his pocket, loosely flowing shirt unbuttoned at the neck, trim beard and hat: the ensemble projects his confident and even flirtatious poise as his steady gaze returns our own. Banishing the stiff decorum of genteel manners, but not formal enough to be mistaken for a gentleman, the poet offers something new; his relaxed yet engaged stance seems untethered to social class, as if Virginia "carelessness" democratically trickled down from the gentry to more Americans, including a former Brooklyn printer.

Rather than settled and to be copied, manners here are "untaught," are instead an intuitive aiming toward, an experiment committed not to jettisoning past models but rather to adapting and improvising. With their antagonistic/flirtatious relation to fashion (always equated with Europe), Jefferson and Whitman escape both "worship" and sneering contempt. (The latter attitude animates Henry David Thoreau when in *Walden* he notes the "worship" that defines slaves of fashion: "The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveler's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same") (68).

Even those whose profession was to encourage this "worship" of Paris—mid-twentieth-century fashion magazine editors—were loyal to an American style—elegance but with a "dash of daring," in the famous words of Carmel Snow, the influential head of *Harper's Bazaar* in its prime (1930s to mid-1950s). Though meticulously turned out, Snow deflated the inertness of perfection via a "lightness"—her word—and "breeziness" evident in being "off-handed in the way she put things together," with an American jauntiness she savored, says her biographer (Rowlands, 152). That jauntiness, an extended legacy of Virginia carelessness, is incarnated in Barbara Stanwyck's 1930s' streetwise Hollywood version. Her poised bantering in "untutored yet suave Brooklynese" is the "hardheaded, no-nonsense" female sophistication that refused the reigning "Noel Coward style" as "too la-di-da," a "self-conscious sort of naughtiness" (Kendall, 15; Harvey, *Comedy*, 65). Maybe Gottlieb was right? By 1966, the "dash of daring" required to confound conventional (European) expectations was a dash of the vulgar, and editor Diana Vreeland turned to another Brooklyn

Barbara for the cover of *Vogue*—"kooky," homely (allegedly) Streisand with her famous "Jewish" nose "bump," "anteater" profile, and thrift-shop style. American sophistication was, once again, reinventing—sophisticating—itself.

We are allergic to "reverence," avant-garde artist and critic Allan Kaprow had noted two years earlier in 1964, dismissing museums' "hushed atmosphere, the reverence with which one is supposed to glide from work to work." The sanctity imitates the manners of European curators, who preside over the former monasteries and palaces that became grand museums. But the "United States is a country of sophisticated mongrels, and anyone pretending to be highfalutin is marked as a nostalgic . . . as time separates us from our European origins" (Kaprow, 56–57). The motley reigns.

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