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‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth- Century Culture

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Perhaps the greatest problem which any historian has to tackle is neither the cataclysm of revolution nor the decay of empire but the process by which ideas become social attitudes.

—J. H. Plumb

I have always observed a singular accord between supercelestial ideas and subterranean behavior.

—Montaigne

The whole history of ideas should be reviewed in the light of the power of social structures to generate symbols of their own.

—Mary Douglas

No ideas but in things.

—William Carlos Williams

ONE OF THE things that make the modern world “modern” is the development of consciousness of self. The European world that produced the Reformation, the new capitalist order, and the growing system of nation-states also gave us a new vocabulary that revealed a new vision of the self. “Consciousness” became a key word in the seventeenth century; the new language of self announced what Owen Barfield has called “the shifting of the centre of gravity of consciousness from the cosmos around him into the personal human being himself.”¹ The results of such a shift were significant. Impulses that control human behavior and destiny were felt to arise more and more *within* the individual at the very time that the laws governing the world were seen as more and more impersonal. Not only was it more difficult to feel spiritual life and activity immanent in the world outside the self; as the rituals of the external church grew feebler, the needs of inner self grew also stronger.

This story is familiar to the historian of modern thought. He has charted the way of this newly developed self in a stormy and changing world from its beginnings in Luther and Calvin, Descartes and Locke. To insist that the history of thought in the modern era is the history of thinking about that self may be an exaggeration. But the consequences of this vision of a self set apart have surely been felt in every field of inquiry, whether it be psychology or political theory, epistemology or economics. Freud, in one of his rare moments of historical analysis, pointed in 1917 to a series of blows that had been administered by modern science to the fragile self. In the sixteenth century, Copernicus gave it a cosmological buffeting by removing man from the center of the universe and insisting that he dwelled on a small fragment of matter, only one of a countless number of them. In the nineteenth century,

Darwin made a biological assault on the self when he argued man's essential affinity with all animals and brought into doubt the special role of reason and civilization. The final blow, Freud thought, was that delivered upon our own century, the psychological blow. This vision (his own) denied that the center of personality was the ego or the soul, and it further suggested, from its new view of the unconscious, that man in the traditional sense did not have full control over himself.² In Freud's vision, the history of science is especially important because of its effect on man's view of himself.

All of this has been the stuff of the intellectual historian. He has studied each "crisis" in thought—as he calls it—brought about by a newer vision of new knowledge. He has attempted to assess the "influence" of major and even minor "thinkers" and has examined new "patterns" of thought emerging from the reconsideration of old problems in new contexts or from new problems arising in changed circumstances. On occasion, he has made an effort to relate "ideas" to the particular social structure in which they appear to have been generated. We have "seen" ideas become social attitudes. We have been made aware of the "impact" of Locke, Darwin, and Freud. Seldom do we even ask the question whether social attitudes do indeed become "ideas." When the historian talks of "popular" ideas, he rarely sees them as part of the world in which "ideas" (*real ideas?*) are born.

Yet that world—that combination of new social, economic, political, and religious structures—in which the new idea of self-consciousness developed belonged to others than just Hobbes and Locke—and I do not mean Descartes and Pascal! The same problems of self so important in the systematic thinking of the modern era were already widely felt. The changes in language and usage, the new words and word forms we find in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are at least suggestive. It is striking, for example, to see the interest as early as the seventeenth century in what was called "character"; and how significant a cultural form character study became. Surely by the nineteenth century *character* was a key word in the vocabulary of Englishmen and Americans.

Philip Rieff has pointed out that as cultures change so do the modal types of persons who are their bearers.³ By 1800 the concept of character had come to define that particular modal type felt to be essential for the maintenance of the social order. The term itself came to mean a group of traits believed to have social significance and moral quality, "the *sine qua non* of all collective adjustment and social intercourse."⁴ In the age of self-consciousness, a popular vision of the self defined by the word "character" became fundamental in sustaining and even in shaping the significant forms of the culture. Such a concept filled two important functions. It proposed a method for both mastery and development of the self. In fact, it argued that its kind of self-control was the way to fullest development of the moral significance of self. But it also provided a method of presenting the self to society, offering a standard of conduct that assured interrelationship between the "social" and the "moral." The importance of character can be most easily established by examination of the hundreds of books, pamphlets, and articles produced during the century, the character studies providing examples for

emulation, and the manuals promising a way to character development and worldly success. These were clearly a popular and important cultural form, but further examination of other aspects of the culture—literature, the arts, popular music, and the like—helps reinforce the importance of the concept of character to the culture of the nineteenth century. It was a culture of character.

It is significant in this context to call attention to the other key words most often associated with the concept of character. A review of over two hundred such items reveals the words most frequently related to the notion of character: *citizenship, duty, democracy, work, building, golden deeds, outdoor life, conquest, honor, reputation, morals, manners, integrity*, and above all, *manhood*. The stress was clearly moral and the interest was almost always in some sort of higher moral law. The most popular quotation—it appeared in dozens of works—was Emerson's definition of character: "Moral order through the medium of individual nature."

The problem of self, even as vaguely as it is defined here, thus becomes a fundamental one for almost all modern cultural development. The effort to achieve both a moral and a social order and a freely developing self shapes the cultural products of the times—high, middle, and low culture. The very existence of manuals (obviously necessary among the middle class in terms of their numbers and sales) indicates the reality of the problem. Further investigation would establish, I think, that the patterns of behavior, the institutions developed, the persistence in nineteenth-century America of a predominantly Arminian vision, the insistence on the so-called Protestant ethic, with emphasis on work as essential in a society that was constantly stressing producer values—all these are part of what I have suggested is a culture of character .

These are assertions, not proofs; these are not established propositions. Yet they illustrate my conviction that we can best understand modern cultural developments in all forms if we see and define the particular vision of the self basic to each cultural order. But my fundamental interest in the culture of character lies in the signs of its disappearance and the resulting call for a new modal type best suited to carry out the mission of a newer cultural order. It was not that the culture of character died suddenly or that books and manuals stressing the "character" vision of the self disappeared. In fact they are still being published. But, starting somewhere in the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, there rapidly developed another vision of self, another vision of self-development and mastery, another method of the presentation of self in society. First, there is clear and growing evidence of an awareness of significant change in the social order, especially after 1880. Symptoms are easily suggested: what was called "American nervousness" and the various efforts at its diagnosis; the rash of utopian writings; the development of systematic sociological and economic analysis in the academic world; the development in government and public journals of a view of the need for "objective" and "scientific" gathering of data and treatment of social ills; and, even more important, the development of psychological and psychiatric studies. This awareness of change also suggested the

need for a new kind of man, a new modal type to meet the new conditions. Perhaps few were as specific as Simon Patten and *The New Basis of Civilization* (1909), in which he argued that a society moving from scarcity to abundance required a new self. But it is hard to read the social theorists of the period—Sumner, Ward, Veblen—without some sense of the keen interest in the relation between social orders and psychological types, the belief that a change in the social order almost demanded a change in the people in it. [...]

There is general agreement among historians that some significant material change occurred in the period we are considering. Whether it is a change from producer to a consumer society, an order of economic accumulation to one of disaccumulation, industrial capitalism to finance capitalism, scarcity to abundance, disorganization to high organization—however that change is defined, it is clear that a new social order was emerging. But even more important than this was the growing awareness on the part of those living through the change that it was in fact occurring and that it was fundamental. [...]

All of this is preface to the discovery of the beginnings of a radical shift in the kinds of advice manuals that appeared after the turn of the century, and to new preoccupations, which strike at the heart of the basis of the culture of character. [...] It is further a striking part of the turn-of-the-century decade that interest grew in personality, individual idiosyncrasies, personal needs and interests. The vision of self-sacrifice began to yield to that of self-realization. There was fascination with the peculiarities of the self, especially the sick self. Miss Beauchamp, in Dr. Morton Prince's 1905 study *The Dissociation of Personality*, became a figure of popular discussion. At least five major studies of Jesus appeared in the same decade. But in these works the Nazarene is not the healer, the social problem-solver, the achieving man of character and oral exemplar. Rather he is a sick personality, a miserably maladjusted fanatic. So serious was the debate on this analysis that Albert Schweitzer felt called upon to reply to these studies in 1913 with *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*. And our literature produced the strange heroine of William Vaughan Moody's *The Great Divide* (1909), with her peculiar problems of personality (in its way, a precursor of the drama of Eugene O'Neill), and Gertrude Stein's remarkable portraits in *Three Lives* (1906), perhaps in its way a model for Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Literature was interested increasingly in probing personality and less in studying moral or social achievement in the more traditional way of a culture of character.

But even without these hints the evidence is readily available in hundreds of manuals and guides for self-improvement published between 1900 and 1920. One of Raymond Williams' "keywords," *personality*, is a modern term.⁵ It appears in the late eighteenth century, and there is some evidence of its modern usage in the nineteenth century. While there are examples of its use by Emerson and Henry Adams, Walt Whitman alone, to my knowledge, made frequent and consistent use of the word in its current sense in the last century. By the first decade of this century, it was an important part of the American vocabulary. It is in this decade as well that a series of volumes and articles began to

appear addressed to the problem of helping people develop their personalities. From the start *personality* was distinguished from *character*. [...] From the beginning the adjectives most frequently associated with personality suggest a very different concept from that of character: *fascinating, stunning, attractive, magnetic, glowing, masterful, creative, dominant, forceful*. These words would seldom if ever be used to modify the word *character*. One writer makes the point: character, he insists, is either good or bad; personality, famous or infamous.⁶

“Personality is the quality of being Somebody.”⁷ This definition—repeated in various ways in almost all of the manuals I have analyzed—is also a major theme of this literature. The problem is clear. We live now constantly in a crowd; how can we distinguish ourselves from others in that crowd? While the term is never used, the question is clearly one of life in a mass society (*crowd* is the most commonly used word). Since we live in such a world it is important to develop one’s self—that is, those traits, “moral, intellectual, physical, and practical,” that will enable us to think of ourselves and have others think of us as “somebodies.” “To create a personality is power,” one manual writer insists.⁸ One does this by being “conscious of yourself and of others,” by being discerning and sincere, by showing energy, by paying attention to others so that they will pay attention to you.

To be somebody one must be oneself (whatever that means). It is an almost too perfect irony that most of the works published and sold in large numbers as self-help in developing an effective personality insist that individuals should be “themselves” and *not* follow the advice or direction of others. The importance of being different, special, unusual, of standing out in a crowd—all of this is emphasized at the same time that specific directions are provided for achieving just those ends. In virtually the same breath the reader is also urged repeatedly to “express your individuality” and to “eliminate the little personal whims, habit, traits that make people dislike you. Try in every way to have a ready command of the niceties, the manners, the ways of speech, etc. which make people think ‘he’s a mighty likable fellow.’ That is the beginning of a reputation for personality.”⁹ Thus “personality,” like “character,” is an effort to solve the problem of self in a changed social structure that imposes its own special demands on the self. Once again, such a popular view of self proposes a method of both self-mastery and self-development as well as a method of the presentation of that self in society. Both methods differed from those proposed in the culture of character and they underpin the development of a new culture, the culture of personality. [...]

A brief examination of two works by one of the most popular writers of the period will serve to press home the importance of the change in emphasis from character to personality. In 1899 Orison Swett Marden published *Character: The Greatest Thing in the World*. Crowded with character studies of special historical heroes as exemplars, this book dwells most particularly on the “mental and moral traits,” the “high ideals,” the “balance” that make character and therefore bring success in the world. Being a true Christian gentleman, pure, upright, intelligent, strong, and brave, possessing a sense of

duty, having benevolence, moral courage, personal integrity, and the “highest kinship of soul,” devoting service to mankind, being attentive to the “highest and most harmonious development of one’s powers” to achieve “a complete and consistent whole”—these are the key words and phrases used in support of the argument. In the course of the volume, Marden stresses the basic values necessary in a producer-oriented society, including hard work (the “sacredness of one’s work”) and thrift. He ends the book with a powerful appeal. Quoting President Garfield (“I must succeed in making myself a man”), Marden insists that character above all means, for those interested in developing it, “Let him first be a Man.”

In 1921 Marden published *Masterful Personality*. It suggests a remarkably different set of interests. In this book Marden addresses himself to “man’s mysterious atmosphere,” the aura and power of personality that can “sway great masses.” Against the profound dangers of feeling inferior, he proposes a search for supremacy. Much attention is focused on “personal charm.” He urges women not only to rely on physical beauty but also to develop “fascination.” The ability to attract and hold friends is important. “You can,” Marden insists, “compel people to like you.” “So much of our success in life depends upon what others think of us.” Manners, proper clothes, good conversation (“to know *what* to say and *how* to say it”), energy, “life efficiency,” poise—these are the concerns of this volume. In the course of 20 years Marden had come to see the need for a different character type.¹⁰

The older vision of self expressed in the concept of character was founded in an inner contradiction. That vision argued that the highest development of self ended in a version of self-control or self-mastery, which often meant fulfillment through sacrifice in the name of a higher law, ideals of duty, honor, integrity. One came to selfhood through obedience to law and ideals. Brilliantly sustaining the human needs of a producer-oriented society, it urged in effect a sublimation of self-needs or their redefinition in Arminian terms. But the newer vision of personality also had its paradox. It stressed self-fulfillment, self-expression, self-gratification so persistently that almost all writers as an afterthought gave a warning against intolerable selfishness, extreme self-confidence, excessive assertions of personal superiority. But the essential antinomian vision of this, with its view not of a higher law but of a higher self, was tempered by the suggestion that the self ought to be presented to society in such a way as to make oneself “well liked.” there is an obvious difficulty here. One is to be unique, be distinctive, follow one’s feelings, make oneself stand out from the crowd, and at the same time appeal—by fascination, magnetism, attractiveness—to it.

Both visions of self—visions I argue shaped the very nature of the culture—are assumed from the start not to be natural but to be things that can be learned and practiced, through exercise and by study of guidebooks to success. Both visions relate to the needs of a particular social structure and do not develop in an atmosphere of pure philosophical speculation. The older vision no longer suited personal

or social needs; the newer vision seemed particularly suited for the problems of the self in a changed social order, the developing consumer mass society.

The new personality literature stressed items that could be best developed in leisure time and that represented in themselves an emphasis on consumption. The social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality was that of a performer. Every American was to become a performing self. Every work studied stressed the importance of the human voice in describing methods of voice control and proper methods of conversation or public speaking. Everyone was expected to impress and influence with trained and effective speech. Special books and courses were developed to meet demand in this area alone. In these books and articles exercise, proper breathing, sound eating habits, a good complexion, and grooming and beauty aids were all stressed. At the same time, clothing, personal appearance, and “good manners” were important, but there was little interest in morals. Poise and charm top the list of necessary traits, and there was insistence that they could be learned and developed through careful practice. The new stress on the enjoyment of life implied that true pleasure could be attained by making oneself pleasing to others. [...]

The test of the general approach proposed in this paper would be a more specific analysis of the cultural forms of our century to see whether in fact they share the characteristics of a culture of personality, whether they can be examined as manifestations of the working out of the basic ideas central to this vision of self. Investigations have convinced me that most cultural forms studied to date reveal a kinship to the culture of personality. Comic strips, radio programs, even beauty pageants have yielded evidence of significant dependence on these ideas. For purposes of this paper, however, I want to offer only one example. I am convinced that the nature and form of the modern motion picture as it developed as a middle-class popular art between 1910 and 1915 clearly show its participation in the culture of personality. Technically, the film, especially in the hands of its major developer as a middle-class art, D. W. Griffith, and those who followed him, depended on two major modes and used them dramatically in startling juxtaposition. The first was the handling of vast groups of people. Vachel Lindsay in his brilliant 1915 book on film speaks of the role of what he calls “crowd splendor” in motion pictures.¹¹ Films are not only a mass medium, they also represent one of the major ways in which a mass society can examine itself as mass. There was from the start of serious motion pictures an intimate relationship between it and the portraying of the role of crowds. To the depiction of the crowds, and often in striking contrast to it, Griffith added the extraordinary form of the closeup [...] the face, bigger than life and abstracted from it, provides a brilliant expression of self, of an individual. The importance of this contrast—the mass and the isolated individual apart from that mass—to the development of film, and thus of film’s role in the culture of personality, cannot be exaggerated.

Up to 1910, motion picture studios generally concealed the identity of most screen players. In 1910, however, the idea of the movie star was born. The creation of the star changed the nature of the role of

motion pictures in our society. It brought into even more prominent use the press agent and modern advertising. “Henceforth, a screen player was to be marketed for her admirers as a personality, an image and, to an increasingly sinister extent, an object,” the historian of the star system suggests.¹² This immediately leads to fan magazines and to a new consciousness of the importance of personality. It leads, in fact, to a new profession—that of being a movie star or a celebrity. In the culture of character, the public had insisted on some obvious correlation between achievement and fame. Now that insistence is gone. The very definition of reality was altered, as Richard Schickel explains in his suggestive study of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.: “Indeed, it is now essential that the politician, the man of ideas, and the non-performing artist become performers so that they may become celebrities so that in turn they may exert genuine influence on the general public.”¹³ Fairbanks himself was dedicated not to his art but to himself. As early as 1907 a famous actress said of him that he would be famous in films: “He’s not good looking. But he has worlds of personality.” [...]

If Fairbanks was at the beginning of this world of stars and press agents, we know that it was only the beginning. There *are* ideas in things (maybe *only* in things, as William Carlos Williams insists), but we are only beginning to understand our cultural developments in terms of the system of ideas on which they are in fact based, the system of ideas inherent in the cultural forms we study. Movies suggest many explorations not yet undertaken. For films have been an agency fundamental for the generation of the key symbols of our social structure. Complete with stars and even gods and goddesses, housed in places that (even down to the massive organ) resemble huge cathedrals, motion pictures became for thousands a new religion (perhaps a special religion for the antinomians of the twentieth century). No wonder some more fundamentalist Protestant religionists forbid movie-going to their congregants. They know a surrogate or competing religious order when they see one.

ABRIDGMENT

“[‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture](#)” (Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Pantheon, 1984)

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Footnotes

1. Owen Barfield, *History in English Words* (London, 1954), p. 166. ↵
2. The essay “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis” is reprinted in *Standard Edition of the Collected Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 23 vols. (London, 1955), XVII, 135–144. ↵
3. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York, 1966), p. 2. ↵

4. A. A. Roback in the article “Character” in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 14 vols. (New York, 1930), III, 335. [↵](#)
5. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976), pp. 194–197. The word “character” does not appear in Mr. Williams’s study. [↵](#)
6. Henry Laurent, *Personality: How to Build It* (New York, 1915), p. iv. This volume was translated from the French by Richard Duff. [↵](#)
7. *Ibid.*, p. 25. [↵](#)
8. *Ibid.*, pp. iv, 29. I have used this manual as typical. Part 1 deals with the “building” of personality, and Part 2 with “how to impress.” It stresses self-control as a way to control others. I find all of the themes of other manuals studied stated here more boldly and precisely. [↵](#)
9. B. C. Bean, *Power of Personality* (Meriden, Conn., 1920), p. 3. This is one of a series of pamphlets called *The Science of Organizing Personal Powers for Success*. [↵](#)
10. Orison Swett Marden, *Character, The Greatest Thing in the World* (New York, 1899), pp. 7, 11, 16, 21, 25, 30, 37, 50; *idem*, *Masterful Personality* (New York, 1921), pp. 1, 3, 17, 23, 33, 68, 291. [↵](#)
11. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York, 1915). There was a revised edition in 1922. It remains a classic work for all cultural historians. [↵](#)
12. Alexander Walker, *Stardom: The Hollywood Phenomenon* (New York, 1970), p. 36. [↵](#)
13. Richard Schickel, *His Picture in the Papers: A Speculation on Celebrity in America Based on the Life of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.* (New York, 1974), p. 9. [↵](#)

Nor does socialism for the twenty-first century worship technology and productive forces as a fetish that took the form in the Soviet Union of immense factories, mines, and collective farms to capture presumed economies of scale and destroyed the earth, our common home. Finally, contrary to its self-proclaimed inventor (Heinz Dieterich), socialism for the twenty-first century is not essentially a problem of informatic complexity that requires cybernetic calculation of quantities of concrete labor as the basis for an exchange of equivalents.² So, let us explain what socialism for the twenty-first century is. There are lessons to be learned from the experiences of the twentieth century, and the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela, adopted in 1999, reflects many of those lessons. The theory of Culture and Personality also drew on Boas's cultural relativism and Freud's psychoanalysis about early childhood. If we premise that all humans are hereditarily equal, why are people so unique from society to society? The theoretical school answered this question by using Freud's psychoanalysis: the differences between people in various societies usually stem from cultural differences installed in childhood. In other words, the foundations of personality development are set in early childhood according to each society's unique cultural traits. Based on this basis, the theoretical sections devoted to culture will focus on the history and theory of twentieth century European visual culture. Rapid advances in mechanical reproduction and projection technologies made visual materials—photographs, illustrated periodicals, posters, prints, films, and eventually televisual media—more prevalent than they had ever been before. These materials played a prominent role in political and social conflicts in twentieth century Europe. In this course, we will treat visual objects as sources of.

1. Seth Bernstein, Ph.D. Angelina Lucento, Ph.D. Research Fellows International Center for Ecologies shape cultures; cultures influence the development of personalities. There are both universal and culture-specific aspects of variation in personality. Some culture-specific aspects correspond to cultural syndromes such as complexity, tightness, individualism, and collectivism. A large body of literature suggests that the Big Five personality factors emerge in various cultures. However, caution is required in arguing for such universality, because most studies have not included emic (culture-specific) traits and have not studied samples that are extremely different in culture from We