

Celebrity Culture

Joseph Epstein

Perhaps the best way to begin is briefly to examine the words “celebrity” and “culture,” each on its own first, and then to see if the two slide together and click, making a decent fit.

In *The Nature of Culture*, his book of 1952, the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber offered more than one hundred ways in which the word “culture” was then used. By now, more than fifty years later, the number of its uses has doubtless more than doubled. “The Culture of...,” like “The Death of...” and “The Politics of...,” has become a fairly common prefix for book and article titles, usually ones of extravagant intellectual pretensions, from Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* on down.¹

The word “culture” no longer, I suspect, stands in most people’s minds for that whole congeries of institutions, relations, kinship patterns, linguistic forms, and the rest for which the early anthropologists meant it to stand. Words, unlike good soldiers under the Austro-Hapsburg empire, don’t remain in place and take commands. Instead they insist on being unruly, and slither and slide around, picking up all sorts of slippery and even goofy meanings. An icon, as we shall see, doesn’t stay a small picture of a religious personage but usually turns out nowadays to be someone with spectacular grosses. “The language,” as Flaubert once protested in his attempt to tell his mistress Louise Colet how much he loved her, “is inept.”

¹ Alfred Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1991).

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Today, when we glibly refer to “the corporate culture,” “the culture of poverty,” “the culture of the intelligence community”—and “community” has, of course, become another of those hopelessly baggy-pants words so that one hears talk even of “the homeless community”—what I think we mean by “culture” is the general emotional atmosphere and institutional ethos surrounding the word to which “culture” is attached. In this newer context, culture also implies that the general atmosphere pervading any discrete aspect of life determines a great deal else. Thus, corporate culture is thought to breed self-protectiveness practiced at the Machiavellian level; the culture of poverty, hopelessness and despair; the culture of the intelligence community, viperishness; the culture of journalism, a short attention span; and so on. Or, to cite an everyday example I recently heard, “the culture of NASA has to be changed.” The comedian Flip Wilson, after saying something outrageous, would use the refrain line, “the devil made me do it.” So today, when spotting dreary or otherwise wretched behavior, people often say, “the culture made them do it.”

As for “celebrity,” the standard definition is no longer the dictionary one but rather closer to the one that Daniel Boorstin gave in his book *The Image: Or, What Happened to the American Dream*: “The celebrity,” Boorstin wrote, “is a person who is well-known for his well-knownness,” which is improved in its frequently misquoted form as “a celebrity is someone famous for being famous.”² (The other well-known quotation on this subject is Andy Warhol’s “in the future everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes,” which is also frequently misquoted as “everyone will have his fifteen minutes of fame.”)

To be sure, there are people well-known merely for being well-known: What the hell do a couple named Sid and Mercedes Bass do, except appear in bold-face in *The New York Times* “Sunday Styles” section and other such venues (as we now say) of equally shimmering insignificance, often standing next to Ahmet and Mica Ertegun, also well-known for being well-known? Many moons ago, journalists used to refer to royalty as “face cards”; today celebrities are perhaps best thought of as bold-faces, for as such do their names often appear in the press.

But to say that a celebrity is someone well-known for being well-known, though clever enough, is not, I think, sufficient. The first semantic problem our fetching subject presents is the need for a distinction between celebrity and fame—a distinction more easily required than produced.

I suspect everyone has, or would rather make, his own. The distinction I prefer derives not from Aristotle, who didn’t have to trouble with celebrities, but from the baseball player Ted Williams, of whom a sportswriter once said that he, Williams, wished to

² Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962).

be famous but not a celebrity. What Ted Williams wanted to be famous for was his hitting. He wanted everyone who cared about baseball to know that he was—as he believed and may well have been—the greatest hitter who ever lived; what he didn't want to do was to take on any of the effort off the baseball field involved in making this known. As an active player, Williams gave no interviews, signed no baseballs or photographs, chose not to be obliging in any way to journalists or fans. A rebarbative character, not to mention a slightly menacing s.o.b., Williams, if you had asked him, would have said that it was enough that he was the last man to hit .400; he did it on the field, and therefore didn't have to sell himself off the field. As for his duty to his fans, he would have said, in the spirit of the alleged deathbed words of W. C. Fields, “on second thought, screw ‘em,” though in Williams's case, it would probably have been on first thought.

Whether Ted Williams was right or wrong to feel as he did is of less interest than the distinction his example provides, which suggests that fame is something one earns—through talent or achievement of one kind or another—while celebrity is something one cultivates or, possibly, has thrust upon one. The two are not, of course, entirely exclusive. One can be immensely talented and full of achievement and yet wish to broadcast one's fame further through the careful cultivation of celebrity; and one can have the thinnest of achievements and be less than immensely talented and yet be made to seem so through the mechanics and dynamics of celebrity-creation, in our day a whole mini- (or maybe not so mini-) industry of its own.

Or, yet again, one can become a celebrity with scarcely any pretense to talent or achievement whatsoever. Much modern celebrity seems the result of careful promotion or great good luck or something besides talent and achievement: Mr. Donald Trump, Ms. Paris Hilton, Mr. Regis Philbin, take a bow. The ultimate celebrity of our time may have been John F. Kennedy, Jr., notable only for being his parents' very handsome son—both his birth and good looks in any case beyond his control—and, alas, known for nothing else whatsoever now, except for the sad, dying-young, Adonis end to his life.

Fame, then, as I prefer to think of it, is based on true achievement; celebrity on broadcasting that achievement, or inventing something that, if not scrutinized too closely, might pass for achievement. Celebrity suggests ephemerality, while fame has a shot at reaching the happy shores of posterity.

There are, of course, divisions of fame to consider. Oliver Goldsmith, in his poem “The Deserted Villages,” refers to “good fame,” which implies that there is also a bad or false fame. Bad fame is sometimes thought to be fame in the present, or fame on earth, while good fame is that bestowed by posterity—those happy shores again. (Which doesn't eliminate the desire of most of us, at least nowadays, to have our fame here and hereafter, too.) Not false but wretched fame is covered by the word “infamy”—“Infamy, infamy, infamy,” remarked the English wit Frank Muir, who had an attractive lisp,

“they all have it in for me”—while the lower, or pejorative, order of celebrity is covered by the word “notoriety,” also frequently misused to mean notable.

We know from Leo Braudy’s magnificent book on the history of fame, *The Frenzy of Renown*, that the means of broadcasting fame have changed over the centuries: from having one’s head engraved on coins, to purchasing statuary of oneself, to (for the really high rollers—Alexander the Great, the Caesar boys) naming cities or even months after oneself, to commissioning painted portraits, to writing books or having books written about one, and so on into our day of the publicity or press agent, the media blitz, and the public relations expert. One of the most successful of public-relations experts, Ben Sonnenberg, Sr., used to say that he saw it as his job to construct very high pedestals for very small men.

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Which leads one to a very proper suspicion of celebrity. As George Orwell said about saints, so it seems to me sensible to say about celebrities: they should all be judged guilty until proven innocent. Guilty of what, precisely?

I’d say of fraudulence (however minor); of inflating their brilliance, accomplishments, worth; of passing themselves off as something they aren’t, or at least are not quite. If fraudulence is the crime, publicity is the means by which the caper has been brought off.

Celebrity, then, does indeed exist, but is the current heightened interest in the celebrated sufficient to form a culture—a culture of a kind worthy of study? Alfred Kroeber defines culture, in part, as embodying “values which may be formulated (overtly as mores) or felt (implicitly as in folkways) by the society carrying the culture, and which it is part of the business of the anthropologist to characterize and define.”³ What are the values of celebrity culture? They are the values, largely, of publicity. Did they spell one’s name right? What was the size and composition of the audience? Did you check the receipts? Was the timing right? Publicity is concerned solely with effects and does not investigate causes or intrinsic value too closely. For example, a review of a book of mine called *Snobbery: The American Version* received what I thought was a muddled and too greatly mixed review in *The New York Times Book Review*. I remarked on my disappointment to the publicity man at my publisher’s, who promptly told me not to worry: it was a full-page review, on page 11, right-hand side. That, he said, “is very good real estate,” which was quite as important, perhaps more important, than the reviewer’s actual words and final judgment. Better to be confusedly attacked on page 11, in other words, than extravagantly praised on page 27, left-hand side. Real estate, man, it’s the name of the game.

³ Alfred Kroeber, abstract of “Culture, Events, and Individuals,” manuscript “not for publication,” Supper-Conference for Anthropologists, Viking fund.

We must have new names, Marcel Proust presciently noted—in fashion, in medicine, in art, there must always be new names. It's a very smart remark, and the fields Proust chose seem smart, too, at least for his time. (Now there must also be new names among movie stars and athletes and politicians.) Implicit in Proust's remark is the notion that if the names don't really exist, if the quality isn't there to sustain them, it doesn't matter; new names we shall have in any case. And every society somehow, more or less implicitly, contrives to supply them. I happen to think that we haven't had a major poet writing in English since perhaps the death of W. H. Auden, or, to lower the bar a little, Philip Larkin. But new names are put forth nevertheless—high among them has been that of Seamus Heaney—because, after all, what kind of a time could we be living in if we didn't have a major poet? And besides there are all those prizes that, year after year, must be given out, even if so many of the recipients don't seem quite worthy of them.

Considered as a culture, celebrity does have its institutions. We now have an elaborate celebrity-creating machinery well in place—all those short-attention-span television shows (*Entertainment Weekly*, *Hollywood Access [Excess?]*, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*); all those magazines (beginning with *People* and far from ending with *The National Enquirer*). We have high-priced celebrity-mongers—Barbara Walters, Diane Sawyer, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Oprah—who not only live off others' celebrity but also through their publicity-making power, confer it and have in time become very considerable celebrities each in his or her own right.

Without the taste for celebrity, they would have to close down whole sections of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and the "Style" sections of every other newspaper in the country. Then there is the celebrity—usually movie star—magazine profile (in *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *Gentlemen's Quarterly*; these are nowadays usually orchestrated by a press agent, with all touchy questions declared out-of-bounds) and the television talk show interview with a star, which is beyond parody. Well, *almost* beyond: Martin Short in his brilliant impersonation as talk-show host Jimmy Glick remarks to actor Kiefer Sutherland: "You're Canadian, aren't you? What's that all about?"

Despite all this, we still seem never to have enough celebrities, so we drag in so-called "It Girls" (Paris Hilton, Cindy Crawford, other supermodels), tired television hacks (Regis Philbin, Ed McMahon), back-achingly boring yet somehow sacrosanct news anchors (Walter Cronkite, Tom Brokaw). Toss in what I think of as the lower-class punditi, who await calls from various television news and chat shows to demonstrate their locked-in political views and meager expertise on network and cable stations alike: Pat Buchanan, Eleanor Clift, Mark Shields, Robert Novak, Michael Beschloss, and the rest. Ah, if only Lenny Bruce were alive today, he could do a scorchingly cruel bit about Dr. Joyce Brothers sitting by the phone wondering why Jerry Springer never calls.

Many of our current-day celebrities float upon “hype,” which is really a publicist’s gas used to pump up and set floating something that doesn’t quite exist. Hype has also given us a new breakdown, or hierarchical categorization, of celebrities. Until twenty-five or so years ago great celebrities were called “stars,” a term first used in the movies and entertainment and then taken up by sports, politics, and other fields. Stars proving a bit drab, “superstars” were called into play, this term beginning in sports but fairly quickly branching outward. Apparently too many superstars were about, so the trope was switched from astronomy to religion, and we now have “icons.” All this takes Proust’s original observation a step further: the need for new names to call the new names.

This new ranking—stars, superstars, icons—helps us believe that we live in interesting times. One of the things celebrities do for us is suggest that in their lives they are fulfilling our fantasies. Modern celebrities, along with their fame, tend to be wealthy or, if not themselves beautiful, able to acquire beautiful lovers. “So long as man remains free,” Dostoyevsky writes in the Grand Inquisitor section of *The Brothers Karamazov*, “he strives for nothing so incessantly and painfully as to find someone to worship.”⁴ Are contemporary celebrities the best thing on offer as living gods for us to worship? If so, this is not good news.

But the worshipping of celebrities by the public tends to be thin, and not uncommonly the worship is nicely admixed with loathing. We also, after all, at least partially, like to see celebrities as frail. Cary Grant once warned the then-young director Peter Bogdanovich, who was at the time living with Cybil Sheppard: “Will you stop telling people you’re happy? Will you stop telling them you’re in love?” When Bogdanovich asked why, Cary Grant answered, “Because they’re not happy and they’re not in love.... Let me tell you something, Peter, people do not like beautiful people.”⁵

Grant’s assertion is borne out by our grocery press, *The National Enquirer*, *The Star*, *The Globe*, and other variants of the English gutter press. All these tabloids could as easily travel under the generic title of *The National Schadenfreude*, for more than half the stories they contain come under the category of “See How the Mighty Have Fallen”: Oh, my, I see where that bright young television sit-com star, on a drug binge again, had to be taken to a hospital in an ambulance! To think that the handsome movie star has been cheating on his wife all these years—snakes loose in the Garden of Eden, evidently! Did you note that the powerful senator’s drinking has caused him to embarrass himself on any number of public occasions? Dear me, the outwardly successful Hollywood couple turn out to have had a child who died of anorexia! Who’d’ve thought?

⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Norton, 1976) 234.

⁵ See Gavin Esler, “Peter Bogdanovich—Hollywood Survivor,” interview, BBC News, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/hardtalk/4149215.stm>>.

How pleasing to learn that our own simpler, less moneyed and glamour-laden lives are, in the end, much to be preferred to those of these frightfully beautiful and powerful people, whose vast publicity has diverted us for so long and whose fall proves even more diverting now. In a recent short story called “Ice” in *The New Yorker*, Thomas McGuane writes: “As would become a lifelong habit for most of us, we longed to witness spectacular achievement and mortifying failure. Neither of these things, we were discreetly certain, would ever come to us; we would instead be granted the frictionless lives of the meek.”⁶

Along with trying to avoid falling victim to *schadenfreude*, celebrities have to be careful to regulate the amount of publicity they allow to cluster around them. And not celebrities alone. Edith Wharton, having published too many stories and essays in a great single rush in various magazines during a concentrated period, feared, as she put it, the danger of becoming “a magazine bore.” Celebrities, in the same way, are in danger of becoming publicity bores, though few among them seem to sense it. Because of improperly rationed publicity, along with a substantial helping of self-importance, the comedian Bill Cosby will never again be funny. The actress Elizabeth McGovern said of Sean Penn that he “is brilliant, *brilliant* at being the kind of reluctant celebrity.”⁷ At the level of high culture, Saul Bellow used to work this bit quite well on the literary front, making every interview (and there have been hundreds of them) feel as if it were given only with the greatest reluctance, if not under actual duress. Others are brilliant at regulating their publicity. Johnny Carson was very clever about carefully husbanding his celebrity, choosing not to come out of retirement, until exactly the right time or when the perfect occasion presented itself. It apparently never did. Given the universally generous obituary tributes he received, dying now looks, for him, to have been an excellent career move.

Close readers will have noticed above that I referred to “the actress Elizabeth McGovern” and felt no need to write anything before or after the name Sean Penn. True celebrities need nothing said of them in apposition, fore or aft. The greatest celebrities are those who don’t even require their full names mentioned: Marilyn, Winston, Johnny, Liz, Liza, Oprah, Michael (could be Jordan or Jackson—context usually clears this up fairly quickly), Kobe, Martha (Stewart, not Washington), Britney, Shaq, JLo, Frank (Sinatra, not Perdue), O. J., and, with the quickest recognition and shortest name of all—trumpets here, please—W.

One has the impression that being a celebrity was easier at any earlier time than it is now, when celebrity-creating institutions, from paparazzi to gutter-press exposé to television talk-shows, weren’t as intense, as full-court press, as they are today. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, a reviewer of a biography of Margot Fonteyn noted that she

⁶ Thomas McGuane, “Ice,” *The New Yorker* (24 January 2005): 78–83.



"Ok, now let's get one of you demanding your privacy."

"was a star from a more respectful age of celebrity, when keeping one's distance was still possible."⁸ My own candidate for the perfect celebrity in the twentieth century would be Noel Coward, a man in whom talent combined with elegance to give off the glow of glamour—and also a man who would have known how to fend off anyone wishing to investigate his private life. Today, instead of elegant celebrities, we have celebrity criminal trials: Michael Jackson, Kobe Bryant, Martha Stewart, Robert Blake, Winona Ryder, and O. J. Simpson. Schadenfreude rides again.

A received opinion about America in the early twenty-first century is that our culture values only two things: money and celebrity. Whether or not this is true, vast quantities

⁷ Manohla Dargis, "The Authorized Sean Penn," *The New York Times Book Review* (23 January 2005): 7.

⁸ Zoë Anderson, "She Was Groomed to Conquer," *Times Literary Supplement* (21 January 2005): 18.

of money, we know, will buy celebrity. The very rich—John D. Rockefeller, et alia—used to pay press agents to keep their names out of the papers. But today one of the things money buys is a place at the table beside the celebrated, with the celebrities generally delighted to accommodate, there to share some of the glaring light. An example is Mort Zuckerman, who made an early fortune in real estate, has bought magazines and newspapers, and is now himself among the pundits, offering his largely unexceptional political views on *The McLaughlin Group* and other television chat shows. Whether or not celebrity in and of itself constitutes a culture, it has certainly penetrated and permeated much of American (and I suspect English) culture generally.

Such has been the reach of celebrity culture in our time that it has long ago entered into academic life. The celebrity professor has been on the scene for more than three decades. As long ago as 1962, in fact, I recall hearing that Oscar Cargill, in those days a name of some note in the English Department of NYU, had tried to lure the then-young Robert Brustein, a professor of theater and the drama critic for *The New Republic*, away from Columbia. Cargill had said to Brustein, “I’m not going to bullshit you, Bob, we’re looking for a star, and you’re it.” Brustein apparently wasn’t looking to be placed in a new constellation, and remained at Columbia, at least for a while longer, before moving on to Yale and thence to Harvard.

The academic star, who is really the academic celebrity, is now a fairly common figure in what the world, that ignorant ninny, reckons the Great American Universities. Richard Rorty is such a star; so is Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (who as “Skip” even has some nickname celebrity recognition); and, at a slightly lower level, there are Marjorie Garber, Eve Sedgwick, Stanley Fish, and perhaps now Stephen Greenblatt. Stanley Fish doesn’t even seem to mind that much of his celebrity is owed to his being portrayed in novels by David Lodge as an indefatigable, grubby little operator (though Lodge claims to admire Fish’s happy vulgarity). Professors Garber and Sedgwick seem to have acquired their celebrity through the *outrisme* of the topics they’ve chosen to write about.

By measure of pure celebrity, Cornel West is, at the moment, the star of all academic stars, a man called by *Newsweek* “an eloquent prophet with attitude.” (A bit difficult, I think, to imagine *Newsweek* or any other publication writing something similar of Lionel Trilling, Walter Jackson Bate, Marjorie Hope Nicolson, or John Hope Franklin.) He records rap CDs and appears at benefits with movie stars and famous athletes. When the president of Harvard spoke critically to West about his work not constituting serious scholarship (as if that had anything to do with anything), it made front-page news in *The New York Times*. West left, as we now know, and was instantly welcomed by Princeton. If West had been a few kilowatts more the celebrity than he is, he might have been able to arrange for the firing of the president of the university, the way certain superstars in the National Basketball Association—Magic Johnson, Isaiah Thomas, Larry Bird, Michael Jordan—were able, if it pleased them, to have their coaches fired.

Pure scholarship, sheer power of intelligence glowing brightly in the classroom, is distinctly not what makes an academic celebrity or, if you prefer, superstar. What makes an academic celebrity, for the most part, is exposure, which is ultimately publicity. Exposure can mean appearing in the right extra-academic magazines or journals: *The New York Review of Books*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Atlantic Monthly*; *Harper's* and *The New Republic* possibly qualify, as do occasional cameo performances on the op-ed pages of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. Having one's face pop up on the right television and radio programs—PBS and NPR certainly, and enough of the right kinds of appearances on C-Span—does not hurt. A commercially successful, much discussed book represents good exposure. So does strong public alignment with the correct political causes.

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Harvey Mansfield, the neo-conservative political philosopher at Harvard, is a secondary academic celebrity of sorts, but not much in demand; Shelby Steele, a black professor of English who has been critical of various aspects of African-American politics, was always overlooked during the days when universities knocked themselves out to get black professors. Both men have been judged politically incorrect. The “renowned feminist” (in the words of princetoninfo.com) Elaine Showalter wrote television reviews for *People*, but it didn't help: a bit too vulgar, I suspect. Nor did the fact (also learned from princetoninfo.com) that she has been called “Camille Paglia with balls,” which is itself a thought one doesn't wish to contemplate overlong. The underlying and over-arching point is, to become an academic celebrity you have to promote yourself outside the academy, but in careful and subtle ways.

One might once have assumed that the culture of celebrity was chiefly about show business and the outer edges of the arts, occasionally touching on the academy (there cannot be more than twenty or so academic superstars). But it has also much altered intellectual life generally. The past ten years or so have seen the advent of the “public intellectual.” I have always felt uncomfortable with that adjective “public,” which, when first I saw it, I thought drained away much of the traditional meaning of intellectual. The root sense of an intellectual, I believe, is someone who is excited by and lives off and in ideas. An intellectual has traditionally been a person unaffiliated, which is to say someone un beholden to anything but the power of his or her ideas. Intellectuals used to free-lance, until fifty or so years ago, when jobs in the universities and in journalism began to open up to some among them. (Philip Rahv, the editor of *Partisan Review*, and Irving Howe, the editor of *Dissent*, broke the barrier when, without doctorates, they were accepted into the English Department at Brandeis University.) *Time* magazine used to be a safe if usually unhappy harbor for intellectuals with alimony problems or a taste for the expensive life.

Far from being devoted to ideas for their own sake, the intellectual equivalent of art for art's sake—and let us not pause to ask what art's sake is—the so-called public intellectual is usually someone who comments on what is in the news, in the hope of affecting policy, or events, or opinion in line with his own political position, or orientation. He isn't necessarily an intellectual at all, but merely someone who has read a few books, mastered a style, a jargon, and a maven's tone, and has a clearly demarcated political line.

But even when the public intellectual isn't purely tied to the news, or isn't thoroughly political, what he or she really is, or ought to be called, is a “publicity intellectual.” In Richard A. Posner's interesting book, *Public Intellectuals*, intellectuals are ranked by the number of media mentions they or their work have garnered, which, if I am correct about publicity being at the heart of the enterprise of the public intellectual, may be crude but is not foolish.⁹ Not knowledge, it turns out, but publicity is power.

The most celebrated intellectuals of our day have been those most skillful at gaining publicity for their writing and their pronouncements. Take, as a case very much in point, Susan Sontag. When Susan Sontag died at the end of last year, her obituary was front page news in *The New York Times*, and on the inside of the paper, it ran to a full page with five photographs, most of them carefully posed—a variety, it does not seem unfair to call it, of intellectual cheesecake. Will the current prime ministers of England or France receive equal space or pictorial coverage? Unlikely, I think. Why did Ms. Sontag, who was, let it be said, in many ways the pure type of the old intellectual—unattached to any institution, earning her living (apart from MacArthur Foundation and other grants) entirely from her ideas as she put them in writing—why, it seems worth asking in the context of the subject of celebrity, did she attract the attention she did?

I don't believe Susan Sontag's celebrity finally had much to do with the power or cogency of her ideas. Her most noteworthy idea was not so much an idea at all but a description of a style, a kind of reverse or anti-style, that went by the name of Camp and that was gay in its impulse. Might it have been her politics? Yes, I think politics had a lot to do with it, even though when she expressed herself on political subjects, she frequently got things mightily askew: During the Vietnam War she said that “the white race is the cancer of human history.”¹⁰ As late as the 1980s, much too late for anyone in the know, she called Communism “Fascism with a friendly face” (what do you suppose she found so friendly about it?). To cheer up the besieged people of Sarajevo, she brought them a production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. She announced in *The New Yorker* that the killing of 3,000 innocent people on 9/11 was an act that America had brought on itself.¹¹ As for the writing that originally brought her celebrity, she later

⁹ Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Susan Sontag “What's Happening in America,” *The Partisan Review* (Winter 1967): 57.

came to apologize for *Against Interpretation*, her most influential single book. I do not know any people who claim to have derived keen pleasure from her fiction. If all this is roughly so, why, then, do you suppose that Susan Sontag was easily the single most celebrated—the greatest celebrity—intellectual of our time?

With Cynthia Ozick's face and body, with Camille Paglia's face and body, yes, even with my stunning face and body, I don't think Ms. Sontag would quite have achieved the same celebrity. I think, that is, that her attractiveness as a young woman had a great deal to do with the extent of her celebrity; and she and her publisher took that (early) physical attractiveness all the way out. From reading Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock's biography *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon*, one gets a sense of how carefully and relentlessly she was promoted, especially by her publisher, Roger Straus.¹² I do not mean to say that Sontag was unintelligent, or talentless, but Straus, by having her always dramatically photographed, by sending angry letters to the editors of journals where she was ill-reviewed, by bringing out her books with the most careful accompanying orchestration, promoted this often difficult and unrewarding writer into something close to a household name with a face that was ready, so to say, to be Warholed. That Sontag spent her last years with Annie Leibowitz, herself the most successful magazine photographer of our day, seems somehow the most natural thing in the world. Even in the realm of the intellect, celebrities are not born but made, usually very carefully—as was, I think, Susan Sontag.

One of the richest themes in Leo Braudy's *The Frenzy of Renown* is that of the fame and celebrity of artists and, above all, writers. To sketch in a few bare strokes the richly complex story Braudy tells, writers went from serving power (in Rome) to serving God (in early Christendom) to serving patrons (in the eighteenth century) to serving themselves, with a careful eye cocked toward both the public and posterity (under Romanticism), to serving mammon, to a state of interesting confusion, which is where we are today, with celebrity affecting contemporary literature in what strikes me as a more and more significant way.

Writers are supposed to be aristocrats of the spirit, not promoters, hustlers, salesmen for their own work. Securing a larger audience for their work was not thought to be their problem. "Fit audience, though few," in John Milton's phrase, was all right, so long as the few were the most artistically alert, or aesthetically fit, few. Picture, I ask you, Lord Byron, Count Tolstoy, Charles Baudelaire at a lecturn at Barnes & Noble, C-Span camera turned on, flogging (wonderful word!) their own books. Impossible!

¹¹ Susan Sontag, "The Talk of the Town: Comment: Tuesday, and After," *The New Yorker* (24 September 2001): 32.

¹² Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock, *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon* (New York: Norton, 2000).

Some superior writers have been very careful caretakers of their careers. In a letter to one of his philosophy professors at Harvard, T. S. Eliot wrote that there were two ways to achieve literary celebrity in London: one was to appear often in a variety of publications; the other to appear seldom but always to make certain to dazzle when one did.¹³ Eliot, of course, chose the latter, and it worked smashing. But he was still counting on gaining his reputation through his actual writing. Now good work alone doesn't quite seem to make it; the publicity catapults need to be hauled into place, the walls of indifference stormed. Some writers have been able to steer shy from publicity altogether: Thomas Pynchon for one, J. D. Salinger for another (if he is actually still writing or yet considers himself a writer). But actively seeking publicity was thought for a writer, somehow, vulgar—at least it did when I began publishing.

Edmund Wilson, the great American literary critic, used to answer requests with a postcard that read:

Edmund Wilson regrets that it is impossible for him to: Read manuscripts, Write articles or books to order, Make statements for publicity purposes, Do any kind of editorial work, Judge literary contests, Give interviews, Conduct educational courses, Deliver lectures, Give talks or make speeches, Take part in writers' congresses, Answer questionnaires, Contribute or take part in symposiums or "panels" of any kind, Contribute manuscripts for sale, Donate copies of his books to Libraries, Autograph books for strangers, Allow his name to be used on letterheads, Supply personal information about himself, Supply photographs of himself, Supply opinions on literary or other subjects.

A fairly impressive list, I'd say. I have long admired Edmund Wilson for his range of intellectual interests and his work habits. When I was a young man, he supplied the model for me of how a literary man ought to carry himself. One of the things I personally find most impressive about his list is that everything Edmund Wilson clearly states he will not do, Joseph Epstein has now done, and more than once, and, like the young woman in the Häagen-Dazs commercial sitting on her couch with an empty carton of ice cream, I will do them all again.

I tell myself that I do these various things in the effort to acquire more readers. After all, one of the reasons I write, apart from pleasure in working out the aesthetic problems and moral questions presented by my subjects and in my stories, is to find the best readers. I also want to sell books, to make a few shekels, to please my publisher, to continue to be published in the future in a proper way. Having a high threshold for praise, I also don't in the least mind meeting strangers who tell me that they take some delight in my writing. But, more than all this, I have now come to think that writing away

¹³ T. S. Eliot, *Letters of T. S. Eliot, Vol. 1: 1898–1922*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt, 1989).

quietly, producing (the hope is) solid work, isn't any longer quite sufficient in a culture dominated by the boisterous spirit of celebrity. In an increasingly noisy cultural scene, with many voices and media competing for attention, one feels—perhaps incorrectly but nonetheless insistently—the need to make one's own small stir, however pathetic. So, on occasion, I have gone about tooting my own little paper horn, doing book tours, submitting to the comically pompous self-importance of interviews, and doing so many of the other things that Edmund Wilson didn't think twice about refusing to do.

"You're slightly famous, aren't you, Grandpa?" my then eight-year-old granddaughter once said to me. "I am slightly famous, Annabelle," I replied, "except no one knows who I am." This hasn't changed much over the years. But of course seeking celebrity in our culture is a mug's game, one you cannot hope to win. The only large, lumpy kind of big-time celebrity available, outside movie celebrity, is to be had through appearing fairly regularly on television. I once had the merest inkling of this fame when, walking along one sunny morning in downtown Baltimore, a red Mazda convertible screeched to a halt, the driver lowered his window, pointed a long finger at me, hesitated, and finally, the shock of recognition lighting up his face, yelled, "C-Span!"

I was recently asked, through e-mail, to write a short piece for a high price for a volume about the city of Chicago. When I agreed to do it, the editor of the volume, who is (I take it) young, told me how very pleased she was to have me among the volume's contributors. But she did have just one request. Before making things final, she wondered if she might see a sample of my writing. More than forty years in the business, I thought, echoing the character played by Zero Mostel in *The Producers*, and I'm still wearing the celebrity equivalent of a cardboard belt.

"Every time I think I am famous," Virgil Thomson said, "I have only to go out into the world."¹⁴ So it is, and so ought it probably to remain for writers, musicians, and visual artists who prefer to consider themselves, to put it as pretentiously as possible, *sérieux*. The comedian Richard Pryor once said that he would consider himself famous when people recognized him, as they recognized Bob Hope and Muhammed Ali, by his captionless caricature. That is certainly one clear criterion for celebrity. But the best criterion I've yet come across holds that you are celebrated, indeed famous, only when a crazy person imagines he is you. I especially like the fact that the penetrating and prolific author of this remark happens to go by the name of Anonymous.

¹⁴ Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: Da Capo, 1977).