Now You See Me, Now You Don't: Fanny Fern's Private Theatricals in *Ruth Hall; A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* (1854)

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When in 1851 the legendary American entertainment pioneer P. T. Barnum organized the American tour of Swedish singer Jenny Lind, he and his protégé could already draw on a cultural phenomenon established since the forties. The "angel in the house," this notorious female stereotype of the antebellum era, had taken the public stage. The private woman had become the object of a decidedly non-domestic, public attention. As Richard Brodhead has noted, "new female celebrities […] began to appear before audiences newly huge in scale, and to be *known* to publics much greater yet" (1989:276). Moreover, the 18-months American tour of our "Swedish nightingale" Jenny Lind

> consolidated enduring patterns of American mass-cultural stardom: the road tour with entourage, the mobbing of the star's vehicle and the surrounding of her hotel, the conversion of ticket acquisition into a high public drama, […] [and] the exposure of the well-guarded star in carefully arranged public appearances. (Brodhead 1989: 276)

One of the alert businessmen who, along with Barnum, recognized the business potential of the new female celebrities was Nathaniel Parker Willis, himself a celebrity of sorts, who had been a promoter of women writers in his highly successful journals since the 1840s. Seeing how successfully Jenny Lind toured the States, Willis apparently decided he wanted a piece of the cake for himself and published a book entitled *Memoranda of the Life of Jenny Lind* (1851), largely a compilation of press releases by P. T. Barnum. In a chapter on the star's "Private Habits and Manners," Willis reveals a thorough understanding of the specific appeals of the lady in a public context:

> The private life of Jenny Lind is a matter of universal inquisitiveness […] One wonders, as one looks upon her soft eyes, and her affectionate profusion of sunny hair, what Jenny's heart can be doing all this time. Is fame a substitute for the tender passion? She must have been desperately loved in her varied and bright path.
>
> (qtd. in Brodhead 285)

Willis was, and he assumed that his audience was, especially interested in the fascinating ambivalence of the private woman in public. She is in public and yet

she remains hidden. Her public appearance seems to permit the otherwise forbidden public gaze into the domestic sphere, while this public curiosity can never be quite satisfied, because the private becomes public, ceases to be private in the process of being exposed. The secret stops being a secret when it is revealed. As Brodhead shows, the appeal of the private spectacle in public lies basically in its visual economy:

> All of the spectacles we have considered strongly reinforce the habit of motionlessly seeing. When Jenny Lind was touring America, Barnum had another crew scouring Ceylon for elephants and other natural wonders which, reimported and publicly displayed, became his other great enterprise of 1851, Barnum's Great Asiatic Caravan, Museum and Menagerie — a show that opened a wonderworld to audiences willing to experience wonders in the passive or spectatorial mode. (Barnum arranged for Jenny Lind to review the circus parade in New York City; in other words, to appear in public as an exemplary watcher). (284-5)

Of course, all that I have said so far does not tell us much about the object being watched, the woman in public. Drawing on Brodhead's analysis I have focused on the exposers and watchers and have in a manner of speaking set the stage for the lady to appear on. A brief inspection of Fanny Fern's life and her autobiographical novel will now illustrate the way in which Fern, one of the most famous celebrities of the 1850s and 60s, was both circumscribed and enabled by her role as a private woman in public.

While Nathaniel Parker Willis was busy promoting famous women and at the same time promoting his own business, his younger sister Sara Payson Willis, who would soon become the famous Fanny Fern, was just about to leave a domestic setting in a decidedly disreputable way. Sara Willis had suffered a series of personal tragedies that culminated in the death of her husband, who died of typhoid fever and left her without any financial support (Warren 1992:76; Walker 1993:11). Her father and in-laws were apparently disinclined to help the young widow and her two daughters. In 1849 Sara reluctantly consented to a second marriage with a man she didn't love, and the marriage soon proved a disaster (Warren 83). In 1851, when her brother Nathaniel was occupied with Jenny Lind's "private habits and manners," Sara took a desperate step. With her two daughters, she left her husband, contacted a law firm and moved into a hotel (Walker 12). The result reads like a cynical commentary on the public

appearance of famous 19th century women. Sara's second husband, Samuel Farrington, in a newspaper advertisement publicly exposed his wife as having deserted him. Refusing to reimburse any loans that Sara might receive in his name, he renounced responsibility for his wife and her children (Warren 85-86). For Sara herself and her family such uncalled-for publicity must have been a painful embarrassment, which obviously led to an even greater alienation between her and her family.

After unsuccessfully trying to earn a living as a schoolteacher and as a seamstress, Sara started writing short newspaper articles, which she published in several Boston journals. When she asked her famous brother Nathaniel in New York for professional support, which — given his influential position in the publishing business as the "high priest of the feminine subculture" (Wood 1971:16) — he could have supplied easily, he flatly refused. In a letter answering her inquiry for help he told her that her sketches

> would do only in Boston. You overstrain the pathetic, and your humor runs into dreadful vulgarity sometimes. I am sorry that any editor knows that a sister of mine wrote some of these which you sent me. In one or two cases they touch very close on indecency. For God's sake, keep clear of that. (qtd. in Wood 15)

Willis' letter was to become a turning point in Sara's life. Deeply disappointed and hurt, she wrote on the letter "from Nathaniel Parker Willis when I applied for literary employment […] being at the time quite destitute" (qtd. in Wood 15). Sara kept the letter all her life. Having thus been shamefully publicized by her husband and barred from publicity by her brother, Sara sought a public career all the same and soon succeeded beyond all expectation. Under her pseudonym Fanny Fern she became the most famous and the best-paid columnist of her time.

In her first novel, *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* (1854), Fern tells the obviously biographical story of a young woman, who after a series of dire experiences and the loss of her beloved husband, is forsaken by her family and in-laws. Struggling for survival, she eventually remembers her writing skills and becomes a successful columnist. In the context of Fern's biography, *Ruth Hall* serves essentially as a "self-vindication" (Baym 1978:250) and as a revenge on her family and all who had betrayed her (Lang 1995:159). Her

brother Nathaniel appears as Ruth's brother Hyacinth, a ridiculously feminine dandy, who betrays his innocent sister's love and confidence. Sara's father becomes the hypocritical old miser and bigot Mr. Hall, and her mother-in-law haunts the whole book as a nosy and malicious old witch with false teeth and false hair. After Fern's pseudonym was lifted following the publication of *Ruth Hall*, it was predominantly the biographical nature of the book and the unflattering portrait of the family — especially that of the famous N. P. Willis — which turned the book into a *succès de scandale*. What I am especially interested in, however, is Fern's treatment of the emerging culture of exposure and visual consumption described at the outset of this paper.

Ruth Hall is very much a book about watching and more specifically about seeing behind masks, surfaces, and beyond superficial and conventional forms. In the short introduction to her novel, Fanny Fern (or the narrator) informs us about what we should expect of her book:

> *I PRESENT YOU* with my first continuous story. I do not dignify it by the name of "A Novel." I am aware that it is entirely at variance with all set rules for novel-writing […] I have avoided long introductions and descriptions, and have entered unceremoniously and unannounced, into people's houses, without stopping to ring the bell. Whether you will fancy this primitive mode of calling, whether you will like the company to which it introduces you, or – whether you will like the book at all, I cannot tell. Still, I cherish the hope that, somewhere in the length and breadth of the land, it may fan into a flame, in some tried heart, the fading embers of hope, well-nigh extinguished by wintry fortune and summer friends. (3)

Fern's offhand rejection of the dignity of a literary form such as the novel is only partly the gesture of modesty that it might seem to be at first glance (Opfermann 1996:140). Rather, she rejects the novel because she has something to offer that is better than what a novel could ever supply, which is the truth. When she tells us she has "entered unceremoniously and unannounced, into people's houses", she implies that she shows what domestic life *is really like*, and that she spares us the part which we usually find in novels: the "long introductions and descriptions". Entering unannounced and unobserved into people's private sphere and even into their private thoughts then is exactly what the narrator in *Ruth Hall* does all the time. She overhears private conversations, she reads people's minds and incessantly exposes the villains' duplicity. One particular

chapter even begins with the charming announcement "*LET US PEEP* into the doctor's [the father-in-law's] sitting room" (128). However, the narrator is not the only one in *Ruth Hall* who likes a peep once in while. In a soliloquy overheard by the narrator, Ruth's mother-in-law remembers how she inspected Ruth's private belongings: "I've been peeping into her bureau-drawers today. What is the use of all these ruffles on her under-clothes, I'd like to know?" (18).

While the mother-in-law's curiosity quite obviously serves to disqualify her character as jealous and materialistic, the narrator herself throughout the text remains uncensored for her curiosity. It is after all the narrator who is watching the watcher all the time and who exposes the watcher as a prying and meddlesome person in the process. The novel is therefore much less critical of the peeping disposition *per se* than of the moral stature of the person observing and the person being observed. Narrator and mother-in-law appear as competing observers in search of a hidden truth that might compromise the object of their curiosity.

The single most frequently and most thoroughly observed person of the novel is, as the title suggests, the heroine Ruth Hall herself who starts out as a person misunderstood and misinterpreted within the private sphere and who finally succeeds in making her true self public. But Ruth's true self, which becomes the object of public attention only when Ruth becomes a successful writer within the context of the plot, is of course made visible to the reader right from the start. In the second chapter, for instance, it is said of young Ruth that "Simple child! She was unconscious that, in the freedom of that atmosphere where a 'prophet out of his own country is honored,' her lithe form had rounded into symmetry and grace" (15). That Ruth is beautiful and even a little prophet is only one part of the information we get here. It is the fact that she is unconscious of being beautiful, that she is beautiful without knowing it and without wanting to be beautiful that makes the picture complete. Ruth's "unconsciousness" serves as proof that she does not pretend and that she does not calculate on her beauty. Her "unconsciousness" thus signifies an authentic (and thus naive, or in

terms of a literary paradigm, sentimental) mode of communication, in which the aspect of intentionality or even the aspect of consciousness is denied.

Throughout the novel, this mode of communication, or the fantasy of an authentic and direct communication without any loss and without the danger of misunderstanding and misinterpretation is symbolized by the body, the material and the self-evident. There is a wonderful scene, when the old lady inspects Ruth's new and beautiful country house, finds nothing objectionable, and finally reaches the nursery:

> The old lady begins to think she must give it up; when, luckily, her eye falls on a crouching "Venus," in the corner. Saints and angels! why, she has never been to the dress-makers! There's a text, now! What a pity there is no appreciative audience to see the glow of indignation with which those half-averted eyes regard the undraped goddess! (35)

It is quite clearly Ruth herself, her natural and authentic, her "naked" beauty which is symbolized in the crouching Venus, while the old Lady exemplifies society and its attendant dangers: The mother-in-law needs "an appreciative audience to see [her] indignation," which implies that even her indignation is intended, or should I say, pretended. The "undraped goddess" on the other hand is perfectly self-sufficient. Hidden in the corner of the nursery, she obviously does not want to be seen, nor need to be seen in order to assert her beauty.

Fern's ideal of direct and authentic communication can be seen as an element common to sentimental literature of the nineteenth century. What makes Fern's case especially interesting, however, is that her fantasy of communicative simplicity, authenticity and purity is situated right in the middle a rapidly growing culture and entertainment industry, in which pretension, make-belief, or, for that matter, fictionality and irony have become characteristic traits of communication. Moreover, this entertainment industry becomes the setting of the second half of the book. In one of the overt attacks against the entertainment business, Fern has one of the book's heroes complain:

> Would I write long descriptions of the wardrobe of foreign *prima donnas*, who bring their cracked voices, and reputations to our American market, and 'occupy suites of rooms lined with satin, and damask, and velvet,' and goodness knows what, and give their reception soirees, at which they '*affably notice*' our toadying first citizens? By Jupiter! Why shouldn't they be 'affable'? Don't they come over here for our money and

> patronage? […] in the name of George Washington and common sense, let it not be taken as a national exponent. There are some few Americans left, who prefer ipecac in homœopathic doses. (161)

While everything about "the foreign prima donnas" is false and superficial, it is really the man who celebrates them who is the target of the attack. Fern's cultural critique thus returns to a very familiar and private setting. The foreign prima donna with the cracked voice and the cracked reputation is no one else but our Swedish nightingale Jenny Lind and the man who writes long descriptions of her wardrobe is Fern's Brother Nathaniel Parker Willis.

The patriotic and nationalistic coloring of the hero's critique suggests that the longing for purity and authenticity implies a fear of contamination, for which Fern had much reason in her own career. Research on Fern has shown that she worked very much in the same business as her brother and P. T. Barnum did (Kelley 1984:3-7). Susan Geary for instance characterizes J. C. Derby, the publisher of her first book *Fern Leaves*, as — exactly! — "the P. T. Barnum of book selling" (381-382). Robert Bonner, Fern's publisher and friend from 1855 until her death in 1872 has been described as "'the most blatant' of the journalists […] and the man who, together with Barnum and Beecher, was 'inventing the modern art of ballyhoo'" (William Charvat qtd. in Lang 158).

By bringing Fern close to the very culture of fashion and entertainment she struggles to criticize, I do not mean to belittle her work as a feminist and a social critic. I rather suggest that the effectiveness of Fern's public exposure of her "true self" can best be understood in the context of a discourse which is characterized by an increasing fear of the loss of authenticity, a fear of contamination and of manipulation. After all, the authentic, the original, is precisely the thing most desperately sought after in a society which is increasingly characterized by mass production, by public "images," and by complex and obscure modes of indirect communication. Fanny Fern's authentic voice is thus in a very real sense the product of the emerging systems of mass communication, the product of that which that voice criticizes. By denying her own entanglement in an increasingly complex system of communication and by excluding the possibility of misinterpretation and misunderstanding by projecting it as a question of morality,

Fanny Fern succeeded in making her voice distinct and audible. The assumed simplicity and the purity which she endorsed as proof of authenticity on the other hand, marked the limits of her criticism.

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