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Nothing Personal: James Baldwin, Richard Avedon, and the Pursuit of Celebrity

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Abstract: This article reflects on literary celebrity through an examination of James Baldwin's artistic career, especially his collaboration with American photographer Richard Avedon in a book entitled *Nothing Personal*. Baldwin's case is used to analyze a changing publishing world, which has been characterized for the last few years by a form of indifference toward writers of serious literature.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Richard Avedon, literary celebrity, literary publishing

I came into publishing in the mid-1980s at a time when there was a great push for book promotion. Waterstones was expanding, bookshop readings were all the rage, and Granta *was transforming itself into an influential magazine and starting to make lists: "Best British Authors Under 40," etc. The Booker Prize was being televised live, and there was significant media interest; you might even be asked onto* Newsnight. *Among the television book programmes I took part in were ones with Sidney Sheldon and Jack Higgins as my co-interviewees. My first book tour was with Pete Townsend of The Who, a really bizarre introduction into the world of literature—as it transpired, it was more a baptism into the world of celebrity.*

Around the same time, in the summer of 1985, I sat in the south of France where I was supposed to be working on a BBC documentary about James Baldwin, and one evening Baldwin asked me to read the manuscript of his new book. He couldn't find a publisher. The book had been repeatedly turned down. So, of course, I sat through the night and read it. It wasn't

good. Baldwin was on his heels. Publishing, promotion, and touring felt like things of the past for him. He seemed quite far removed from the heady days of the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, it was tempting to think of Gloria Swanson in Sunset Boulevard*; there was a quality of the film about the scene, especially when Baldwin said to me, "I'll soon be making my comeback."*

I returned to London, as well as the novelty of accustoming myself to promotion and publicity at Faber and Faber, where the media offices, as opposed to those of the editorial staff, seemed to be the most active hub of the building. It has continued thus. Publicity and promotion are what matter now in publishing. Baldwin's being turned down—mid-career—is now a more frequent occurrence. Reputation means little. The seeds of present-day problems were all sown back then.

However, one thing that was fast fading then, and isn't apparent now at all, is celebrity. Like Gloria Swanson, Baldwin's celebrity couldn't secure him a contract. And he was a celebrity. I spent time with him in Nice, in New York, in London. He was a star, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. People didn't know who he was, or what he was, but they knew he was famous. Today, I don't think of writers as being celebrities or making comebacks. Which is just as well, for celebrity is toxic and leads one away from the desk and in the direction of the cameras.

It's these thoughts that led me to put together this essay, which was delivered as The Graham Storey Lecture at Cambridge University on 10 February 2014.

It is clear from the explosion of Creative Writing courses that are on offer in British universities, and the continued demand for such degrees in the United States, including the increasingly popular, if somewhat baffling, Ph.D. in Creative Writing, that despite an ongoing crisis in the publishing industry, and statistics which clearly demonstrate a downturn in our general literacy and appetite for literary fiction, young people still wish to be exposed to the craft and discipline of writing in the hope that writing—a vocation that suggests independence and the ability to set one's own hours and work at home—might provide them with a career of some kind. But, as I've suggested, in a culture that is increasingly less wedded to literature as a mirror into which we might peer to learn

about the society around us, sales of literary books are falling. The harsh truth is that sales of literary fiction have always represented the smallest section of the fiction market. Approximately 55% of all fiction sold is romance fiction; then, in descending order of sales, we have mystery fiction, science fiction and fantasy, and right at the bottom of the pile, literary fiction.

Publishers hope that the more promotion they bestow upon an author the greater the chances are that this attention will translate into sales. Publishers have always operated in this way. The favoured authors may well be exposed to broadsheet interviews, appearances on radio and television programmes, reviews in the press, bookshop signings, and invitations to speak at literary conferences and festivals. In fact, favoured or otherwise, these days all authors are contractually expected to participate in this circus, but because the column inches in our newspapers that are dedicated to books are shrinking, and because there are hardly any television or radio programmes devoted to literary fiction, most literary authors are published with a hopeful smile from their editors, and perhaps a glass of wine, and thereafter they had better accustom themselves to silence.

Today, in order to achieve any kind of attention for their soon-to-be-published books, authors of literary works will inevitably have to do some of the promotion themselves. Creating a website or a blog, assiduously soliciting blurbs from one's friends or from writers that one admires, or releasing a YouTube video of oneself talking about the book—these and other stratagems have, in recent years, become quite common. In this sense, we've gone back over a century to a time when Mark Twain and Walt Whitman would write their own blurbs and reviews and eagerly distribute images of themselves that might generate approving gossip and, hopefully, sales. Generally speaking, most authors feel that there is something unseemly about attempting to seduce a readership with this kind of self-promoting lap dance. It makes navigating the already difficult interface between the dignified solitude necessary for literary productivity and the demands of a modern business driven by capitalism all the more problematic. Today's authors, however, know that, with the help of their agents, publicists, and editors, visibility

can mean the continuation of a career that might otherwise atrophy in this culture of general indifference toward the dignity of the word. The twenty-first-century author doesn't want to be a celebrity and find himself on the pages of the tabloids. He doesn't expect to be a regular guest on television chat shows. Nobody anticipates emulating Arthur Miller and marrying Marilyn Monroe. (Or a modern day equivalent—say, Lindsay Lohan or even Miley Cyrus.) Forget the movie premieres and after-parties. Today's authors just want to write, be published, and be read.

Contemporary authors who are fortunate enough to generate some publicity and some sales will not, in most cases, be troubled by questions related to managing their fame and preventing it from corroding into literary celebrity. (The distinction is somewhat arbitrary, but I'm assuming that while fame might focus on the work, the object of celebrity is the person, the personality.) While the quality of one's work might deliver fame, the fact is, for the last couple of decades or so, the public appetite for celebrity no longer includes writers of literary fiction. There are, of course, some celebrities who write books. I'm thinking of Nigella Lawson, Bill Clinton, James Franco, David Jason, and Sir Alex Ferguson. And Morrissey, who is now, alongside Aristotle and Milton, published by Penguin Classics (which tells us more about the hopelessness of modern publishing than it does about Morrissey). But today's celebrity writers are not really writers in the literary sense. Some of them are not even famous, for celebrity often tips a nod toward fame in its most pitiful manifestation: the past tense. However, fifty years ago, when literature often *was* the mirror we peered into to see ourselves, it was possible for literary writers to be both famous and, if they chose to mismanage their fame and bathe in the footlights of adulation, perhaps even become celebrities.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the nature of the culture on both sides of the Atlantic was such that it took John Osborne far more seriously than Alma Cogan, and Norman Mailer at least as seriously as the Beach Boys. The most successful writers of the time had the opportunity to go beyond being just famous writers; they could become spokespeople, cultural commentators, oracles of their time. As a result,

they became talk show celebrities, ran for office, addressed the nation in print, hobnobbed with politicians, and the messy nature of their own private lives was often publicly displayed. However, in nearly every case in which a writer stopped being the gatekeeper of his or her own fame, and allowed him- or herself to become a celebrity, there seemed to be a concomitant falling off of talent and a loss of direction.

In late 1964, James Baldwin, together with renowned photographer Richard Avedon, published a collaborative book called *Nothing Personal*. At the time, Baldwin was a forty-year-old man who had spent the greater part of his late twenties and thirties living in France. Born in Harlem in 1924, the eldest of nine children, he grew up and went to school in New York City through the tough years of the Depression and spent much of his time as a lonely, somewhat sensitive child in the library or church, where he sought both an escape and an alternative home. By the time he was ready to leave school it was clear to young Baldwin that he wanted to be a writer, but such an ambition seemed preposterous for a black teenage boy in the US of the early 1940s. He sought guidance from Richard Wright, who was then living downtown in the Village and who, with the publication of *Native Son* in 1940, had become one of the most famous writers in America. Wright was generous toward the young boy, and secured Baldwin a fellowship that enabled him to continue work on a novel, some of which he had shown to Wright. But then Wright, who was fed up with and humiliated by the racial climate of the US, suddenly left and relocated to Paris. A few years later, in 1948, a similarly disillusioned twenty-four-year-old Baldwin arrived in France with just forty dollars to his name.

For most of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Baldwin struggled to survive in Paris. He lived hand-to-mouth, bouncing between a series of cheap hotels, writing book reviews, borrowing money that he often forgot to repay, and all the while working on a novel. He lived in relative anonymity away from the literary world of the US, but that changed in 1953 with the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The novel received good, but hardly ecstatic, reviews, but the novelty of a negro writer in his twenties publishing a first work of fiction with Knopf certainly attracted notice. In 1956, his second novel,

Giovanni's Room, became something of a *cause célèbre*, concerning as it did a homosexual relationship, and not featuring any black characters. Baldwin's essays, collected as *Notes of a Native Son*, won him an even wider audience than that for his fiction, but it was the publication of the novel *Another Country* in 1962 and the non-fiction work *The Fire Next Time* in 1963 that catapulted him to national and international fame. By this stage Baldwin had already left the relative tranquility of France and returned to the US where, by the time he was forty, there was no question at all as to whom the most famous coloured writer in the world was and, it could be argued, the most famous writer in America. Baldwin reveled in his new visibility; he was a man in demand, a famous writer whose presence was desired at every party, a man who was continually invited to mount the platform, and he always appeared to be happy to oblige.

Nothing Personal was published in a large format, with four short pieces by Baldwin (the longest being a little over 2000 words, the shortest a mere 1000 words) slipped in between Avedon's huge, full-page portraits. The early images in the text are of random couples on their wedding day at New York's City Hall, and the concluding images are of anonymous people posing in the ocean. The very last image in the book is of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, young African American and Caucasian people posing with rather stern but dignified faces. However, the main body of the book is made up of portraits of famous people, among them Billy Graham, the Everly Brothers, a naked Allen Ginsberg, George Wallace, former President Eisenhower, Malcolm X, Arthur Miller, Bertrand Russell, and Dorothy Parker. The longest, and perhaps the most disturbing, sequence in the book is a series of photographs of patients in a mental institution, but overall one is left with the impression that there is little real coherence to the striking images, either sequentially or thematically.

Baldwin's four short texts are of little assistance. The best writing is in the early part of his first piece, when he recalls holding a television remote, flicking through channels, and becoming mesmerized by the advertisements. Incisive, acerbic, and witty, he skewers white middle-class America's fear of imperfection, death, and intimacy:

> [S]quare-jawed youngsters dancing, other square-jawed youngsters, armed with guitars, or backed by bands, howling; all of this—and so much more!—punctuated by the roar of great automobiles, overtaking gangsters, the spatter of tommy-guns mowing them down, the rise of the organ as the Heroine braces herself to Tell All, the moving smile of the housewife who has just won a fortune in metal and crockery; news—news? from where?—dropping into this sea with the alertness and relevancy of pebbles, sex wearing an aspect so implacably dispiriting that even masturbation (by no means mutual) seems one of the possibilities that vanished in Eden, and murder one's last hope—sex of an appalling coyness, often in the form of a prophylactic cigarette being extended by the virile male toward the aluminum and cellophane girl. They happily blow smoke into each other's face, jelly beans, brilliant with desire, grillwork gleaming; perhaps—poor, betrayed exiles—they are trying to discover if, behind all that grillwork, either of them has a tongue. (Baldwin and Avedon)

Thereafter, the narrative starts to lose its way as Baldwin begins to recycle old sermons in florid language: "It has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within." Eventually, the fire and brimstone oratory of the first text sputters and comes to a merciful halt with a bout of somewhat incoherent grumbling that, these days, nobody sings on the streets of New York. Baldwin's three remaining contributions are little more than a series of gushing clichés about the "loveless nation," Kennedy's assassination, "the unloved streets," being "trapped among strangers," the horrors of New York City's architecture, and our unloved children (Baldwin and Avedon). The final short piece is so mystifying that its opening deserves to be quoted in full:

> *'The light that's in your eyes/Reminds me of the skies/That shine above us every day'*—so wrote a contemporary lover, out of God knows what agony, what hope, and what despair. But he saw the light in the eyes, which is the only light there is in the

> world, and honored it and trusted it; and will always be able to find it; since it is always there, waiting to be found. One discovers the light in darkness, that is what darkness is for; but everything in our lives depends on how we bear the light. It is necessary, while in darkness, to know that there is a light somewhere, to know that in oneself, waiting to be found, there is a light. What the light reveals is danger, and what it demands is faith. Pretend, for example that you were born in Chicago and have never had the remotest desire to visit Hong Kong, which is only a name on a map for you; pretend that some convulsion, sometimes called accident, throws you into connection with a man or a woman who lives in Hong Kong; and that you fall in love. Hong Kong will immediately cease to be a name and become the center of your life. And you may never know how many people live in Hong Kong. But you will know that one man or one woman lives there without whom you cannot live. And this is how our lives are changed, and this is how we are redeemed. (Emphasis in original)

Written at the height of Baldwin's fame, and in the midst of Avedon's own prominence as a high fashion photographer for *Harper's Bazaar*, the book's fundamental clumsiness, populated as it is by Avedon's somewhat didactic images and Baldwin's rambling text, suggests two creative artists merely rushing through the motions to fulfill a commission that might deliver them to even more media attention and celebrity. Certainly, drama critic Robert Brustein, in his coruscating review in the *New York Review of Books*, seemed to think so. Under the ironic heading, "Everybody Knows My Name"—a play on Baldwin's cleverly titled 1961 book of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name*—the review, from its very first paragraph, fires with both barrels:

> Of all the superfluous non-books being published this winter for the Christmas luxury trade, there is none more demoralizingly significant than a monster volume called "Nothing Personal". Manufactured in Switzerland by a

> special process, boxed and unpaginated, set between snow-white covers with sterling silver titles, and measuring eleven by fourteen inches in size, this tome consists of enormous photographs by Richard Avedon and alternating commentary by James Baldwin, the text set in huge type with about an inch of space between each of the lines. I stress the physical makeup of the book because it reveals the book's ambitions: no expense has been spared to induce an awe-inspiring effect. One is obviously supposed to handle such a volume with unspeakable reverence, similar to that humility of spirit with which Charlton Heston held Cecil B. DeMille's papier-mâché commandments upon descending from his Hollywood Mount Sinai. But for all the money that went into both productions, the revelations of both are equally synthetic. "Nothing Personal" pretends to be a ruthless indictment of contemporary America, but the people likely to buy this extravagant volume are the subscribers to fashion magazines, while the moralistic authors of the work are themselves pretty fashionable, affluent, and chic.

While it soon becomes apparent that Brustein has no time whatsoever for Avedon, who he accuses of false editorializing and staging pictures, the real source of his anger—and disappointment—is Baldwin, who, he claims, interrupts the photographs "from time to time, like a punchy and pugnacious drunk awakening from a boozy doze during a stag movie, to introduce his garrulous, irrelevant, and by now predictable comments on how to live, how to love, and how to build Jerusalem." Brustein admits that Baldwin's criticism of American life was once "biting and direct," but he now accuses him of squeezing out "empty rhetoric" in a predictable manner and being little more than a "salvation peddler" who is motivated by opportunism. Furthermore, by choosing to lend his name to this enterprise, Brustein claims that Baldwin fails to see that he is part and parcel of the very things he is criticizing. As Brustein puts it, "the writer is letting the times take advantage of him." The implication is that Baldwin is doing little more than embracing

a glossy coffee table celebrity by trading real observation and thought for flabby generalizations. Brustein's overall tone is one of indignant lament: "The author of 'Notes of a Native Son' was a highly aware and complicated individual; the author of 'Nothing Personal', and the rest of his recent writings, is merely a self-constituted Symbol, bucking hard for the rank of Legend."

Clearly what disturbs Brustein is the spectacle of a gifted author who is prepared to debase his calling in exchange for cheap celebrity. In his conclusion, Brustein pulls no punches:

> "Nothing Personal" shows us an honorable tradition of revolt gone sour, given over to fame and ambition, discredited by shadowy motives, twisted by questionable ideas, turned into a theatrical gesture by café society performers. The participation of Richard Avedon in this hypocritical charade is not of very great moment, since Avedon's photography, whether he is blandishing or subverting his models, still remains an arm of show business. But the participation of James Baldwin signifies the further degeneration of a once courageous and beautiful dissent.

Brustein was not the only vociferous critic of the book, but he was certainly the most acerbic. However, what he probably didn't know was the extent of the Baldwin/Avedon friendship. Indeed, the book may well have been little more than a series of "questionable ideas" produced by two artists intoxicated by "fame and ambition," but its roots lay in genuine friendship. Baldwin and Avedon were teenage school friends at De Witt Clinton High School in the Bronx, where they worked together on the school magazine, the *Magpie*, and where Baldwin was generally recognized to be the brightest boy in the school, but also the poorest. Avedon once invited his black school friend home to his family's East Eighty-Fifth Street apartment. The doorman, however, refused to take Baldwin up in the lift, instead pointing him to the staircase. When an embarrassed Avedon told his mother what had happened, she stepped out into the hallway, called the elevator, and when the doors opened punched the doorman in the face. Shortly

after they left school, the two boys conceived the idea of doing a book, with photographs by Avedon and text by the young Baldwin, called *Harlem's Doorways*. Nothing came of the project, but in 1943 Avedon was in Baldwin's mother's apartment taking photographs of a teenage Baldwin and his sister sitting at the kitchen table in the wake of their father's death, and in 1945 the young photographer took a startling portrait of his twenty-one-year-old friend. The two men kept in touch, and as the 1940s turned into the 1950s, and the 1950s led, in turn, to the 1960s, their individual prominence did little to disrupt their affection for each other.

1963 was a tumultuous year for Baldwin. In January *The Fire Next Time* was published and soon became a national bestseller. Its success resulted in Baldwin appearing on practically every talk show in America, and in May his face was on the cover of *Time* magazine. Later that same month, Attorney General Robert Kennedy asked Baldwin to organize a group of black leaders to meet with him at his Central Park South apartment. On May 24th, Baldwin gathered together Lorraine Hansberry, Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, Kenneth Clark, Clarence Jones, Baldwin's brother David, and Jerome Smith, a twenty-five-year-old who had been badly beaten on a freedom ride, and they sat down with the younger Kennedy for what turned out to be a somewhat fractious meeting. (Four years later, Kennedy recalled the heated confrontation and was dismissive of Baldwin, claiming that the author had pestered him for the opportunity to meet and that in the end "it obtained a lot of publicity for him . . . [s]o he played it" [qtd. in Campbell 166].) In June 1963, Civil Rights activist Medger Evers was killed, and an exhausted and edgy Baldwin went on vacation to Puerto Rico. It was here, on June 23rd, that Avedon flew to meet him and suggested that the time might be right for the two school friends, who were now American cultural icons, to finally do some kind of book together. After much talking and drinking, Baldwin suggested that they divide their book into three sections: the America that refuses to see; insanity; and redemption. It was agreed that Baldwin would provide an essay and Avedon would go south and shoot some more photographs.

Of course, nothing happened. Baldwin left Puerto Rico and continued travelling, speaking, and being a celebrity. This was the year of the March on Washington, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Baldwin was absolutely *not* writing, and so Avedon, who had kept his part of the deal and travelled south to take photographs, was understandably frustrated. He was taking the project seriously. In fact, when travelling in the south, he found himself staying at "a motel in Louisiana when the phone rang late one night and a voice on the other end said, 'We know where you are, nigger lover, and we're coming for you'" (Cohen 285). Avedon and his assistant decided to take no chances and immediately vacated their accommodation and sought refuge in the East Louisiana State Mental Hospital, a sojourn that produced the sequence of photographs in the book devoted to mental patients. However, there was still no sign of a text from Baldwin. Eventually, Avedon flew to Finland, where Baldwin was attending a writers' conference in Lahti, a few miles outside of Helsinki. Once there, Avedon sat and talked with his friend late into the night as the two men drank, and in this manner he teased the four short pieces out of Baldwin.

Unsurprisingly, there were those who objected to Brustein's attack, and the *New York Review of Books* printed two letters, one in support of the critic, and one from Truman Capote that attempted to refute many of Brustein's claims. Capote, who quickly identified himself as a friend of Avedon and the writer who had provided the text for Avedon's first collection of photographs, *Observations*, was almost apoplectic in his indignation. He concluded that,

> of Brustein's many injustices, the most unjust is in his depicting Avedon as merely an "affluent" fashion-photographer whose main motivation in assembling this book was to exploit the American desire for self-denigration and, so to say, cash in. Balls. First of all, if the publisher of this book sold *every* copy, he would still lose money. Neither Baldwin nor Avedon will make twenty cents. Brustein is entitled to think that Avedon

> and Baldwin are misguided; but believe me he is quite mistaken when he suggests, as he repeatedly does, that they are a pair of emotional and financial opportunists. (emphasis in original)

What's most notable about the Capote intervention is the lack of any serious defence of Baldwin, which is perhaps unsurprising as he no doubt recognized some of the same fallibility for the bright lights of celebrity in his own personality. His letters of the period to his lover, Newton Arvin, also reveal what Capote thought about Baldwin as a writer. In July 1962 he wrote, "I loathe Jimmy's fiction: it is crudely written and of a balls-aching boredom" (352). In November of the same year, he appeared to be a little more generous with regard to Baldwin's non-fiction, writing: "He is a mysterious mixture of real talent and real fraud" (366).

All of this melodrama occurred fifty years ago, in the culture of a different era. Baldwin, Capote, Gore Vidal, Mailer, Osborne, Kingsley Amis, John Braine, and others went beyond mere fame and achieved the kind of notoriety with which today's writers will most likely never have to concern themselves. Today's literary authors are racked with anxiety over questions such as: How is it possible to simply become visible? How does a lover of words, images, metre, metaphor, and ambiguity survive in a world of texting and Twitter and e-books? These are serious questions, but at least today's authors need worry no more about the perils of being too visible and toppling into the eager arms of celebrity. There is no longer any necessity to adopt the vigilant, coy position of a Salinger or a Beckett for, simply put, people are not that interested. Which is just as well, for mounting the stage and turning oneself into what Baldwin, of all people, once called "a dancing dog" (Baldwin, "Personal"), with the spotlight in one's face, is the worst possible thing that a writer can do to oneself. With the light in one's face one sees nothing and, before setting pen to paper, writers *have* to be able to see something—their audience, their society. Standing slightly offstage in the wings and making the occasional judicious appearance would seem to be a much safer option, as opposed to sitting centre stage hooked up to a radio mic and waiting for the

cameras to roll. If there's anything at all to be gained from this modern age of increased indifference toward authors, it's that there are likely to be fewer casualties of literary celebrity than in times past. After all, as I've suggested, in nearly every case in which authors have allowed themselves to stoop to celebrity there has been a concomitant falling off in the quality of their literary work.

In 1972, critic Benjamin DeMott, reviewing *No Name in the Street*, a new book of essays from Baldwin, observed that "the spokesman becoming a celebrity among celebrities need not forsake his cause, isn't obliged to care less than before about his people. But his life circumstances must [inevitably] change" (64). Indeed, they must, for, as we see in the case of Baldwin, the dangers of a move to full visibility is that one forsakes one's acuity of vision and develops a writing style that begins to parody itself. As DeMott puts it, the sentences begin to sound as though they are "winded by too many summonses to intensity" (64). When he was a schoolboy at De Witt Clinton High School, Baldwin contributed to the 1941 graduation yearbook by stating that his ambition was to be a "Novelist-Playwright." In the space below this declaration a line or two was set aside for a personal comment; Baldwin wrote, "Fame is the spur and—ouch!" (qtd. in Compaore 197).

Today, how many young people would be deluded enough to embark upon a potential career as an author of literary fiction with "fame" or celebrity as the goal? The world has changed. Every schoolboy or schoolgirl knows that models, actors, pop stars, footballers, and chefs are celebrities, not writers. And actually, these days, writing a novel is no big deal. After all, William Shatner has done so, as has Ivanka Trump, Martina Navratilova, Joan Collins, and other real celebrities. Today, the ambitious schoolboy who burns with desire to be a literary novelist, but who also declares that fame and celebrity appeal to him, would very quickly be escorted down the school corridor for an urgent consultation with the careers officer. Young people continue to sign up for Creative Writing courses in vast numbers, and those lucky enough to write a book and find a publisher know full well that to avoid being published into resounding silence

they will have to work hard to achieve some visibility. Being featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, running for political office, writing letters to broadsheet newspapers addressing the state of the nation—this kind of visibility is highly unlikely, and it may well be a blessing in disguise that, with very few exceptions, our culture is no longer as interested as it once was in the personalities of literary writers. Baldwin and Avedon put together *Nothing Personal* in an era in which Mailer could unashamedly, and successfully, publish a book called *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) and John Cheever could do adverts for Rolex watches and boldly declare "I'm a brand name, like Cornflakes, or Shredded Wheat" (qtd. in Cheever ix). In the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and even 1980s, the personality of writers was to be celebrated, at least as much as the work, and authors were seduced into becoming part of the buzz and background noise of the culture. If they did so, however, there were plenty of Brusteins in the wings waiting to pounce. Today's authors are forced into becoming, like Twain, Whitman, and even Dickens, energetic self-publicists, but the siren call of celebrity will, in all likelihood, trouble few. Sometimes indifference really is a blessing.

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