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## Embracing Multiplicity: Autobiographical Personae in Ruth Hall

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Embracing Multiplicity: Autobiographical Personae in *Ruth Hall*

Gina Marie Schneck

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Embracing Multiplicity: Autobiographical Personae in *Ruth Hall*

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Sara Payson Willis Eldredge Farrington Parton, more famously known as the elusive Fanny Fern, employs three autobiographical personae mediated by fiction in her debut novel, *Ruth Hall*: (1) Ruth Hall, the novel's protagonist; (2) Floy, the fictional Ruth's pseudonym; and (3) Fanny Fern, Parton's real-life pseudonym and the name under which *Ruth Hall* was published. Together these personae assert a fragmented presence that incorporates various voices and lives, allowing for exploration, growth, and interactivity.

Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical contract outlines three specific guidelines for autobiography—that it be a narrative, that it explore personal history, and that it link author and protagonist. *Ruth Hall* participates in two-thirds of Lejeune's contract, though Parton's conscious fictionalization demands a revisiting of the autobiographical contract, revealing the impossibility of recording truth as well as the impracticality of a unitary self.

Through her use of autobiographical personae in *Ruth Hall* and in her personal life, Parton succeeds in rewriting the narrative of domesticity for the nineteenth-century American woman. Her self-conceptualization embraces multiplicity as she demands to be seen as “more than.”

Keywords: Fanny Fern, Ruth Hall, Sara Payson Parton, personae, autobiography theory, domesticity, self, presence, voice, Philippe Lejeune, Susan Harris, Daniel Schmidt

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### Embracing Multiplicity: Autobiographical Personae in *Ruth Hall*

Sara Payson Willis Eldredge Farrington Parton, like other well-educated women, especially those who wrote, craved a self-defined voice. Intriguingly, Parton developed such a voice by writing pseudonymously as “Fanny Fern,” and that voice propelled her into one of the most profitable careers enjoyed by any nineteenth-century American journalist. At the height of her fame, she published the novel *Ruth Hall*, a novel that married autobiography and fiction by employing three fictionalized yet autobiographical voices—Ruth Hall, Floy, and Fanny Fern. According to Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical contract (an early addition to autobiography theory), autobiography and fiction exist as separate creatures and when combined, confuse readers. Lejeune insists on autobiographers telling the “truth” as they craft autobiographical selves, though—as subsequent theorists demonstrate—his central argument is problematic. For example, Linda Anderson reveals the difficulty of accurately representing the self, declaring that “in the end, there is only writing” (12). Asserting that lives are far more paradoxical than the autobiographical “I” can capture, Anderson reasons that no autobiographer can fully know the self that she or he narrates; therefore, no autobiographer can possibly tell the truth. Robert Sayre is even more suspicious of the “autobiographical self,” declaring that “the person who writes is never exactly the same as the person who lived. Every autobiographer is, in a way, a ‘ghost’” (16). Parton seems to intuit that she cannot avoid fictionalizing self as she pens her story, and so instead of dodging issues of “truth,” she capitalizes on what might be called fiction inevitabilities by fragmenting the self into separate voices and lives inhabiting overlapping worlds.

Daniel Schmidt argues in “Writing a Self” that Parton’s multiple voices (which I term *personae* to emphasize their interactive wholeness) create a space for self-representation while shielding her safely behind what he terms “layers of fictionality”—layers enabling Parton to

protect her core identity while simultaneously controlling her public, constructed selves (19).

Susan Harris situates her discussion of Parton's narrative voices within a larger claim about the duality of Parton's narrative style, a duality characterized by opposing *modes* of writing: one mode defined by its sentimentality and by its paying tribute to conventional femininity and domesticity, and the other by its sarcasm and potential subversion (613).

Harris and Schmidt aptly describe multiplicity in *Ruth Hall*; a simple modification will allow for a more accurate understanding of this element of Parton's work. Rather than Parton *hiding* behind layers of fiction, as Schmidt suggests, I argue that Parton uses both fictional and autobiographical elements to assert her *presence*. That is, through her three personae or self-variations—Ruth Hall, Floy, and Fanny Fern—Parton establishes a multifaceted, rich, and richly elusive self as the center of her autobiographical novel. And the fact that *Ruth Hall* is fiction rather than “factual” autobiography enables this self to exist beyond the intervention of reality. The act of writing the novel, then, is an act of self-assertion as Parton deliberately creates a world where her writerly, domestic, professional, and other selves may explore, grow, and interact. The first persona, Ruth Hall, is the protagonist and heroine of the novel. Ruth serves as Parton's moralistic voice and the persona that most closely mirrors her lived experience, allowing Ruth to act as contractual autobiographical subject. The second persona is Floy, Ruth's pseudonym and the vehicle she uses to claim power, both as an author and an independent woman. Because Floy is the equivalent of Parton's real-life pseudonym, Fanny Fern, Floy operates as both Ruth and Parton's writerly persona—she is a self-construction rather than a self-representation and, as such, transforms her creator. The third persona is Fanny Fern, Parton's pseudonym and the name under which *Ruth Hall* was published. Fanny Fern links the worlds of fiction and reality. She is commodity, creation, pseudonym, and nickname. Parton creates these

imagined selves without concern for “truth,” and through them asserts her right to self-define. She uses this created world to tell a story that both is and isn’t hers, that affords the necessary combination of familiarity and critical distance to construct a rich and multi-faceted self. Through this self, Parton asserts a non-traditional presence that embraces multiplicity and rewrites the narrative of domesticity for the nineteenth-century American woman.

Ruth, Parton’s moral and biological persona, the first of her fictional selves, participates in and modifies Philippe Lejeune’s proposed autobiographical “contract.” Lejeune outlines three expectations for autobiographical texts: (1) prose or narrative structure, (2) a focus on personal history, and (3) a linked identity between author and protagonist—more specifically a shared name. *Ruth Hall* is a narrative, and it does include ties to Parton’s personal history, but Ruth is not Parton as Lejeune insists she must be to represent Parton’s “true self.” Ruth is not named after Parton, nor is she Parton’s exact mirror (i.e., she does not remarry twice as Parton does, nor does she remain a writer after writing has afforded her financial stability). Parton mediates her autobiographical self via fiction, resulting in an “either/or” genre which Lejeune asserts must therefore be “neither/nor.” In Parton’s autobiographical fiction personae is tied to memory yet free to be more. Parton, then, becomes not a “neither/nor” but a “both/and.” She is Ruth, and she is more than Ruth, and she is more because of Ruth, as selves are so much more than one can conceive.

As the novel opens, readers find Ruth on the brink of marriage, remembering her youth as the narrator recollects Ruth’s blossoming from a “plain, awkward” child to a beautiful woman in a striking realization: “[S]he had found her power! Her manners became assured and self-possessed. *She*, Ruth, could inspire love! Life became dear to her. There was something worth living for—something to look forward to. She had a motive—an aim; she should *some* day make



somebody's heart glad—somebody's hearthstone bright" (6). Immediately, Parton establishes Ruth as a proper girl. Rather than pursuing "[h]istory, astronomy, mathematics, the languages . . ." (6), Ruth longs to make wifedom her study and field. This trait in Ruth reflects Parton's younger self—a self that would marry Farrington (her second husband) out of economic need and familial pressure. Opening with marriage rather than ending with it defies tradition and shows that the "epochs" in Ruth's life and identity are defined by her changing relationships with men.

No one exists in a vacuum—every self is a self-in-relation, so it is not surprising that throughout the novel, Ruth's character is defined by her relationship to others. The reader learns about Ruth's character either through commentary in the dialogue of other characters or through implicit contrast with other characters. It is significant, however, that Ruth does not do some of the defining herself in the first half of the novel, "leaving the process of defining Ruth [entirely] to the other characters" (Harris 619). Ruth's silencing mirrors Parton's own lived experience—that she lived in silence, subject to familial and societal pressures, before turning to writing—and it critiques a society that permits external voices to wholly define women. As the novel progresses, and Ruth's success as a journalist affords her financial freedom, Ruth finally utters an explicit self-definition: she disagrees with a phrenologist who mistakenly calls her frail and prideful (Fern, *Ruth Hall* 221). Her utterance serves as a turning point in Ruth's journey toward independence.

Before this turning point, Ruth's characterization remains subject to the supporting characters of *Ruth Hall*, who closely inspect the novel's heroine and critique the way she fills her roles as wife/mother and author. Two important characters typify Ruth's characterization as wife and mother: Mrs. Hall, her mother-in-law, and Katy Hall, her oldest living child. Mrs. Hall

characterizes Ruth as inept, proud, and silly. She comments on Ruth's impracticality as a "yellow-haired simpleton" (11) who has not been "brought up properly" (12), claiming that she "aint the wife for [Harry]" (52). She defines Ruth in relation to her husband, and determines Ruth as unfit to be wife or mother. Mrs. Hall is a fictional representation of Parton's mother-in-law, though she is reduced to caricature (in evil stepmother fashion) for the sake of constructing the persona of Ruth. Because of her hyperbolic critique, Ruth is not constructed as an inept mother so much as a victim of unfair judgments. Through Mrs. Hall, Parton conflates past and present, demanding to be seen as a divided being—as a silenced woman treated unjustly who became an independent woman and successful author.

Parton's thoughts on motherhood appear as divided as her self, though they become clearer through the character of Katy Hall, Ruth's daughter, who acts as an obvious foil to Mrs. Hall. While the latter characterizes Ruth as inept, Katy sees Ruth as a hardworking mother. She adores, trusts, and obeys her mother. When Mrs. Hall comes between them, inviting Katy to stay "for a week or two," Katy is reluctant to leave her mother; she "cling[s] tightly to her mother's dress" and must be persuaded to leave her mother's side (150). Katy knows that Ruth has not abandoned her, and is working diligently to restore Katy to her proper home (178). Mrs. Hall's characterizations are constantly undercut by textual evidence, but Katy's characterization of Ruth is supported, most notably by the narrator who exposes an alliance with Katy by claiming that God is on her side: "He who noteth the sparrow's fall, hath given his angels charge to keep thee" (179). The narrator establishes Ruth as a strong mother figure, holding her up as a moral character and heroine. More importantly, the narrator defends motherhood's expansion beyond its scripted role in proper nineteenth-century society. Parton's message, then, is not that women should abandon their homes in pursuit of "more fulfilling" roles but that motherhood *need not be*

tossed aside in the pursuit of additional roles/interests. Furthermore, Parton suggests that her work outside the home *benefitted* her role as mother as it provided material stability and spiritual vigor.

As Ruth fulfills her work outside the home—writing—Parton’s belief in the equal weight of motherhood and authorship becomes known. Here again, Ruth’s success as author is largely determined not by Ruth herself but by other characters—most notably Hyacinth Ellet, Ruth’s brother, who makes this telling statement in response to Ruth’s writing:

I have looked over the pieces you sent me, Ruth. It is very evident that writing can never be *your* forte; you have no talent that way. You may possibly be employed by some inferior newspapers, but be assured your articles never will be heard out of your own little provincial city. For myself I have plenty of contributors, nor do I know of any of my literary acquaintances who would employ you. I would advise you, therefore, to seek some *unobtrusive* employment. (Parton, *Ruth Hall* 147)

Hyacinth casts judgment on Ruth’s writing—calling it inferior—as well as on Ruth’s desire to write, suggesting that it is improper in a woman. He reflects the ideals of the nineteenth-century, which expected women to restrict their work to the four walls of the home. Of course, as the novel unfolds and Ruth forges a successful writing career, readers come to see that his judgment is biased. After all, many nineteenth-century women wrote, both publically and privately, and many found success in their pursuits. Furthermore, the character of Mr. Walter (who acts as a necessary counter to Hyacinth) enters the scene to demand that readers see Ruth as part of the “intelligent and honorable . . . class” (201) and as a successful and worthwhile writer. However,

defending Ruth's talent is secondary to Parton's commentary on the viability of Ruth's choice of career path.

By creating a moral persona who needs to write to support herself, Parton justifies Ruth's jaunts into the world of business, but here Parton differs from Ruth. Ruth writes not to self-create but to support her children, thereby fulfilling her role as moral and biological persona, but the real-life Parton also wrote to fulfill a spiritual need. For though Ruth says, "no happy woman ever writes," (225) Parton believes the opposite. In an article titled "Women and Their Discontents," which is addressed to husbands concerned over their wives' "listless" state, Parton offers advice to rescue the weary souls of women. She says (to women):

Write! Rescue a part of each week at least for reading, and putting down on paper, for your own private benefit, your thoughts and feelings. Not for the *world's* eye unless you choose, but to lift yourselves out of the dead-level of your lives; to keep off inanition; to lessen the number who are yearly added to our lunatic asylums from the ranks of misappreciated, unhappy womanhood, narrowed by lives made up of details. (Fern, *Other Writings* 342)

Parton examines the role of wife and mother, labeling it as fulfilling but exhausting, and ultimately not enough to keep women's souls bright. Writing, then, becomes a spiritually necessary addition to the domestic routines of many women. According to Parton, happy women write. Through the fictionalization of the wife/mother experience, Parton suggests that this reason for writing (to lift herself "out of the dead-level" of her life, "to keep off inanition"), though slightly different than Ruth's, is just as "proper." Under the guise of moralistic Ruth, Parton suggests that women can and should write simply because they want to, and that spending time writing, away from motherly duties, is not only permissible but vital. To Parton, writing

was more than a hobby; it was a genuinely fulfilling experience that allowed her to become a better mother. Writing allowed her to enjoy the conscious effort of self-assertion, overcoming the passivity that would doom her to a unitary, delimiting life as wife/mother.

Parton's commentary on female authorship continues into the final scene, when Ruth's financial success permits her to return home and reclaim her singular domestic role. It seems that her stint as author has ended. As she returns home, she passes a cemetery. This is the language used to describe the scene: "Hushed, holy, and unprofaned, was this Sabbath of the dead! Aching hearts here throbbed with pain no longer; weary feet were still; busy hands lay idly crossed over tired breasts . . ." (272). This sentimental imagery casts Ruth's return home as a metaphorical death. It is peaceful—a reward for a hard-working mother who can return to her duties undistracted, and what Ruth must do to remain morally upright—however, it is a loss. The scene then moves to the image of a bird trilling and Mr. Walter binds Ruth to this image by stating, "Life has much harmony in store for you yet" (272). Harmony cannot happen in isolation; thus, Mr. Walter anticipates that Ruth will not remain isolated in her domestic sphere. Whether through a return to writing, a remarriage, or something else entirely, Ruth will find community and thereby happiness. Parton did not stop writing in her self-sufficiency, nor did she stop writing when she remarried (and remarried again). Thus, Ruth deviates from Parton's experience. This fictionalization, done perhaps to appease critics or to comment on the significance of writing, is undercut by the final image of a bird singing for others—Ruth will find her happiness in being "more than," in finding community beyond her role as mother. Parton undercuts this fictionalization further by including Floy, Ruth's pseudonym, to complicate Ruth's morality and "wholeness."

Floy comes into being as an act of desperation, when Ruth has exhausted efforts to find work and now faces starvation. As a last resort, she turns to writing and constructs Floy as her pen name. Initially, this construction simply disguises Ruth from those who would crucify a mother for stepping outside of the home, though Floy eventually becomes a second identity with transformative power. Floy is the persona Ruth uses to gain her writerly voice. Given that she is a fictional creation of a fictional character, Floy is twice mediated and, as a result, her authority supersedes Ruth's (and becomes Ruth's) in a brilliant smoke-and-mirrors trick that enables Ruth to take part in the power of elusiveness. As Schmidt writes, Floy "lifts Ruth and her children out of their conscripted roles in society" (17).

Ruth asserts her presence through Floy; Floy is a clay impression that Ruth can mold, again and again, constructing a self that interacts with readers even when Ruth physically cannot because of public scrutiny. Floy parallels Fanny Fern, Sarah Parton's pen name—she is a pseudonym created by Ruth, allowing Ruth to exercise her powers of self-creation while also enjoying the protection that a fictional pseudonym offers. After his first encounter with Floy's writing, Mr. Walter makes this telling commentary regarding Floy's nature:

What a singular being she must be, if I have formed a correct opinion of her; what powers of endurance! What an elastic, strong, brave, loving, fiery, yet soft and winning nature! A bundle of contradictions! ... The first piece of hers was a stroke of genius—a real gem, although not very smoothly polished; ever since I read it, I have been trying to find out the author's name, and have watched her career with eager interest; *her* career, I say, for I suppose 'Floy' to be a woman, notwithstanding the rumors to the contrary. (180-181)

The “Ruth” that Mr. Walter constructs (through his impressions of Floy) is complex—she is “elastic, strong, brave, loving, fiery, yet soft.” She is all of these things at once, suggesting the success of Ruth’s self-creative efforts. Floy is elastic; she defies unitary definition. Floy contains pieces of Ruth but is not wholly Ruth, much like Parton’s personae contain pieces of her but are not wholly her and act as both fictional and autobiographical mirrors.

While we see Floy’s reception via letters from her audience, Parton does not include Floy’s writing in *Ruth Hall*. This allows Parton to comment on the importance of writing without subjecting Floy’s writing to the reader’s judgment. Parton does this for two reasons. First, she shifts the focus from the merit of Floy’s writing (and thereby her authorial talent) to the importance of the sacred act of writing itself. Her point lies in writing’s capacity for self-creation, healing, and empowerment. Writing need not be a career and it need not be public in order to achieve these aims. Second, Parton doesn’t need to prove that she’s an apt writer—her career speaks for itself. The same goes for Ruth, who is autobiographically tied to Parton. Parton doesn’t need to broadcast Ruth’s writing to defend its merit.

Floy becomes a tangible being both to Ruth and to her readers, who together define Floy. These fictional readers build relationships with Floy; they interact with her in very real ways and through those interactions she *becomes* real. The consequences she enacts on Ruth (her creator) are also real. The following quote (regarding reader reaction to Floy) bears reading in its entirety, as it represents the power that elusiveness grants as well as the ways in which autobiographical fiction offers space to effectively self-create:

All sorts of rumors became rife about ‘Floy,’ some maintaining her to be a man, because she had the courage to call things by their right names, and the independence to express herself boldly on subjects which to the timid and clique-

serving, were tabooed. Some said she was a disappointed old maid; some said she was a designing widow; some said she was a moonstruck girl; and all said she was nondescript. Some tried to imitate her, and failing this, abused and maligned her, the outwardly straight-laced and inwardly corrupt, puckered up their mouths and “blushed for her;” the hypocritical denounced the sacrilegious fingers which had dared to touch the Ark; the fashionist voted her a vulgar, plebian thing; and the earnest and sorrowing, to whose burdened hearts she had given voice, cried God speed her. And still ‘Floy’ scribbled on, thinking only of bread for her children, laughing and crying behind her mask.... (170-1)

That Floy could not be duplicated or pinned down demonstrates the power that Ruth, her creator, enjoyed. Floy’s definition belonged to Ruth and Ruth alone. Though some ridiculed Floy, calling her “disappointed” and “designing,” this did not stop Ruth from writing, for her critics could not pierce the authoritative presence she constructed, nor could they take away her success. She could become and become anew, transforming at will into a myriad of contradictory things as Ruth, the woman-behind-the-mask, explored her own selfhood. This newfound power allows Ruth to finally speak for herself and make her essential utterance in the phrenologist’s office. Like Floy, Fanny Fern gained her authority through print; readers read her periodicals and imagined the persona behind the pen. Thus, Parton’s autobiographical fiction produced an elusive creation that demanded *being*. However, Fanny Fern’s readers interacted with Floy a bit differently. Floy was presented not as print phenomenon (like Fern) but as Ruth’s creation. Readers meet Floy not through “her” writing but in the act behind her creation, witnessing Ruth-as-Floy and the presence she affords Ruth. Through Floy, Parton invites readers to share in her lived experience—specifically the story of her transformation via writing—generating empathy



and authority. By the same token, Floy gives Parton space to offer cultural commentary on women's place in society, on the importance of writing, and on the elasticity of womanhood. She presents Ruth with a voice, granting her authority by giving her space to explore the complexity of her selfhood.

Like Ruth's "Floy," Parton's pseudonym came into being at the very start of Parton's career, as a slight to Parton's brother, Nathaniel Parker Willis. Willis was a popular journalist and magazine editor at the time, which led Parton to seek his help in a moment of desperate financial need; she hoped Willis would publish her work or, at the very least, offer publishing advice. Willis, however, rejected Parton's pleas. He refused to publish her writing or to even send word round to his editorial connections. Parton adopted the name "Fanny Fern" partly as a satirical jab at Willis, who had employed women with pen names such as Fanny Forrester and Grace Greenwood (the latter having published a collection entitled *Greenwood Leaves*, which Parton parodied by releasing *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*). Susan Belasco writes of the intent behind the pen name: "to protect her identity and her privacy, to solve the problem of her multiple names, and... to parody the names of Fanny Forrester and Grace Greenwood" (xxxiii). Fanny Fern's construction as a fluid persona granted the pen name its presence and power. Fanny Fern could be anything, could speak through a multiplicity of voices and lenses, which contributed to her usefulness as commodity.

The chameleon Fanny Fern is an old maid in "Sunshine and Young Mothers," a housemaid in "Soliloquy of a Housemaid," genderless in "I Can't," and the husband of an authoress in "Tom Pax's Conjugal Soliloquy." Each of these constructed, fictional identities carry "concepts of self" (Anderson 16), or autobiographical strains (for example, "Apollo Hyacinth" is a barely-disguised criticism of Parton's brother). But none of these is a truly

autobiographical detail just as *Ruth Hall* is not autobiography. Instead, such details construct the fictional persona of Fanny Fern—a chameleon persona, who changes gender and class and even race at will. Lafraddo writes that “readers repeatedly wondered aloud and in print whether ‘Fanny Fern’ was a man writing under a woman’s name or an unruly woman” (54). This ambiguity served Parton by enabling her to *become*—and then to become anew. Parton was both protected by and prospered through Fanny Fern’s public attention-grabbing flux of identity. Lafraddo states that “Willis [Parton] publicly constructs Fanny Fern as *multiple*, destabilizing any one self-representation” (70).

Fanny Fern became so much a part of Parton’s life that she (Fanny Fern) crossed the gap from fiction into reality: Parton adopted the pseudonym as her real-life nickname. Rosenthal writes that “she began to use the pen name in her personal life,” and “to such an extent that her friends, and even her husband, James Parton, began to call her Fanny” (54). Not only could readers interact with a text version of Fanny Fern, but family and friends interacted with a flesh-and-blood Fanny. For Parton, the act of becoming Fanny was transformative. Richard Schechner, in speaking of performance theory, suggests that performing (or putting on the act of a character/persona) is “a way to experiment with, act out, and ratify change” (163). These changes can be temporary or permanent; for Parton, both are true. The act of constructing Fanny Fern gave Parton a permanent presence. Her decision to publish *Ruth Hall* as Fanny Fern was likely inspired by Fern’s authoritative presence and, as a result, her power as commodity. At the height of her career, Fanny Fern was a household name, earning Parton a literal fortune. Fern had made her way into homes and into the discourse of the day. However, because Fanny Fern’s presence remained fluid and multiple, Parton could continue experimenting, becoming anew as

she adopted evermore iterations of Fern. Though a fictive act, “Fanny” began to have real-world consequences.

Fanny Fern, in essence, became a sort of living autobiography for Parton. She became tangible as Parton acted out a story that cannot be life, for it is performance, but cannot be fiction, for she lived it. Schechner speaks of this paradox when he suggests that “performances are *lilas*—sports, play—and *maya*, illusory. But . . . so is all life *lila* and *maya*. Performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more ‘truthful,’ more ‘real’ than ordinary experience” (xi). Schechner suggests, perhaps, that performances get closer to truth than autobiography, (though ultimate truth is, of course, a construct) for they uncover the illusory nature of experience. Performances make their performer aware of the acts he or she adopts, revealing more about our nature than would “ordinary experience,” in which one is unaware of their role as performer. Fanny Fern, then, is the medium by which autobiography and fiction are unified, as she is an act by which Parton (through her performance) can uncover “truth.” She affords Parton the critical distance to examine the world around her—and this distance is transformative both for Parton and for those that interact with Parton via Fanny Fern. Fern contains a sort of mythological power that cannot be stripped by society. She contains all the voices that Parton has ever penned, encompassing a diverse world of silenced women clamoring for a voice.

Parton’s identity (as Fanny Fern) was unveiled shortly after the publication of *Ruth Hall*. An editor from Parton’s past betrayed her as retribution for her successful career. However, Parton never abandoned the pen name, neither in her business dealings nor her personal life. She continued to identify as Fanny Fern personally. Writing, she knew, was the one certainty in life; her identity as writer would not expire despite her unmasking. Tracing Parton’s signature on

legal documents throughout her life reveals this same narrative of multiplicity—of Parton, the wife and mother, and Fanny Fern, the chameleon writer. More specifically, it reveals that Parton became deliberate in her self-conception and that she directed others' perception of her as well. Both before and after *Ruth Hall* was published, Parton was aware of the importance of a name; she both abandoned names/personae that did not suit her as well as adopted those that reflected her self-conceptualization. In the process, she constructed a personae all her own.

The evolution of Parton's name demonstrates her view of the self and of marriage. Parton was born Sara Payson Willis, but she abandoned her family name to adopt her first husband's name, Eldredge. The surname "Willis" does not appear on legal documents thereafter, save on her daughter Ellen's marriage document (which asks for the mother's maiden name—and which Parton herself arguably had no control over). Considering their estrangement following her family's refusal to support her in widowhood, Parton's insistence on the name being removed from records is justified. Furthermore, after Parton's second marriage to Farrington ended in divorce, the surname "Farrington" does not appear on any further legal documents. Here again, Parton eliminated ties to persons that refused to see her as she wished to be seen. Following her divorce, Parton again adopted her first husband's surname—and on legal documents leading up to her third and final marriage, "Mrs. Sarah Payson Eldredge" appears: a mark of her widowhood and of her devotion to both deceased husband and surviving children. Thus it becomes clear that Parton did not reject the establishment of marriage—in contrast with later feminists (such as Simone de Beauvoir, who famously suggested that marriage was the death of love, given that a married woman was an object owned and thereby no longer desired)—but instead celebrated it as a primary contributor to her sense of self.

The autonomy Parton enjoyed in marriage is evident in the variety of names she used on legal documents. Following her third marriage to James Parton, two names appear repeatedly on her legal and personal documents: “Fanny Fern” and “Sara Parton” (including variations of the two). On most legal documents, including her will and the U.S. Grave Index, the name Sara Payson Parton appears. The name “Parton” meant more to her than a legal or binding arrangement; she also used the name in conjunction with “Fanny Fern” as an assertion of multiplicity. In personal letters, as in two separate letters to Benjamin Franklin Butler, she signed her name as (1) “Fanny Parton” and (2) “Fanny Fern (Mrs. James Parton).” Though modern critics have imposed a certain narrative on nineteenth-century marriage, Parton’s records reveal the unfairness of this singular narrative. Parton viewed her final marriage as a union of equals; both she and her husband were highly-esteemed contributors to the writing industry and, furthermore, Parton retained “her separate property and the control of her own earnings” (Fern, *Ruth Hall* 280). As a result, Parton felt anything but stifled.

Parton’s insistence on using her pen name beyond the page revealed a self-conceptualization as “more than.” She was a wife *and* an author (and more). As such, we see documents with the signature “Fanny Fern,” such as her correspondence with Walt Whitman; there is also a portrait of Parton drawn by her daughter, Ellen, with the inscription “Fanny Fern.” Furthermore, Massachusetts Town Records use the name “Fanny Fern,” indicating that the public also valued her identity as a writer (perhaps more so than her private identity), although this may simply reflect their primary interaction with Parton via her writing as “Fanny Fern.” Ultimately, Parton’s constructed identity as Fanny Fern had real-world consequences, both for herself and for readers. Though early autobiography theory suggested that autobiography recorded selves, Parton used autobiography (fictionalized or not) to create a self. Her

construction of the autobiographical Fanny Fern transformed her person, not just as a conduit for her writing to reach the public but also as an assertion of presence. Her adoption of the name for personal reasons further typifies its transformational effect; her professional life offered much in the realm of spiritual fulfillment.

Thus, Parton interacts with personae both in her novel and her personal life, blurring lines of fiction and reality to explore and declare her presence. She constructs Ruth, the moral and autobiographical persona, to reflect her experience as a silenced woman and to showcase her later transformation. Floy, her writerly persona, is used to comment on the spiritual importance of writing—how it transported Parton from a life defined externally to a life defined internally. Finally, she employs Fanny Fern, the bridge between fiction and reality, to demonstrate how self-representation grants power. Fanny Fern transformed the living Sara Parton into an independent, heard woman through her refusal to be defined. As she became Fanny Fern in her personal life, she asserted her right to self-define and demanded that others see her as she wished to be seen: in multiples.

This assertion is significant for a woman writing in the nineteenth-century, for several reasons. The first is in her divorce from outdated rhetoric on marriage, as evidenced by novels such as *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (wherein husbands routinely abuse alcohol and cheat on their wives), *Silas Marner* (wherein wives become burdens that must be endured rather than life-partners to be enjoyed), and *Bread Givers* (wherein marriages are loveless, economic arrangements that doom women to lonely existences). Ruth found solace in her role as wife and mother, and her husband, Harry, treated her with kindness and respect. This fictional marriage proves unrestrictive; in it, Ruth freely occupies and finds fulfillment in multiple roles. Parton, too, found fulfillment in her marriage—she clung to her identity as wife on both legal and

personal documents. She also abandoned her maiden name and her second husband's name, asserting that marriage was significant to her identity—but only if the marriage was happy and autonomous. Parton defends marriage decisively, and her defense extends beyond Ruth's short stint as wife.

Furthermore, Parton's assertion of multiplicity is significant because it is non-traditional yet accepted by the public (and thereby granted authority). In a society that expected women to be domestic, Parton demanded to be seen as more than her role as wife and mother. *Ruth Hall's* subtitle, *A Domestic Tale of the Present Time*, sheds light on this contribution, as it (juxtaposed with the novel that follows) reveals the impracticality of expecting women to be unitarily "domestic." The term *domestic* could have multiple definitions here: (1) relating to one's own country, (2) relating to familial affairs, and (3) relating to work done in caring for the home. An examination of each of these definitions will illuminate the significance of Parton's non-traditional assertion of multiplicity.

In light of *national* domesticity, *Ruth Hall* becomes a tale of the American woman, suggesting that the American woman's life is not traditional or unitary. If Parton's story is the story of the American woman, Parton is justifying her life and granting it the authority of a potentially universal model. Furthermore, she is suggesting that the traditional tale of the "domestic" woman is a fantasy that inaccurately represents the truth of womanhood. The domestic woman confined to the home could not exist in Parton's "present day" America, both for economy's sake and for women's mental health.

Read in the context of *familial affairs*, Ruth's domestic circle implies a new or non-traditional definition of family. For Ruth, "family" is comprised of herself, husband, children, and Mr. Walter (who refers to her as "sister" and who becomes the stand-in for her absent

brother, Hyacinth). Absent from her family are her parents, sibling, and in-laws. That Ruth (and Parton) can choose who comprises family is not revolutionary for twenty-first-century readers, but significant for readers contemporary to Parton who lived a more traditional narrative of familial loyalty. Women were tied economically and otherwise to their families, but Ruth escapes such ties by asserting her own identity and gravitating towards people who support her professional endeavors. She is, at first, criticized for making such moves, but these criticisms do not restrict her from achieving personal and professional success.

There is irony in reading the novel in context of *domestic work*, given that Ruth completes her professional work primarily from home, writing in the evenings in her bedroom, hunched over a desk as her children sleep behind her. Yet traditional domestic work consists of cooking and cleaning, work that Ruth must do in addition to her writing. She delights in both roles, homemaker and writer, as non-traditional as that may be, then or now. Furthermore, Ruth writing from home makes the home into a valid and significant workplace. Though workplace affairs occurred primarily in the public, business sphere, Ruth's writing proves the language of separation to be inaccurate. The public and private spheres converged daily and necessarily. In conjunction, Parton asserts that any work done at home, even cooking and cleaning, held significance. The domestic nature of work did not make it lesser than. Through Ruth's story, Parton asserts that wifely and motherly duties be seen as a valid job, one that must be paired with play. As such, Parton's article to distressed husbands discussed the role of writing in supplementing domestic work, as an outlet for frustration and a means of relaxation ("Women and Their Discontents"). Ruth's writing, therefore, should be seen as a benefit to her role as mother. Though Ruth chooses to retire her pen, it was her pen that afforded her financial security, and her pen that returned her daughter to her care.



Thus, Parton's assertion of multiplicity reveals the flaw in Lejeune's autobiographical contract. Though he would assess *Ruth Hall* as a "neither/nor" genre for its insistence on utilizing both autobiography and fiction, Parton proves the in-between space to be fruitful as she constructs an identity that is "both/and." Fiction gives her freedom to discard pieces of her past, such as her ill-matched marriage to Farrington. The point of the novel is to create, not to recite, so by removing her tie to the "truth," she removes the shackles of accuracy and pens a self that obeys its own rules. However, by using autobiographical elements, Parton grants that self authority; Sayre suggests that autobiography offers its author legitimacy and "author-ity" (13)—an ownership of the self. Through elements of autobiography, Parton explores her transformation as woman and author, and through elements of fiction, she receives the proper critical distance to experience further transformation. Her discovery of self is a lifelong process that is constantly in flux.

Sara Parton's use of fictionalized selves makes her an important forebear to authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who wrote about their intimate experiences through fictional protagonists. "The Yellow Wallpaper" gives a voice not only to Gilman's suffering, which was silenced just as Parton was silenced, but also to the many other woman who suffered as she did. It demands, specifically, that the problem of postpartum depression not be ignored any longer. Autobiography asks its readers to imagine a person behind the writing—a living, flesh-and-blood human—and the experience is intimate. It is raw and cannot be ignored. The addition of fiction allows room to explore without limits. Autobiographical fiction heals, it protects, and it asserts presence; it says, "I am here. I have experienced." And we must listen to its call.

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