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The Editorial Double Vision of Maxwell Perkins: How the Editor of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Wolfe Plied His Craft

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The Editorial Double Vision of Maxwell Perkins:
How the Editor of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Wolfe Plied His Craft

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
English at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Introduction: An Editorial Legacy Shrouded in Mystery	1
From Distinguished Editor to Literary Legend.....	2
A Practice-based Approach.....	7
Competing Loyalties	9
Chapter 1: Perceptions of Authorship.....	11
Early Influences	12
Perception vs. Reality	18
Allegiance to Talent.....	23
Mediation and the Writing Process.....	26
The Exceptional Thomas Wolfe	34
The Pitfall.....	38
Chapter 2: Putting the Reader First.....	42
An Egalitarian Approach to Literature	43
The Responsive Reader.....	46
Aesthetic Preferences.....	50
Shoring Up the Narrative Structure	57
A Tailored Approach	61
Surrendering to the Text	66
Chapter 3: Investment and Return	68
Financial Assistance.....	69
Personal Favors.....	77
A Jolt of Inspiration	82
A Gentle Nudge	85
Giving Freely	90
Chapter 4: The Support of a Family	92
The Agonies of Creation.....	93
Perkins’s Program of Emotional Support	96
Establishing Interpersonal Relationships.....	98
Providing Personal Validation	103
Making Connections	110
Abuses Suffered.....	115
A Safe Haven	118
Chapter 5: Territorial Disputes	120
In Hand.....	121

Editing for Error.....	124
Marketing Concerns.....	128
Advertising Dilemmas.....	134
Avoiding Censorship.....	138
Threats of Libel.....	144
The Nature of the Game.....	148
Conclusion: Editorial Double Vision.....	150
Personal Attributes.....	151
Professional Environment.....	153
Historical Moment.....	157
For the Love of Literature.....	159
Bibliography.....	161

Abstract

THE EDITORIAL DOUBLE VISION OF MAXWELL PERKINS: HOW THE EDITOR OF FITZGERALD, HEMINGWAY, AND WOLFE PLIED HIS CRAFT

By Rachel F. Van Hart, BA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Scholars and literary enthusiasts have struggled for decades to account for editor Maxwell Perkins's unparalleled success in facilitating the careers of many of the early twentieth century's most enduring and profitable writers, among them F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. This study seeks to penetrate that mystery by dissecting Perkins's editorial practice and examining how he navigated the competing tensions between commercial success and aesthetic integrity in various circumstances. At play in the construction of his literary legacy are prevailing perceptions of authorship, complex interpersonal relationships, and the inherent battle between art and commerce. Focusing on his day-to-day activities, it is apparent that Perkins was guided by a unique editorial double vision—the propensity to appreciate the aesthetic experience while retaining the critical detachment necessary to appraise a literary work from a commercial standpoint—when solving the paradoxical dilemmas inherent in modern publishing.

Introduction: An Editorial Legacy Shrouded in Mystery

The legacy of editor Maxwell E. Perkins is a point of persistent fascination in literary history. More than a century after the celebrated American editor entered the profession of publishing, his name is still invoked to embody the quintessential editor-author relationship. In 2005, for example, the Center for Fiction established the Maxwell E. Perkins Award to recognize the editor, publisher, or agent who has “discovered, nurtured and championed writers of fiction in the United States” over the course of his or her career (“The Maxwell E. Perkins Award”). During his 33-year career as an editor for Charles Scribner’s Sons publishing house—from 1914 to his death in 1947—Perkins certainly did discover, nurture, and champion a host of great American authors, chief among them F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. Perkins is renowned for his role in ushering a new school of American fiction into print, a faction that includes classics such as Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, and Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel*. In addition, the editor’s influence was instrumental in the development of enduring popular fiction such as Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s Pulitzer prize-winning *The Yearling*, and in the advancement of contemporary hits such as the mystery novels of Willard Huntington Wright (pseudonym S.S. Van Dine) and the historical novels of Janet Reback (pseudonym Taylor Caldwell). Perkins published a diverse and impressive catalog of writers, and he garnered a considerable reputation for helping to turn their manuscripts into commercial and literary successes. What further distinguished Perkins’s editorial career was his

ability to shape a text without usurping the agency of the author. Sixty-eight books are dedicated to the honor or memory of Maxwell Perkins—supposedly more than to any other editor—a striking testament to the loyalty and gratitude of Perkins’s authors (Brucoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xxvii). The outpouring of appreciation from authors combined with the editor’s track record for literary and commercial success is evidence of his gift for honing the creative work of others without encroaching on their aesthetic agenda. Somehow, Perkins successfully maneuvered modern publishing’s most challenging paradox—the need to reconcile artistic integrity with commercial viability. The delicate balance the editor struck between the competing interests of author and publisher is at the heart of the Perkins’s legacy, but the question of how he sustained that balance is the mystery that prods literary enthusiasts to examine his editorial practice with perennial interest.

From Distinguished Editor to Literary Legend

A reserved man, Perkins was constitutionally averse to public attention, but persistent efforts to unearth the secret of his editorial success have brought to light volumes of information pertaining to his personal and professional habits. Perkins’s desire for anonymity was in perpetual conflict with the widespread acclaim he helped others achieve; his efforts to remain in the background quickly eroded as author after author gratefully acknowledged his role in their success. Accusations of collaboration followed by the very public defection of Thomas Wolfe eventually cemented the editor’s reputation as a quasi-celebrity in the literary world. By the 1940s he was already somewhat of a legend within literary circles, but it was Malcolm Cowley’s two-part *New Yorker* profile—against which Perkins consulted with a lawyer to see if it could be

suppressed—that catapulted the private editor’s name into the public sphere.¹ Nevertheless, Perkins remained a relatively obscure figure, even to those who considered him a close friend. When he died suddenly in 1947, several authors grappled to understand the void left in his wake by composing various memoirs and tributes that attempt to articulate the exceptional qualities—mostly intangible—that set him apart as an editor. Likewise, *Editor to Author*, a compilation of Perkins’s letters to various authors, was assembled by Scribner’s colleague and longtime friend John Hall Wheelock and released in 1950 with the hope that it might “give us the clue to Max’s creed as an editor” (Wheelock 5). Over the years much of Perkins’s correspondence—with various authors, close friends, and even his daughters—has been published, demonstrating a seemingly insatiable curiosity about the editor and his affiliations. In 1978, the long anticipated publication of *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius*, a comprehensive biography compiled by A. Scott Berg, was met with great enthusiasm; it became a bestseller and won the National Book Award for the depth of its research and readability of its prose. Berg’s authoritative biography was re-released in 1997, 50 years after the editor’s death, thereby renewing public interest in the legacy of Maxwell Perkins. Though his prestige is essentially limited to literary scholars and enthusiasts today, his reputation for being “the only literary editor of whom students of American literature and most of their teachers have heard” remains secure (Brucoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xvii). Because he edited some of America’s most revered authors, Perkins’s importance to literary history is undeniable, but the difficulty involved in explaining his success has elevated the editor to something of a literary icon and shrouded Perkins’s legacy with an air of mystery.

¹ Cowley, a charming man and notable literary figure at the time, spent months researching the profile through correspondence and interviews with the editor’s authors, colleagues, and friends before approaching Perkins, who reluctantly acquiesced to be interviewed (Berg 421). Afterward, Perkins expressed relief that Cowley had turned the discussion more toward the mechanics of publishing than of himself, but he jocularly complained of being inundated with manuscripts and visits from aspiring authors who had gotten the impression from the article that Perkins could work his literary magic for any writer (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 564-65).

While the aura of mystique surrounding the editor's success effectively perpetuates the Perkins legend, it eclipses our understanding of his editorial legacy. The trouble is apparently one of semantics. Explanations of the editor's success are rife with language that is either vague or metaphoric, and there appear to be no sufficient signifiers to denote the advantageous attributes or techniques employed in his editorial practice. Clearly, articulating what it was, exactly, that set Perkins apart is no simple matter; even the letter of recommendation that introduced Perkins to Charles Scribner promised only "He has in him the right stuff" (qtd. in Berg 35). Evidently he did, but what exactly that "stuff" was made of has been a cause of speculation ever since. In an homage published 15 years after Perkins's death, author Chard Powers Smith notes that every sketch that tries to draw a portrait of Perkins as an editor "ends with express or implicit surrender before his 'mystery' his 'secret'" (Smith 85). Yet, even Smith, who experienced Perkins's methods firsthand, fails to offer an explanation of the editor's success that isn't couched in the supernatural.² Unfortunately, the imprecise accounting of his legacy has led some to misconstrue or misrepresent Perkins's approach to editing. For instance, composition teachers have been encouraged to "be the Maxwell Perkins to his or her student's Fitzgerald,"³ an inspiring aphorism but one that can be regrettably misleading depending on how it is interpreted. For example, writing teacher and scholar Carolyn Matalene once proposed a composition curriculum based on Perkins's editorial method, but the rationale behind her program is undermined by her limited understanding of the way he approached his editorial role. Matalene proposes that writing teachers follow Perkins's lead by refusing to give writing

² In his attempt to explain Perkins's "secret," Smith relies heavily on metaphor, essentially likening Perkins to a "just God," or a "Puritan divine," who considers it his sacred duty to minister to the "literary elect" (Smith 89, 96).

³ Jeffrey Sommers references this adage in a 1989 article encouraging the use of writer's memos (179).

assignments, arguing that doing so impedes the writer's investment of self (Matalene 5). Yet, she fails to acknowledge that Perkins often pitched ideas to writers and that it was because of this that Rawlings undertook to write her abiding classic, *The Yearling*. If writing teachers and editors wish to emulate Perkins's success by imitating his method, then they need to ensure that their approach is derived from a clear understanding of his editorial practice. Perhaps the most egregious misrepresentation of Perkins's editorial technique and philosophy is the "Tuscany Max Perkins Editorial Process" advertised by Tuscany Press ("Publisher Message"). Exclusively publishing books that espouse Catholic ideology, the publisher's overbearing editorial plan essentially requires the author to collaborate with an editor in order to guarantee that his manuscript adheres to the theological dogma of the imprint. This approach to editing is practically blasphemous to the name of Maxwell Perkins because it rejects one of the most important tenets of Perkins's editorial philosophy—respect for authorial agency. Furthermore, Perkins would have regarded the publisher's practice of sponsoring a single ideological point of view with disdain because it repudiates his personal conviction that publishers serve a noble democratic function by facilitating dialogue and debate. Distilling the secret to Perkins's editorial success may be a complicated endeavor, but the gross misrepresentation of his principles, philosophy, and editorial method does a disservice to his legacy and is a barrier to the lessons it may offer.

To a great degree, Perkins emerges as a perplexing figure in literary history because his professional legacy is closely entwined with the literary legacy of others. Because Perkins's prestige is predicated on that of the authors he supported, it is particularly difficult to identify the achievements that were uniquely his. Even the ambiguous title of Berg's biography, *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius*, hints at the difficulty of discerning whose genius warrants

celebrating—that of the editor or the author? Because cultural literary values tend to cast influential agents apart from the author as a threat to textual authority, one of the primary concerns in Perkins scholarship to date has been discerning where an author’s talent ended and the editor’s influence began. This is particularly true of his most famous triumvirate, and, as a result, Perkins’s name is “permanently linked with F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe in literary history and literary myth,” which scholar Matthew Bruccoli notes, “are much the same thing” (Bruccoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xvii). Should there be a way to separate editor from author and history from mythology, it may be possible to unlock the secret of Perkins’s success and define the implications of his legacy in more constructive terms. A demystified account of Perkins’s editorial practice promises potential benefits for many with a stake in literary endeavors: for the prospective editor who tries to emulate his success; the literary scholar who wants to better understand the effects of the editor-author relationship on the text; the composition teacher who hopes to empower student writers; and for publishers and authors who wish to foster greater accord in their professional relationships. Unraveling the mystery of Perkins’s editorial success is certain to reveal some practical paradigms that are of consequence today.

To determine the true secret behind Perkins’s success, it is necessary to recall the distinguishing aspect of his career, his ability to balance the aesthetic interests of the author with the commercial interests of the publisher. As liaison between the two, Perkins was subject to a professional paradox in which he was called upon to mediate conflicts between the author’s pursuit of artistic achievement and the publisher’s desire for financial profitability. Underlying this tension were contemporary notions of art and authorship, which traditionally pit autonomous artistic expression against industrialized mass production. Though publishing is a capitalist

enterprise, it is unique in its dependence upon an independent entity—the author—for its sustained productivity. Likewise, as Bruccoli points out, the author is bound to the publisher for the aesthetic fulfillment of his craft because “Publication is the mandatory act of authorship: A book is not a book until it is published” (Bruccoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xiii). Recognizing the interdependent nature of the relationship, Perkins somehow managed to preserve the author’s sense of artistic agency while also fulfilling his obligation to help the publisher profit. Therefore, the question at the core of Perkins’s legacy is, how did he do it? In order to engage this question, we must abandon the pervasive “great man” narrative of his success—which effectively dismisses his editorial achievements—and focus instead on his method.

A Practice-based Approach

By foregrounding Perkins’s editorial practice rather than his personality, the patterns of logic and behavior that set him apart as an editor begin to emerge. Though illuminating, previous attempts to impart a sense of his method by publishing the editor’s correspondence with authors have fallen short because they effectively sidestep the difficult challenge of sustained analysis. Likewise, a relative dearth of critical scholarship detailing his actual editorial practices is indicative of the overwhelming complexity of the task. Most of our knowledge about Perkins’s methodology has been revealed through anecdotal evidence, but such accounts convey only a subconscious sense of his editorial style rather than a conscious awareness of his approach. By contrast, this study attempts to ascertain Perkins’s secret of success by outlining his editorial methodology in light of his primary achievement: masterfully navigating the conflict between artistic integrity and commercial enterprise. A synopsis of Perkins’s response to the series of professional tensions stemming from that dilemma, this study attempts to facilitate analysis of

Perkins's editorial method by examining the ways in which he mediated the needs of both author and publisher in his practice.

In the effort to derive a complete understanding of Perkins's editorial practice, anecdotal, archival, analytical, and epistolary records have been combed for evidence of Perkins's editorial challenges and the ways in which he met them. These records, particularly the vast catalog of correspondence, reveal much about Perkins's personality and editorial philosophy, but they also help us to identify the particular editor-author interactions that made Perkins such a significant tour de force in the lives of his authors. Fortunately, the majority of Perkins's professional papers have been preserved; these documents were entrusted to Princeton University Library along with most of Scribner's files ("Archives"). Appropriately, however, much of Perkins's correspondence remains interlaced within the files of each individual author. Perkins was a prolific correspondent, and the sheer mass of the epistolary record he left is daunting. For instance, nearly 700 letters, notes, and telegrams were exchanged with Rawlings from 1930 to 1947—an average of one exchange per week for more than 17 years (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 1). The Perkins-Hemingway correspondence is even more prolific; more than 1,170 letters between the two are housed in the Scribner's archive at Princeton University, and more are available at the Hemingway Collection in the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston (Brucoli and Trogdon 19). Not surprisingly, a complete volume of the editor's correspondence remains to be printed, but a rather substantive amount of Perkins's correspondence with his most notable authors has been published. Several volumes transcribe the exchanges that circulated between Perkins and his trifecta of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Wolfe, and individual volumes are devoted to his correspondence with Rawlings and Lardner as well. Wheelock's composite *Editor to Author* rounds out the epistolary evidence with a sampling of Perkins's letters to various authors. These

exchanges form the bedrock of this analysis because the majority of Perkins's editorial work took place in the lines of his letters. Also of particular interest to this study is Wolfe's confessional *The Story of a Novel*, which recounts the process of writing and editing his first two books. This ill-fated exposé prompted the critical allegations of artistic collaboration that ultimately compelled Wolfe to sever the editorial relationship—a blow to Perkins both professionally and personally. Wolfe's defection from Perkins and the house of Scribner's is an unusual disparity in the editor's record, and their notorious break is perhaps the most misunderstood element of Perkins's legacy. Tracing the fault lines of the Wolfe-Perkins relationship, it becomes apparent that their association strayed from Perkins's typical editor-author dynamic, a differential that proves the effectiveness of the editor's characteristic approach to editorial relationships.

Competing Loyalties

In examining Perkins's editorial practice, it immediately becomes apparent that the trouble with the general understanding of Perkins's legacy is not that his editorial prowess has been overrated—rather, it has been oversimplified. His relationships with authors were indeed interpersonal and supportive, but his investment in Charles Scribner's Sons was equally acute. In many ways, the record of his editorial achievements is emblematic of the contradictions he faced in his effort to reconcile these competing loyalties. He fought for the publication of radical new authors from within the walls of one of America's most conservative publishing houses, yet he encouraged those same writers to tone down their work to prevent drawing public ire; he invested the publisher's resources in developing an author's talent, yet he never required the author to reciprocate by signing a contract with Scribner's; and though Perkins was predisposed

to idolize the author and treat his work as sacrosanct, experience and pragmatic necessity led him to push the bounds of editorial intervention in shaping a text. The quality that distinguished Perkins as an editor is something similar to what Fitzgerald once described as “the test of a first-rate intelligence,” that is, “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up” 69). Applied to his fiction, this concept is referred to as Fitzgerald’s double vision, “his ability to immerse the reader in experience at an emotional and sensory level, while at the same time allowing him to stand back at a distance and criticize the experience intellectually” (Mangum, *Cambridge Companion* 62). In mediating the priorities of author and publisher, Perkins demonstrates a sort of double vision of his own: he retains his idealistic regard for the author and sympathizes with his aesthetic pursuits while continuing to bear in mind the practical problem of ensuring that those pursuits are profitable for the publisher. Perkins’s editorial method developed in response to the perpetual tension between author and publisher, and his proven ability to engage the perspective of both when reconciling their competing priorities points to the apparent secret of his success—his editorial double vision.

Chapter 1: Perceptions of Authorship

In the first half of the twentieth century, cultural attitudes toward literature were dominated by Romantic-era portrayals of authorship, which threw the individual genius of the literary artist into relief by pitting his act of autonomous creation against the base commercial processes of industrialized mass production. This depiction effectively elevates the status of the author, but it puts his purpose at odds with that of the very entity necessary to fulfill his role—the publisher. As representative of both parties, Perkins was fully cognizant of the extent to which the author-publisher relationship was mutually dependent, yet he adhered to convention by habitually downplaying his editorial role, emphasizing instead the aesthetic superiority of the author. Nonetheless, Perkins also held the function of the publisher in high esteem, and he passionately argued that the industry's contribution to American letters is an essential service to democratic society. Neither position was a matter of lip service for the editor; his early influences predisposed him to be rather idealistic when it came to matters involving literature, and his passion for books indebted him to both the author who wrote them and the publisher who proliferated them. But Perkins was pragmatic as well, and by acquiescing to public perceptions of authorship he preserved the author's sense of agency and ensured that the commercial value of the text was not compromised. Thus, Perkins found it to his personal and professional advantage to adopt an editorial mantra that prioritized the agency of the author, even if it perpetuated cultural attitudes that were disparaging to the publisher.

Early Influences

By the late eighteenth century, technical advances in the printing process had given rise to a commercial publishing industry that largely supplanted the traditional system of literary patronage. The advent of modern publishing brought about fundamental changes in the profession of authorship, taking it from a service-based vocation—writing for the pleasure of an individual benefactor—to a product-based enterprise, which demands that the author’s work appeal to the tastes of many. In this new system, authors are obliged to profit from the distribution rather than the production of their work, highlighting the new state of interdependence among writer, publisher, and reader (Brady 11). In many respects, the democratization of literary production empowers authors with a greater sense of aesthetic autonomy, but the commercial implications of mass production threaten to debase the value of the written word by reducing it to a mere commodity. Already frustrated by a growing sense of estrangement from the eventual reader, Romantic-era authors embraced the idea of alienation and used it to their advantage by constructing the now-traditional image of the literary artist who struggles in solitude to bring forth a work of genius unsullied by commercial influence. By portraying their contribution to the emerging publishing industry as that of a uniquely enlightened literary “artist” rather than a producer, these authors managed to elevate their social status, defend their newfound aesthetic agency, and endow their work with a greater sense of importance. Increasingly, authors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reinforced this new paradigm by emphasizing their creative propriety over a text and conscientiously distancing themselves from the base commercial processes of mechanized literary production (16). Hence, the notion that aesthetic integrity is somehow predicated on complete authorial autonomy became a powerful cultural concept. Even today, when it is generally accepted that all

discourse is, to some extent, a product of social construction, “we continue to maintain the traditional image of the author as an individualist up against a materialistic world, trying to create something pure and unsullied by the rank commercialism of society despite the interference of the system of publication, which requires mediation and compromise” (Inge 623). This idea, which exacerbates the tension between author and publisher, pervaded cultural perceptions of authorship during the first half of the twentieth century, and the problem of reconciling the expectation of authorial autonomy with the mitigating forces of publication became the defining paradox of Perkins’s career.

Fortunately, the honorable reconciliation of opposing forces was a recurrent theme in Perkins’s life; even his earliest influences tested his ability to balance competing interests. Maxwell Perkins was born the son of statesmen and activists; therefore, he was raised with a serious regard for public service but also a deep appreciation for humanistic expression in art. Named William Maxwell Evarts Perkins in recognition of both his maternal and paternal lineage, the young editor seemed predestined to have the dual nature of each line meld in his personality. From his maternal grandfather, William Maxwell Evarts, Perkins received his cool pragmatism and stately demeanor. Evarts enjoyed a distinguished law career in which he fought and won three major cases: “the Geneva arbitration case, the Tilden-Hayes election case of 1876, and the Andrew Johnson impeachment” (Berg 25). He was later named Secretary of State and served two terms as a United States Senator for the state of New York (26). Conversely, Perkins derived his sensitive spirit and liberal appreciation for the nonconformist from his paternal grandfather, the bohemian Charles Callahan Perkins. Shunning business opportunities to study art abroad, Charles Perkins dabbled in several aesthetic ventures before eventually making a name for himself as the first American art critic (26). He and his wife were well connected in literary and

artistic circles, and the young Maxwell admired their expansive aestheticism (Robillard 13-14). Though Perkins's exterior composure and habits most frequently recalled the reserved New England discipline of the Evarts clan, his pragmatism was occasionally overcome by an idealistic passion for art inherited from the Perkins clan. Perkins was a compulsive doodler, and at least once he threw fiscal caution to the wind to purchase "a thirty-inch marble statue of the Venus de Milo," one of his favorite possessions (Berg 37). Throughout his life, Perkins wrestled internally with the need to reconcile the dichotomous strains of his lineage. There were "few other Americans in whom so much history was palpably and visibly embodied," Perkins's close friend Van Wyck Brooks once observed, "so that one saw it working in him, sometimes not too happily, for his mind was always in a state of civil war" (Brooks 26). Ultimately, however, the duality of Perkins's nature served him well, for he was, according to Brooks, "Cavalier by taste and Puritan by conscience," a fitting tendency for one whose vocation required sympathy on behalf of the artist yet sensitivity to the practical matters of publication (qtd. in Robillard 2). Additionally, the family legacy of civic service pricked Perkins's conscience, and he felt duty bound to serve the public interest in some fashion. A love of literature eventually led him to a career in publishing, which satisfied his puritan obligation to serve the public while fulfilling his cavalier penchant for books.

The obvious choice for Perkins's career was to follow in his father's footsteps and continue the legacy of his grandpa Evarts by entering the practice of law, but Perkins's love of literature continually steered him toward a profession in letters instead. Reading was an important pastime in the Perkins's home, and the family would gather on Sunday evenings to hear Maxwell's father read Romantic-era classics such as Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* (Berg 27). The acts of gallantry, self-sacrifice, and

individual achievement popular in Romantic-era fiction inspired the young boy, and the idea that an individual could raise the consciousness of society by his heroic example appealed to his growing sense of civic duty. Later, Perkins became fascinated with military strategy, and his particular interest in the exploits of Napoleon Bonaparte led him to what would become his favorite book, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Tolstoy's epic had a significant impact on Perkins's career, as did Enlightenment-era essays and novels promoting democracy, the free exchange of ideas, and rationality. Perkins admired "the world of Swift, Addison, Defoe and Pope that especially included the circle of Dr. Johnson," according to Brooks, who notes that the editor's epistolary style was "distinctly eighteenth century" as a result of their influence (Brooks 30-31). The competing influences of Perkins's childhood are somewhat encapsulated by his dual appreciation of Enlightenment-era principles, which favor reason and individualism over tradition, and Romantic-era notions of art, which embraced emotion and experience. Under the influence of his Puritan consciousness, however, Perkins chose to study economics as an undergraduate at Harvard.¹ Nevertheless, he maintained an active interest in literature, and soon after he graduated it looked as if he was on track to become a writer,² but the constant internal tension between his desire for aesthetic fulfillment and his obligation to civil society demanded reconciliation. As he debated his options, Perkins kept cycling back to the one principle of which he was certain, "there could be nothing so important as a book can be" (Brucoli and Bucker 234). Ultimately, this conviction led him to pursue a career at Charles Scribner's Sons publishing house, where he remained for more than three decades. Perkins believed wholeheartedly in

¹ Perkins apparently had little interest in the subject, and his decision to study Economics has been attributed to William Evarts's aphorism: "I pride myself on my success in doing not the things I like to do, but the things I don't like to do" (qtd. in Berg 31). Perkins would later lament that he "threw away [his] education" by majoring in economics rather than literature, which he loved (31).

² As a senior, he taught English composition at a girl's finishing school in Boston, and for about three years after graduation Perkins worked as a reporter for *The New York Times* (Berg 32-36).

literature's power to enlighten and advance society, and he therefore came to regard publishing as a necessary conduit of democracy. By extension, Perkins conceptualized the editorial role as one of public service to the masses, clearing the way for authentic discourse to enter the marketplace of ideas. Perkins took this responsibility seriously, and he denounced his own literary ambitions on principle because he felt it was important to remain objective when vetting the ideas of other writers so that readers would be offered a representative dialogue. Perkins regarded the editor who secretly harbored authorial ambitions with suspicion, considering such aspirations a threat to the integrity of the democratic process. A literary agent once asked Perkins why he himself didn't write, and Perkins's unequivocal response was simply, "Because I'm an editor" (qtd. in Berg 136). Unlike many editors, however, Perkins "never showed signs of the frustrated novelist in his publishing career," and apparently he fulfilled any latent desires to write by dictating dozens of letters a day that encouraged and guided other authors in the practice of their craft (136). In return, Perkins discovered a measure of personal satisfaction in his occupation. Like his grandfathers before him, Perkins derived pleasure in the patronization of others.³ It is possible that Perkins's admiration for authors was galvanized by the pervasive culture of hero worship in the 1920s, which extended to popular authors; though he certainly viewed writers as visionaries worthy of a hero's welcome, his conviction about the importance of literature ran deeper than the celebrity fervor of the jazz age. (Brucoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xx). In Perkins's opinion, working with authors was tantamount to assisting in a grassroots campaign for democracy because their writing facilitated intellectual debate. Rather than become an author himself, Perkins preferred the honor of a supporting role, thanks in part to his

³ William Evarts had significant sway in Washington, and Robillard notes that he used his personal influence to launch the careers of "many young men," among them the historian Henry Adams (9). Likewise, Charles Perkins and his wife were recognized as "friends to many artists," and they continually expressed their sensitive devotion to the needs of the artist "through appreciation of the work of others" (14).

admiration of Prince Andrei, a character in *War and Peace*.⁴ A natural leader, Prince Andrei discovers that truth is a shifting target, and he subsequently foregoes an opportunity to serve as a general in the imperial army to become a humble field soldier instead, believing that the only honest way to serve his country is to see that the plans of others are properly carried out (Tolstoy 644). Free from the social and philosophical constraints imposed on a front man, Perkins found his niche in the editorial staff's ranks; there he was free to promote the ideas of many men and facilitate public discourse by helping their truth to pass unmitigated into the marketplace of ideas.

In publishing, Perkins found the perfect medium for his competing drives; its democratic implications fulfilled his sense of obligation to the public good while the identification and development of promising writers satisfied his creative impulse. Publishing represented to Perkins the most fundamental of our democratic freedoms—the freedom of the press—and he regarded his role as a facilitator of national dialogue as a sacred duty. Perkins's commitment to the free exchange of ideas is demonstrated most effectively in his letters defending the publisher from criticism or calls for censorship. In one such letter he argues that publishers are democratically obligated to uphold the principle of free speech:

...you seem not to understand the function of a publisher, nor to attach any importance to one of the greatest principles in the whole world – that which upholds free speech for the sake of the freedom of the intellect. According to this principle any serious and careful book upon any person of importance and significance to the general public should find a publisher; and any publisher who

⁴ In a letter to his daughter Peggy, Perkins once wrote that Prince Andrei was “the best man that ever was written about except perhaps Hamlet,” adding, “I wish each of you, if you *must* marry, would find a Prince Andrei for a husband. — Even if he is a little too scornful and impatient” (Frothingham, King, and Porter 115).

refrained from publication, even if he did not agree with the author's conclusions, because of fear of some particular sect, would be untrue to his profession, and indeed to the cause of intellectual freedom.⁵ (Wheelock 62)

Under the weight of such a significant responsibility, Perkins approached his role with due seriousness, for he felt as if he were a practitioner who dealt “in the most powerful of all commodities—words” (qtd. in Berg 33). As a result, Perkins selflessly devoted himself to his role, and his associates used to quip that he worked “thirty hours a day, eight days a week” (Robillard 33). Indeed, the amount of time he spent away from the office seemed to be in inverse proportion to the number of years he spent at Scribner's, and when he did catch the “6:02 train for New Canaan” his briefcase was generally stuffed with manuscripts, which he would read at home in the evenings and on weekends (Cowley, “Profiles – II” 43). Perkins's personal commitment to the publishing profession indicates how important he believed his job to be, but the need to alleviate tensions inherent in the precarious relationship between author and publisher compelled him to habitually downplay the importance of his editorial role.

Perception vs. Reality

“Don't ever get to feeling important about yourself,” Perkins once cautioned a group of editorial hopefuls, “An editor does not add to a book. At best he serves as a handmaiden to an author...He creates nothing” (qtd. in Berg 6). An endorsement of predominant cultural stereotypes, this admonition is characteristic of Perkins's modest approach to editing as well as his commitment to portraying the publisher's function as subordinate to the creative act of the

⁵ The correspondence between Perkins and his authors tends to be relatively informal, and their letters frequently contain unorthodox spellings, punctuation, and grammatical constructions. No silent emendations have been made to the text when quoting from letters; this material has been reproduced exactly as it appears in the indicated source unless necessary contextual information is missing, in which case it has been provided in brackets.

author. Ironically, Perkins continued to perpetuate the perception of the author as an autonomous literary agent despite the fact that he knew the extent of the disparity between perception and reality firsthand. As a narrative, the idea of the literary artist can have a powerful effect on the way an author or his work is perceived, and Perkins's efforts to maintain public perception of the author as a literary artist is indicative of a pragmatic editorial strategy with distinct professional advantages. Readers, writers, and publishers find this illusion to their liking for various reasons. For the reader, the depiction of an author as a literary artist appeals to the public's desire for heroes and love of celebrity. In turn, the glorification of the author elevates his stature and endows him with the social capital necessary to supplement what can be a relatively paltry income from royalties. In addition, the illusion confers greater significance to an author's work by depicting the text as free from capitalist motives—a boon to both author and publisher. In essence, Perkins was able to promote the proverbial brand of the author by downplaying the role of the publisher. Furthermore, the ideal of the solitary literary artist had become so ingrained in popular conceptions of authorship by this time that it had become something of a self-defining concept for the author, making Perkins's recognition of a writer's aesthetic prerogative both flattering and vindicating. Similarly, many authors expected a certain measure of deference on the part of the publisher, and Perkins's propensity to de-emphasize the importance of the editorial role was a welcome diplomatic gesture. To that effect, Perkins masterfully imparted a self-effacing manner in his dealings with authors, and his letters alone are a study in the art of subtle persuasion. In a note concerning Ray Stannard Baker's autobiography, for instance, Perkins's tone is apologetic as he unnecessarily offers an explanation for his feedback: "I now enclose quite a long memorandum," he writes, "which I am afraid is truly superfluous anyhow. I realize that all that could be useful to you is merely the impression of a reader sympathetic to the

book, who would presumably see it more objectively than the author” (Wheelock 169). Though coy, Perkins’s communications were by no means insincere, for he did harbor a fundamental respect for an author’s unique aesthetic outlook. Perkins’s respect for the author’s point of view is revealed in what is, perhaps, the most emphatic statement he ever made to a writer: “Don’t ever *defer* to my judgment” (Kuehl and Bryer 47). “You won’t on any vital point, I know,” Perkins assured Fitzgerald in the following lines of his letter, adding, “and I should be ashamed, if it were possible to have made you; for a writer of any account must speak solely for himself” (47). Although the young author did eventually concede the point in question, the editor’s acknowledgment of his aesthetic prerogative solidified Fitzgerald’s trust in Perkins and contributed to the development of a constructive, trusting relationship. Thus, with motivations that were somewhat utilitarian and somewhat idealistic, Perkins maintained an attitude of deference to the author’s creative instinct that became a hallmark of his editorial method. Fearful that too much attention on the editorial role “might undermine readers’ faith in writers, and writers’ confidence in themselves,” Perkins sought to minimize his public exposure (Berg 6). Perkins upheld the policy that an editor should be neither seen nor heard, and he purposely avoided speaking engagements, contest judging, and most social events in an attempt to dodge the public spotlight (Wheelock 264). His concern for public perception was so great that he even refused the gift of Wolfe’s manuscript because he felt it was inappropriate for an editor to own an author’s work (Brucoli and Bucker 131). Perkins’s commitment to downplaying his role explains why he sullenly concluded that he was “through” the day a colleague at Doubleday dubbed him “the dean of American editors”⁶ (Berg 9). Not only did this accolade signal the end

⁶ Kenneth D. McCormick, then editor-in-chief at Doubleday & Company, introduced Perkins as “the Dean of American Editors” to a group of students in an extension course on book publishing through New York University (qtd. in Berg 3). When Perkins returned home that night, he said to his eldest daughter,

of his professional ascent but, by recognizing his contribution to literature, it also threatened to undermine the illusion of authorial proprietorship he had been careful to maintain. The man behind the curtain had been exposed.

Given the obvious professional advantages, it appears as if Perkins's efforts to perpetuate the myth of the solitary literary artist were nothing more than a shrewd business practice. Yet, to suppose that the editor consciously rejected the ideal is to insinuate that his dealings with authors were in some way disingenuous, which they weren't. Rather, Perkins entertained the notion of the literary artist as a privileged creative being without necessarily discounting or affirming the stipulation that isolation is a necessary component of his aesthetic process. Perkins believed that the true writer possessed innate qualities that distinguished him from other men and the first was a "literary conscience" (Wheelock 128). He believed that all writers had dual consciences, "One of them," he explained, "is the one we all have, but the writer, the artist, has another which compels him in the same way not to shrink from revealing life, however unpleasant it is" (128). Perkins was convinced that "the business of literature is to reveal life," and his commitment to realism in literature was no less palpable than his commitment to the democratic ideal of free expression (209). Nowhere in the record does his voice register more strength or passion than in his defense of a text that rings true to life. Yet, Perkins believed that the only way to reveal life was to write from experience; therefore, he regarded the ability to internalize experience as a necessary skill for any writer. In Hemingway, for example, Perkins recognized this special gift at play even in the author's fishing prowess. "It must require the intuition of an artist," he once said of Hemingway's powers of observation, "to learn quickly the geography of the ocean bottom and the ways of fish, but Hemingway learned in a year what often takes a decade or a lifetime. It was

Bertha Perkins Frothingham, "I gave a speech tonight and they called me 'the dean of American editors'...When they call you the dean, that means you're through" (9).

as though instinctively he projected himself into a fish—knew how a tarpon or a kingfish felt, and thought, and so what he would do” (qtd. in Berg 158). Writing, Perkins felt, was an exercise that required a fine-tuned awareness of experience, and he once told author James Jones that he believed anyone could tell if he were a writer if, “when he tried to write, out of some particular day, he found in the effort that he could recall exactly how the light fell and how the temperature felt... Most people cannot do it. ...but that ability is at the bottom of writing, I am sure” (Wheelock 273). Despite the vast disparity in their styles, Fitzgerald once characterized the “family resemblance” between his own writing and that of Hemingway and Wolfe as “the attempt that crops up in our fiction from time to time to recapture the exact feel of a moment in time and space exemplified by people rather than by things...an attempt at a mature memory of a deep experience” (Kuehl and Bryer 203-04). Inevitably, Perkins’s respect for the innate ability of the author led him to grant a certain amount of deference to his craft. Though Perkins was committed to helping the author hone his work, he was cautious not to pressure him to fit a predetermined aesthetic mold. “If you have a Mark Twain, don’t try to make him into a Shakespeare or make a Shakespeare into a Mark Twain,” he advised the group of publishing students, “in the end an editor can get only as much out of an author as the author has in him” (qtd. in Berg 6). But what the author had “in him,” according to Perkins, was the innate ability to write from experience and the literary conscience that compelled him to do so, and this was what the editor defined as talent. Thus, Perkins managed to construct his own version of the ideal literary artist—recasting the genius of solitude for the talent of experiential reflection—and this reinterpretation of cultural conceptions enabled him to reconcile his idealistic perception of the author with the practical realities of editorial intervention.

Allegiance to Talent

The challenge of identifying and nurturing talented writers was the most rewarding aspect of the publishing process for Perkins, and the quest to discover the next original voice in American letters was the driving force of his career. Perkins's investment in potential talent was so great that he often staked his reputation on the bet that a promising new author would someday realize his full potential. As early as 1919, Perkins effectively argued that "a publisher's first allegiance is to talent" when making his career-defining pitch for *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald's first novel (qtd. in Berg 16). Despite its flaws, Perkins had discerned a hint of brilliance in Fitzgerald's manuscript, and the young editor boldly baited Charles Scribner II himself—the head of one of America's most respected and conservative publishing houses—to take on the radical new author: "If we're going to turn down the likes of Fitzgerald," he declared, "I will lose all interest in publishing books" (16). In his search for new authors, Perkins was not necessarily concerned with the construction of a manuscript, for he knew that could be improved; instead, he perused the author's work for something—some spark of creative genius—that distinguished the author rather than the text. "His passion," noted longtime associate John Hall Wheelock, "was for the rare real thing, the flash of poetic insight that lights up a character or a situation and reveals a talent at work" (Wheelock 7). To this end, the editor engaged in a perennial search, not for the next big title but for the next big talent, what he referred to as "the real thing"⁷ (qtd. in Berg 6). Once Perkins detected talent in an author his allegiance to that person was immediate and boundless. For instance, it took many years and the publication of several books before Chard Powers Smith became a profitable Scribner's author, but Perkins's focus always remained on Smith's potential. "His only interest in me was in my

⁷ Perkins once wrote to Hemingway, "the utterly real thing in writing is the only thing that counts, + the whole racket melts down before it" (Brucoli and Trogdon 224).

next job,” Smith recalled, and though he found Perkins’s seeming “ignorance of and indifference to” his sales figures and critical reviews distressing at the time, he later appreciated the editor’s unwavering faith that his talent would eventually be revealed (Smith 89). Professionally, Perkins justified the continued support of an unprofitable author because he likened the acquisition of talent to a long-term investment on the publisher’s part. Perkins once explained his author-based recruitment strategy to Hemingway:

The great interest in publishing is to take on an author at the start, or reasonably near it, and then to publish not this book and that, but the whole author. It is not only more interesting, but it is sounder because your investment is in his whole output and not in individual books. You can afford to lose on certain ones because of the gains you make on others. (Brucoli and Trogdon 150)

What made this a particularly winning strategy in Perkins’s case was his uncanny ability to predict the course of a literary career. In a 1944 letter to William B. Wisdom, for example, Perkins offers his thoughts on the potential legacies of some contemporary authors with rather remarkable precision:

I have always read Dos [Passos] with fascination, but the fascination of his writings was that of amazingly revealing *documents*. His books will be valuable to the social historian. They will not long survive as novels, hardly even as fiction. And [Sinclair] Lewis is a remarkable journalist, a satiric journalist. His importance is not in his writing as creation, but in his amazing observation. Anyhow, I always thought that he never got beyond the late Victorians as a writer of fiction. [James Branch] Cabell I never tried hard to read, but had little success with him in the little I did. And if I really read him, I might feel very differently.

[Willa] Cather I should put very high, and Ellen Glasgow for her urbanity and on technical grounds. [Robert] Nathan I always felt a kind of irrational impatience with. (Wheelock 251)

Indeed, his judgment in such matters was “almost unerring in its clairvoyance,” according to Wheelock, so the gambles that he took on new writers typically paid off (7). In a sense, his career was leveraged on this knack as his early success with such risky acquisitions as Fitzgerald and Hemingway paved the way for his future investment in more challenging authors such as Wolfe. That’s not to suggest that Perkins’s talent or interest lay merely in the prediction of commercial success; while many of the books that came out under his watch were profitable, quite a few are still considered to be major literary accomplishments.⁸ Perhaps the most conspicuous example of Perkins’s exceptional literary judgment is his immediate recognition of excellence in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Perkins knew instinctively that the manuscript before him was nothing short of an American classic, but he misjudged the sophistication of the contemporary reading public and was always somewhat perplexed by the book’s lackluster commercial success despite its relatively positive critical reception.⁹ Usually, however, he was a more accurate judge of public taste, and he typically displayed remarkable clarity in evaluating the writing of his own authors, even those to whom he was close. Of Hemingway, for example, he observed: “Hem’s best writings, his truly magical ones, are his stories, and especially the quiet stories. But I did think that, as a novel, ‘A Farewell [to Arms]’ was more completely

⁸ The Modern Library’s list of 100 Best Novels still includes Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (74) and *The Sun Also Rises* (45), as well as Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night* (28) and *The Great Gatsby*, which is second only to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (“100 Best Novels”).

⁹ The first printing of 20,870 copies brought the author just \$6,261 in royalties, barely cancelling his \$6,000 debt to Scribner’s, and some copies from the second printing of 3,000 were still in the publisher’s warehouse when Fitzgerald died 15 years later (Bruccoli and Smith 217). Fitzgerald received some of his strongest reviews yet for *The Great Gatsby* as well as letters of congratulations from admired contemporaries such as Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, and T.S. Eliot, but some critics dismissed the novel as nothing more than a sensational story (218).

successful than ‘[For Whom] The Bell [Tolls],’ though not the equal of ‘The Bell’ as literature” (Wheelock 251). Perkins graciously accepted the fact that not all authors are writers of literary masterpieces, and that writers of literary masterpieces didn’t always hit their target, but that never dampened his enthusiasm for the writer who had demonstrated the potential for greatness.

Nonetheless, the publisher continued to occupy the position of literary gatekeeper, and conflict inevitably ensued if an author missed his mark. After all, publishing is a capitalist enterprise, and the publisher’s primary objective is to provide books that will appeal broadly to readers—that is, consumers. Though publishers may concede to lose money on a few books for the sake of prestige—and most do from time to time—the incentives to produce commercially successful book are great, greatest among them being the capacity to continue production. The enterprise, therefore, demands a certain degree of agreement between author, publisher, and reader. But authors, influenced by the social myth of the solitary literary artist, were fundamentally opposed to anything resembling collaboration, lest they compromise their artistic integrity for the sake of commercial gain. As liaison between author and publisher, Perkins found himself at the epicenter of this professional paradox, for it was his job to broker agreement between the two. Perkins’s own democratic values compelled him to defend the agency of the author, but he knew that if books didn’t sell the continued production of both author and publisher were in jeopardy. Therefore, Perkins didn’t shrink from the necessity of imposing upon an author’s creative process, but he did remain sensitive to interventions that might undermine perceptions of authorial agency.

Mediation and the Writing Process

Outwardly, Perkins professed that the instincts of the author were superior to the judgment of the publisher, yet the nature of his editorial intercessions reveals that he was not opposed to intervening—sometimes definitively—in the writing process. He suggested, negotiated, and sometimes rejected his authors' ideas for new projects; proposed both minor and major revisions to a manuscript; and is often credited with shoring up the structural integrity of the works he edited. In effect, Perkins collaborated with authors in a broad sense—in spite of his contradictory proclamations that the writer's judgment is supreme. Nevertheless, Perkins carefully maintained a deferential and tactful approach when negotiating a text because he did not want to compromise the author's sense of ownership over his work, and this tactic cultivated a productive dynamic in the editor-author relationship. The seriousness with which Perkins approached certain aspects of the writing process, however, intimates that he considered more to be at stake than professional affability. Ostensibly, Perkins's theory regarding the publisher's role in a democratic society made him hesitant to divulge his own views to authors for fear that he would inadvertently influence their work. To that effect, Perkins refused to intervene in the manuscript stage of writing because he considered that to be the phase in which authors develop their ideas. The stages immediately proceeding or following the draft of a manuscript Perkins seemed to regard as fair game, however, as a time in which it was not only professionally appropriate but also mutually advantageous to help the author express his own ideas more clearly.

Sometimes, however, Perkins was obliged to keep an author from wasting his efforts. Though Perkins committed to his authors for the long haul, his dedication to their talent did not mean he was committed to publishing anything they wrote. Taylor Caldwell's case serves as a prime example. After an early success with her novel *Dynasty of Death*, subsequently followed

by a weak sequel, she submitted several manuscripts to Scribner's that Perkins rejected outright. Undeterred, she continued to send work in for him to review—a testimony to Perkins's diplomatic handling of the formidable task of rejection—and eventually the pair discovered a niche that was well suited to her particular style¹⁰ (Berg 399-400). Rejecting an author's work, especially an established author, was a delicate business, but Perkins proved early on that he was equal to the job. As a recently appointed editor, Perkins's first task was to write a letter to Brooks, his boyhood friend, rejecting the manuscript that Perkins had submitted to Scribner's on his behalf (Wheelock 10). The circumstance could hardly have been more awkward, for Perkins—writing from a hospital bed after an appendectomy—was obliged to share the happy news of his recent promotion while simultaneously delivering discouraging news to an author and friend. Yet, Perkins's letter “glided with such delicate skill over brittle ice that its extreme thinness was scarcely apparent,” and his characteristically easy style kept “neither the rejector nor the rejected” from being put in an awkward position (Robillard 53). Essential to this effect was the modicum of self-depreciation that would eventually become characteristic of Perkins's correspondence and which became more pronounced as the news to be delivered was less favorable. As a rhetorical technique, Perkins's tendency to undermine his own authority helped to assuage the situation because “it saved face, always, for the other fellow” (55). Recognizing the value in his friend's work, Perkins submitted the manuscript to other publishers on his behalf (55). The following year, B. W. Huebsch published *America's Coming of Age* by Van Wyck Brooks.

Generally, however, Perkins dispensed rejections with a quick and definitive finality suitable to his position of authority as the publisher's representative. Perkins's direct manner of

¹⁰ Perkins encouraged Caldwell to try a historical novel and suggested a format for her narrative that “served as the model for best-selling fictionalizations of real lives which she would write during the next four decades—Saint Paul, Cicero, and Pericles among them” (Berg 400).

negation—though characterized as “devastating”—left no room for further argument or negotiation on the part of the author, a stark contrast to “the orthodox author-soothing that usually accompanies rejections” (Smith 93). Ultimately, the benefit of administering a rejection with such finality was that it cleared the way for the author to move on to other tasks. “Max’s unconditioned denial acted as a purge. You were utterly emptied of your idea, even if it had been a good one,” Smith recalled, admitting that in contrast to typical, mollifying rejections, “Max’s method, with but one swift needleprick of pain, was cleaner, and the inoculation was permanent” (93). If author and editor were meeting in person, the needleprick required nothing more than a slight scowl and a stare from Perkins’s luminous gray eyes. Known for his reserved personal manner, Perkins usually said little when he met with an author, instead conveying his thoughts through body language that was so evincive that his meaning passed unequivocally into the author’s consciousness. Smith provides a detailed account of such an encounter in describing what he called Perkins’s four degrees of denial:

First, if the matter was slight, there was a simple, good-natured scowl, perhaps with little shakes of the head, all no more than a social mannerism related to small talk. Second, if the matter really got into his attention, there was the censorious or appraising version of the gray-eyed plain stare, but alleviated by the little smile as if to say he knew you were too intelligent to be serious about anything so silly. Third, there was the censorious stare unrelieved by the smile, very stately and terrible. And fourth, if you proposed something intolerable that could not be ignored, the stare was reinforced along the fine nose by the lift of a scornful nostril in olfactory discomfort, to which might be added a nauseous smile that was trying unsuccessfully to be forbearing. It was an expression of horrified

compassion that you, his friend, his author—and therefore a very great author!—should have fallen into this dreadful delusion. The expression would last a few seconds, which was a sufficient eternity, then it would resolve into a scowl and scatter in small negative head-shakes. But those seconds were plenty. Not only did the passage persuade me that my notion had been imbecile, but it threw me in my turn into compassion for him, poor Max, poor very God that I in my childish blindness should have imposed on him such suffering. (92)

To say little but express much was one of Perkins's special attributes, but the technique of dissuading an author without voicing the negative is indicative of his editorial genius. In letters, of course, Perkins was forced to be more articulate with his criticism, but he managed the same effect by writing from the conciliatory premise that an idea or manuscript was rejected only because it was beneath the author's talents, not because it failed to meet the publisher's standards. When dealing with the self-conscious Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, for example, Perkins's rejection is definitive, but kind: "I do not think that A FAMILY FOR JOCK should be published as a book," Perkins wrote, "It isn't written as you would have written it had you intended it to be a book. Besides, it did not originate in you, as all your other books have, but was written, one might say, by assignment, - and when it is done that way, a book never does come up to the author's own level"¹¹ (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 599). Granted, Rawlings had previously expressed some misgivings about adapting her screenplay into book form, but Perkins's direct approach allowed him to reject the piece of writing without conveying any doubts about the writer.

¹¹ While adapting one of her stories, "A Mother in Mannville," into a screenplay for MGM, Rawlings attempted to expand it into a novel for Scribner's by the title *A Family for Jock* (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 19).

Typically, Perkins was reluctant to turn away a manuscript once it was written, so he was careful to ensure that the author considered his project wisely before the writing began. Despite his insistence that “an editor adds nothing,” Perkins made an apparent distinction between an idea for a book and a work in progress. Perkins never shied from playing the part of the muse with his authors; if one was struggling to come up with a new project, the editor could be counted on to provide an idea for him. Likewise, Perkins permitted himself to collaborate with an author when developing a concept for a book, and one of Smith’s anecdotes reveals that Perkins could be surprisingly stubborn and persuasive during these conferences. In recalling his own experience, Smith observes the subtle persistence that marked Perkins’s pre-writing negotiations:

If it involved something not yet in process, he would usually propose emendations of my idea, and, now that he knew me, his manner would be argumentative, sometimes pleading, with quick gestures and eyebrows lifted high for emphasis. If the matter were important, like a new book I wanted to start, and we didn’t agree after the second drink, we had a third. If we didn’t agree then, we had a fourth. And if we didn’t agree then, we had another lunch. When we reached agreement, we walked back to the office and Max gave me a check. (Smith 90)

There are three subtle but important points in the way Smith tells his story that are worth noting here. First is his aside, “now that he knew me,” which signals that Perkins would only engage in such an intense discussion if he was familiar with the author. Perkins made a point of building rapport with his authors before pushing the limits professionally. Once a sense of mutual trust and respect was established in the relationship, his efforts to influence the author’s writing agenda took on the characteristics of a lively, intellectual debate rather than an imposing

injunction. Similarly, the “pleading” nature of Perkins’s argument is then taken as a signal of his deep, personal commitment to insuring that the undertaking was worthy of the author’s time and attention rather than of the editor’s desire to impose his will. Finally, the anecdote—and the negotiation—ends with consensus. Perkins may have been persistent, but he would have felt remiss if he thought he had strong-armed an author into a writing project. Given these caveats, Perkins could justify his efforts to influence the direction of an author’s work if the writing had not yet begun.

When an author was at work on a manuscript, however, Perkins exhibited an almost superstitious adherence to silence. The editor feared that a novel too much talked about could not be written, and his letters are peppered with cautions against prematurely discussing a work-in-progress. For instance, in a letter to Rawlings he warns her that, “it is a bad thing to talk to anyone very much about a novel. . . . Sometimes when one talks about a novel, they give it a degree of expression that makes it impossible for them to write it even” (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 144). Thus, once the topic had been determined and approved, Perkins voluntarily silenced his input and waited until after the author had worked through the material alone before weighing in. Perkins knew that writing a book was a difficult task, and he was sympathetic to the author who was struggling to overcome a hurdle, but he did not want to jeopardize the integrity of the writer’s ideas. It is evident from the correspondence that most authors would have welcomed additional input from their editor. For instance, Rawlings once implored Perkins to be upfront with his opinions: “Now please don’t write me another of those restrained ‘You must do it as seems right to you’ notes,” she insists, “Tell me what is really in your mind” (252). But when writers came to him with pleas for help during the manuscript stage he would simply advise them, “just get it all down on paper and then we’ll see what to do with it” (qtd. in Wheelock

xvii). Once complete, Perkins would read the manuscript in search of the author's intentions and then help to shape the writing around the writer's original conception. The inherent value he placed on the author's objective was indicative yet again of his latent idolization of the literary artist, but it was his commitment to preserving the democratic integrity of the writing that truly reinforced this self-imposed injunction. This responsibility was trumped only by the needs of the eventual reader, therefore Perkins dutifully responded to the manuscript with detailed outlines and notes for the author to consider during revision. Even if he suggested substantial editorial changes to the text later on, Perkins was confident that the original intentions of the author would be honored as long as he respected the sanctity of the manuscript stage. By focusing on the mission of clarifying, rather than altering, the author's original plan, Perkins managed to preserve the author's sense of authority and rationalize his eventual intervention into the text.

Still, Perkins was apprehensive about gaining too much sway over a writer, and his persistent acknowledgement of the author's agency acted as a subconscious check on his own editorial power. His suggestions—especially those with the potential to alter the direction of the text—were often prefaced with a statement reminding the author of his ultimate authority. A passage typical of this tendency appears in a letter to Edith Pope, which affirms her authority over the text before offering a suggestion: “A book, of course, has to arise out of the author, and what an editor must fear most is that he will influence the author too much. And so you must make your decisions. The only thing is...” (Wheelock 231). That segue, “the only thing is,” is fairly typical of Perkins's subtle effort to downplay his criticism. In contrast to the pointed decisiveness of Perkins's rejections, his critical feedback was administered with a calculated air of uncertainty—though he lacked neither assurance nor conviction. This approach softened the delivery of his critique and was one of Perkins's best tactics for ensuring that his suggestions

were not made too forcefully. Another characteristic of Perkins's feedback was the subtlety with which he argued his point. He would drop his editorial suggestions deferentially, almost indifferently, in his casual, breezy correspondence. "Max's comments," observed his biographer, "were effective almost subliminally; he had a way of gently tossing them out as one would pebbles into a pond, making rings of meaning which enlarged until they touched the author's consciousness (Berg 404). This tactic of subtlety enabled Perkins to glide over the fact that he was acting on behalf of the publisher and convey the sense that his primary interest was purely in the aesthetic success of the author. The substantive value of Perkins's critique was usually self-apparent, and the author needed little persuasion to incorporate the editor's suggestions into his writing. But, if the matter was of minor significance and the author chose not to heed Perkins's advice—as Hemingway often did—then the editor typically accepted his decision and argued the point no further.

The Exceptional Thomas Wolfe

Naturally, not all authors are created equal, and it was easier for Perkins to respect the prerogative of an author like Hemingway, who needed very little editorial guidance, than, for instance, an author like Smith, who was apt to flounder without Perkins's direction. "Certain authors absolutely demand help," Perkins once wrote in reference to Wolfe, "and if it is not given them they will go to another publisher to get it. But most real writers do not. Most of them know what they want to do, and do it. Nobody ever edited Hemingway, beyond excising a line or two for fear of libel or other legal dangers" (Wheelock 228). Perkins's insistence that "most real writers" do not need help is yet another betrayal of the hold cultural perceptions of authorship still had on his conception of authorial autonomy. However, the ideal of the solitary literary artist

was invalidated by Perkins's experience as an editor, for he was constantly dealing with talented authors who all needed help, to varying degrees, with their texts. In order to justify his most intense editorial interventions Perkins concentrated on another aspect of the ideal author as he saw him—his heightened sensitivity. Perkins was instinctively wary of the emotional or psychological state of his authors, and if he thought the writing process was jeopardizing their wellbeing he would ramp up his editorial involvement in an effort to bail them out. Such was the case with Wolfe, who became so enmeshed and overwhelmed with the magnitude of the artistic task he'd set for himself that Perkins began to fear for his sanity. "When [Wolfe] could go no further with 'Of Time and the River,' he brought it to me and asked me to help him, and I did it with very great reluctance and anxiety," Perkins would later explain, "Tom *demanded* help. He *had* to have it. No one who did not know him could possibly understand it, but he would get into a state of such desperation that one realized that if he were not enabled to complete his book soon, something very serious would happen to him" (228). This worry sometimes led Perkins to devote himself to seemingly hopeless manuscripts in an effort to spare the author the blow of failure. For instance, Perkins described Marcia Davenport's *The Valley of Decision* to Rawlings as "the most chaotic manuscript I ever saw in my life," but he struggled to make sense of it for weeks, not because he thought it would be a huge success, but because "it would not do to allow Marcia to fail on this big undertaking. It might ruin her career to get beaten that way" (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 541). With Wolfe, however, the stakes were higher, and the Herculean task of seeing his manuscripts through the press would prove to be the defining challenge of Perkins's editorial career.

In many ways Wolfe was the exception that proved the rule—his distinct artistic temperament did not conform to the patterns that Perkins had come to expect from other authors,

and their deep affection for one another caused the relationship to diverge from Perkins's typical editor-author dynamic. Unlike most of Perkins's authors, who struggled to find the means to express their thoughts, Wolfe's words poured forth in an unrelenting stream, and he saw no need to stanch the flow.¹² Though much of what he wrote was brilliant, the effusive nature of his writing created a unique editorial challenge, for neither Scribner's nor the general public was prepared for Wolfe's self-indulgent writing style. Thus, Perkins found himself in the unusual position of needing to restrain an author's creative impulse rather than encourage it. But Wolfe was neither prepared nor willing to edit his own material, and he depended heavily on Perkins's objective editorial perspective when revising his manuscripts. Over time, Perkins became more directly involved in Wolfe's writing than that of any other author, and their partnership eventually developed collaborative overtones. In an unprecedented arrangement, the pair would often work side-by-side in Perkins's office to prepare a manuscript for press. Though little epistolary evidence remains to corroborate claims regarding the nature of their working relationship, Perkins maintained that he never added anything to Wolfe's writing, and he insisted time and time again that he never cut Wolfe's prose without the author's consent.¹³ Even so, he did play an unusually large part in shaping Wolfe's manuscripts into their published form. Because Wolfe struggled to gain an objective perspective on his writing, the editorial directives Perkins gave him were far more specific than those typically offered to his authors. Perkins's suggestions were usually broad and open ended, allowing the author quite a bit of space for

¹² When Fitzgerald advised Wolfe to consider the merits of the "novel of selected incidents," arguing that "Repression itself has a value," Wolfe countered that all novels are by nature novels of selected incident: "You couldn't write about the inside of a telephone booth without selecting. You could fill a novel of a thousand pages with a description of a single room and yet your incidents would be selected" (Brucoli and Baughman, *The Sons* 256-58).

¹³ Additionally, Brucoli notes, "There are no revisions or insertions in Perkins's hand on any of the tens of thousands of pages of Wolfe's manuscripts and typescripts" (Brucoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xviii).

creative application. With Wolfe, however, the editor's advice was uncharacteristically direct, and suggestions such as, "Make rich man in opening scene older and more middle-aged," or "Cut out references to daughter," and "Complete all scenes wherever possible with dialogue," left little room for artistic interpretation¹⁴ (Brucoli and Bucker 121-23). Already faced with the task of unifying a sprawling manuscript, Perkins's restrictive editorial guidance most likely reflects his need to keep the prolific Wolfe on task. The ease with which Wolfe could compose was uncanny, and when a new passage was required to bridge the gap between scenes in a manuscript that had just been cut Wolfe would simply "[pull] a chair up to a corner of Max's desk and feverishly [scribble] one of the requested connecting passages right there" (Berg 239). Perkins quickly learned, however, that Wolfe—who was resentful of any cuts to his material—was prone to "compensate for his earlier losses by jamming verbiage into those lacunae" (240). Therefore, the editor's restrictive approach was geared more toward the practical problem of containing Wolfe's prose than the artistic problem of creation. Though the mass of Wolfe's manuscripts has been largely exaggerated over the years, the challenge of shaping them into single, printable volumes has not. For instance, Wolfe's initial manuscript for *Of Time and the River* rang in at about one million words, but in the year that they revised it Wolfe estimated that he wrote an additional half million words of new manuscript (236-40). That summer, Perkins confessed to Rawlings that the situation itself was out of proportion: "I am engaged in a kind of life and death struggle with Mr. Thomas Wolfe" (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 150). The premise of the struggle was the practical necessity of cutting and shaping the manuscript into printable form. Unwilling to lose any of his material, Wolfe reacted to Perkins's edits as if in physical pain: "Every time he slashed a page from corner to corner, Perkins could see that Tom's eye was following his hand.

¹⁴ The memo that contains these suggestions is unsigned, but was presumably prepared by Perkins in reference to *Of Time and the River* (Brucoli and Bucker 121).

Wolfe winced with pain, as though Max had gouged his skin” (Berg 239). By his own admission, Wolfe was not equal to the task of culling a manuscript, and the proverbial dirty work of excision fell to his editor.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Wolfe was grateful for his editor’s help, and he wrote to a mutual friend in praise of how Max “has sweated and labored and lavished untold care and patience upon this huge manuscript of mine” (Tarr, *Ever Yours* 260). Despite its troubles, Perkins regarded his close editorial involvement in Wolfe’s writing as his most fulfilling professional experience, writing to Wolfe soon before *Of Time and the River* was published, “But the plain truth is that working on your writings, however it has turned out, for good or bad, has been the greatest pleasure, for all its pain, + the most interesting episode of my editorial life” (Bruccoli and Bucker 128). Unfortunately, it was the very success of their alliance—the nature of which violated cultural perceptions of authorship—that eventually undermined their personal and professional relationship.

The Pitfall

Most authors accept the fact, at least on some level, that publication is an inherently collaborative act that requires a certain degree of compromise on their part. But Wolfe considered the mechanics of publishing to be a legitimate threat to his artistry, because the image of the solitary literary artist was more to him than a social construction; it was an essential component of his self-identity. In his letters, Wolfe frequently discusses feelings of isolation and alienation, and often insinuates that he is generally misunderstood, that no one but the true

¹⁵ In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe confessed, “Cutting had always been the most difficult and distasteful part of writing to me; my tendency has always been to write rather than to cut. Moreover, whatever critical faculty I may have had concerning my own work had been seriously impaired, for the time being at least, by the frenzied labor of the past four years. When a man’s work has poured from him for almost five years like burning lava from a volcano; when all of it, however superfluous, has been given fire and passion by the white heat of his own creative energy, it is very difficult suddenly to become coldly surgical, ruthlessly detached” (78-79).

literary artist could appreciate his craft or the weight of his burden. Therefore, Wolfe embraced the traditional depiction of the artist who struggles for Truth in an unsympathetic world as a self-defining concept, and the ideal became a soothing recompense for his perceived burden. Thus, when literary critic Bernard De Voto publically accused Wolfe of being unable to write without Perkins's help, he challenged Wolfe's status as an author and cut to the very core of his self-perception.

Rumors had circulated around literary circles for years about the close relationship between Wolfe and Perkins, and the author's long essay-turned-book, *The Story of a Novel*, provided the perfect opening for critics eager to capitalize on the speculations. The book, which Wolfe envisioned as an artistic manifesto, outlined the process of composing *Of Time and the River* and gave generous though not unwarranted credit to Perkins for his moral and critical support. De Voto, however, took advantage of the writer's confessions, and used them to argue that Wolfe's inability to structure his own work was indicative of an artistic deficiency: "The most flagrant evidence of his incompleteness is the fact that, so far, one indispensable part of the artist has existed not in Mr. Wolfe but in Maxwell Perkins. Such organizing faculty and such critical intelligence as have been applied to the book have come not from inside the artist, not from the artist's feeling for form and esthetic integrity, but from the office of Charles Scribner's Sons"¹⁶ (qtd. in Berg 295). De Voto implies that, in receiving help from his publisher, Wolfe did not act unilaterally, therefore throwing Wolfe's artistic integrity into question because he failed to meet conventional expectations of absolute artistic autonomy. De Voto's critique suggested that Wolfe's writing was nothing more than the product of a literary assembly line, a charge that "destroyed Wolfe's pleasure of accomplishment" and threatened to undermine the significance

¹⁶ De Voto's scathing review, "Genius is Not Enough," first appeared in the 25 April 1936 edition of *The Saturday Review of Literature*.

of his novel (296). Most damningly, however, it threatened to undermine the writer's faith in himself.

Perkins instinctively grasped the seriousness of De Voto's implications, and he later acknowledged that the trouble was linked to their cooperative effort. "We did not bring this about, but it just naturally developed out of his nature and circumstances, and [Wolfe] resented the fact that he had become so dependent," Perkins reflected after Wolfe's severance with Scribner's (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 332). The break with Wolfe was a terrible blow to Perkins, and many of his friends and colleagues believed that it haunted him until the end. In his eagerness to see Wolfe published, Perkins had indulged the impulse to guide the author through the writing process, and in so doing he strayed further than ever from his ideal image of editorship: "it has always been my conviction," Perkins once wrote, "...that a book must be done according to the writer's conception of it as nearly perfectly as possible, and that the publishing problems begin then.- That is, the publisher must not try to get a writer to fit the book to the conditions of the trade, etc. It must be the other way around" (253). Some, however, would argue that fitting the book "to the conditions of the trade" was exactly what Perkins did with Thomas Wolfe's novel approach to literature. Yet, it is impossible to know how his work would have been received if published in its original form. At least one scholar is convinced that, without Perkins, Wolfe never would have been published at all.¹⁷ But Perkins recognized that Wolfe was a special case, and even though he mourned the loss of their professional bond, he did not regret his actions, for Wolfe—it seemed to Perkins—had left him no other choice. Years later, Perkins responded to a piece that accused editors of slashing manuscripts and seriously injuring the work

¹⁷ Matthew Bruccoli has repeatedly insinuated that it is unlikely that Wolfe would have ever been published without Perkins's editorial backing. For example, in one critical essay, he asserts, "For the record: No Perkins, no *Look Homeward, Angel*—and very likely no Wolfe" (Bruccoli, "What Perkins Really Did" 145).

of writers like Thomas Wolfe, and his response is in part a defense of their unique editorial relationship as well as a warning to editors about the danger of losing perspective on the writer's importance to publishing:

Editors aren't much, and can't be. They can only help a writer realize himself, and they can ruin him if he's pliable, as Tom was not. That is why the editors I know shrink from tampering with a manuscript and do it only when it is required of them by the author, as it was by Tom. When an editor gets to think differently from that, to think he knows more about a writer's book than the writer – and some do – he is dead, done for, and dangerous. When he thinks he is a discoverer because he doesn't fail to recognize talent – was a jeweler ever praised because he knew a diamond from a lump of glass? – He is a stuffed shirt, and through. But I've known it to happen. (Wheelock 229-30)

Though the situation with Wolfe was the actualization of all Perkins feared should his name become too closely associated with one of his writers, he continued to rationalize the nature of their relationship, viewing it as a sort of necessary evil in the mission to see Wolfe's talent realized. Though it hurt him deeply, Perkins eventually recognized Wolfe's action as "a kind of desperate tearing himself loose in order to stand up alone," and admitted, "And of course that is what he ought to do, in fact, and must do, if he is to become a really great writer" (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 332). The sentiment expressed in these lines hints at Perkins's own struggle to uphold an impossible ideal of authorship in spite of his professional obligation to intervene in their work. Despite his pragmatic effort to reconcile the interests of author and publisher by playing to public perceptions, perhaps it was Perkins who was repeatedly trying to convince himself that the first-rate author, the true author, is one who does, indeed, stand alone.

Chapter 2: Putting the Reader First

Publishers have obvious financial incentives for producing books with mass appeal, and so do writers. Therefore, it would seem that publisher and author would work amiably together toward this goal; but authors' interest in the proliferation of their work transcends commercial gain because their aesthetic purpose cannot be fulfilled unless a book is read. Authors are thereby suspicious of editorial intervention, wary that financial incentives will entice the publisher to induce them to pander to public taste and compromise the artistic integrity of their work. Despite their skepticism, Perkins exerted unprecedented levels of influence on the construction of his authors' texts, ultimately guiding their work to greater commercial and critical heights, without impeding their aesthetic agendas. Perkins achieved this balance by contributing to an author's work indirectly; instead of prescribing specific changes to the text the editor offered his impressions as a representative reader, allowing the author to devise a solution to the issues identified. By playing the role of quintessential reader, Perkins helped bridge the gap between writer and audience that is exasperated by modern publishing. The alternative perspective the editor provided helped authors re-envision their text from the reader's point of view so that they could make improvements that enhanced its commercial value without relinquishing aesthetic control. To that end, Perkins refrained from heavily marking an author's manuscript, presenting his feedback primarily as commentary. Additionally, the editor limited his intrusion into the writer's work by offering only as much assistance as the individual author required. Although

Perkins's critique was somewhat subjective in the sense that it was reflective of his own aesthetic tastes and biases, he was careful to frame his suggestions as advice rather than directives, giving authors the freedom to reject or accept his interpretation of their work. In effect, Perkins helped improve the commercial viability of the book while preserving authorial intention by providing an opportunity for the author to respond to the concerns of a sympathetic reader before publication.

An Egalitarian Approach to Literature

Whether it was his love of literature or his democratic sense of obligation to disperse the ideas of others, Perkins granted equal consideration to every manuscript that crossed his desk. Accordingly, he approached a new piece of literature without any preconceptions, as if he were being introduced to a person for the first time. Editors "ought to judge books the way they judge people," Perkins once explained, "When they meet a person and talk to him, they do not say that he does not resemble some other person, or does resemble him, or make any such comparison. They just size him up on his own terms. That's the only way to judge" (Wheelock 248-49). Perkins believed that editors and reviewers who failed to recognize the potential in a piece of writing were blinded by some sort of editorial or aesthetic bias, asserting that "anything true in the original – which, of course, is very rare – baffles them because they haven't anything with which to compare it directly" (248). Undoubtedly, Perkins's conscientious effort to evaluate a manuscript without prejudice, as a reader might, led him to become an adept recruiter of talented new writers. Because he applied a fresh critical perspective to each manuscript, Perkins was able to discern the potential in an original piece of writing, even if some revision was necessary to make the work truly successful. Once more, Perkins was critical of editors who approached a

manuscript from a biased perspective, asserting that their recommendations were destined to falter because “they can only think of its revision, not in terms of the writer’s intent and capacities, but in the terms of some classic that they measure everything of that kind against” (248). In much the same way that he would feel out a new author to determine whether he possessed a writer’s constitution, Perkins would get to know a manuscript before appraising it as a whole—always with an eye toward its potential. His associate John Hall Wheelock once observed how Perkins was reluctant to reject a manuscript if he detected even a hint of promise in the writing:

How many a bulky manuscript, unpublishable for one reason or another, was laid on his desk, with a report noting perhaps certain passages that showed promise! For Max, that was enough. The work might not be publishable, but there were glimmerings of talent. Into his already swollen briefcase it would go; a weekend was devoted to it, in the hope, not always unrewarded, that something could be salvaged. (1)

Once he was committed to a manuscript, Perkins set about the mission of realizing the potential promised. Perkins knew that every detail was essential to building the overall effect of a literary work, and he had a keen understanding of how the individual features of a text worked together to achieve a desired affect. “Everything Max does is directed toward the whole effect of the book,” Marcia Davenport once explained, “...He can take a mess of chaos, give you the scaffold, and then you build a house on it” (qtd. in Berg 404). Perkins has been repeatedly praised for his structural skill as an editor, which is marked by his ability to shape the narrative framework of a text. Therefore, in the ongoing hunt for literary potential, Perkins did not dismiss a manuscript

simply because it contained some structural flaws. If the manuscript provided a solid foundation from which to work, Perkins would see the job of constructing a book through.

Perkins most likely derived his impulse to prioritize the structural integrity of a literary work from an influential experience in a college composition course. Ironically, as an editor, Perkins was unapologetically critical of collegiate writing programs. In fact, he would even assert that composition courses were “harmful” to writers because they encouraged students to “[get] into the habit of seeing everything through a kind of film of past literature, and not seeing it directly with one’s own senses” (Wheelock 267). Perkins was leery of institutional writing instruction because it threatened to homogenize literature and discourage original expression by teaching students to filter their writings through a literary rather than experiential lens. Fortunately, however, the instructor of Perkins’s undergraduate composition course—the dynamic professor Charles Townsend Copeland—was no typical academician. A former actor, law student, and newspaperman, Copeland was “neither an intellectual nor a scholar,” but his flair for the dramatic coupled with an “almost mystical enthusiasm” for literature resonated with students, and he soon became an institutional fixture at Harvard (Berg 31). Among the students who “flocked to his recitations of the English masterpieces and joined his indulgent literary discussions” was an impressionable Maxwell Perkins (31). Roused by Copeland’s enthusiastic approach to literature, Perkins petitioned to be among the thirty students enrolled in his expository writing course. It was in this course that Perkins experienced firsthand what a critical reader could achieve when he probed the very marrow of a writer’s prose. Rather than lecturing to a classroom, Copeland provided individual instruction to his writing students through a critique-based curriculum. A classmate’s description of the professor’s technique anticipates the way Perkins would eventually approach his editorial role:

...you were summoned to his chambers in Hollis and told to bring with you your manuscript. You were told how to read what you had written. Soon you began to feel that out of the darkness all around you long fingers were searching through the layers of fat and fluff to find your bones and muscles underneath. You could fight back but eventually he stripped you to your essential self. Then he cuffed the battered remains and challenged them into their own authentic activity. (32)

Like Copeland, Perkins was eager to dig through the layers of a manuscript to find the author's original intentions and bring them back to the fore. Then, instead of giving the author instructions on how to fix the manuscript, he challenged him to re-enter the text with a conscious awareness of its purpose and its strengths. Trust in the editorial relationship was essential to the success of this method because it helped the editor root out an author's buried intentions and readied the author to receive his feedback. Likewise, Copeland's unorthodox instructional method was productive only because he enjoyed a spirit of mutual respect in his student-teacher relationships. "Copey was not a professor teaching a crowd in a classroom," one of his former students noted, "He was a very distinct person in a unique relationship with each individual who interested him" (qtd. in Berg 31). Incidentally, Perkins maintained a lifelong relationship with his former professor and even counted him among his own stable of writers. Copeland continued to mentor Perkins, and the editor always regarded him with tremendous respect. "So far as I am concerned," he once told the professor, "you did more good than all the rest of Harvard put together" (32). More than anything, however, Professor Copeland had impressed upon Perkins the advantages of being an active, responsive reader rather than a mere critic of manuscripts.

The Responsive Reader

Perkins's devoted approach to editing may have won his authors' loyalty, but it was on the strength of his critique that he earned their trust. His skill for appraising and discussing the literary works of others was an attribute that garnered the respect of his authors. "So many of his authors said that he could talk about literature better than any writer," Perkins's longtime secretary, Irma Wyckoff, once observed (qtd. in Berg 136). Yet, Perkins could do more than discuss literature, he could break it down into its essential components, analyzing how each element contributed to the overall effectiveness of the whole. Often, Perkins's editorial suggestions pinpointed a weakness in the text that the author had sensed yet couldn't quite identify. Such was the case with F. Scott Fitzgerald when Perkins suggested that readers of *The Great Gatsby* would be dissatisfied if the author didn't reveal more about the title character. "*I myself didn't know what Gatsby looked like or was engaged in & you felt it,*" Fitzgerald enthusiastically responded, "If I'd known & kept it from you you'd have been *too impressed with my knowledge to protest*" (Kuehl and Bryer 89). Fitzgerald was a willing and skillful reviser, and he fit the mold for Perkins's ideal editorial relationship perfectly. Perkins's goal, according to Wheelock, was "to serve as a skilled objective outsider, a critical touchstone by recourse to which a writer is enabled to sense flaws in surface or structure, to grasp and solve the artistic or technical problems involved, and thus to realize completely his own work in his own way" (Wheelock 5). Perkins did not want to solve the problems inherent in a text; rather, he wanted to direct the author's attention to that problem so that he could devise his own solution. Inevitably, however, some authors needed more prompting than others. If necessary, Perkins would give examples or make suggestions pertaining to specific elements or episodes in the text, and if an author had lost perspective on the work in general he would offer assistance by providing a detailed outline of the manuscript as well as a plan for reorganization. Even as broad strokes,

Perkins's editorial suggestions "reveal an extraordinary insight, a wealth of creative criticism far beyond the range of the usual editorial routine" (6). Nevertheless, Perkins continued to approach his role as diagnostic rather than prescriptive, a practice that demonstrated respect for the author's prerogative as creator of the text yet provided the editor an opportunity to help shape it.

Unlike Copeland, Perkins did not simply relay his initial reactions to a manuscript, but would study the text until he was intimately familiar with the way it was constructed. Perkins began by outlining the book, deconstructing its plot turns and analyzing its characters until he was as knowledgeable about the piece as was the writer. In a letter written shortly after Scribner's accepted his first manuscript, Wolfe describes the pains Perkins took to dissect his work and the impression the editor's effort had on him:

...on the desk was a great stack of handwritten paper—a complete summary of my whole enormous book. I was so moved and touched to think that someone at length had thought enough of my work to sweat over it in this way and I almost wept. ...Then he went over the book scene by scene—I found he was more familiar with the scenes and the names of characters than I was. (Burlingame 41)

Not only did Perkins's detailed synopsis of a manuscript signal his commitment to the work, but the amount of time and mental energy he invested to truly understand the author's plan made his assessments particularly comprehensive. Even when Perkins's response to a manuscript was delivered in epistolary form, the pains he took to unravel the author's work were evident. Charged with a critically creative perspective, Davenport referred to these outlines as "the tangible art of Max as editor" (Wheelock xvii). According to Davenport, Perkins's reflections on a manuscript had a clarifying effect for the author:

It throws a penetrating beam of comprehension and perspective through the two banks of fog that confuse and obstruct a novelist: the central theme of the whole book, and the details of characterization, action, dialogue (dialogue *is* action, said Max many times); the interworkings of memory, imagination, susceptibility to place and to physical impressions: Max saw more clearly what a writer meant to do than the writer could see himself. (xviii)

An author can easily lose sight of his intentions in the process of writing, and Perkins helped him rediscover his original purpose. Perkins preferred to withhold his editorial recommendations until he had read the entire manuscript because it allowed him to judge whether an author's intentions would be apparent to a reader from the parameters of the text. Perkins tried to remain cognizant of the author's intentions as he read through the manuscript, even if they were somewhat obscured by the writing. For example, in his response to Davenport's manuscript for *East Side, West Side*, Perkins observes that the city of New York emerges as one of the book's most important characters. Whether this was consciously intended on the author's part or not, Perkins's positive reaction to this motif proves its effectiveness, and he recommends enhancing that element in her narrative by emphasizing the cityscape. "Make Jessie more aware," Perkins suggests, "as she goes about in cars, cabs and afoot, of the way New York is, of how Fifth Avenue looks in the haze of afternoon, or whatever, even when she is lost in the past. This means that you should emphasize what you have already done" (286). That last line is typical of the subtle admonitions punctuating Perkins's letters to remind authors that his suggestions are not mandates but prompts designed to encourage them to expand on the ideas already present in their manuscripts. Perkins reiterates this point several times as he suggests ways Davenport might develop the New York motif: "The reader must be aware of time and place, as it is and as she

remembers it. That is what you intended, and means only an occasional reference to give a sense – by sight or smell or whatever – of a spot of New York. In truth, I only know this from what you have said and written, so you have done it. But strengthen it” (287). Here, not only does Perkins reinforce the author’s sense of ownership over her work but he also ensures the force of his critique by invoking the needs of the reader. Aware that an author’s aesthetic purpose is only realized when the reader is capable of drawing his intended meaning from the text alone, Perkins gave himself over to a manuscript completely. By allowing himself to be swept up in the experience of the writer’s prose, Perkins could determine whether the author’s intentions had been fulfilled from a reader’s perspective.

Aesthetic Preferences

As an editor, Perkins was careful not to bring his own philosophical or aesthetic ideals to a manuscript, but as a reader, his personal literary preferences inevitably shaped his editorial practice. When Perkins became an editor in 1914, much of American literature was still imitative of British and European models; therefore, he made it his mission to distinguish the fiction of his native land by promoting original, talented American authors (Wheelock 8). This patriotic mission pushed him to consider the value in new forms of expression while his keen skill for literary appraisal prevented him from “[mistaking] the merely new for the authentic” (8). Furthermore, Perkins’s ideals about the function of literature in society led him to place a democratic premium on texts that captured the mood of many through the perspective of few; this predilection positioned him to look favorably on some of the early modernists for their self-conscious portrayal of the human experience. Likewise, Perkins gravitated toward the developing school of realism because of its humble interest in the troubles and triumphs of the

common man. Though the editor dabbled in everything from memoirs to cookbooks, “Fiction was his principal concern,” according to Wheelock, “and, within that classification, his temperament inclined him toward the inventive and experimental”¹ (7). Despite his enthusiasm for novel approaches to literature, Perkins did not discount “the validity of the great traditions and standards of the past,” and many of his aesthetic preferences harken back to classic literary paradigms (8). Most notably was Perkins’s penchant for the narrative form. Perkins regarded the novel as the height of literary achievement, and he encouraged almost all of his authors—regardless of their chosen genre—to write one at some point. Not surprisingly, when Perkins responded to a piece of writing as a reader, the editorial improvements most frequently suggested were aimed at making the text more consistent with the novel form. Whether weighing in on fiction or nonfiction, Perkins privileged textual constructions that were characteristic of long narratives—namely, verisimilitude, character development, consistency, and unity.

Perkins’s proclivity for realistic fiction fostered an active concern for narrative verisimilitude. The focus on believability was clearly pertinent to the success of certain books, one example being S.S. Van Dine’s detective series. When editing these mysteries, Perkins had to think critically about the plausibility of certain clues. For instance, he once queried whether it were actually possible for someone to be killed instantly with a .32 caliber gun: “You often read of a suicide shooting himself in the head or heart with even a larger caliber, and not dying for hours or even days,” Perkins mused (Wheelock 53). But ensuring the verisimilitude of a story went beyond mere technical detail; it required that the construction of an author’s characters and situations be believable as well. It was in this interest that Perkins prompted Fitzgerald to somehow account for, or at least suggest, how the character Gatsby came to be so wealthy.

¹ The editor’s correspondence suggests that Perkins’s enthusiasm for nonfiction was reserved primarily for historical narrative—biography, memoir, and historical accounts given through the perspective of a central player.

Considering the point from the reader's perspective, Perkins argued that "almost all readers numerically are going to be puzzled by his having all this wealth and are going to feel entitled to an explanation," and he encouraged Fitzgerald to at least hint at Gatsby's occupation (Kuehl and Bryer 83). Similarly, Perkins notes instances in which a character's behavior seems inexplicable or unjustifiably irrational. In a letter to Hamilton Basso, for instance, Perkins questions an element of Basso's story that gave him pause as a reader: "I cannot for the life of me understand how Ellen got to be ostracized or, at any rate, looked upon with suspicion and disapproval, just because her fiancé seduced a maid" (Wheelock 160). Sometimes, however, it wasn't the content, but the way in which a scene was constructed, that undermined the narrative verisimilitude of a piece. For instance, in writing to Davenport about *East Side, West Side*, Perkins recommended that she break up a long dialogue with "a few trifling interpolations" to make the narrative flow more easily (289). "Writing, like drawing, is an art," the editor explained, "and whatever conveys the *meaning* is justified. But I think, as we are today, that when Mark talks so long among his people, without interruption and a fresh start...the effect is reduced, because it seems unnatural" (289). Done well, Perkins viewed dialogue as a useful device for moving a story forward without belaboring the narrative with unnecessary exposition. "When you have people talking, you have a scene" Perkins would say, "You must interrupt with explanatory paragraphs, but shorten them as much as you can. Dialogue is *action*. You can't take the reader's attention from it much without impairing its effect" (289). In other cases, Perkins noticed that an author's commentary detracted too much from a scene, and he often urged writers to minimize their intrusion into the narrative and trust, instead, their action and dialogue. Clearly, ensuring the verisimilitude of a text was a delicate balancing act, but, by responding to the work as a reader, Perkins helped his authors walk this narrative tightrope with greater ease.

Perkins gave special consideration to the development of a book's characters because he considered them—by virtue of their action and dialogue—the true vehicle for moving a story forward. When Perkins took issue with Fitzgerald's initial portrayal of Jay Gatsby it was because the character lacked depth in comparison to the rich descriptions of other characters in the novel. In his assessment of the manuscript, Perkins observes that, “among a set of characters marvelously palpable and vital – I would know Tom Buchanan if I met him on the street and would avoid him – Gatsby is somewhat vague. ...Now everything about Gatsby is more or less a mystery i.e. more or less vague, and this may be somewhat of an artistic intention, but I think it is mistaken” (Kuehl and Bryer 83). Perkins supports this synopsis by citing the misled impressions of other readers as well, noting that he, his wife, and Charles Scribner had all concluded from the manuscript that Gatsby was older than he was intended to be. Fitzgerald met his editor's challenge and soon reported to Perkins that, “after careful searching of the files (of a man's mind here)...& after having had Zelda draw pictures until her fingers ache I know Gatsby better than I know my own child” (89). Perkins frequently urged his authors to draw more from their characters, and his letters repeatedly petition them to reveal their complexity to readers. For instance, he insists that “Louise, so very important a character, is not nearly enough to the fore, is not early enough realized” in *The Valley of Decision*, and he cites this relatively flat character as one of the major defects in Davenport's manuscript (Wheelock 197). Similarly, Perkins asked Rawlings to enhance her portrayal of a character in *Cross Creek*: “Couldn't you make Lem show some of his meanness in that scene even—well, he did in his reference to Oliver,—but more of it? They are very tough people, and the toughness ought to be more evident” (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 308). Perkins was adept at anticipating which characters would appeal to readers, and he strove to ensure that they weren't underemphasized. For instance, he implored James Boyd to

refine the character James in *Marching On* because he “immediately wins the affection of the reader, and his respect too,” but is “made too simple throughout” (Wheelock 50). On another front, Perkins advised authors to prepare readers for the introduction of a significant character by having them appear in the background before they come into play in the story. For instance, he once wrote to Rawlings, “Mr. Marsh Tucker. He’s grand. He was part of that community, a live and picturesque figure. But the reader should have known about him as on the landscape before these things happened, and in a way to be made curious about him,- maybe only by your passing him on the road and by someone telling of him” (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 470). Most likely, this was a convention that Perkins first admired in Tolstoy’s fiction, but it is an effective means of enhancing the narrative verisimilitude by helping the story to unfold organically.

Respectful of the fact that each book abides by its own rules, Perkins allowed that readers could accept nearly any twist in a narrative as long as it adheres to the internal logic particular to that book. In *The Great Gatsby*, for example, the narrative consistency is predicated on the strict adherence to Nick Carraway’s perspective when telling the story. Because Carraway relates a good deal of information secondhand, the reader is left guessing what is accurate and what has been filtered through the character’s biases and presumptions. Though Fitzgerald’s use of this technique was relatively innovative, Perkins intuitively recognized the inner logic at play and identified where Fitzgerald began to stray from his design: “in giving deliberately Gatsby’s biography when he gives it to the narrator you do depart from the method of the narrative in some degree, for otherwise almost everything is told, and beautifully told, in the regular flow of it” (Kuehl and Bryer 84). Similarly, Perkins notes that part six of Davenport’s manuscript for *The Valley of Decision* “does seem to me to have a different quality and to go out of the novel” (Wheelock 197). Likewise, when editing the largely-autobiographical *Of Time and the River*,

Perkins was unfailing in his recognition of passages where Eugene—Wolfe’s literary doppelganger—reflects on an event in ways that are inconsistent with the character’s insight and experience to that point in the story (Skipp 317). Whatever the scenario, Perkins remained cognizant of the inherent logic of each text, and he was sure to note any instances in which the author violated his own parameters.

Perkins believed that every text should contain a unifying element, some indication of a larger theme that bound the events of a narrative together, and he made a point to identify the theme—as he read it—for the author. “The book should have a unity, by its very nature,” Perkins declared of *The Valley of Decision*, “because the steel mills and their influence run all the way through it, and so do Mary and her influence. And we should be able to bring it this unity by pulling it together” (Wheelock 198). When Davenport strays from the unifying motif for too long, Perkins kindly redirects her by noting his concern for the effect it may have on the reader: “I am still baffled,” the editor writes, “especially about that last part, which is so much taken up with the coming of the European crisis that the reader is carried away from these two influences, which he should always feel” (198). The gold standard for literature, Perkins seemed to think, was a text that was relatable because it endowed a book with universal appeal. “The idea of this book, the purpose that runs through it,” Perkins once summarized for Caroline Gordon,² “is that it shows how a man saved his independence in spite of everything – at least that is how it seems to me. This is a real and important theme, to which anyone could respond” (86-87). Though Perkins was a proponent of books that explored universally relevant themes, he discouraged authors from forcing contemporary issues in their writing. His advice was to avoid fictionalizing present-day controversies because—denied the benefit of hindsight—it put the book at risk for

² Caroline Gordon published under her maiden name, but Perkins addressed her by her formal name, Mrs. Allen Tate, by which she was known privately.

becoming prematurely dated. For instance, Perkins once advised Rawlings not to incorporate any themes into her fiction that didn't come naturally:

One of these pieces began by saying that you sometimes felt as if you should be using your talent for the issues of the day. Sometime your talent might have occasion to fit into some issue. But unless that happened, I would forget about the day. In this depression men have gone to ruin because they were so tempted to forget their vocation and turn their material to an immediate purpose.- In a way that was one of the issues between me and Tom, and I kept telling him that what he felt would come through his writing even though not specifically stated. (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 473)

The reference to Wolfe concerns the author's later enthusiasm for Marxism and his attempt, though thwarted by Perkins, to re-cast his fiction to reflect his new Communist beliefs in ways that violated the autobiographical scope of his narrative.³ Perkins was equally wary of books about the future, noting that "books written in anticipation of events and developments often lose a great deal of relevance they are intended to have because things develop quite, or somewhat, differently" (Wheelock 252). Ultimately, Perkins remained convinced that the best writing came out of reflection on a personal experience. Though Perkins enjoyed unity in literature, he did not insist that an author force a piece into some sort of arbitrary theme. Perkins maintained the conviction that "a writer does best what comes entirely from himself, and not so well in carrying out the ideas of others...the best fiction does not arise out of an idea at all, but the idea, or argument, arises out of the human elements and characters as they naturally develop" (252). Each worthwhile text, therefore, had an underlying element of unity according Perkins, and, as

³ In March 1934, Perkins wrote Hemingway: "Old Tom has been trying to change his book into a kind of Marxian argument (having written most of it some years before he ever heard of Marx)" (qtd. in Skipp 317).

editor, his job was to identify that aspect so that the author could be sure it was apparent to the reader as well.

Briefly outlined, these editorial maxims represent Perkins's primary considerations when responding to a text, and they reveal the subliminal influence of his aesthetic preferences on his editorial practice. Yet, Perkins purposefully responded to issues of theme, character, and style in a manuscript first, addressing minor editorial details only after the major structural components of a literary work were in place. This was a wise strategy because it kept the text fluid and open to substantive changes in revision. "I did see a few other little things," Perkins once wrote to Rawlings, "but they were so small as not to be worth mentioning, and particularly as you have not revised, and may easily change them. Otherwise I would leave them to the proof when one gets a new view of a book anyhow" (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 157). Ironically, it was the "little things" that Perkins would have traditionally been concerned with in his role as editor, but, by approaching his role as a reader rather than an editor, Perkins managed to get more involved in the core components of a story, thereby rendering the overall structure of the narrative more effective.

Shoring Up the Narrative Structure

Perkins is often praised for his exceptional skill at shoring up the structural integrity of a manuscript, most notably in connection with *The Great Gatsby*. Indeed, Perkins did seem to possess a certain talent for identifying areas of the text that needed strengthening, but it is important to note that the role he assumed in this regard was advisory rather than collaborative. On this point, eminent Fitzgerald scholar Matthew Bruccoli makes a rare argument:

Fitzgerald gave Perkins too much credit for improving [*The Great Gatsby*] when he wrote after publication: “Max, it amuses me when praise comes in on the ‘structure’ of the book—because it was you who fixed up the structure, not me.” Perkins did not restructure the novel. Fitzgerald did his own work, acting on Perkins’s general advice. (Bruccoli and Smith 210)

Bruccoli makes a legitimate point: Fitzgerald did solve his own writing problem. But, it was Perkins who helped him to define the problem that needed solving. By tracing the editor-author exchanges regarding the structure of *The Great Gatsby*, we find that Perkins was not only a wise advisor but a subtle coach as well, guiding the author through possible scenarios for revision while leaving the game-time decision up to him.

A published version of Fitzgerald’s early manuscript reveals how carefully structured the novel already was when Perkins first reviewed it. As James West notes in his introduction to *Trimalchio: An Early Version of The Great Gatsby*,⁴ “There is a tradition in Fitzgerald studies that *The Great Gatsby* became a masterpiece in revision. ...*Trimalchio* does not challenge that opinion. Fitzgerald improved the novel in galleys; *The Great Gatsby* is a better book than *Trimalchio*. But *Trimalchio* is itself a remarkable achievement” (xix). Impressed by the caliber of Fitzgerald’s achievement, Perkins did not want to undermine the author’s sense of accomplishment by launching directly into suggestions for improvement. Instead, he sends an initial response that briefly praises the book’s vitality, marvels over Fitzgerald’s writing, and

⁴ The text of *Trimalchio* was pulled primarily from the working set of galley proofs that are marked in Fitzgerald’s hand. This set is housed as part of the Fitzgerald collection at the Princeton University Library and has been compared against a duplicate, unmarked set of galley proofs held by the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections in Thomas Cooper Library at the University of South Carolina, which was found to be identical. These galleys are thought to be the “nearest in substantive form to the typescript that Fitzgerald mailed to Scribners in October 1924” (West, *Trimalchio* xx).

promises a critique after further consideration.⁵ Six days later, the editor writes to impart his full impression of the manuscript, but once again he prefaces his commentary with praise. Perkins declares that it is a book of which Fitzgerald can truly be proud, and he highlights the author's primary achievements: the invocation of various moods, the effectiveness of the narrative scheme, and the hint of the eternal in Dr. Eckleberg's eyes (Kuehl and Bryer 82-83). Even Perkins's segue into criticism is buffered by admiration: "I could go on praising the book and speculating on its various elements, and meanings," Perkins writes, "but points of criticism are more important now" (83). Perkins then identifies three problem areas for Fitzgerald to consider when making revisions: the slower pace of chapters six and seven, the vague depiction of Gatsby, and the departure from the narrative style in Chapter VIII. Fitzgerald had already expressed some concern about the midsection of the book, so Perkins didn't elaborate on his first point other than to confirm the author's suspicions: "you are right in feeling a certain slight sagging in chapters six and seven," Perkins agrees before punting the problem back to Fitzgerald for a solution (83). "I don't know how to suggest a remedy," Perkins admits, "I hardly doubt that you will find one and I am only writing to say that I think it does need something to hold up here to the pace set, and ensuing" (83). With his next two suggestions, however, Perkins is more precise. He begins with the obscurity of Gatsby as a character and points to several places in the text that hinder the reader's understanding of him before hazarding a few suggestions for how this might be remedied. For instance, he recommends making the description of Gatsby as physically palpable as that of the other characters so readers will have less trouble imagining

⁵ Of his initial impressions Perkins wrote, "I think the novel is a wonder. ...it has vitality to an extraordinary degree, and *glamour*, and a great deal of underlying thought of unusual quality. It has a kind of mystic atmosphere at times that you infused into parts of "Paradise" and have not since used. It is a marvelous fusion, into a unity of presentation, of the extraordinary incongruities of life today. And as for sheer writing, it's astonishing" (Kuehl and Bryer 82).

him. Likewise, Perkins casually suggests some ways in which Fitzgerald might account for Gatsby's wealth without undermining the element of mystery that is essential to his character:

It did occur to me though, that you might here and there interpolate some phrases, and possibly incidents, little touches of various kinds, that would suggest that he was in some active way mysteriously engaged. You do have him called on the telephone, but couldn't he be seen once or twice consulting at his parties with people of some sort of mysterious significance, from the political, the gambling, the sporting world, or whatever it may be. (83)

On this point, Fitzgerald followed Perkins's advice rather closely, but the open-ended nature of Perkins's suggestions kept them from coming across as too prescriptive. Perkins's advice on how to shore up the narrative integrity of the novel is similarly open ended. He simply suggests that Fitzgerald break Gatsby's history up by letting "the truth of some of his claims like 'Oxford' and his army career come out bit by bit" in the narrative rather than all at once (84). This solution is more pragmatic than creative, and it seems to be included more as a challenge to Fitzgerald than as an actual suggestion. As was his custom, Perkins sandwiches his critique with praise, beginning with the statement, "The general brilliant quality of the book makes me ashamed to make even these criticisms," and eventually concluding, "You once told me you were not a *natural* writer – my God! You have plainly mastered the craft, of course; but you needed far more than craftsmanship for this" (84). Notably, however, Perkins's praise for *Gatsby* was unusually generous, even for the supportive editor.

Though Bruccoli insinuates that Perkins's contributions to *The Great Gatsby* merely amount to minor recommendations that "called for an extension of the narrative plan already present," he acknowledges that "the novel achieved its structural distinction" when Fitzgerald

reworked it in proofs, “shifting parts of Gatsby’s history from Chapters VII and VIII to Chapter VI, thereby eliminating his autobiographical summary in Chapter VII as Perkins had recommended” (Bruccoli and Smith 210, 213). West agrees, noting that Fitzgerald “followed his own instincts for revision but also paid attention to [Perkins’s] advice. On his own, he rewrote Chapters VI and VII; reacting to [Perkins’s] suggestions, he moved much material concerning Jay Gatsby’s past to earlier positions in the novel and added short paragraphs to account for Gatsby’s wealth” (West, *Trimalchio* xvi). If nothing else, it seems that Perkins’s suggestions had the desired catalytic effect on Fitzgerald, for the author’s next letter begins with his appreciation of Perkins’s encouragement and critique, which is followed by a six-point list of the author’s intended revisions. Fitzgerald not only deserves credit for his initial achievement, but he should also be recognized as a consummate professional writer because he was receptive to criticism and knew how to apply it to the betterment of his own aesthetic agenda. Reading *Trimalchio* together with *The Great Gatsby*, one can sense the transformation from impressive to immortal; the shifts are subtle, which makes Perkins’s critical evaluation of Fitzgerald’s work seem all the more remarkable. Though Perkins was clearly impressed by the initial manuscript, he managed to quell his professional enthusiasm long enough to consider the book from a reader’s standpoint, thereby enabling him to pinpoint the few but imperative areas in which even an already-strong text could be improved. In this subtle way, Perkins helped hone a promising manuscript into an enduring classic.

A Tailored Approach

When Perkins dispensed editorial advice he tailored his suggestions to the individual author, altering the specificity of his comments in proportion to how much help the author

needed or would allow. Hemingway, for example, required little added perspective because he built time into his writing process to let his first draft “cool off” before making revisions (Brucoli and Trogon 71). Conversely, Davenport was prone to becoming overwhelmed by the complexity of her manuscripts, requiring Perkins to be a little more specific when outlining the places in her text where a reader might become lost. In fact, Davenport became so mired in the details of her 800,000-word manuscript for *The Valley of Decision* that “she was prepared to scrap it altogether” by the time she sent it to Perkins (Berg 403). Realizing Davenport’s desperation, Perkins took it upon himself to untangle the book from the manuscript:

Several readings later, Max organized his suggestions into a series of letters, one of them thirty pages long. His approach to the material was as orderly as that of a genealogist drawing a family tree. He started at the beginning and picked out the most important story lines, those he felt should run through the entire novel; anything that weakened those strands had no business in the book. Ignoring Mrs. Davenport’s divisions, he separated the novel into three major parts and told her the principal purpose of each. Then he provided an extensive chapter-by-chapter breakdown, with detailed commentary. Finally, he clarified the characters for the author, sharpening their definition in short summaries of their traits. (404)

Perkins’s intervention worked, and in the end it took Davenport only five months to revise the novel completely and cut its length by nearly half. All the while she would keep “Perkins’s letter on one side of her typewriter and the manuscript on the other,” marking off the editor’s suggestions as she went (404). But Perkins preferred to offer only as much editorial input as was necessary, and the extent of hands-on editorial assistance he gave Davenport in this example was fairly atypical of his practice.

It is here, in the delicate balance between support and dependence, that we uncover one of the largest fault lines in the Wolfe-Perkins editorial relationship. Unlike Fitzgerald, who needed merely a broad editorial suggestion to initiate a series of careful revisions, Wolfe required an unprecedented level of one-on-one editorial guidance. Wolfe was a reluctant reviser if ever there was one. In fact, he rarely rewrote any passages at all. Instead, he begrudgingly excised sections from his work—which were subsequently saved for use in another piece—and added connecting passages to bridge any gaps. The only corrections he was liable to make on a page proof were restorations of his original verbiage if a word had been transposed to type incorrectly, and he was notorious for cramming completely new passages into the margins of the galley proof. Even though Wolfe acknowledged that his approach had some deficiencies, he still preferred to cut a story from whole cloth rather than piece it together. Furthermore, the nuances of his ambitious aesthetic plan predisposed Wolfe to verbosity and made him prone to lose perspective on the commercial aspect of his work.⁶ By his own admission, Wolfe lacked the critical distance to recognize “wordiness and over-abundance” in his own writing, and he explained to Perkins that “The business of selection, and of revision is simply hell for me—my efforts to cut out 50000 words may sometimes result in my adding 75000” (Bruccoli and Bucker 4). Therefore, Wolfe was thrilled to find an editor who could manicure his prose, and though he admitted that he had “no right to expect others to do for me what I should do for myself,” he leaned heavily on Perkins for help structuring his manuscripts (4). As a result, the pair spent many nights together culling and shaping the unwieldy manuscripts of *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, a close partnership that eventually imploded because it bordered the edge of collaboration too closely.

⁶ Wolfe was interested in the novel of inclusion, and Perkins later explained the author’s aesthetic plan as the autobiographical unfurling of an immense American epic: “He had one book to write about a vast, sprawling, turbulent land — America — as perceived by Eugene Gant” (Perkins 275).

Over the years, Wolfe-enthusiasts have questioned the wisdom of Perkins's editorial interventions, charging that he took the scalpel too firmly in hand when excising the author's prose. Under Bruccoli's direction, The University of South Carolina Press even published *O Lost*, the restored text of Wolfe's manuscript for *Look Homeward, Angel*. Bruccoli argues that printing the novel as Wolfe originally conceived it proves that the manuscript was indeed publishable in its original form despite Perkins's insinuations that it was too long to be printed as a novel⁷ (Bruccoli, "What Perkins Really Did" 147). Even Fitzgerald had advised Perkins early on to indulge the abundance in Wolfe's prose, noting that the author "[struck him] as a man who should be let alone as to length, if he has to be published in five volumes" (Kuehl and Bryer 168). But it wasn't just the cumbersome size of Wolfe's manuscripts that concerned Perkins about his writing; after all, the editor's favorite book, *War and Peace*, was about twice as long as *Look Homeward, Angel*. Were physical dimensions truly a barrier, and had Perkins decided that the content of Wolfe's prose justified its length, he would have split it into volumes as he essentially intended with the division of Wolfe's manuscript *The October Fair* into two novels.⁸ What the editor did see as problematic was Wolfe's tendency toward digression. In his quest to capture life in its entirety, Wolfe belabored his narrative with a "mixture of styles, multiple, ambiguous views of the same material, as well as occasional indulgence of parodic and satiric urges" (Mills 65). For example, Perkins thought *O Lost* was weighed down by Wolfe's excessive need to catalog and quantify. At times the author shifts from the narrative style to catalog a character's experience through list making then shifts back to the narrative style. While this technique does manage to portray a character's experience in a new light, it effectively

⁷ Bruccoli further explains that publishing the 294,000-word manuscript would have been an expensive gamble on a first novel, and there were probably concerns that critics and readers would balk at such a long book by an unknown writer ("What Perkins Really Did" 147).

⁸ *Of Time and the River* (Scribner's 1935) and *The Web and the Rock* (Harper & Brothers 1937)

undermines the importance of the experience that is portrayed by “offering another viewpoint of the same event” (66). Likewise, Perkins believed Wolfe’s penchant for statistical interplay constituted an unnecessary distraction for readers. In *O Lost*, for example, Wolfe digresses from Gant’s narrative at one point to offer an empirical look at another character’s employment history:

Moreover, Gant’s second son, Ben, had now been employed by the morning paper for a period of six years and four months and, with allowances for holidays, vacations, and illnesses, had now passed more than 2100 mornings in the discharge of his duties. During this time he had consumed, between the before-mentioned hours of 3:30 and 6:00 a.m., over 4000 cups of coffee and 2500 pieces of assorted pie and pastry, as well as 14,464 cigarettes. (Wolfe, *O Lost* 192)

Though the intellectual dalliances are impressive and do, at times, strike of genius, they do not function well within the context of a standard novel; the stylistic inconsistencies make the narrative hard to follow and the effect ambiguous.⁹ Wolfe’s “urge toward exhaustiveness” conflicted with “such novelistic values as consistency of characterization and the preservation of verisimilitude” that Perkins considered essential to the success of a book in the literary marketplace (Mills 71). Therefore, Perkins viewed these segues as unnecessary distractions from the story, and his edits were intended to give Wolfe’s writing more cohesion by shaping it into a form that was consistent with the structure of a novel. Some have argued that Perkins waylaid the author’s aesthetic plan to capture the whole of life by “implying the ‘mixed, flexible, multiple view of experience’” when he reconfigured the scope of Wolfe’s narrative (70). Indeed,

⁹ Brucoli would disagree. He argues that Perkins “altered the scope and intention of the novel Wolfe wrote” when he attempted to shape Eugene’s story into something more characteristic of a Bildungsroman: “Eugene is the central figure in *O Lost*, but the novel is a family and community panorama. Wolfe was extremely well read and well educated; he knew what kind of novel he intended to write—the novel of inclusion” (Wolfe, *O Lost* xiv).

the author himself even asserted that the piece he had written didn't necessarily constitute a novel but, rather, "a book made out of my life" (Brucoli and Bucker 2). However, Wolfe's aesthetic goal of writing the novel of inclusion appeared to be in conflict with his personal goal of becoming a highly regarded and well-read author. Therefore, because he had deliberately sought "a little honest help" in getting his manuscript published, Perkins helped him in the only way he knew how, by responding to Wolfe's prose as a representative reader.¹⁰

Surrendering to the Text

In Perkins's mind, the author's goal of producing books that were aesthetically sound and the publisher's of distributing books that were commercially appealing were not, necessarily, unrelated. When it came to literature, "[Perkins] loved the best but was no literary snob" (Wheelock 7). According to Wheelock, Perkins appreciated a story well told, and he saw popular appeal as commensurate with, rather than opposed to, critical achievement: "The great books, he used to say, stand somewhere between the precious and the trashy, between what speaks to the literati only and what appeals to the masses. The great books reach both" (7-8). Perkins didn't pander to public taste, but he did use it as a touchstone for literary success. Therefore, he approached his editorial role as if he were a professional reader, appraising a text for its capacity to interest, engage, excite, or otherwise move him. For Perkins, the secret to being an effective editor was to surrender to a text entirely. "The trouble with reviewers, and with editors, is so simple that nobody gets it," Perkins once explained to Joseph Stanley Pennell, "They ought to just take a book and give themselves to it, and read it like a regular citizen and see whether they like it or not. They ought not to apply their standards and frames of reference, and all that, to it,

¹⁰ In a note of introduction accompanying Wolfe's first manuscript he closes by asking for "a little honest help" from the publisher (Brucoli and Bucker 3).

until afterwards” (248). Of course, when it came time for Perkins to apply frames of reference in the form of a critique, the editor exhibited great skill, but it was his ability to respond to a text as a reader rather than as an editor that gave him a direct impact on the construction of the text without usurping the author’s agency. Perkins’s unique ability to hone a text without violating the author’s sense of ownership over it has prompted many to view him as the quintessential author’s editor despite the fact that it was actually the reader with whom he was most concerned when editing. However, Perkins’s support of the author extended well beyond his help with manuscripts, and it is apparent that his success as an editor was determined primarily by his response to the personal and emotional trials of authorship that constantly threatened to waylay the publishing process rather than his response to the text on the page.

Chapter 3: Investment and Return

In Perkins's view the publishing equation was relatively simple: take a talented author, remove any barriers that prevent him from writing, and eventually a great book will materialize. Putting this formula into practice, however, proved rather complicated. Countless distractions and peripheral concerns threatened to divert authors from writing, chief among them were financial trouble, personal crisis, and lack of inspiration or direction. To truly become an asset to their imprint, authors need to put out multiple books; yet the nature of the writer's task makes it impossible for the publisher to expect or demand that they meet specific targets of productivity. Furthermore, Perkins considered the idle author to be the most egregious waste of human potential he could imagine—talent. Therefore, when he sensed an author's efforts begin to flag, he immediately launched a campaign to set him back on track. This intervention often resulted in a substantial outlay of the publisher's capital and human resources, but Perkins reasoned that increasing an author's productivity would inevitably pay off in the form of a literary masterpiece. More often than not he managed to justify the company's expense, but in some cases he pushed Scribner's willingness to incur financial risk on an author's behalf to the limits and was compelled to seek new sources of revenue to keep his writers writing. Perkins was professionally obligated to be mindful of Scribner's resources when he guided an author back to the grindstone, but that didn't prevent him from doing anything in his power to see a book come to light.

Financial Assistance

Authorship in the first half of the twentieth century was neither a lucrative nor often a sustainable profession. Writer and critic Michael Cowley estimated in 1944 that “There are probably not a hundred people in the United States who make their living entirely from their books,” and if authors were solely dependent on royalties for income, he ventured, they “would have about the same living standard as sharecroppers” (Cowley, “Profiles - I” 36). Instead, most authors were obliged to cobble together a living by writing short stories for popular magazines, giving public lectures, teaching, news reporting, screenwriting, or the like. Generally, authors were less beholden to their publisher for financial sustenance, though the literary prestige garnered from publishing books did help them secure work in other venues. Perkins disliked the fact that an author’s split fiscal loyalties jeopardized his commitment to the publisher and absorbed time and energy that could otherwise be channeled into writing, but he often had little choice but to tolerate it. This did not prevent him, however, from trying to minimize the damaging effects of extramural professional activities. For example, the editor was particularly wary of the lecture circuit and typically advised authors to decline public speaking engagements because he feared that an author who overanalyzed his craft risked losing his creative edge. Likewise, Perkins strongly discouraged his authors from yielding to the siren’s call of Hollywood, which tempted many to the job of screenwriting with the attractive promise of a stable salary; screenwriters were forced to write by assignment and in teams, two conditions that Perkins found antithetical to the practice of dignified writing. If anything, Perkins preferred that his authors write short fiction for sale to national magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*—or, better yet, to Scribner’s own magazine. At least, Perkins reasoned, producing short stories allowed the author to develop his craft through writing, and the best of his efforts could

eventually be compiled in an anthology to augment the writer's catalog. Subsidized by advertising, national magazines such as *The Post* paid handsomely for short fiction,¹ and their wide circulation helped the author gain exposure to a broad audience. The drawback, however, was that magazine writing was viewed as a commercial endeavor, therefore the resulting fiction was automatically relegated to a lower critical echelon. The proliferation of popular magazines at that time offered a welcome opportunity for authors to supplement their living while honing their craft, but it did not provide a forum for unadulterated artistic expression. Ironically, in order to have creative freedom and profit from the endeavor, an author needed a publisher.

Unlike commercial magazines, publishers didn't actually pay authors for their work. They sometimes provided an advance, but this constituted what was essentially a loan against the author's future earnings from the sale of his book. In Perkins's day, publishers were relatively conservative when it came to offering advances and when they did it was rarely enough to cover an author's expenses for a sustained period of writing. Scribner's was not known for offering lavish advances, and the publisher's general policy toward the end of Perkins's career allowed "\$500 for a non-fiction book or \$1,000 for a novel" with a "reasonable chance of success" (Cowley, "Profiles - I" 36). To put that into perspective, a \$1,000 advance would be equivalent to less than \$13,500 today.² Regardless, Perkins endeavored to prove the publisher's commitment to an author by offering advances freely and consistently assuring those who complained of financial trouble that they had the right to borrow against their account at Scribner's any time. In cases where an author had exceeded the publisher's credit limit, Perkins creatively tapped financial resources outside of the publishing house in an effort to provide

¹ For example, Fitzgerald was drawing rates of \$2,000 per story by 1924 (Brucoli and Baughman, *The Sons* 32).

² When adjusted for inflation, \$1,000 in 1944 is equivalent to \$13,450.91 in 2015 ("US Inflation Calculator").

continued financial support.³ Perkins recognized that fiscal instability was a significant roadblock to a writer's productivity, and his commitment to talent was so great that he took it upon himself to do anything within his power to support an author financially.

When it came to conjuring new fiduciary tools to provide for an author's material needs, Perkins's resourcefulness had no bounds. A review of the many sources he tapped for Wolfe's benefit alone offers a representative overview of his enterprising ways. When Perkins first met Wolfe he was teaching at New York University but still leaned on his mother for occasional assistance, insisting that the extra funds were necessary to buy time for him to write (Turnbull 92). Notably, Wolfe's penchant for creature comforts was particularly hard to satisfy, and he found the traditional notion that an artist should physically suffer for his craft absurd.⁴ In fact, Wolfe was prone toward self-victimization, and his tendency to obsess over money was usually a reaction to the dearth of such comforts rather than a legitimate need for solvency. Nevertheless, Perkins agreed that Wolfe's "greatest need was to be able to devote full time to writing," and he wasted little time fulfilling that requirement (152). Though Wolfe would not draw royalties on his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, until June of 1930, Perkins managed to arrange "a generous \$4,500 advance" that allowed him to quit teaching in February of that year (152). A month later, due in part to a letter of recommendation by Perkins, Wolfe was awarded a \$2,500 Guggenheim Fellowship⁵ that paved the way for a trip abroad where a second book was begun (Berg 160). In the long intervals between novels, Perkins helped keep Wolfe afloat by selling

³ Scribner's was not immune to the boom and bust financial climate of the 1920s and '30s. In 1929 the company's net earnings were \$289,309, by 1932, however, they had shrunk to \$40,661 (Berg 207).

⁴ In his biography of Wolfe, Turnbull asserts that the author regarded the "artist-in-a-garret myth" as "the equivalent of saying that because three-fingered Mordecai Brown was a great pitcher, all the other pitchers should immediately have two fingers cut off" (78).

⁵ Though not substantiated, an autobiographical short story written by Wolfe's lover, Aline Bernstein, indicates that it was Perkins who initially suggested that Wolfe pursue the Guggenheim fellowship (Berg 467).

novellas to the house magazine in the guise of short stories. *Scribner's Magazine* published three of Wolfe's novellas in 1932 alone, and one, *The Web of the Earth*, was "the longest piece ever printed in a single issue of that magazine" (Turnbull 181). It is almost certain that Perkins had a hand in convincing the magazine's editors to bend their standards for Wolfe's sake, for although other, higher-paying periodicals such as *Collier's* and *Cosmopolitan* had requested short fiction from Wolfe, he was unable to constrict his prose to the lengths they specified (181).

Unbeknownst to Wolfe, Perkins entered another of his pieces, *A Portrait of Bascom Hawke*, in Scribner's short-novel contest, and when it tied for first place the "\$2,500 windfall seemed like picking up gold in the streets" (181). Of course, Perkins's efforts were not driven entirely by financial motivations. The publicity from the win had the desirable effect of keeping Wolfe's name in the public spotlight, and the victory—against more than 1,500 contestants—buoyed Wolfe's confidence (181). Other financial interactions, however, were less uplifting. Wolfe frequently got into disputes over alleged financial abuses, and Perkins—whom Wolfe trusted as his beneficiary—was often caught in the middle of these tiffs. For instance, Wolfe first appointed Perkins his financial administrator in a ploy to avoid paying "Two swindling New York dentists" whom he claimed were trying to "extort \$525 from [him] for two weeks incompetent and shoddy work"⁶ (Brucoli and Bucker 59). Wolfe was naturally distrustful when it came to finances, and it was only a matter of time before his growing paranoia would lead him to find fault with his benefactors. Though Scribner's had, in many respects, made significant financial concessions for Wolfe over the years, he found an axe to grind when the royalty rate for his novella, *The Story of a Novel*, was lower than his rate for novels. Rather than argue with Wolfe—whose grievance

⁶ Incidentally, Perkins investigated the situation and found the dentists to be "highly reputable, but very high priced" and therefore ascertained that the charges were fair (Brucoli and Bucker 64). Nevertheless, Perkins's response to Wolfe was characteristically consoling, and he implored him not to worry, that he was "trying to effect some kind of a compromise," assuring the frazzled author that "it will be fixed up when you get back some way" (64).

was, according to Perkins, unjustified—the editor adjusted the royalty to appease him.⁷ “The difference,” Perkins explained, “in what you will receive if 3,000 copies are sold, between the ten and fifteen percent royalty, will be \$225.00. We certainly do not think that we should withhold that sum of money if it is going to cause so much resentment, and so much loss of time and disquiet for all of us” (193). For Perkins, the long-term loss Scribner’s would suffer by perpetuating an argument with Wolfe was far greater than the immediate loss accrued by increasing his royalties. With Wolfe, as with all authors, Perkins was constantly weighing the publisher’s investment with the potential reward, and his creative efforts to sustain a writer financially are evidence of his conviction that if an author’s attention weren’t redirected back to writing, that reward may never be realized.

The financial support Wolfe required paled, however, in comparison to the fiscal needs of F. Scott Fitzgerald. If it weren’t for the loyalty and support of both Max Perkins and Fitzgerald’s literary agent, Harold Ober, it is uncertain if the author would have remained solvent long enough to compose his later, more mature novels.⁸ Unlike Wolfe, Fitzgerald was extremely conscientious of his debts, and he consistently made efforts to pay back his loans with interest. Unfortunately, lifestyle and circumstance made this an uphill battle for Fitzgerald, and he died owing more than \$10,000 to his publisher, agent, and editor⁹ (Brucoli and Smith 489). The Achilles heel of Fitzgerald’s career was financial instability and alcohol—which were not, necessarily, unrelated. By the time Fitzgerald had completed his second novel, Perkins had

⁷ It later became apparent that Wolfe’s attempt to provoke a dispute over his royalties was a sign of his impending break with Scribner’s.

⁸ *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender Is the Night* (1934)

⁹ Fitzgerald owed \$5,456.92 to Scribner’s, \$3,728.13 to his agent, Harold Ober, and at least \$1,500 to Perkins. At the time of his death, in 1940, Fitzgerald’s literary stock was at its lowest level ever, “His copyrights were regarded as virtually worthless, and royalties from his writings were a trickle” (Brucoli and Smith 489). His literary estate would not become solvent again until the 1950s, when the movement known as “the Fitzgerald revival” was in full swing (492).

essentially been instated as his financial overseer. The editor set up Fitzgerald's account at Scribner's much like a bank account, allowing the author to draw against "and reasonably in excess of it," an arrangement well-suited to Fitzgerald's fiscal needs (qtd. in Berg 42). Nevertheless, the bulk of Fitzgerald's income, which was relatively substantial for the times, was generated by the sale of short fiction to glossy, popular magazines, or "slicks" as they were called. Fitzgerald kept detailed records of his earnings until 1937, and at that time he had taken in about \$360,000 from the sale of short stories and only about \$66,000 in royalties¹⁰ (West, "Fitzgerald's Ledger" 18). Still, he proved incapable of living within his means. Notoriously poor at keeping his lavish tendencies in check, Fitzgerald's occasional benders—financial and otherwise—kept him in a perpetual state of debt. Fitzgerald was therefore beholden to high-paying magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* as a reliable and immediate source of income; short stories could be written and paid for quickly whereas a novel required a period of sustained concentration, and there was a significant lag in royalty payments (18-19). Fitzgerald, however, preferred to think of himself as a writer of novels, and he detested the time short story writing took from his sustained fiction.¹¹ Though Fitzgerald's short stories were not without literary merit, he was sensitive to Hemingway's insinuations that he was "whoring" himself to the commercial slicks¹² (Hemingway 155). Perkins, however, recognized the value in

¹⁰ Presumably, this includes the revenue from four novels, *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tender Is the Night*; four anthologies, *Flappers and Philosophers*, *Tales of the Jazz Age*, *All the Sad Young Men*, *Taps at Reveille*; and one play, *The Vegetable* (Brucoli and Smith xxiii-xxix).

¹¹ Fitzgerald repeatedly referred to his short-story writing as "trash," and once, disappointed by poor sales of *The Great Gatsby*, he lamented, "My God! If [*Gatsby*] should sell 10,000 copies I'd be out of debt to you for the 1st time since 1922. Isn't that a disgrace, when I get \$2500. for a story as my regular price. But trash doesn't come as easily as it used to and I've grown to hate the poor old debauched form itself" (Kuehl and Bryer 134).

¹² In an extremely self-debasing aside in a letter to Hemingway, Fitzgerald belittles his accomplishment as a writer of short stories: "Here's one last flicker of the old cheap pride:—the Post now pay the old whore \$4000. a screw" (Brucoli and Baughman, *A Life in Letters* 169)

Fitzgerald's commercial work, and he attempted to pad the author's royalties by consistently releasing a collection of his popular fiction shortly after the publication of one of his novels. Nevertheless, Perkins viewed Fitzgerald's roller coaster financial situation as the biggest threat to his production of "serious," rather than popular, fiction. He knew that the constant press to write for the magazines taxed Fitzgerald's creative energies, and he worried that the author wouldn't have a fiscal window large enough to support the composition of a novel. But Perkins retained his faith in Fitzgerald's potential, and when Hemingway declared Fitzgerald "the great tragedy of talent in our bloody generation," the editor countered, "If we could only fix Scott up for a clear six months, we might turn that tragedy into something else" (Brucoli and Trogden 175-76). So deep was Perkins's faith in Fitzgerald that he consented to "fix Scott up" through personal loans whenever his resources at Scribner's were exhausted.

By 1936, however, Fitzgerald had accrued \$7,500 in debt to Scribner's, and he had no definite plans for another novel. At this point, Perkins was forced to concede that there "simply was no business justification in this house running his debt up further" (qtd. in Berg 302). Despite the seven personal loans totaling \$1,400 he had made to Fitzgerald in the preceding eighteen months, Perkins continued to loan the author money to "enable him to keep at writing and avoid Hollywood and that sort of racket" (302). Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to save Fitzgerald from Hollywood's golden lure, and to Perkins's dismay he spent two years as a quasi-successful screenwriter before settling back down to write fiction. When he finally did quit the silver screen, he found himself in the same pinch, only this time with fewer friends in the glossy magazine business. But the always-faithful Perkins was quick to offer his patronage again, even when the cash wasn't yet in hand. Perkins was thrilled to have Fitzgerald writing again, and even though he'd only seen the first 10,000 words of what was to be *The Last Tycoon*—Fitzgerald's

final novel, which remained unfinished at the time of his death—Perkins promised him \$1,000 from the forthcoming estate of his godmother (383). Perkins was confident the investment was a worthy one, and his assurance is evident in his note to Fitzgerald: “you are welcome to [the money] if it will help with this book. I can believe that you may really get at the heart of Hollywood, and of what there is wonderful in it as well as all the rest” (Kuehl and Bryer 259). By this point, Perkins had gone through the cycle with Fitzgerald often enough to know that his investment may not save the man, but it could possibly rescue an unwritten book.

Fitzgerald was eternally grateful for the support of his agent and publisher, and he acknowledged his debts to both in “Financing Finnegan,” a farcical short story published in *Esquire* in 1938.¹³ In the story, Fitzgerald explores his financial caprice from a point of view that is sympathetic to an author’s financial backers. With not a little self-parody, Fitzgerald portrays Finnegan as something of a literary phoenix, an author whose “career had started brilliantly and if it had not kept up to its first exalted level, at least it started brilliantly all over again every few years” (Fitzgerald, “Financing Finnegan” 740). Convinced that Finnegan will once again rise from the ashes, his agent and publisher continue to honor his requests for funds, even though it puts their business and personal finances in the red. Finnegan is, after all, “the perennial man of promise in American letters,” and backing a talent like that, his financiers tell themselves, will surely pay off in the end (740). At the time of the story, however, it looks increasingly doubtful that Finnegan will ever fulfill his promise again, but the collusion between the three men necessitates that they maintain an optimistic façade, because, at this point, hope for the future is their only recourse. Thus, the agent and publisher “[enter] into a silent conspiracy to cheer each other up about Finnegan. Their investment in him, in his future, had reached a sum so

¹³ Fitzgerald was “in one of the worst artistic and financial slumps of his career” when he wrote the story in June 1937, and was deeply in debt to Perkins and Ober at the time (Mangum, *A Fortune Yet* 159).

considerable that Finnegan belonged to them. They could not bear to hear a word against him—even from themselves” (742). This story is a shrewd example of Fitzgerald’s technique of double vision turned inward: it depicts the author’s literary benefactors as victims as well as enablers by prompting the reader to oscillate between assurance and doubt in Finnegan’s ability to deliver. In effect, Fitzgerald satirizes the inherent dilemma of investing upfront in an artist’s potential, a dilemma that Perkins encountered every time he paid an advance to an author. With a talent like Fitzgerald, however, it is easy to see how Perkins could be tempted to take such a risk, but, notably, he was the only one to continue to finance “Finnegan” to the end.¹⁴

Personal Favors

Money was not the only source of distraction. Perkins encountered countless personal and professional hang ups that threatened to waylay an author’s progress, the mitigation of which required less tangible modes of support. In an effort to keep his authors on task, Perkins assumed responsibilities that extended far beyond a typical editor’s scope. He took an active interest in real estate, for instance, if he thought he might be able to steer an author toward more productive accommodations. In an effort to temper the diversion of New York’s social scene, Perkins recommended that Fitzgerald take a house in Wilmington, Delaware. Unfortunately, the home Fitzgerald selected there was a grandiose mansion¹⁵ that “abetted [his] lust for showy living,” interrupting work on his novel and forcing him, once again, to write mercenary fiction for popular magazines (Berg 114). In another instance, Wolfe requested that Perkins help him find a

¹⁴ After 20 years of financial backing, Ober felt that he could no longer justify continued advances to Fitzgerald. Stung by the agent’s unprecedented refusal to grant his request for funds, Fitzgerald took the change in policy as a sign that Ober had given up on him and he terminated their professional relationship (Brucoli and Smith 454).

¹⁵ The house was a Greek Revivalist mansion just outside of Wilmington called Ellerslie (Berg 114).

relatively remote apartment, one where he could avoid the clamor of Manhattan's literary circles, and Perkins was eager to answer the call (Brucoli and Bucker 74, 85). Conversely, what some authors needed most was the affirmation of the literati, and—despite the fact that he loathed social gatherings—Perkins took it upon himself to escort out-of-town authors through New York's literary scene to boost their morale. Such was the case with Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings who was terribly self-conscious about her abilities as a writer when she first came to Scribner's. To prove that she belonged among serious writers, Perkins invited her up from Florida “to meet the literati, to bask in the glamour surrounding Scribner novelists” (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 5). Sometimes, all an author needed was a little face time with the editor to validate his importance to the publisher, and more often than not Perkins's lunch hour was spent listening to a writer's woes. Though he sometimes grouched about his growing social obligations,¹⁶ Perkins's reliable sense of humor helped him withstand his authors' barrage of demands with a certain degree of levity. As his associate John Hall Wheelock once recalled, “After the departure of some particularly excited visitor he could burst out in laughing desperation: ‘What sort of madhouse is this, anyway! What are we supposed to be – ghost-writers, bankers, psychiatrists, income-tax experts, magicians?’” (Wheelock 4). Nevertheless, Perkins continued to support the productivity of his authors by ministering to their personal needs. Whether it was an author who needed advice on how to “bring about” a cat, or one who wanted extra copies of his new book sent to twenty friends, Perkins would deliver—usually without even being asked (68, 165). Though these favors absorbed physical and human resources, Perkins viewed them as indispensable to the cause of redirecting an author's attention back to writing.

¹⁶ For example, in a note to his mentor, Professor Copeland, Perkins wrote, “Somehow, the New York authors expect an editor to do vastly more than they used to. Now you have to go for ‘tea’ in the afternoon, which lengthens the day to six o'clock or so. There are some you even have to dine with, in their studios, in order to work with them later” (Wheelock 149).

Oftentimes, a writer's flagging effort was rooted in self-doubt, and Perkins took proactive steps to validate an author's confidence. Perkins realized that the opinions of other authors were one the most lucrative tools at his disposal, therefore, he regularly solicited the input of others by sending complimentary copies of an author's book to his peers. A note enclosed with one of his letters from Rawlings makes it clear that Perkins hand selected the recipients of particular books. In deciding who should receive copies of *The Yearling*, for example, Perkins deliberately chose a mix of authors who were friendly with Rawlings, like Marcia Davenport, as well as some that she admired, like Ernest Hemingway (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 347). Earlier in her career, however, Perkins deduced that the endorsement of "established stars like Willa Cather, Scott Fitzgerald, and James Branch Cabell" would have the greatest impact on her shaky confidence, so he hazarded to send her debut novel, *South Moon Under*, to some of the day's most influential literary names for their reactions (5). His proactive efforts proved worthwhile, and, when Rawlings was discouraged with the progress of her second novel, Perkins was able to give her a boost by sharing a positive affirmation from no less a star than Fitzgerald.¹⁷ Perkins continually tended to the self-confidence of his authors in other ways as well. His letters were always steeped in praise for their work and admiration of their talent. Fitzgerald once told Perkins, "its your always wonderful letters that help me to go on believing in myself" (Kuehl and Bryer 90). Perkins kept his finger on the pulse of a writer's confidence, and when he felt it begin to falter he would deploy some gesture—such as his gift of a leather-bound copy of *The Great Gatsby* to Fitzgerald when sales were disappointingly low—as a sign of his unflagging faith in the value of

¹⁷ "Incidentally," Perkins wrote, "you once remarked upon my having sent 'South Moon' to Scott Fitzgerald as not being very apt because it was not his sort of book. He had never said anything about it to me, but last night, in talking about his own book by long distance, he referred to yours, and in the highest terms. It is not his kind of book either, but he knew it was a beautiful book" (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 138).

his work. Perkins well knew the paralysis that self-doubt could provoke in authors, and he made a consistent effort to shore up their confidence to keep that affliction at bay.

Perkins regarded a writer's time as one of his most valuable resources, and if there were something he could do to save time for an author, he would gladly step into the role of errand boy. When Taylor Caldwell arbitrarily decided to write a historical novel about Genghis Khan, for example, Perkins took it upon himself to send her as much information on the subject as he could, including books on central Asia (Berg 400). Similarly, Perkins queried the appearance and distribution of Montenegro's Order of Danilo for Fitzgerald, who worried that bestowing the medal upon the fictional Gatsby might be perceived as "horribly amateurish" (Kuehl and Bryer 90). Yet, the research assistance Perkins provided for these two authors was dwarfed by his efforts on behalf of Ring Lardner. A nationally syndicated sports columnist and humorist, Lardner was already a popular writer, but Perkins was one of the first to regard him as a serious author. Apparently, even Lardner didn't take his own writing seriously, and, though he was amenable to Perkins's suggestion that they publish an anthology, he showed "no passionate interest in having his work collected into books" (Caruthers x). In fact, "Ring thought so little of [his stories] he did not even keep copies for himself," and in compiling the volume Perkins was forced to "rely on Lardner's faulty memory to discover where his efforts had been published" (Berg 51). With little help from Lardner, the editor spent the next six months scouring library vaults and magazine morgues for the pieces that comprised *How to Write Short Stories*¹⁸ (51). The effort, however, paid off; the anthology drew critical attention to Lardner for the first time and raised his prominence as an American satirist (Caruthers x). In spite of Lardner's newfound literary prominence, Perkins always lamented the fact that he could never inspire him to write a

¹⁸ His investment in the process of assembling Lardner's book was so great that, in his excitement at having finally secured all the necessary stories, Perkins steamrolled its printing and placed it onto Scribner's spring list before the author had officially agreed to publication (Berg 51).

novel. In a letter to Hemingway, Perkins reveals his conviction that even authors as talented as Lardner could fail to live up to their potential if they didn't continue to write:

Ring was not, strictly speaking, a great writer. The truth is he never regarded himself seriously as a writer. He always thought of himself as a newspaperman anyhow. He had a sort of provincial scorn of literary people. If he had written much more, he would have been a great writer perhaps, but whatever it was that prevented him from writing more was the thing that prevented him from being a great writer. But he was a great man, and one of immense latent talent which got itself partly expressed. (Brucoli and Trogdon 217)

Nevertheless, the author's son, Ring Lardner, Jr., credited Perkins with his father's continued literary productivity, insisting that his father "might never have written another short story after 'The Golden Honeymoon'" had he not enjoyed the literary success achieved as a result of *How to Write Short Stories* (Berg 51). Perkins could take solace in the fact that, at least in some small way, his efforts to revive Lardner's work in print had the fortuitous effect of reviving the author's faith in himself.

Perkins was an ardent believer in the transformative power of print, and it was not uncommon for him to rush an author's manuscript into type in order to give the author the catalytic thrust necessary to finish the job. This was a conscious violation of best-business practices because a manuscript was not typically set into galley proofs until after "all the preliminaries" were in order (Burlingame 91). These "preliminaries" included negotiations over content, clarity, and consistency; proofing a manuscript for errors of punctuation, spelling, and style; and estimating the length so precisely that paper for the first run could be ordered (91). Yet, Perkins was often guilty of sending a manuscript to print before the preliminaries were over

because he determined that the advantage of seeing one's work in print—providing a sense of accomplishment and renewing the author's perspective on the work—outweighed the extra cost to the publisher and hassle for the printer.¹⁹ Perkins found this method particularly helpful for Rawlings, and he would send her “manuscript directly to galley proof, where the revisions were then made, and finally to page proof, where additional revisions were accomplished,” despite the objections of the printer (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 15). “When she could see her work in proof,” Perkins thought, “it always gave her the added incentive to see the project to its end,” (15). The practice, however, was not without its risks. Wolfe, for instance, was charged nearly \$700 in fees by the printer for excess corrections to *Look Homeward, Angel*, a fine that Scribner's agreed to absorb on Wolfe's behalf²⁰ (Brucoli and Bucker 194). Fortunately, however, Perkins was operating in a fairly supportive professional environment as well, and his continual use of this tactic reveals that his superiors at Scribner's were willing to balance their quest for profit against their reputation for quality. Nevertheless, Perkins's readiness to bend the rules of publishing to suit his authors' needs was a clear signal of his commitment to waive fiscal prudence if it might improve a writer's output.

A Jolt of Inspiration

Inevitably, an author's ideas can grow stagnant, and when this happens a little jolt of inspiration is typically all that's needed to get him moving in a new direction. When Perkins sensed that a writer was stuck, or that his ideas were growing stale, he would dispense books like

¹⁹ Burlingame characterizes editors and authors as “the printer's natural enemies” because the inefficiency of such practices created more work for the printer and interfered with the complex schedule on which they operated (Burlingame 95).

²⁰ Perkins later questioned the wisdom of this move, thinking perhaps he had inadvertently encouraged Wolfe to be lax with his proofs by forgiving him the responsibility of paying the printer's extra fees. Wolfe later argued over the fairness of a \$1,100 charge for excess corrections to *Of Time and the River*, which were amassed in large part because Wolfe had neglected to read his proof.

a tonic. “Max was like an old-time druggist,” recalled author James Jones, “Whenever he saw you getting sluggish, he prescribed a book that he thought would pep you up. They were always specially selected for your condition, perfectly matched to your particular tastes and temperament, but with enough of a kick to get you thinking in a new direction” (qtd. in Berg 21). Soon after Fitzgerald received Van Wyck Brooks’s *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* from Perkins, he enthusiastically wrote his editor to say, “Its one of the most inspirational books I’ve read and has seemed to put the breath of life back in me. Just finished the best story I’ve done yet & my novel is going to be my life masterpiece” (Kuehl and Bryer 31). It’s likely that the story Fitzgerald refers to here is the oft-anthologized “The Diamond As Big as the Ritz” since it came out around the same time and Fitzgerald’s “heavily underlined copy” of Brooks’s book attests to its influence on his short fiction (Berg 21) The books Perkins provided were not necessarily directed at a specific writing problem, rather, they were often meant to be of general benefit to the author. Perkins likely ascribed to Burlingame’s view that books were the tools of an author’s trade:

But the record shows that the best creative writers read hungrily and constantly; that they can no more work without books in reach than a carpenter can work without his square. . . .they are silent teachers and the only ones he can find.

Without them, craftsmanship, technique, cannot be learned, whatever the writer’s gifts of observation and reflection. Obviously they build his vocabulary and the patterns of his composition, but more subtly they are stimulants of his thinking.

They prick ideas into his consciousness. (Burlingame 13)

Hemingway became particularly dependent on Perkins’s constant supply of reading matter, and Perkins seemed to relish picking out books for him to enjoy, selecting volumes as disparate as *Angels on Toast*, by Dawn Powell; *A Judge Comes of Age*, by John C. Knox; and *Lee’s*

Lieutenants, by Douglas S. Freeman—the latter of which, he was “dead sure” Hemingway would like (Wheelock 175, 205). Perkins had a relatively reliable knack for matching books to an author’s taste, and even if his recommendation fell flat, it still had the benefit of spurring a lively literary debate between author and editor. Furthermore, Perkins’s practice of sharing books with his authors had an immediate advantage as well; it provided author and editor with a common touchstone to reference when discussing complex literary questions. For instance, Fitzgerald cited Brooks’s theory that editor William Dean Howells had blunted Twain’s prose when arguing against Perkins’s suggestion that he soften the tone of religious contempt apparent in a passage of *The Beautiful and Damned* (Kuehl and Bryer 45-47). Perkins eventually convinced Fitzgerald that the change was for the best, reassuring the author that he “should hate to play...the W. D. Howells to your Mark Twain” (47). By virtue of sharing a common literary reference, Perkins was able to discern the larger implication behind Fitzgerald’s resistance to his advice and therefore respond to his concerns more effectively.

Usually, the books Perkins recommended were specific to the author, but nearly all of his writers received a copy of his favorite literary touchstone—*War and Peace*. Perkins “presented copies of [Tolstoy’s] novel in the same spirit that Gideons dispense Bibles,” his biographer observed, “He gave one to almost every friend and author, and there was always a copy close to him at work and at home which he read time and again from start to finish” (Berg 62). Perkins regarded Tolstoy’s epic as a paradigm of fictional achievement, and he advised his authors to read it constantly. He even suggested to Davenport that she “read it every other year, alternately with *Anna Karenina*,” which she did faithfully (Wheelock xvii). In addition, Tolstoy’s novel had become something of a retreat for Perkins,²¹ and perhaps he believed that it could provide the

²¹ Perkins once told longtime friend Elizabeth Lemmon that he, “always found *War and Peace* a help in time of trouble” (qtd. in Berg 359)

same type of refuge for his authors. Ironically, Perkins eventually had to concede that he had “made trouble for a lot of writers” and for himself by getting them to read *War and Peace* (Tarr, *Ever Yours* 175). At the time, Perkins was engaged in an epic struggle of his own with Chard Powers Smith. Inspired by Tolstoy, Smith was trying desperately “to capture the spirit of an entire nation at war” in what would eventually become his Civil War saga, *Artillery of Time* (Berg 364). Likewise, Wolfe had been impressed with Tolstoy’s method of blending fiction and fact, an observation that reinforced his own penchant for writing fiction that was almost purely autobiographical; “if we are going to worship anything,” Wolfe wrote to Perkins, “let it be something like this. ... This is the way a great writer uses his material, this is the way in which every good work is ‘autobiographical’—and I am not ashamed to follow this in my book” (Bruccoli and Bucker 44). The irony that Wolfe, already an inordinately prolific writer, would aspire to write like Tolstoy was not lost on Perkins, and his tribute to the author in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* notes the similarity: “It is said that Tolstoy never willingly parted with the manuscript of *War and Peace*. One could imagine him working on it all through his life. So it was with Wolfe and *Of Time and the River*” (Perkins 273). Despite its troubles, Perkins maintained that it was best for a writer to read *War and Peace* “over and over, to the neglect of books on the art of fiction” (Wheelock 298). In fact, Perkins generally believed that the best way to learn about writing was through immersion in literature: “Learn about writing from reading,” he once told an aspiring author, “That is the right way to do it” (267). Thus, providing reading material to authors was Perkins’s subtle way of guiding their development as writers while at the same time inspiring them with a renewed passion for their craft.

A Gentle Nudge

Perkins was sympathetic to the many pitfalls that threatened to stall an author's progress, but the one cause of delay he absolutely could not tolerate was mere idleness. Wasted time equated to wasted talent for Perkins, and his letters are punctuated with seemingly casual inquiries into a writer's progress, an effort, no doubt, to conceal his anxious interest in their productivity. Trying to avoid the appearance of nagging, Perkins skillfully constructed these queries under the pretense of encouragement. An example of one such probing comment is given in an early letter to Hemingway: "As for when you will have something done, I could not make out definitely at all from your letter. But we will just wait patiently and be mighty quick to jump when anything does come" (Brucoli and Trogdon 70). Sometimes, his gentle nudge was masked by flattery, as was the case when he wrote James Huneker, "We have been in daily hope that you would bring in the manuscript of your novel" (Wheelock 25). Even his daughters weren't spared the editor's insistence on sustained productivity, and when they wrote him during their summers away he always begged for more. "Darling Lisbet: —" he might write, "You write me splendid letters. Please have another dream and tell me of it," or, to the same daughter, "E, a daddy can't have any fun without his children. There is no use his trying. ...But when he gets their letters, then he is happy" (Frothingham, King, and Porter 56-58). In fact, the interpolation of phrases both encouraging and questioning an author's productivity became such common features in Perkins's correspondence that he once, jokingly, wrote to Rawlings, "I hope when you opened this letter you didn't think to yourself, here comes that fellow again to urge me on with the book" (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 484). Because Perkins was careful not to pressure the author too much, his constant check-ins had the quality of an endearing idiosyncrasy rather than an imposition.

Many times an author's idleness could be traced to complacency, and Perkins was mindful to prevent this state of mind from taking hold. Perkins grew wary when an author took a

break from writing, especially after enjoying a great success. In fact, he seemed more concerned with the possibility that a successful writer might waste time resting on his laurels than that an unsuccessful author would give up. Therefore, once a book was published he immediately turned his attention to the author's next project and encouraged him to do so as well. To aid in this, Perkins kept a ready store of ideas for his authors to draw from because he realized that sometimes an author needed a little more than prompting—sometimes he needed an idea. Not wanting to micromanage his authors, Perkins would cast about for some concept that might catch their imagination; if he hit on the right topic, the results could be serendipitous. That is exactly what happened when he suggested that Winston Churchill consider writing “a history of the British Empire” (Wheelock 161). Something in that suggestion stirred Churchill, and Perkins recalled that he “got up and began walking about rapidly, and it seemed as if at that moment he hit upon a project – a history of the English race, which was to include [America].²² “He must truly have thought of it previously,” Perkins mused, “but it was as if he took the idea from the Empire and immediately enlarged and changed it” (161). As with Churchill, the ideas Perkins floated were usually tailored to the interests and writing style of the individual author. For instance, he felt instinctively that Hemingway should write a piece on his adopted home of Key West. Once, while on a fishing trip together, Perkins asked Hemingway, “Why don't you write about this?” (qtd. in Berg 141). But Hemingway had his own agenda at the time, and it was roughly another twenty-three years before he would publish his Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Old Man and The Sea*, which he dedicated to the memory of Maxwell Perkins.²³

²² Churchill published *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, a comprehensive, four-volume overview of the history of the British Empire in 1956.

²³ Perkins's biographer implies that *To Have and Have Not* was the manifestation of the “Gulf Stream novel” Perkins had suggested Hemingway write (Berg 325). However, the book was a disappointment to Perkins despite the fact that it became a national bestseller. *The Old Man and The Sea* embodies the spirit of Perkins's suggestion more fully, and Hemingway's decision to dedicate the book to his former

Sometimes, however, Perkins hit on an idea that was so perfectly suited for a particular author that he couldn't resist advocating for it a little more persistently. This was the case with Rawlings, whom Perkins encouraged for years to write a "boys' book" about life in the Florida scrub. The idea was inspired by Perkins's strong response to Lant, a character in Rawlings's debut novel, and his desire to see the boy in that book developed further (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 114). Though Rawlings was amenable to the idea, she had already started planning her second novel and was not mentally prepared for a foray into juvenile fiction. "Do you realize," she wrote Perkins somewhat incredulously, "how calmly you sat up there in your office and announced that you were expecting a boy's *classic* of me?" (131). But she did not shrug off her editor's call, to the contrary, she immediately began considering the logistics of the project: "There is more fine material to be gotten for it, that will have to come slowly, and it would be a pity to toss off a pot-boiler when by letting it go until my material has increased, and until I can give it my undivided attention, we might get something really decent out of it. A boy's mind is really too sacred a responsibility just to flip crumbs at it" (131). Always respectful of the author's prerogative, Perkins conceded to Rawlings's agenda, helping her bring out her second, and relatively unsuccessful, novel before returning to the idea for a work of juvenile fiction. The editor's patience proved valuable when—more than five years after he had first mentioned the possibility of a "boys book" to Rawlings—she published *The Yearling*, a perennial classic and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for a Novel in 1939.

In what became his own peculiar habit of matchmaking, Perkins would propose subjects, or even genres, that seemed well beyond an author's comfort zone, and his intuition was generally sound. Granted, Perkins grew somewhat impatient in later years, and in his rush to see

editor likely indicates the author's acknowledgment that the latter book is the achievement that Perkins's comment inspired.

an idea for a book realized he would sometimes recruit authors and “then [try] to pawn off on them ideas he had treasured for years” (Berg 398). It seldom worked when forced, but when Perkins began with the author in mind, as he most often did, he was usually able to successfully indulge his own literary interests. For example, Perkins was an enthusiast for military strategy, and the Civil War was one of his favorite topics; therefore, when Captain John Thomason found himself without a writing project, Perkins decided that Thomason’s military background made him the perfect candidate to write a biography of Confederate general Jeb Stuart²⁴ (Wheelock 52). Sometimes, Perkins sensed that an author was struggling to find his niche, so he helped redirect his efforts to an altogether unfamiliar genre. Such was the case with Taylor Caldwell, who floundered to get a manuscript accepted after her second novel. Recognizing that Caldwell had a rare talent for telling stories on a “grand scale,” Perkins suggested that she try her hand at a work of historical fiction. Though her first attempt was only marginally successful, Perkins’s “simple intuition that Taylor Caldwell should write historical novels” proved on target, and she spent the next forty years writing historical fiction in what became “one of the most enduring and profitable careers in the history of book publishing” (Berg 400-01). Perkins’s pairings, however, were not always quite so obvious. No one was more surprised than poet Chard Powers Smith when Perkins sat down to lunch with him and suggested that he write a novel about the Civil War. “Without any preamble,” Smith recalled, “speaking in his softest, chariest tone, looking straight before him as if I weren’t there, Max said, ‘I thought you might do a Civil War novel?’” (Smith 97). By this point, Smith had published two books with Scribner’s, one a collection of poetry and the other a treatise on poets, and neither had been particularly successful; but Perkins remained confident in Smith’s future as a writer, and he explained, “I saw a historical novelist in you from the beginning” (97). Three years later, Smith published *Artillery of Time*, which was

²⁴ *Jeb Stuart* (1930)

critically well received and has been likened to a northern *Gone with the Wind* (“Chard Powers Smith” B11). Considering this episode years later, Smith argued that it revealed the “mystery” of Maxwell Perkins better than any other anecdote he knew: “he had taken on a poet to write a book about poetry, which meant nothing to him, in order to lead him through a book about poets, which meant little more, to a book about people in a historical setting which he knew almost from the moment of meeting him was his calling” (Smith 97). By helping his authors to discover an outlet for their talents, Perkins not only kept them actively engaged in the practice of writing, but he also helped them through a process of authorial self-discovery that worked to their benefit as well as the publisher’s.

Giving Freely

In addition to financial resources, Perkins invested untold stores of energy, time, and thoughtfulness into the continued productivity of his authors. Backing this investment was the office of Charles Scribner’s Sons, which lent Perkins their resources—including his own time and efforts as an employee—in the expectation that he would invest wisely in the development of an author’s potential. In a sense, the publisher was dealing with a sort of futures market in which it banked on the fact that its investment would eventually pay out in literary dividends. Sometimes, however, an author’s needs exceeded the availability of resources that the publisher was willing to expend, and in those cases Perkins’s commitment to literary production becomes apparent through personal sacrifice. Interestingly, though the editor could have protected his own and his company’s investments by insisting that authors sign contracts granting Scribner’s an option on their future work, the editor refused to require any such legal obligation, and trusted instead in a sense of mutual commitment. What may seem an impractical business practice today

actually proved very effective for Perkins, for his discreet efforts to promote productivity were often successful, and his refusal to make the author feel indebted to the publisher effectively strengthened the bond between both.

Chapter 4: The Support of a Family

Perkins allayed much of the tension inherent in the codependent relationship between author and publisher by attending to the emotional needs of his authors, thereby casting the bond between them in a fraternal rather than financial light. Since authors are somewhat mistrustful of a publisher's motives, they are prone to resentment because they feel that the industry profits unfairly from the pains of their intellectual labor. Given the fact that profit margins in publishing are relatively slim in comparison to other industries, publishers tend to view authors as rather irrational creatures and are sometimes frustrated by their attitude of entitlement. Nevertheless, publishers accept the carping of their authors as a part of the territory, for long experience has shown that it is indeed "an outside factor, an independent being, a human, changeable, unpredictable, sometimes disordered and often ornery critter on whom [they are] ultimately wholly dependent and who, in turn, is helpless without [them]" (Burlingame vii). But the author—who has invested unquantifiable stores of personal, emotional, and intellectual agony into his work only to collect less than a fifth of the financial reward—has a particularly difficult time embracing this seemingly inequitable state of dependence. Perkins was sympathetic to the author's plight and believed that the emotional investment of self in writing was impossible to compensate financially, but he understood that Scribner's conservative fiscal policies were necessary because a large overhead was required for continued production.¹ Therefore, Perkins

¹ According to Burlingame, "the publisher is subject to inexorable, material demands. The rhythm of the presses must not be interrupted. Paper must be bought. Authors, office boys and linotypers must be

tried to compensate by providing his authors with an abundance of moral support—the only backing he could provide freely—as they endured the emotional trials endemic to authorship. By investing in the emotional wellbeing of his authors, Perkins signaled a commitment to their work that transcended mere commercial interest and directed their attention back to the original impetus for writing—personal fulfillment. Through his program of emotional support, Perkins established strong ties with authors and, in turn, engendered a sense of loyalty to the publisher that eventually came to be regarded as something akin to a familial bond.

The Agonies of Creation

Collectively, professional writers have garnered a reputation for being notoriously difficult to handle. The author’s “artistic temperament,” as it is commonly called, is characterized by tendencies toward moodiness, erratic behavior, and eccentricities typical of an emotionally charged personality. Roger Burlingame’s own experience—first as an editor and then as a writer—suggests that the stereotypical image of the brooding author is not necessarily unfounded. While an editor, Burlingame claims that he “learned the worst of authors and the best of publishers,” as he was obliged to “tease, cajole, humor, placate and scold angry and brooding men and women who had found a superfluous semicolon or refused to believe a royalty report or searched the *Times* in vain for an advertisement” (Burlingame x). However, when Burlingame’s “first dubious literary conceptions attained the flesh of print” and he joined ranks with the author, “[he] too haunted the bookstores, complained of advertising, royalty, semicolons and jackets with the worst of them” (x). Unlike Burlingame, however, Perkins did not need to become an author to appreciate the laments of the professional writer. He recognized that their gripes were

paid. And the red and black marks upon the ledger must be studiously followed, for the margins between them, in the publishing business, are dangerously small” (Burlingame 25-26).

not just the product of indignation over paltry fiscal returns, rather, he attributed the constant grouching, sudden bouts of despondency, and ridiculous antics of his authors to the mental and emotional strains of the writing process.

Perkins tolerated the mercurial nature of his authors because he believed it to be a natural byproduct of the innate qualities that made them literary artists. Their outbursts, it seemed to him, were simply a natural manifestation of their heightened sensitivity to emotional experience and their antics a product of the stress incurred when their “literary conscience” compelled them to transpose this experience into writing. Perkins was duly sympathetic to the writer’s lot, and he conceptualized the burden they bore as a perpetual state of mental gestation that periodically culminated in bouts of intense effort—a solitary labor—from which they brought forth a manuscript. In fact, Perkins often described the writing process in rather obstetric terms: “That woman has two books in her and it will be very bad for her if they aren’t written,” he might say, or again, “It’s there inside him all right, but it’s going to be the devil getting it out” (qtd. in Turnbull 191). Though Perkins was “boundlessly sympathetic with the agonies of creation,” he knew that pain was a part of the process and therefore “regarded such distress as inevitable, fruitful, and roughly proportional to the value of the work” (191). Therefore, Perkins viewed an author’s signs of distress as a positive indication of productive labor: “Writing a novel is a very hard thing to do,” he once reassured Nancy Hale, “...and if you get discouraged it is not a bad sign, but a good one. If you think you are not doing it well, you are thinking the way real novelists do. I never knew one who did not feel greatly discouraged at times, and some get desperate, and I have always found that to be a good symptom” (Wheelock 127). Marcia Davenport once noted that such reassurances were a typical hallmark of Perkins’s editorial style: “Max said and, more typically, wrote to all of us, in one phrase or another, ‘It is the good book

that gives a writer trouble.’ ‘All you lack in regard to this book is confidence.’ ‘Writing a novel is a very hard thing to do.’ ‘I know it is a terrible task.’ ‘Don’t lose courage’” (xvi).

Nevertheless, Perkins realized that the tension from this struggle must inevitably be released; therefore, he was willing to forgive the sometimes illogical, ill-advised, or ill-intended transgressions of his authors. Because Perkins believed authors to be somewhat unique in their capacity for creation, his sympathetic regard for the burden they bore endowed him with a seemingly infinite store of patience for their antics.

Seeing that latent tension from the writing process might express itself at any time, Perkins learned to be attentive always to his writers’ emotional needs. For example, Rawlings once confessed to Perkins that she experienced something akin to postpartum depression when she finished a writing project:

A queer thing happens to me whenever I am all through with one piece of work, and I have wondered if it was common to all writers. Before I go to work on something else, I drop into the most terrific despair. It has always been so. I feel that I have no pretensions to artistry, that I have my bally nerve ever to sit down to the typewriter again. ...I have been in that distressing mid-way state of mind for some weeks—hating everything and everybody in sight... (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 88)

At times, such despair threatened to get the best of Perkins’s authors, and he had to talk more than one off the ledge when they vowed to give up writing altogether.² At such moments, Perkins’s quiet restraint allowed him to convey sympathy without galvanizing the writer’s self-pity, and he defused the situation by calmly reiterating his abiding faith in the author’s talent. Yet

² For instance, Fitzgerald once joked that he had “just about decided to quit work and become an ash-man” (Kuehl and Bryer 29), and Wolfe declared “I shall not write any more books” after publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* (Brucoli and Bucker 55).

even Perkins wasn't immune to moments of hopelessness. He once confided to Rawlings that he was, "in a very hard piece of work, and have gone through the usual abysses of despair over it" (449). But, unlike his authors, he was able to keep perspective on the matter, rationalizing from experience that, "although I always feel it just as much, I do now know that there is generally some way out, and often a mighty good way too" (449). The editor's ability to self soothe is just as telling as his acknowledgement that "the hopelessness of an author writing a book is much greater," for it reveals the humility in his attitude toward his own efforts and the strength of his compassion for the difficulty of the author's task (449). Though Perkins was not a writer himself, his close involvement in the process of refining their manuscripts lent a dimension of empathy to his naturally sympathetic regard for a writer's burden.

Perkins's Program of Emotional Support

Perkins took the emotional health of his authors as seriously as he took their physical health, and he made it his business to attend to their morale. More than a pragmatic strategy aimed at protecting the publisher's assets, Perkins's thoughtful consideration and constant attention to the emotional needs of his authors was an indication of his deep regard for the literary artist as an exceptional creative being. As a matter of propriety, Perkins never discussed this aspect of his role openly, and the subtlety of his approach makes it easy to overlook the editor's constant attention to the morale of his authors. Essentially, Perkins's program of emotional support rested on three pillars: the development of interpersonal relationships; constantly expressed assurance in an author's capabilities; and the establishment of a sense of community within the publishing house to extend their network of support. A brief letter

dispatched to Thomas Wolfe shortly before *Look Homeward, Angel* was released demonstrates how seamlessly Perkins incorporated all three strategies into his everyday editorial interactions:

Dear Wolfe:

I was mighty glad to get a letter from you. We all miss you greatly and I expect to miss you more this summer.- There aren't many people who take pleasure in walking, and there are fewer with whom I take pleasure in drinking. Everything is much as usual here except that the fiction market which was bad enough as things were, has been rendered still worse by the Doubleday announcement that they are to publish new novels at one dollar. I am glad you worked hard and we were able to get out "Look Homeward Angel" before this collapse came.

When you get down to work, just do the work the best you can. Don't ever think about the public, or the critics, or any of those things. You are a born writer if there ever was one, and have no need to worry about whether this new book will be as good as the "Angel" and that sort of thing. If you simply can get yourself into it, as you can, it will be as good. I doubt if you will really think of any of the extrinsic matters when you are at work, but if you did, that might make it less good.

There are two people I hope you may see,- Scott Fitzgerald and John Galsworthy. I dare say the Heinemann crowd will see you see Galsworthy, and I hope you will see that you see Scott. I know you would have a grand time together. I meant to have written him that you were likely to turn up, but never did it.- If you need any introduction you can tell him that I was extremely anxious that

you should look him up,- but the fact is you won't need any introduction, for he will know all about the "Angel" and will be eager to see you.

I shall write more when there is more to be said.

Ever yours,

Maxwell Perkins (Brucoli and Bucker 33-34)

Aware that Wolfe was nervous about the debut of his first novel, Perkins attempts to bolster his spirits using his three-pronged approach. First, the editor intimates that the nature of his relationship with Wolfe is personal rather than professional, effectively implicating the publisher in this bond by use of the collective "we": "We all miss you greatly and I expect to miss you more this summer.- There aren't many people who take pleasure in walking, and there are fewer with whom I take pleasure in drinking" (33). Next, Perkins provides reassurance by expressing his uncompromising faith in Wolfe's inherent talent: "You are a born writer if there ever was one, and have no need to worry about whether this new book will be as good as the 'Angel' and that sort of thing" (34). Finally, he encourages the author to build a community of support by suggesting that he network with his Scribner's peers: "There are two people I hope you may see,- Scott Fitzgerald and John Galsworthy" (34). Though some strategies enjoyed more success than others, Perkins was steadfast in his efforts to alleviate the burden of the writing process by infusing his editorial practice with this unique program of emotional support.

Establishing Interpersonal Relationships

Though Perkins was notably closer to some authors than others—particularly Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Wolfe, Rawlings, and Lardner—the editor maintained a congenial rapport with all his authors. In spite of his reserved nature, Perkins managed to establish close personal ties with

authors that moved the editorial relationship beyond the impersonal trappings of a purely professional association and enriched their interpersonal bond. Circumstance dictated that he sustain these relationships primarily through correspondence, and Perkins proved a diligent communicator, dictating up to two-dozen letters a day to his long-serving secretary Irma Wyckoff (Berg 136). Despite the volume, Perkins's dutiful letters came across as anything but obligatory, and he took pains to infuse his professional correspondence with little idiosyncrasies that made them appear more personal. For instance, he would specify to his secretary when dictating how he wanted the letters punctuated, and his "propensity for semicolons and for following commas and periods with dashes" gave his letters a conversational feel (136). Likewise, he didn't seem to mind when his typed correspondence contained a few mistakes because it provided him the opportunity to add a personal touch by correcting the letter in his own hand. Perkins was more comfortable expressing his thoughts through writing rather than in person, therefore the practical necessity of communicating mostly through correspondence was an asset to Perkins's editorial practice. In fact, Perkins was rather inarticulate in speech, but he had an ironic knack for composing conversational letters, orating to his secretary, as she recalled, "as if the person he was writing to was in the room" (qtd. in Berg 136). Furthermore, Perkins took the liberty of infusing his letters with matters of personal as well as professional concern, inquiring into an author's private life and interlacing brief anecdotes from his own. This approach reinforced the editor's interpersonal bond with writers by reaffirming his personal concern for the writer's wellbeing. Framing the professional relationship as a friendship had several advantages, one being that Perkins's editorial suggestions came across as advice from a trusted confidant rather than as mandates from the publisher. In addition, the conversational epistolary style Perkins adopted allowed him to ease into unpleasant topics or soften the blow of

his criticisms by volleying between pleasantries and matters of serious consequence.

Consistency, however, was perhaps the most important tactic employed in Perkins's epistolary practice. The editor's commitment to continuing his correspondence with an author even in the "long dead intervals between books" conveyed that he was always "the friend before the editor" (Wheelock xvi). Thus, Perkins signaled that his interest in the editor-author relationship was as much personal as it was professional, thereby assuring authors that they had a loyal ally within the offices of their publisher.

Perkins encouraged his authors to visit whenever they were in New York, and he maintained an open-door policy that many took advantage of at some point. When an author chanced to meet with Perkins, he usually found the editor's calm, self-assured presence a natural tonic for his volatile emotional state. Whether an author arrived on his own volition or whether Perkins had phoned him—sensing by virtue of his "magical instinct" that the author was "once again in the agonies of writing"—the editor would invite him to lunch or "tea"³ then spend their session in almost studied silence (Wheelock xvi). Davenport once described such an encounter:

So I would meet him and sit with him in the small bar at the old Ritz. We sat...and drank our drinks and talked not very much. If I mentioned the problem I had been wrestling with, Max somehow changed the subject... Often he did not talk at all. We just sat there and thought. Suddenly he would say, "Time for my train," pick up from under the table his briefcase full of manuscripts, and bid me a hasty good-bye as he started down Madison Avenue to Grand Central Station. ...I would go home, feeling both calm and exhilarated, and next morning my problem would have disappeared. Others have agreed that they had the same experience.

(xvii)

³ "Tea" was Perkins's euphemism for afternoon martinis.

Though peculiar, the editor's silent presence had an oddly reassuring effect on Perkins's authors. As an author outlined his troubles "in the presence of this quizzically interested man with the telepathic glance and the comprehension deeper than words," he began to develop a new perspective on his dilemma and a solution naturally presented itself (Turnbull 190). When faced with a writing problem, Perkins's charged silence offered the author support yet allowed the space necessary for the writer to reach his own conclusion. Sometimes, however, an author was so overcome by despair that he was not yet capable of productive reflection. In such cases, a colleague noted that it was "the peculiar genius of Maxwell Perkins" that led him simply to change the subject when an author was besieged by a crisis of self-pity (Burlingame 7). To divert the author's attention from his own worries, Perkins would chat about other writers and books, his family, or politics, anything that might bring the author's attention back to the world outside of himself. According to Burlingame, Perkins could even devise a distraction if necessary:

Once, when an author stood in Perkins's office pouring out his unhappiness, Perkins went to the window as if overcome by the burden of his sympathy. After a while, however, he said, without turning: "You know I can't understand why all these busy people move so slowly. The only ones who move fast are the boys on roller skates who have nothing to do. Why don't we—why doesn't everybody—wear skates?" (7)

However odd it may seem, Perkins's method of sidestepping an author's professional concerns worked. He had learned to appraise an author's mood and trust in the process of creation; he realized that the despair that "often [hangs] in the gulf between the luminous image in an artist's mind and its flat reproduction on his paper" was natural and could only be relieved by a

temporary diversion (7). Additionally, by declining to solve an author's writing problem for him, Perkins demonstrated respect for his agency and faith in his abilities.

Blurring the lines between the personal and professional may be frowned upon in business today, but in Perkins's experience the development of interpersonal relationships was a natural and advantageous professional practice. In Perkins's day, Charles Scribner's Sons was still a family-owned firm run by the descendants of its namesake. The heads of the firm were treated with paternal respect while the employees enjoyed the security of knowing they were members of an extended professional family. In fact, the culture of belonging was so strong at the time that a treasured company anecdote recalled an instance in which Charles Scribner II—or C.S., as he was called—lost his temper and fired a cashier in the bookstore only to find him back at his desk the next morning. “‘He can't fire me,’ the cashier said, ‘I've been here twenty years.’ ...So the man kept coming back with his old nine-to-five fidelity until, ten years later, he died, comfortably, with his boots on. And C.S. just ‘forgot’ that he had fired him” (Burlingame 28). Accompanying this entitled sense of belonging was a fierce loyalty to the firm, and it was joked among publishing circles that “nobody left Scribner's until he was carried out” (Cowley, “Profiles - II” 30). Perkins—who did indeed work at Scribner's until he died—felt this bond keenly. When asked how he got his start at the firm the editor simply replied, “Oh, I've always been at Scribner's”⁴ (qtd. in Cowley, “Profiles - I” 42). Therefore, it is only natural that Perkins's filial feelings toward the publishing house should extend to its authors. In representing the firm to them he made a conscientious effort to engender similar feelings of fraternity toward the publisher. To this effect, Perkins was liberal in his use of the editorial “we” and projected his views as if they were representative of those of the majority, even when—sometimes especially

⁴ Actually, Perkins worked for *The New York Times* for nearly three years before joining Scribner's staff.

when—they weren't. In his letter accepting Fitzgerald's first novel for publication, Perkins purposefully discounts the fact that debate over the book was contentious and that many of his colleagues were still dubious of its merits when he writes, "I am very glad, personally, to be able to write to you that we are all for publishing your book, 'This Side of Paradise'" (Kuehl and Bryer 21). As in the case with the young Fitzgerald, Perkins was more likely to utilize this inclusive rhetorical technique with authors who were new to Scribner's, but even established authors were subject to a prudently placed editorial "we" from time to time. By implicating the publishing house within the context of his editorial relationships, Perkins perceptually broadened his authors' base of support. Not only did they have the trusted editor in their corner, but he made it seem as if they also had the backing of the entire firm as well. This strategy produced the desired effect, and soon authors began to transpose their reciprocal sense of loyalty to Perkins to a general feeling of affection toward the publisher. An example of this phenomenon is demonstrated in a Christmas tribute Wolfe composed for Perkins the year *Look Homeward, Angel* was published. In what he called a "statement of my loyal affection," Wolfe notes: "the name 'Scribners' naturally makes a warm glow in my heart, but you are chiefly 'Scribners' to me: you have done what I had ceased to believe one person could do for another—you have created liberty and hope for me" (Brucoli and Bucker 29-32). By association the publisher became a part of Perkins's supportive, interpersonal editorial relationships, a condition that allowed the editor to extend Scribner's familial culture of belonging to his authors and earn their loyalty to the publisher in return.

Providing Personal Validation

Writing is a practice that requires a certain measure of confidence on the part of the practitioner, and Perkins served as a necessary source of validation for his authors. It is not uncommon for the stores of self-assurance that propel an author through the writing process to be empty by the time he sends the manuscript to his editor. Generally speaking, the interval between posting the manuscript and receiving feedback is a particularly vulnerable time in the author's psyche. Burlingame likens the author's cognitive experience during this time to that of a "patient who suspects a cancer," which is relieved only by the editor's assurance that the manuscript does indeed show promise (Burlingame 5). Perkins knew how tenuous a writer's faith in his own talents could be, and his letters to authors reverberate with constant affirmations of their skill. He took special pains to buffer his criticisms by acknowledging the author's inherently superior judgment: "I know you know more about this than I," Perkins might write, or, "I think all of these are rather obvious ideas, and in fact are mostly suggested in your list of topics, but merely setting down anything that occurs to one might, if taken hold of by you, become something well worthwhile" (Wheelock 131, 187). That's not to imply, however, that Perkins coddled his authors. At times he could be brusque, or even a little grouchy, and when he had a criticism to offer he did not avoid sharing it, but his habitual validation of an author's efforts were like an echo of that "little smile that carried enormous reassurance" that he flashed when welcoming an author into his fold (Smith 88). When authors second-guessed themselves Perkins was quick to reiterate his faith in them. For instance, when Rawlings was struggling to finish the manuscript for *Cross Creek*, Perkins wrote, "I think, in truth, all you lack at this moment in regard to this book is confidence. I wish I could give you that, for I am sure you could make it a lovely book, and one full of the truth of life" (Tarr *Max and Marjorie* 472-73). Just as Perkins considered the author's struggle to be a good sign, so, too, did he regard a writer's lack of confidence to be an

attribute. Unlike the trade writer, who derives confidence from knowing exactly where he wants to take a piece of writing, Perkins explained to Rawlings, a true writer possesses a “subconscious confidence” that is right to falter at the enormity of the undertaking (472). Therefore, the constant interpolation of positive reassurances in Perkins’s practice constitute a deliberate attempt to ensure that the writer’s confidence, subconscious or otherwise, was not eclipsed by the difficulty of the task at hand.

Perkins realized, however, that authors need multiple sources of validation, so he diligently collected proof of their achievements, forwarding on critical reviews, sales reports, and relaying encouraging words from fans or other authors. Though he selectively picked from the latter, he never violated an author’s sense of trust by concealing negative reviews or somehow distorting their sales figures. Be that as it may, Perkins was not entirely objective when he dispensed this sort of feedback. His letters tended to emphasize the positive and justify, explain, or question the negative. A classic example of Perkins’s ability to minimize a negative critique can be seen in his response to Wolfe’s anxiety about a review that criticized *Of Time and the River*:

I’ve read your letter with the greatest pleasure up to the part where you began to get going against the tribe of critics.- I sympathize with all that too, but am concerned by feeling that you have got a wrong idea of the reviews in spite of what I have said. The reviews really were splendid, Tom, and what strange chance was it that led you to see the very worst thing said by anybody,- Burton Rascoe’s statement that you had no sense of humor. That enraged me too, since even in the most tragic parts of the book there is humor. I think maybe Rascoe meant that Eugene had no sense of humor, which would at least be a more

reasonable statement; for he does not exhibit it excepting occasionally and certainly to nothing like the degree the author does. But Rascoe's review was highly enthusiastic and excited, and I suppose the answer is that Rascoe has no sense of humor, which I think is the case. (Brucoli and Bucker 154-56)

The tap dance Perkins performs here is one of remarkable subtlety. He at once trivializes critics generally as being a "tribe," and implicates the critic in question for being inarticulate and humorless. Meanwhile, Perkins wonders aloud how Wolfe could chance to find the "worst" criticism, ostensibly among much praise, while using the criticism itself as a platform for praising one of Wolfe's accomplishments—the classic fusion of tragedy and humor in prose. Though dispensed with a light touch, it is certain that Perkins thoughtfully crafted his response to Wolfe because he knew how highly sensitive the author was in respect to criticism. Perkins was first made aware of Wolfe's volatility in this matter when his initial attempt to provide him with tertiary validation backfired. Having sent Wolfe what he thought were positive reviews of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Perkins was surprised when the author responded with the melodramatic declaration: "I shall not write any more books" (55). The editor was flabbergasted, but he remained calm and replied, "If I really believed you would be able to stand by your decision, your letter would be a great blow to me. I cannot believe it, though. If anyone were ever destined to write, that one is you" (55). Perkins was careful not to patronize Wolfe by dismissing his claim outright, yet he still managed to convey the sentiment that the idea that Wolfe could possibly give up writing was preposterous. In solidarity, Wheelock responded to a similar letter from Wolfe with the same cautiously optimistic tone that Perkins had adopted: "if I really believed this decision to be final and not the reaction from a mood, I should be more than unhappy" (56). In a follow-up letter, Perkins assures the young author that the despair he feels is

common to the literary artist: “You know it has been said before that one has to pay somehow for everything one has or gets, and I can see that among your penalties are attacks of despair,- as they have been among the penalties great writers have generally had to pay for their talent” (58). Though Perkins was convinced that a certain degree of suffering was unavoidable in an author’s line of work, this inevitability did not temper his efforts to reassure an author who was feeling discouraged or doubtful.

On the other hand, Perkins recognized that authors who exuded supreme confidence—and none did so more conspicuously than Ernest Hemingway—were the ones whose aplomb was most fragile. Ego was as much a part of the Hemingway brand as was bullfighting, but the writer was extremely sensitive to criticism—despite his bravado when declaring otherwise. It took a delicate touch to provide Hemingway with constructive criticism, but, fortunately, he required minimal editorial guidance. When dispensing editorial advice to Hemingway, Perkins chose not only his battles carefully but his timing as well: “When you have a suggestion for Ernest,” he explained to his daughter Jane, “you have to catch him at the right time” (qtd. in Berg 324). Hemingway liked to think of himself as someone who could take it as well as he could dish it out, and though Perkins knew this was certainly not the case when it came to criticism, he did not challenge the writer’s self-perception. Instead, he made subtle attempts to encourage the author to embrace critical feedback. In a 1929 letter, for example, Perkins slyly tries to enlighten Hemingway on this point: “There are people who write, and even some quite good ones, to whom you do not dare make suggestions because of an uncertainty in themselves.- I never saw any sign of this in you” (Brucoli and Trogdon 100). Apparently, Perkins’s subliminal attempts to influence Hemingway were unsuccessful, for he confided to Rawlings years later, “the only time I ventured an important criticism of a Hemingway book, he uttered one of those expletives

that sometimes get into print, and followed it with ‘Why don’t you get Tom Wolfe to write it for me?’” (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 373). Lurking behind this rebuff was yet another symptom of Hemingway’s fragile self-confidence, his acute jealousy of other writers. The demands of Hemingway’s inflated ego made it impossible for him to tolerate competition for long, and he generally picked fights with those whose writing he admired most.⁵ Perkins was leery of Hemingway’s jealous streak, and he made some deliberate professional sacrifices to appease the literary superstar’s ego. Notably, the editor chose to forego the opportunity to pursue the talented William Faulkner—even though the writer had been submitting short stories to *Scribner’s Magazine* with “unflagging optimism” for years (qtd. in Berg 180). Hemingway had once intimated to Perkins that, next to the dead masters, Faulkner was the closest contemporary whose writing threatened to equal his own, and Perkins knew that he would be inviting trouble by pursuing Hemingway’s presumed literary rival (180). Wheelock later explained Perkins’s rationale for refusing to act on the Southern writer: “Max didn’t follow through on Faulkner just then because he was afraid of arousing Hemingway’s jealousy. ...in Hemingway’s mind, there was no more room in Max’s life for another power so threatening as William Faulkner. Hemingway’s was a mighty ego, and Max knew it” (qtd. in Berg 181). But letting Faulkner go wasn’t the only sacrifice Perkins made on the publisher’s behalf to protect the author’s ego. In one instance Perkins allowed Scribner’s to move forward with the publication of a book that he felt did not represent Hemingway’s finest work. The editor half-heartedly saw *To Have and Have Not* though the press though he considered the characters flat and cartoonish and continually referred to the protagonist as a “type” (324). Though he was reluctant to admit it, Perkins agreed with Edmond Wilson’s synopsis of the novel’s major flaw: “The heroic Hemingway legend has at this point invaded his fiction and, inflaming and inflating his symbols,

⁵ Arguably, F. Scott Fitzgerald was the most lamentable victim of Hemingway’s aesthetic jealousy.

has produced an implausible hybrid, half Hemingway character, half nature myth” (qtd. in Berg 325). Nevertheless, Perkins knew that refusal to publish a Hemingway work would be disastrous for their editorial relationship and could threaten the author’s future association with the publisher. Therefore, Perkins made what he considered necessary professional concessions to protect Hemingway’s ego—the defense that gave him the confidence to continue writing.

Of course, Hemingway wasn’t the only author whose books Perkins published even though they didn’t quite measure up to the writer’s potential. By committing to publish the author rather than individual books, Perkins intrinsically agreed to take on some flops. Perkins sometimes walked a precarious tightrope between undermining the reputation of the publisher and damaging the confidence of the author, and in many cases he chose to make allowances for the author’s sake. Such was the case with Rawlings’s *Golden Apples*, the unremarkable English novel she undertook before returning to the subject she knew best—the people of the Florida scrub that would soon feature in her classic, *The Yearling*. Perkins felt that the occasional publication of a subpar book was justifiable because it gave an author the space and support necessary to exercise his creative spirit, be experimental, make mistakes, and grow as a writer. If nothing else, Perkins reasoned, seeing the author through a lackluster project would have the benefit of purging an inferior aesthetic idea from his mind that might otherwise prevent him from moving on to other works. Therefore, he took a calculated risk on the publisher’s behalf, weighing the potential gain of demonstrating faith in an author with the opportunity costs of padding the publisher’s list with mediocre offerings. Yet, even when Perkins was disappointed with an author’s current efforts, he remained enthusiastically optimistic about their future success. In return, Perkins’s unflinching expression of faith in his authors’ potential gave them the confidence to meet their editor’s lofty expectations. With his unyielding belief that they

could and would achieve great literary heights, Perkins produced something of a Pygmalion effect among his authors that drove them to become better writers.

Making Connections

Despite the public recognition, authorship is a lonely profession. In the many authors' letters that Burlingame perused when compiling the history of Charles Scribner's Sons, he noted a recurrent theme of isolation: "All through the record we feel the author reaching for something outside the blank sheet in his machine or on his table; for aid beyond the circle of his mind" (Burlingame 1). Surely, Perkins sensed this loneliness as well, and his consistent effort to encourage a sense of community among his authors appears to be an attempt to quell this yearning. Though he fell far short of establishing any sort of literary salon—which was never his intent—Perkins made a valiant effort to involve his authors in each other's lives. He sent them books written by their peers, provided unsolicited updates on the lives of other authors, and occasionally tried to arrange introductions between them. Perkins's liberal attitude toward sharing personal details from the lives of his authors may seem like a shocking violation of privacy in today's business climate, but the editor's presumptive attitude of inclusiveness was perhaps inevitable in a publishing house where everyone was treated like family. Particularly in his correspondence, Perkins assumes a collegial attitude by peppering his letters with newsy anecdotes about the lives of other authors and musing about their professional trials and successes. An April 1926 letter to Fitzgerald provides a typical example of the casual manner in which Perkins dispensed information about the affairs of others. Half of the letter's content is pertinent to Fitzgerald's own interests and concerns, while the other is devoted to sharing news of other Scribner's writers: "Our really great success this spring promises to be Thomason's 'Fix

Bayonets!';- for, although its price is \$3.50, it's already well on toward a sale of ten thousand copies, and we're printing five thousand more. [Mark] Sullivan is also going strong.⁶ I think Hemingway's book⁷ will look well when done..." (Kuehl and Bryer 139). Whether Perkins was acting subconsciously or deliberately, the affect of his garrulous correspondence was certainly aimed at allaying an author's sense of isolation by reminding him that Scribner's housed an entire community of authors who could empathize with each other's trials and tribulations. Another potential benefit of this approach was the possibility of fostering ties between authors that extended the Scribner's "family" and reinforced their common bond to the publisher.

Usually, anecdotes about other authors were passed along without incident, but once in a while Perkins encountered an author who did not appreciate being treated like just another member of the gang. Ultimately, this was the case with Sherwood Anderson; he took offense at Perkins's epistolary references to other authors, taking it as an indication that the editor lacked interest in Anderson's own work.⁸ In what was "one of the most self-abasing letters of his career" (Berg 381), Perkins tried to make amends by explaining that he wrote of other authors because he valued Anderson's opinion as a seasoned professional:

It all came only from my feeling that you knew so very well indeed what you were about, and had so much your own way of doing things, that it would be almost an impertinence for me to question you, or urge you, or certainly to try to direct you. I had looked upon you for so long as a master, and as the father of so

⁶ *Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925, Vol. I: The Turn of The Century* (1926)

⁷ *The Torrents of Spring* (1926)

⁸ The true impetus of the conflict was Anderson's belief that Scribner's hadn't sufficiently advertised his books, but that perception led him to conclude that the editor had lost interest in his career as well (Berg 381).

many of these other people who became notable, that I could not help talking to you about them – for my own enlightenment largely. (Wheelock 165-66)

Though Perkins's humility and praise "touched Anderson deeply," it was not enough to convince the author of Scribner's investment in him, and he became one of the few writers that Perkins lost to another publisher (Berg 381). Usually, however, soliciting the opinions of other writers was helpful to Perkins's editorial practice. It gave less-successful authors an ego boost to be associated with the likes of blockbuster writers like Hemingway, and it flattered the ego of authors like Hemingway by inviting them to impart the wisdom of their experience. Furthermore, by baiting and seeding authors with news of their contemporaries, Perkins hoped to inspire an esprit de corps among his authors that would motivate them to continue writing, distract them from their current troubles, and signal that they were not alone in their struggles.

Over the years, Perkins attempted to facilitate friendships between various authors by arranging meetings between them, but these introductions rarely achieved the desired result. Perhaps more for personal reasons than professional, Perkins was especially eager to engender a spirit of camaraderie among his favorite trio—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Wolfe—but they antagonized each other with their disparate personalities and jealousies. The Fitzgerald-Hemingway-Wolfe connection has been characterized as a "sibling rivalry," and Perkins—who represented a father figure to all three—often had to moderate their interactions. Scholar Matthew Bruccoli once summarized the underlying conflict between Perkins's surrogate sons: "Writers are not automatically happy about the success of other writers; moreover, both Hemingway and Wolfe expected Perkins's total loyalty. Hemingway was compulsively competitive and resented Perkins's commitment to other writers—especially to Wolfe... Wolfe was suspicious of everyone" (Bruccoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xxv). Nevertheless, the discord

between Perkins's three major writers highlights the editor's own diplomatic skill in navigating the many differences—in temperament, writing style, revision approach, and outlook—that constantly undercut his efforts to build relationships between his authors.

Despite the tension, Perkins maintained his belief that communion between peers was emotionally advantageous for the writer. Thinking that another author's empathy was perhaps the best tonic for a writer's flagging morale, Perkins would sometimes send one of his authors as an emissary to uplift a downtrodden peer. In the summer of 1936, for instance, Perkins requested that Rawlings look in on Fitzgerald as he convalesced in North Carolina. Fitzgerald had fallen into what Rawlings characterized as "the cosmic despair" that afflicts writers from time to time, herself included, and she eagerly agreed to fulfill her editor's request (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 270). Rawlings reported that she had had a "perfectly delightful time" when she spent an afternoon with Fitzgerald, and offered Perkins an optimistic prognosis for the patient's physical and emotional recovery (264). Even though they held very different aesthetic views, Rawlings recognized that there was "a most helpful stimulation in talk between two people who are trying to do something of the same thing—a stimulation I miss and do not have enough of, at Cross Creek" (270). Rawlings thought their debate may have proved helpful to Fitzgerald as well, and, fittingly, the pair raised a glass in toast "To Max" (270). The initial success of the visit seemed to vindicate the editor's consistent efforts to bring two authors together, but neither Rawlings nor Fitzgerald pursued much of a relationship after that initial meeting and their artistic parley appears to have been a one-time affair. Encouraging friendship among authors proved rather difficult, and Perkins risked a barrage of unintended consequences every time he attempted to pair authors with rather distinct natures. Rawlings's personality had enough give to make her relatively compatible with most people, and Fitzgerald was always generous toward other

writers, but when two equally charged personalities met sparks were liable to fly. Such was the case when Perkins sent Wolfe to Fitzgerald on a similar errand several years before. The two authors butted heads almost immediately in a debate about what it meant to be an American, and Wolfe took offense at Fitzgerald's preoccupation with pedigree (Turnbull 158). Though Perkins had initiated the meeting primarily for Fitzgerald's benefit, Wolfe suspected that Perkins was trying to get Fitzgerald's "feel" for him and eventually he became convinced that Fitzgerald was trying to distract him from writing to sabotage his career (164). Perkins later sent Wolfe to Hemingway in the hopes that the latter could curb the effusive author's tendency toward abundance in prose, but that encounter has been summarized as "a cordial failure" (Bruccoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xxv). It is difficult to ascertain exactly how writers such as Wolfe responded to their editor's attempts at matchmaking, and it would have been even more difficult for Perkins to know how his efforts were received since authors were not always truthful when relaying their impressions back to the editor. For instance, Wolfe told a friend that he was sorry he ever met Fitzgerald, but he wrote Perkins that he found Fitzgerald to be "very generous and at heart a very kind and sensitive person" (qtd. in Turnbull 164). Likewise, Rawlings was compelled to downplay the role alcohol had played in the cordiality of her meeting with Fitzgerald; both authors struggled with alcoholism, and Rawlings's omission is characteristic of a guilty child wanting to protect a loving parent from worry.⁹ In both cases, the burnished reports of their meetings seem to indicate that Perkins's authors naturally assumed a manner of deference before their paternal father-editor, a fealty that Perkins neither intended nor expected. Indeed, it seems as if Perkins was rarely privy to the failings of his matchmaking efforts, which may explain why—in light of his dubious rate of success—he continued to utilize authors as his

⁹ In her report of the meeting to Perkins, Rawlings claims that she and Fitzgerald had "only sherry and a table wine" (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 264), but her unpublished account reveals that, in addition, they ordered "a bottle of port, and as the afternoon wore on, another and another" (Bruccoli and Smith 412).

ambassadors. Yet, as Rawlings's toast with Fitzgerald clearly indicates, the mutual connection with Perkins served as a de facto bond between his authors whether they acted on it or not.

Abuses Suffered

Because authors regarded Perkins as a sort of father figure in the house of Scribner's, they tended to show their worst sides with impunity, assured that—like the prodigal son—they would always be welcomed back to the fold. This did not mean, however, that authors didn't try Perkins's patience, and at least once he confided to a friend that writers "are all sons of bitches" (qtd. in Bruccoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xxviii). But he tolerated their abuses, in part, because he knew that "without the sons of bitches, there are no masterpieces" (xxviii). Furthermore, Perkins expected writers to give him a certain amount of trouble since he ascribed to the theory that the best literature was written by "rascals"¹⁰ (Turnbull 191). Accordingly, Perkins must have considered Thomas Wolfe's writing first-class, for he caused the editor more trouble than any other writer. Fitzgerald could be exasperating and Hemingway infuriating, but dealing with Thomas Wolfe on a regular basis was demoralizing. Charmingly effervescent one minute then sullen and morose the next, Wolfe's volatile nature seemed to reflect the smoldering pit of emotion that fueled his ebullient outpourings of prose. To make matters worse, the seriousness with which Wolfe regarded his artistry made him intolerant of criticism or advice, and he alternately venerated and vilified anyone who took an active interest in his writing. But it wasn't just criticism of his prose that could incite Wolfe's indignation; he could not abide doubts about his genius or character, though he splayed his family, friends, and acquaintances on the proverbial table of his fiction for the world to examine critically. Whatever the motivation,

¹⁰ Perkins, who grew a little pessimistic about the prospects for literature in the 1940s, once mused to a literary agent, "Perhaps the trouble with literature in our time, is that there aren't as many rascals as there used to be" (qtd. in Cowley, "Profiles – II" 39).

Wolfe was intent on testing the loyalty of his closest allies, and Perkins was no exception. At one point, Wolfe antagonized Perkins to the point that the editor's wife, Louise, deemed it necessary to intercede on her husband's behalf, chastising the author in a note for his deplorable behavior toward Perkins.¹¹ Incidentally, Wolfe was the only one of Perkins's authors who passed freely between his personal and private lives; he was a regular guest in the editor's home and often spent Christmases with his family. Though he frequently dined with the Perkins family, all the editor's daughters were slightly afraid of him. One night, when Wolfe was cursing and raving at Perkins as if no one else could hear, Nancy, the youngest, "burst into tears and yelled at Wolfe not to talk to her father that way" (Berg 242). Though Perkins usually tolerated Wolfe's antics with the patience of a saint, he once exclaimed in frustration, "Tom, there are ten thousand devils in you, but there is also an archangel" (qtd. in Turnbull 188). Despite all that, the editor continued to concentrate on the best in Wolfe, and for eight years he managed to maintain a tenuous personal and professional relationship with the troublesome author that was surprisingly intimate. This was no small feat, and as one scholar shrewdly observed, "No editor or publishing house could have kept Wolfe; only Perkins could have held him for four books" (Bruccoli and Baughman, *The Sons* xxviii). But it was precisely the promise of the books Wolfe could potentially write that endowed Perkins with the perseverance to continue their association. Though the two had become uncharacteristically close over the years, the reason Perkins exerted such personal and professional energy on maintaining his relationship with Wolfe was the potential he saw in his prose. In some respects, Perkins viewed Wolfe as the ideal writer, for the author's natural style and choice of themes led Perkins to think that at long last he might have discovered an American Tolstoy: "It was with America he was most deeply concerned and I

¹¹ "Listen Tom," Louise Perkins wrote, "if anyone else were as man to man as you were tonight you would fight him! You know that he is your friend—really your friend—and that he is honorable. Isn't that enough? Please don't behave that way..." (qtd. in Berg 290).

believe he opened it up as no writer ever did for the people of his time and for the writers and poets and artists of tomorrow” (Perkins 277). Therefore, Perkins saw the potential payoff of seeing Wolfe through his difficult development as an author worth whatever frustration or pain he caused. Like any black sheep, Perkins adored Wolfe all the more, and though their evening sessions were full of arguments, sneers, and pouting, he felt it was a privilege to see Wolfe through the production of his manuscripts.

The letters that anticipate Wolfe’s ultimate break with Perkins and Scribner’s are indicative of a power struggle, but the contention is one-sided; in this instance, the bellicose Wolfe was at war with himself. Realizing that fear over public perception of collaboration would make it impossible for Wolfe to amicably continue his association with Scribner’s, Perkins reluctantly accepted the fact that it was necessary for the author to change publishers if he was to continue developing his talent. Though it hurt the publisher to lose such a successful author, it had always been Scribner’s policy not to insist that an unsatisfied author remain in its ranks. Nevertheless, Wolfe’s desertion of Perkins was the hardest thing the editor ever endured professionally, and it seems as if part of the sting was Perkins’s fear that he had failed Wolfe as an editor despite the fact that he had devoted more time and attention to him than any other author. In an oral history, Wheelock revealed that after Perkins’s death they found some of the letters Wolfe wrote preceding the break tucked away in his office, as if the editor had been too ashamed to put them in the publisher’s files (Brucoli and Bucker xxii). Wheelock ascertained that “Max died of a broken heart,” and it was Wolfe’s break—the turning away of the author he had helped the most—that “wounded Max almost mortally” (qtd. in Brucoli and Bucker xxii). Perkins eventually admitted that he hadn’t appreciated the strain of the burden he had carried with Wolfe until it had been lifted, yet he was still concerned with figuring out how the tragedy

had come about, and he never ascribed blame to Wolfe alone. Despite Wolfe's foibles, Perkins stayed loyal to the author for life,¹² as he did all of his writers. More than any other tenet of his program of emotional support, Perkins's fidelity to his authors was appreciated, and his loyalty was eventually reciprocated—even by Wolfe, who, on his deathbed, expressed his gratitude to the editor for always being there.

A Safe Haven

As Perkins's authors oscillated between bouts of despondency or fits of triumphant jubilation, their editor remained grounded, constant, and loyal, thereby becoming a much-needed source of equanimity in their emotionally turbulent lives. Indeed, Davenport once reflected that Perkins's provision of moral support was the very thing that distinguished him as an editor:

People have asked us who knew Max just what it was that he did as our editor; how he differed from any other editor. The difference was Max himself, of course. What he did was *be with us*, in mind, in mood, in the commonplaces of existence as much as in the notable experiences. He was with us in retrospection when we dealt with remembered experience, and in anticipation when we were grappling with the still unformed mass of what we aimed at. He gave us infinite, tolerant understanding which built a floor under the isolation and solitude that are the writer's life. (Wheelock xvi)

In ways little and small, Perkins earned the loyalty of his authors by consistently demonstrating concern for their emotional needs. His genuine sympathy for the author's struggle endowed him with the patience and intuition to know just when an author needed a morale boost. Wolfe once

¹² When Perkins learned of Wolfe's fatal illness he kept in close contact with Wolfe's brother Fred and with Wolfe's agent, writing only when they thought it might be beneficial (Brucoli and Bucker 267-74).

likened Perkins's intercession on his behalf to that of "a man who is drowning and who suddenly, at the last gasp of his dying effort, feels earth beneath his feet again" (Wolfe, *Story of a Novel* 75-76). By ministering to the emotional needs of his authors, the editor—and, by extension, the publisher—came to represent a safe haven in which an author could confidently moor his tempestuous ship.

Chapter 5: Territorial Disputes

A mass producer of books, modern publishing patterns itself after other capitalist industries, assuming a system of divided labor in which the author develops a literary product and the publisher produces and disseminates it to consumers—that is, to readers. The difference, however, is that the author is inextricably associated with the final product, a fact that beguiles him into thinking that he commands greater control over the production process than the publisher. It is not uncommon, therefore, for territorial disputes to erupt between author and publisher, and the ensuing conflicts kept Perkins busy in the effort to sort out each party's demands and mediate the resultant tensions. In many cases, Perkins was professionally obligated to uphold the publisher's interests, and his pragmatic nature generally led him to side with Scribner's when it came to professional matters unrelated to the construction of a text. Perkins understood that authors couldn't be objective when their work was involved and that publishers must operate with a certain degree of impartiality to protect the wellbeing of their enterprise. Therefore, he believed that the publisher's jurisdiction encompassed the nuanced coordination of tasks such as scheduling, proofreading, and advertising by necessity. Putting out a successful new list required that the steps of production, distribution, and marketing for each new book were coordinated with those of others in what amounts to a rather intricate proverbial dance. As choreographer of this dance, Perkins was often tasked with the unsavory job of pacifying an indignant author who felt as if the publisher had trod upon his toes when it took control of his creative property for production. The production process posed the biggest threat to the

establishment of trust in the editorial relationship because it highlighted Perkins's divided loyalty to author and publisher, and it proved a constant test of Perkins's diplomacy.

In Hand

Publishers use the term “in hand” to denote the point in the publication process in which manuscripts pass from the creative purview of the author to the technical domain of the publisher. This invisible command shift is a somewhat mystifying concept for authors, as illustrated by Fitzgerald who asked Perkins, “what is ‘in hand?’— I have a vague picture of everyone in the office holding the book in the [right hand]¹ and reading it” (Kuehl and Bryer 88). Implicit in Fitzgerald's confusion is a common misconception, the idea that a physical book spontaneously materializes once the author's work is through (Burlingame 91). In actuality, however, there are many concerns that must be addressed before the process is complete. To start, the book must be proofed—first on galleys, which go to proofreaders, the editor, and the author—then typeset with corrections before it is printed, bound, and prepared for distribution. Meanwhile, necessities such as a title and dust jacket must be conferred upon, and an advertising campaign arranged. It usually is not long after a book is deemed “in hand” that an author begins to feel control over his creation slipping, and “jittery authors are likely to make frequent calls or write anxious letters” in response to the unsettling conversion of their manuscript into galley proofs (92). Made frantic by the ensuing permanence of their work, authors sometimes expect the publisher to stop the presses while they performed anything from minor surgery to a total overhaul of their prose. Though Perkins couldn't honor such requests, he did grant generous

¹ Fitzgerald actually wrote “light and” here, but Burlingame presumes in *Of Making Many Books* that what he meant to write was, indeed, “right hand” (91). The correction is sustained here because Fitzgerald, by his own admission, was slightly intoxicated when he wrote this letter to Perkins (Kuehl and Bryer 88).

leeway with the galley proofs, allowing his authors to make substantial revisions while the manuscript was in hand—much to the ire of the printer.

Sometimes, however, an author's reticence to relinquish his proofs was symptomatic of a subconscious reluctance to part with the work at all, and in such cases Perkins would call attention to the finite limitations of factors such as printer's schedules, advanced sales, and the strategic placement of the book on the next season's list to convince the reluctant author to let go. For most authors, applying a little deadline pressure proved an effective and benign method of focusing their last stores of energy into the work in hand. There were, indeed, some very real fiscal consequences for backtracking on a set publication date, and if technical considerations weren't enough to induce the author to relinquish his text, then Perkins would persuasively argue that it was strategically more advantageous for a book to be delivered on deadline than held in perpetuity for the sake of perfection. Knowing that it was in the best interest of the book to proceed with publication as planned, Perkins worried over Wolfe's second novel when the author "sat brooding over [the proofs] for weeks in the Scribner library and not reading" (Perkins 273). Sure that nothing he could say would convince Wolfe to let the novel go, Perkins made an uncharacteristically unilateral decision to move forward with publication, informing Wolfe only afterward that the revised proofs had been submitted to the printer (273). Though Wolfe was initially ecstatic with relief that the burden of the novel had been lifted,² he later regretted the rushed publication of *Of Time and the River*. Soon after its release, Wolfe wrote Perkins: "I am sick at heart—we should have waited six months longer—the book, like Caesar, was from its mother's womb untimely ripped—like King Richard, brought into the world 'scarce half made up'" (Brucoli and Bucker 144). Wolfe stubbornly clung to the conviction that with a few more

² Wolfe dedicated the novel to Perkins in what the editor considered to be exceedingly extravagant terms, and Perkins believed that the tribute contributed to rumors that the pair had collaborated on the text (Perkins 273).

months he could have rendered an even greater success: “I still sweat with anguish—with a sense of irremediable loss—,” Wolfe wrote, “at the thought of what another six months would have done to that book—how much more whole and perfect it would have been” (142). Perkins, however, presumed that granting Wolfe an additional six months on the novel would have only resulted in his request for six months more, and he was concerned that Wolfe’s desire for perfection would prevent him from moving on to write other books. Despite Wolfe’s initial gratitude, Perkins was aware that he had taken a great risk in publishing the book without the author’s consent, and in a note questioning the sincerity of the elaborate dedication to the editor that Wolfe had planned, Perkins anticipates his eventual laments about the novel’s imperfections: “The way in which we are presenting this book must prove our (+ my) belief in it. But what I have done has destroyed your belief in it + you must not act inconsistently with that fact” (128). In forcing the book through publication, Perkins did what he thought was necessary to keep Wolfe on track as a writer. Unfortunately, his drastic decision had the unintended consequence of undermining their editorial relationship and damaging the author’s faith in the publishing process, making it nearly impossible to work with him afterward. Though he took a six-month hiatus from writing after *Of Time and the River* was released, Wolfe begged Perkins not to proceed with the publication of a nearly-complete collection of short stories until he was physically present: “Yes, I know I have stayed too long, but Max, Max,” Wolfe reiterated, “you must wait on me” (177). Wolfe’s shaken faith in the publisher’s credibility exemplifies the potential risk involved when Perkins walked the tightrope between the author’s agency and the publisher’s need to operate on schedule. The editor’s unprecedented decision to steamroll the publication of Wolfe’s novel points yet again to the unique challenge that Wolfe presented as an author. Perkins’s act of desperation involving *Of Time and the River* was a singular incident; no

other author required such a radical intervention because no other author had ever been as hopelessly tangled in the web of his own creation as was Wolfe.

Editing for Error

When a book is in hand the text is proofed for errors in consistency, spelling, grammar, and fact. Professional copyeditors and proofreaders are employed for this job today, but in Perkins's time the responsibility was shared between compositors, editors, and authors. Clearly the publisher wants the books that it prints to be polished, but "the publishing contract does not normally stipulate the extent of the editing and checking to be provided" by their staff (Brucoli, "Getting It Right" 120). Though an author might expect the publisher to take ownership over the task of ensuring that the text is flawless, the publisher is willing to accept a certain degree of error in the first printing. In his history of Scribner's, Burlingame asserts, "a book with no misprints would be a new phenomenon" (110). In fact, Burlingame's attitude toward errors in a first edition is surprisingly nonchalant, and he even cites the rare-book business as proof that "misprints in the first printing of a valuable book enhance its permanent value" (110). Furthermore, he contends, even "law books, dictionaries and telephone directories, where a comb is used that is far finer-toothed than any trade publisher employs," fail to meet the mark of perfection generally expected by authors (110). Assuming that Burlingame's indifference to error in an initial printing was characteristic of Scribner's editorial staff at the time, it makes sense that Perkins's career was not hindered by his reputation for botching the proofing process. In a technical sense, Perkins was a very poor copyeditor, and when he reviewed proofs he tended to focus more on the overall effect of the book—on tightening up its internal structure—than on correcting surface errors such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Ultimately, this tendency

led Perkins to expand the scope of his role as an editor—from a reviewer of copy to an advisor on the text—but this professional development did not come about without any unintended consequences. Without the editor’s attention to detail, an important safety net in the proofing process was absent, which contributed to the sloppy debuts of several novels and marred the reputation of their authors. *This Side of Paradise*, for example, was a relative proofing disaster; it was riddled with so many mistakes that critic Edmond Wilson described it as “one of the most illiterate books of any merit ever published” (qtd. in Bruccoli, “Getting it Right” 126). Therefore, Fitzgerald’s career was launched with a “stigma of irresponsibility that remained attached to him and has influenced editorial thinking about his work” (125-26). Other classics that appeared under the editor’s watch—among them Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*—still bear the scars of shoddy proofing,³ and Perkins’s consistent failure to oversee the correction of error in a manuscript is one of the major criticisms of his legacy as an editor.

Paradoxically, the more invested Perkins became in a manuscript the greater the chance that there would be surface errors in the first edition. Perkins was protective of manuscripts for books he knew to be controversial, and in his effort to shield them from ill-advised interference he unwittingly increased the likelihood that the book would contain technical error. This had been the case with *This Side of Paradise*. After a hard-won victory to secure publication of the manuscript, Perkins remained apprehensive about how other Scribner’s employees might react to the text, so much so that he “hardly let it out of his hands during any stage of its preparation—not even to proofreaders” (Berg 20). Unfortunately, Perkins was a poor speller and grammarian, and Fitzgerald was far worse. “To the end of his life,” notes Burlingame, “[Fitzgerald] wrote ‘etc.,’ ‘ect.,’ and ‘yacht’ ‘yatch.’ ‘Week’ and ‘weak’ were interchangeable. ‘Descision’ and

³ See Bruccoli, “Getting it Right” for further discussion of error in these novels, particularly in *The Great Gatsby*.

'tyranny' were favorites; so was 'dissipation,' and always he wrote the name of his friend Hemingway with to m's" (Burlingame 111-12). The combined efforts of editor and author spelled disaster for the book's initial printing, and soon after its debut "the witty New York *Tribune* book columnist Franklin P. Adams had turned the search for errors into a parlor game," and "a Harvard scholar sent Scribners a list of over 100 mistakes" (Berg 20). Though humiliated, the young editor gallantly insisted on taking the blame. Eventually, however, Perkins learned to compensate for his weak copyediting skills by recruiting the help of trusted colleagues, but by allowing authors to make substantial revisions during the proofing stage he opened up the possibility that new errors would be introduced in the final stage of production. For instance, Perkins left the proofing of Wolfe's first novel primarily to his associate John Hall Wheelock, but shortly after the book was published a single reader sent the author a 14-page letter identifying 415 mistakes in the first edition (Brucoli and Bucker 313-27). Aghast, Wolfe forwarded this letter to Wheelock, but was met with a sympathetic yet characteristically tolerant attitude toward imperfection in publication: "Unless author and publisher are willing and prepared to devote the rest of their natural lives to the ideal of absolute letter-perfection as regards every semicolon and spacing," Wheelock replied, "there must always be errors" (48). But a dismissive attitude did not alter the fact that authors expected a certain level of assistance from their publisher in this capacity and even Hemingway, who praised Perkins for taking a hands-off approach to editing his work,⁴ would complain bitterly when he discovered a typographical error in any of his books. Though Perkins made sure errors were corrected in

⁴ In a letter meant to reassure Charles Scribner III of Hemingway's loyalty to the publisher despite Perkins's death, the writer makes a plug for Scribner to encourage other editors to follow Perkins's example: "If it would do any good you might let it be known that while Max was my best and oldest friend at Scribners and a great, great editor he never cut a paragraph of my stuff nor asked me to change one" (Brucoli and Trogon 345).

subsequent editions, he continued to prioritize the overarching affect of the text rather than technical accuracy when editing an author's manuscript.

Perkins's focus on the overall impression of a text caused him to overlook certain details, which led to error, but it also enabled him to expand the editorial role in new ways. Traditionally, the editor's job was "limited to proofreading galleys...and to other perfunctory chores" that required little creative insight (Berg 12). But, the unprecedented level of interest Perkins took in the structural integrity of a work—and the success of his editorial suggestions—eventually elevated the idea of editorship to a role that is advisory in nature. Before Perkins, "nobody at Scribners had edited so boldly or closely as he did Fitzgerald," and several of Perkins's senior colleagues viewed his hands-on editorial practice as questionable (70). As an editor, Perkins was already something of a professional anomaly: "He was a terrible speller, his punctuation was idiosyncratic, and when it came to reading, he was by his own admission 'slow as an ox,'" but the one attribute that enabled him overcome his technical shortcomings was his propensity to "[treat] literature as a matter of life and death" (4). Like most readers, Perkins was concerned primarily with a story's affect rather than its technical accuracy. If the elements of a narrative worked together on the surface, then it was easy for Perkins to overlook inconsistencies or errors of fact. *The Great Gatsby* is perhaps the most notable example of a book in which Perkins was so caught up in the general impact of the story that he failed to notice textual inconsistencies, such as Fitzgerald's inadvertent miscalculation of the age of Daisy's child, or errors such as the anatomically incorrect reference to Dr. Eckleberg's "retinas."⁵ But these details were not, in

⁵ Brucoli notes that Fitzgerald either fumbled his chronology or his arithmetic when he states the age of Daisy's child as three in June 1922, when the novel is set; if that were true, then Daisy would have been nine months pregnant on her wedding day in June 1919 ("Getting it Right" 122). Additionally, he notes that Fitzgerald is mistaken when he describes the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg as "blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high," because the retinas are at the back of the eye; most likely Fitzgerald was describing the pupils or irises (123).

Perkins's mind, essential to the impact of the story, and, indeed, they often go unnoticed by the average reader. What worried Perkins most was that readers would be frustrated by the inadequate development of Gatsby as a character and that this would detract attention from Fitzgerald's grand narrative scheme. In a sense, Perkins's deficiencies as a copyeditor led to him to become a strong critical editor because it allowed him to view the forest in spite of the trees. This perspective helped him to encourage the development of strong writing and powerful narratives that contained enough force to propel most readers past any textual disparities. In another respect, it signified to authors that Perkins was an editor who prioritized the content of their texts as much as they did,⁶ thereby making him a desirable ally in the publishing house.

Marketing Concerns

The proper approach to marketing a book is one aspect of publication on which publisher and author will likely never agree. Decisions about how to best represent a book inevitably stray into that murky area where the territory of author and publisher overlap, and publishers rely on their editors to negotiate compromises with authors that are agreeable to the marketing department. But this requires an appreciable amount of diplomacy on the editor's part because author and publisher come at the problem from completely different angles. The author wants to represent his book in a way that conveys his aesthetic plan whereas the publisher wants to present the book in a way that will appeal to potential buyers. For example, it was not uncommon for author and publisher to quibble over the artwork used on a book's dust jacket, or

⁶ Apparently, Fitzgerald was less concerned with textual error as he was the overall impact of his work. For example, the day *The Great Gatsby* was to be released, he wrote Perkins about his "fears and forebodings" that women might not like the book because it didn't contain an important female character or that critics would dismiss it because it dealt with the rich, but on the issue of corrections he indifferently mentions that "Ring [Lardner] suggested the correction of certain errata – if you made the changes all right – if not let them go" (Kuehl and Bryer 99).

wrap, because they have fundamentally different ideas about its aesthetic purpose: “In his mind the publisher always [sees] a new book in its wrap on a counter or in a store window while the author [visualizes] it on his drawing-room table” (Burlingame 113-14). To the publisher, the dust jacket serves a utilitarian purpose—attracting a buyer’s attention—and the easiest way to make a book stand out among its competitors is to use artwork that sensationalizes a scene from the book or illustrates it with bold colors and designs. Authors generally abhor the idea of pandering to public taste with gimmicky graphics because they believe it undermines the dignity of their work. Instead, the author expects that the cover design will somehow convey the essence of the book or illustrate its main theme. For example, James Boyd took issue with the wrap initially provided for *Marching On*, insisting that the troops on the cover “are not marching on. They are strolling,” and complaining that the artwork did not capture the sense of momentum he deemed central to the narrative (qtd. in Burlingame 114). The author’s request for a new wrap was met with opposition since the original had already been well received by booksellers and Scribner’s sales force. Perhaps hoping that Boyd would acquiesce, Perkins insisted that a great deal of thought had gone into the design of the dust jacket before offering to show the disgruntled author an alternative. “We take infinite pains with our wraps,” Perkins explained, “...The house realizes that bad wraps can actually kill books, and that there is nothing so important in connection with exploitation as the wrap” (115). Although Perkins failed to impress upon him the publisher’s stance on the matter—that it is the buyer, “the customer who sees the wrap first and reads the book after,” for whom the artwork is designed—he successfully allayed Boyd’s concerns with the second wrap (116). Of course, not all authors were entirely oblivious to the idea that a book’s physical appearance can induce certain effects on potential readers. Some, like Fitzgerald, took a keen interest in the physical properties of their books because they hoped to cultivate a certain

impression about their work amid the book-buying public. Having once worked in advertising, Fitzgerald took an active interest in the makeup of his books, recommending ways to set the type, suggesting advertising blurbs, incorporating the cover art into his prose,⁷ and staying loyal to his publisher in part because it was his ambition to bring out “something that could be a set” (Kuehl and Bryer 22). Similarly, Hemingway gave due consideration to the commercial function of a wrap, and he knew how to get his publisher’s attention when lodging a complaint. “About the Jacket—,” Hemingway wrote Perkins in reference to the cover art for *A Farewell to Arms*, “You must know best but it seems lousy to me... All I know about the effect of the jacket is that with the book in a pile on the counter with other books and me looking for it I could not find it and the clerk had to find it for me” (Brucoli and Trogdon 117). Reading between the lines, however, it is clear that Hemingway’s complaint had little to do with the fact that the artwork was not sufficiently eye catching. Not surprisingly, the elaborate illustration conflicted with the author’s no-frills style, and it offended his sensitive ego by downplaying the Hemingway brand:

I’m no actress wanting the name in Big electric lights—But the name must have some value as a selling point... It looks as though the jacket designer had been so wrapped up in the beautiful artistic effort on the front that she had tried to eliminate if possible the title and author’s name so they wouldn’t intrude on the conception of that nude figure with those so horrible legs and those belly muscles... (117-18)

In this case it was too late for Perkins to go back to the drawing board, so he attempted instead to mollify the disgruntled Hemingway by rationalizing the publisher’s choice. He assures the author that Scribner’s had commissioned the “best person in the market” who “always wins the prizes

⁷ Fitzgerald was so impressed with the wrap designed for *The Great Gatsby* that he famously implored the editor not to give it away because he’d “written it into the book” (Kuehl and Bryer 76).

for jackets” to illustrate his book, adding that they had even rejected some of the celebrated artist’s first attempts (120). Furthermore, Perkins argues that sales of the book are strong, thereby indicating that the jacket had done the book no harm even if Hemingway’s criticisms had, supposedly, caused the editor some anxiety. Satisfied that he had sufficiently addressed all of Hemingway’s complaints, Perkins closes the argument by affirmatively declaring, “we have safely passed that [concern over the dust jacket] now, for good and all” (120). What they had safely passed, however, was a potential rift in author-publisher relations, and Perkins’s multifaceted approach to addressing Hemingway’s grievance demonstrates the editor’s willingness to placate his authors when he couldn’t consent to their demands.

A strong title is a major selling point for a book, and Perkins was keen to find a title that pleased both author and publisher. Perkins knew that a title was “usually involved with [an author’s] feelings about his book,” and that “it brings out some aspect which is dear to him,” therefore he wanted the author to have significant sway in the outcome of this important decision (Burlingame 98). Generally, however, publishers agreed that it was a provocative title—more so than the artwork, the author, or even the advertising—that made a sale,⁸ and Perkins was obliged to encourage authors toward titles that were considered strong from a marketing standpoint. Coincidentally, authors were particularly prone to “title fever,” as Burlingame put it, once a book was in hand, and Perkins would sometimes leverage this flush of uncertainty on the author’s part to the publisher’s advantage when bargaining over a title. For instance, Fitzgerald oscillated for months between various titles for *The Great Gatsby*, and eventually Perkins convinced him to see Scribner’s preferred title through the press, even though Fitzgerald wired last minute to

⁸ It likely would have aggrieved Hemingway to know that the predominant opinion at Scribner’s during his time was that an author’s name meant little to the book-buying public, regardless of his credentials amid literary circles (Burlingame 98).

request that it be changed to *Under the Red, White and Blue*⁹ (Berg 82). Though contemporary readers cannot imagine the book by any other name, Fitzgerald always “believed in his heart that the title would forever stand at his book’s one flaw” (82). Usually, however, publisher and author attempt to negotiate a title that is mutually agreeable. In what was a more typical scenario, Perkins would request a list of suggested titles from the author and then the publisher would pick from those. This was how they settled on the name for Wolfe’s first novel. Perkins’s requested that Wolfe draw up a list of suggestions when it became apparent that neither he nor his colleagues were fond of his working title, *O Lost*. From that list Perkins and Wheelock settled on *Look Homeward, Angel*—a nod to Milton’s *Lycidas*—which had the fortunate advantage of being the title favored by Wolfe as well (135-36). At least once, however, Perkins became so engrossed in his search for the perfect title that he forgot to include the author in the final decision. Already accustomed to managing the details of Ring Lardner’s literary publications, Perkins took it upon himself to prepare a list of titles for the Literary Guild to consider for its sponsored omnibus of all Ring Lardner’s short fiction. Perkins was pleased with the title he chose, *Round Up*, because of its strong American overtones and began publication arrangements with the guild while Lardner was vacationing in the Caribbean (145). By the time Lardner cabled to let the editor know he preferred his own title, *Ensemble*, the title pages, covers, and dust jackets had already been printed. Perkins was duly apologetic but assured the author that the Literary Guild had enthusiastically embraced the title *Round Up* as “well-sounding, and extremely effective typographically” (Caruthers 134). It usually worked best when the title originated with the author, but Perkins was not averse to dissenting from an author’s suggestion if he had a justifiable objection. For instance, when Rawlings considered naming her juvenile

⁹ Among the titles Fitzgerald considered were *Among the Ash Heaps and Millionaires*, *Trimalchio*, *Trimalchio in West Egg*, *On the Road to West Egg*, *Gold-hatted Gatsby*, *The High-bouncing Lover*, and *Under the Red, White and Blue* (West, *Trimalchio* xvii).

classic *The Fawn*, Perkins conceded that it was a fine title but—considering that it was to be marketed as a book for boys—pointed out that such a title might come across as “too poetic, or even a little sentimental” (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 238). Seeing his point, Rawlings agreed to reconsider, and eventually the pair settled on *The Yearling* as a fitting title. Sometimes the difficulty was not in thinking of a title but in settling on one. Hemingway kept about thirty titles in reserve while polishing his fourth novel, but Perkins knew the author had struck gold with his working title, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and he cabled him enthusiastically: “TITLE BEAUTIFUL CONGRATULATIONS” (Berg 378). In most cases, however, the title of a manuscript was changed before publication, not because the publisher insisted on a saleable title, but because author and editor agreed that the title should be reflective of the piece as a whole, and sometimes the right title wasn’t apparent until the book had assumed its final form (Wheelock 192). Perkins’s personal opinion was that “The title should give the quality of the book, if possible – or else it should be appealing, and should reflect the quality of the book after one has read it” (194). Anecdotally, the editor upheld Stark Young’s *So Red the Rose* as a title that perfectly captured the essence of the book, and he was convinced, as were his colleagues, that the novel’s immediate commercial success was due in large part to the strength of its title (192). Despite his enthusiasm for a well-crafted title, Perkins never lost sight of the fact that it was the content of a book’s pages that really mattered, and the editor willingly admitted that any title was only as good as the book that bears it:

I do not know whether it is not almost more true that the book makes the title than that the title makes the book. We have often had great struggles over a title, and thought it might be a bad one. Then the book has succeeded supremely and it

seemed the only title that was conceivable for it. The title came to fit the book.
(193)

Realizing that the effort to find an angle that resonates with the public is a bit of a gamble, Perkins weighed the risk of upsetting an author with the potential consequences of altering the publisher's expert strategy for marketing a book. In the quest for consensus, Perkins's ultimate goal was to ensure that the books published under Scribner's imprint were well positioned for commercial success, but his faith in the value of the books they were printing led him to gravitate more toward the author's conviction that the best way to market a book was to reflect it accurately.

Advertising Dilemmas

Advertising represented yet another contentious issue, only on this front authors criticized their publishers for not taking enough interest in the promotion of their books. Publishers came to expect such complaints, noting that it is rather universal for an author to blame the commercial failure of his book on a "deficiency in advertising space" (Burlingame 116). Consequently, Scribner's archives abound with letters from authors bemoaning the dearth of advertising devoted to their books: "Again and again it is in the record that an author thinks some other author gets more advertising space than he," Burlingame observes, "A says, 'if I got as much as B, I should be satisfied,' but B says, 'why do I get less than A?'" (119). Perkins was relatively adroit at handling such complaints, and he convincingly reassured authors of the publisher's commitment to promoting their work while attempting to bring their expectations back into proportion. For example, in response to James Huneker's complaints about the dearth of advertising for his novel, *Steeplejack*, Perkins points out that Scribner's strategically chose to

stretch its resources in order to continue campaigning for the book through the busy Christmas season. “We do not wish to spend all our money in one brief explosion of advertising,” the editor explained, “but to carry it through a number of weeks and then revive it with greater emphasis just before the holidays” (qtd. in Burlingame 120). In other cases, Perkins invited authors to get directly involved in their own advertising campaigns as a means of quelling their criticism. Such was the case with James Boyd whom Perkins asked—supposedly at the behest of the advertising department—for some “material” that could be put out in the press about his Civil War novel, *Marching On*. Perkins had a keen interest in military strategy and was extremely knowledgeable about the Civil War already, so he could have easily provided the requested material, but the editor’s purported reluctance and perfunctory apology seems geared more toward flattering the author than appealing to his expertise: “I always feel unfair in asking an author to do anything more than to write such a book as this one. It seems as though the publisher should feel himself compelled to do all the rest, to say the least, but we cannot do what I am now asking you to do” (Wheelock 51). Generally, Perkins was able to pacify complaints about advertising with his calm rationality, but sometimes an author silently stewed in his discontent until it was too late for reason to win him over. In the most severe cases, like that of Sherwood Anderson, the author broke with the publisher. Anderson was already an established author when he joined Scribner’s, but his work there was fitful, and subsequently the three books he published under its imprint were largely unsuccessful. Convinced that “books were not bought by the American people; they were sold to them,” Anderson blamed the publisher for his puny sales figures¹⁰ (Berg 381). In his bitterness, Anderson accused Charles Scribner of regarding him as “a man too old to spend money on” (qtd. in Berg 381). Perkins was sympathetic to the writer’s disappointment and

¹⁰ The three books Anderson published with Scribner’s had sold no more than 6,500 copies.

thoughtfully noted that “even if the question of money were not necessarily involved, an author writes books to have them read, and wants to have them read by as many as possible,” but he was also sure that no amount of advertising could have increased the sale of those books (381-82). In fact, Perkins had little faith in advertising generally, or, at least, it seems as if that was what he wanted his authors to believe.

When Perkins’s authors complained that their books weren’t selling because Scribner’s was mismanaging or ignoring their advertising campaign, the editor responded with the kind yet resolute explanation that advertising did very little to make a book sell. On this point Perkins towed the company line. “Authors,” he explained, “generally have a completely unjustifiable faith in what book-advertising can do, and they get it largely from knowing what advertising in general can do” (Wheelock 138). Despite what the author thought he knew about advertising, Perkins insisted that promoting books was a different sort of affair. Unlike soap, which everyone must buy from time to time, the market for book readers—and more specifically, book buyers—is relatively small. Thus, advertising must be targeted to the literary public rather than the general public, which explains why those “Hawk-eyed” authors don’t always see their books advertised on the day they are published (Burlingame 116-20). Furthermore, Perkins once explained to Arthur Train, books do not adhere to the first principle of advertising—repetition. While manufacturers of other goods can lose money on a product for years before it becomes profitable on account of persistent, repetitious advertising, each new book is a distinct product, Perkins’s asserted, which makes it “impossible to apply to any one, except to a very limited extent, this great fundamental advertising principle” (Wheelock 138). Perkins’s rationale on the subject was consistent with arguments made by his contemporaries, particularly by Charles Scribner himself, and it is likely that his professional environment shaped his view on the

limitations of book advertising. But he knew as well as anyone else—for he had spent four years in the marketing department before being called up to join the other editors on the fifth floor—that the allocation of advertising resources was not quite as equitable as the publisher might make it out to be. Largely unbeknownst to the author, the publisher engaged in preliminary promotions, “spadework” as Burlingame put it, to feel out a book’s potential market before designing its advertising campaign (Burlingame 121). Salesmen took the pulse of wholesalers, preliminary advertisements were tested in trade journals, and advanced sales monitored for signs that sales of a book might take off (121). The more promise a book showed at the outset, the more the publisher invested in advertising it. Therefore, it’s no wonder that Perkins intentionally kept such insights secret from his authors; there was nothing to be gained by worrying them needlessly or in exciting their expectations—it was, after all, an inexact science. Because he could have several authors on the new season’s list at any given time, it behooved Perkins to downplay his knowledge of the marketing department’s activities in order to avoid perceived conflicts of interest. It is quite certain, however, that Perkins did communicate directly with the advertising department, for in at least one instance, a sales blurb lifts verbiage directly from a letter in the editor’s possession. Phrases from the letter of introduction that accompanied *Look Homeward, Angel* were cut and pasted nearly verbatim to introduce Wolfe’s unconventional approach to fiction writing in Scribner’s Fall 1929 catalog: “This novel is a strange and deep picture of American life, the cyclic curve of a large family—genesis, union, disintegration. It touches not only their visible, outer lives, but explores their buried lives as well”¹¹ (Brucoli and Bucker 10). Nevertheless, Perkins maintained a slight air of indifference when discussing

¹¹ The original lines from which this advertising copy was formed read, “And the book tries to describe not only the visible outer lives of all these people, but even more their buried lives. ...The downward movement is represented by a constant excavation into the buried life of a group of people, and describes the cyclic curve of a family’s life—genesis, union, decay, and dissolution” (Brucoli and Bucker 1).

advertising with his authors, and by feigning ignorance of the promotional aspects of publishing he managed to avoid the impression that he was promoting one book over another, a perception that might provoke jealousies and incite charges of favoritism among his authors. In fact, Perkins liked to quip that “they made an editor out of him to keep the company from going bankrupt,” which insinuates that his enthusiasm for promoting a book had no bounds (qtd. in Berg 37). Perkins’s exaggerated ignorance of the advertising department’s activities was a conscientious diplomatic effort on his part to preserve trust in the editorial relationship while glossing over the publisher’s role in this inevitably contentious issue.

Avoiding Censorship

For Perkins, who made it his mission to get as many books out to the public as possible, nothing was more frustrating than the threat of censorship. In theory, Perkins was opposed to censorship of any form because repression inherently conflicted with the democratic principle of free speech. “After all,” Perkins once explained, “it is historically true that the most enlightened ages have been the most free-spoken – that the Eighteenth Century, generally regarded as the greatest of all in taste and intellect, was the very one in which there was the greatest freedom in respect to literary expression” (Wheelock 81). However, censorship was still a relatively common threat to prohibition-era publishing, and Perkins advocated that writers maintain the delicate balance between pushing boundaries and offending public scruples for fear that a book might be repressed. For instance, he once advised an author that, in making unnecessarily incendiary remarks, he risked undermining the purpose of his book altogether: “in saying what you want to say in these two chapters you must not arouse that kind of hostility, for the sake of the distribution of your book. You may not care so much whether it sells, but you do care

whether it is read. It must have readers” (210). Likewise, Perkins objected to gratuitous descriptions of sex or violence in fiction if its function in the text was not justifiable. In a letter to Morley Callaghan, for example, Perkins argues that the sordid details he includes in the manuscript for *A Broken Journey* “are not compatible with the glamour” of the story as a romance, nor “its tragical conclusion” (75). In this case, the editor urged Callaghan to stick to details that were commensurate with his attempt to fashion a story of tragic idyll, but Perkins was not fundamentally opposed to vulgarity in fiction. To the contrary, when readers complained about the depiction of vice in books published by Scribner’s, the editor defended his authors with well-reasoned treatises on the importance of art being reflective of life.¹² Alternately, however, he advised his authors to demonstrate some restraint when writing on sensitive subjects, lest they inadvertently evoke public condemnation. Perkins’s primary concern was that a book might unjustly acquire a reputation that limited its readership, yet he still lamented the fact that a significant, original piece of literature might “be disregarded because of the howls of a lot of cheap, prurient, moronic yappers” (Brucoli and Trogdon 42). Yet, Perkins was also willing to call the public’s bluff, challenging that the offense taken collectively over taboo language and subjects was not nearly as severe as it was made out to be. In response to one critic, Perkins argued that readers’ true values were made apparent by their purchases:

...if the public will not buy books because they contain such words as these, if they feel them to be offensive, vulgar, etc., and show it by not reading the books that contain them, they will cease to be used. Taste and conduct are governed by public opinion. It is rather our judgment that they cannot be governed by anything else – as is exemplified to a striking degree, by the failure of the Eighteenth Amendment. (Wheelock 82-83)

¹² See Wheelock 54-55, 62-63, 80-82, 82-83, 195-96, 244-45, 255-57, and 284-85 for examples.

In essence, Perkins utilized the dilemma censorship posed to force a balance between artistry and artifice; he supported an author's right to test public standards as long as it was performed through aesthetically justifiable means, and he encouraged self-censorship in instances where he felt the author was sensationalizing his text simply to pander to readers' baser instincts. In a publishing house as historically conservative as Charles Scribner's Sons, Perkins's moderate approach to hot-button issues in literature enabled him to become an effective advocate for authors who pushed the limits of public taste and standards with their fiction.

It is somewhat ironic that the modest, mild-tongued Perkins found himself championing the fiction of Ernest Hemingway, one of the early twentieth century's most radical and provocative authors. Indeed, anecdotes depicting the many Perkins-Hemingway language debacles are a popular aspect of the Perkins legend. One of the oft-repeated—and often embellished—stories recounts the time when Perkins was obliged to impart to his boss, the formidable Charles Scribner II, the three unprintable words present in the manuscript for *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway's first novel with Scribner's. According to the version Perkins related to Malcolm Cowley, he did not feel comfortable dictating the words aloud to his secretary nor could he bring himself to utter the profanities in the venerable presence of his boss. Therefore, he wrote them on a memo pad for Scribner to read. When Perkins hesitated before scrawling the third word, the president of the firm gently chided him, asking, "what would Hemingway think of you if he heard that you couldn't even write that word?" (qtd. in Cowley, "Profiles – I" 32). Though Perkins rarely used obscenities himself, he did not shy from Hemingway's use of such language so much as he cringed at the trouble he foresaw in getting those words into print. At that time, Charles Scribner's Sons was one of the most respected bastions of conservatism in literary publishing, and the general consensus among the staff was that "Charles Scribner would

no sooner allow profanity in one of his books than he would invite friends to use his parlor as a toilet room” (qtd. in Berg 96). Therefore, what made Perkins hesitate in that instance had little to do with his own sensibilities, for “Perkins was flexible enough before truth in writing,” but rather the fact that he was face-to-face with the founder’s son “with the Founder himself staring down from [a portrait on] the wall” (Burlingame 77-78). To snub the publisher’s moral traditions was to throw into question the principles upon which the house’s reputation was founded, and Perkins knew he would meet resistance when advocating for such radical fiction. Nevertheless, when Hemingway’s novel came up for review Perkins dutifully backed it. Byron Dexter, a junior editor at the time, noted the significance of that moment: “Perkins was the new idea and the younger people in the place were terrifically for him. I remember the moment of crisis. . . . Old Charles Scribner, Jr. ran the place then with a firm hand—and no two ways about it. We knew that Perkins had to go to bat for Hemingway” (qtd. in Berg 96). Perkins argued before the board that denying Hemingway would only exacerbate the perception of the house as ultra-conservative, which would eventually cause the publisher to suffer for want of progressive new voices. Perkins was decisively pitting the old guard against the new, and many of his contemporaries recognized it as a watershed moment for the publisher. Afterward, it was rumored that Perkins was going to resign because the book had been rejected, but that never came to pass. Instead, the board conceded Perkins’s argument that the continued vitality of Scribner’s was contingent on its acceptance of Hemingway’s novel, and they took the book, albeit “with misgivings” (96). Hemingway respected Perkins for defending his aesthetic principles, and he acknowledged that, despite their many differences, the editor’s priorities were aligned with his own: “I know we both have to be careful because we have the same interest ie (literature or whatever you call it) and I know that you yourself are shooting for the same thing

that I am” (Brucoli and Trogdon 91). Though he would continue to argue passionately whenever the editor advised restraint, Hemingway was secure in the knowledge that Perkins had the best interest of his aesthetic agenda at heart.

Not surprisingly, Hemingway was not one to give in without a fight, and over the years author and editor would endure many rounds of the familiar battle in which Hemingway argued for unrestricted aesthetic expression and Perkins advocated for self-censorship. Though Perkins was generally agreeable to Hemingway’s arguments in theory, practical considerations forced him to encourage compromise in Hemingway’s writing. Among Perkins’s worries were the possibility that Hemingway’s ribald prose might limit the author’s reach to a small, liberal-minded group of readers; that Hemingway’s books could be banned for violating federal laws governing standards of decency in fiction; and that the postal service would refuse to deliver issues of *Scribner’s Magazine* featuring a Hemingway story that incited public rancor (Brucoli and Trogdon 108). Wary of these constant threats, Perkins tried to persuade Hemingway to tone down his language and imagery slightly, suggesting that he could avoid such risks without damaging the overall effect of his prose. But this argument sparked some heated exchanges between editor and author about the necessity of challenging social convention through literature. Because the nature of Hemingway’s writing was so highly selective, he proved a formidable adversary in this debate. “You know what I want—All we can possibly get,” Hemingway once countered, “It’s a fight with me for the return to the full use of the language and what we accomplish in that direction may be of more value in the end than anything I write. I never did use a word if I can avoid it—but if I must have it I know it” (105). Often, the author provided sound aesthetic justifications for his use of an obscenity or depiction of a shocking

scene,¹³ and he warned the editor to be careful not to harm a manuscript inadvertently. “My point is that the operation of emasculation is a tiny one—,” Hemingway wrote in reference to Perkins’s advice to soften his prose, “It is very simple and easy to perform on men—animals and books—It is not a Major operation but its effects are great—It is never performed intentionally on books—What we must both watch is that it should not be performed unintentionally” (91). Though Perkins frequently assured the author that he agreed with him from an aesthetic point of view, his obligation to the publisher demanded that he continue to call for self-censorship.

So far as he could, however, Perkins did advocate for Hemingway’s right to unmediated prose, but if he sensed that it placed the distribution of the author’s work in jeopardy he opted to retreat from battle in the hope that they might eventually win the war. Such was the case when the Boston court banned the serialized version of *A Farewell to Arms* printed in *Scribner’s Magazine*. Before then, Perkins had been hopeful that they could preserve the full scope of Hemingway’s language when the novel was published in book form, but afterward he was forced to insist that three controversial words in the text be removed or indicated only by dashes,¹⁴ lest the book “be scrutinized from a prejudiced standpoint” when it appeared (Brucoli and Trogdon 108). Perkins tried to soothe the indignant Hemingway by informing him that Scribner’s had considered challenging the Boston ban, but had abstained for fear that legal action might foment negative publicity and provoke federal scrutiny (108). Significantly, however, the very fact that the publisher had considered going to court on Hemingway’s behalf—a mere three years after

¹³ For instance, in reference to a dispute over use of the word “balls” in *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway writes, “I found the place in galley 38 where F.H. is talking to the hospital matron—I don’t know what to do—It is supposed to be the deliberate insult and routing of a person through the use of direct language that she is expected by her sex and position never to be exposed to—The final forced conflict between someone from the front and some one of the genteel base. Is the word so impossible of printing?” (Brucoli and Trogdon 104).

¹⁴ The three unprintable words that the publisher deemed necessary to blank out in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* were: cock sucker, fucking, and balls (Brucoli and Trogdon 106-08).

the dramatic boardroom showdown regarding his first novel—is evidence of the changing attitude toward progressive fiction that Perkins’s patient efforts helped induce.

Threats of Libel

Generally speaking, Perkins’s goal was to keep Scribner’s authors out of court because legal troubles consumed valuable time and resources from both publisher and author. Over the years, however, Perkins was ensnared in the legal entanglements of several authors—some that possibly could have been avoided and others that hardly could have been anticipated.¹⁵ Libel was a constant legal threat, especially given Perkins’s affinity for autobiographically based fiction, and he was careful to keep defamatory statements out of Scribner’s books. Through patient and persistent reasoning he succeeded in keeping Hemingway out of any legal entanglements for libel—no small feat in regard to the consummate literary bully. In *The Sun Also Rises*, for example, Perkins was obliged to intercede on behalf of four individuals to whom Hemingway alluded. It is clear from a note to Fitzgerald that Perkins regretted losing what he referred to as “a part of one of the best + most humorous conversations in the book,” but his obligation to the publisher forced him to conclude that the reference in question “simply must come out”¹⁶ (Brucoli and Baughman, *The Sons* 69). In arguing the point with Hemingway, however, Perkins

¹⁵ For instance, at Perkins’s suggestion Arthur Train wrote an “autobiography” of Ephriam Tutt, a fictitious lawyer whose legal adventures had entertained readers of *The Saturday Evening Post* for decades. When the faux memoir was released, many of Tutt’s biggest fans became convinced that he was indeed a real person. A Philadelphia lawyer who purchased Train’s book contended that he’d been tricked out of \$3.50 because the book was sold under false pretenses, and he sued the author and Charles Scribner’s Sons for \$50,000 in damages incurred by “fraud and deceit” (Berg 422-23). The case went to trial and, as usual, Mr. Tutt was victorious.

¹⁶ The passage in question referenced the supposed impotence of Henry James (Brucoli and Trogdon 42).

first tactic was to appeal to his sense of honor, and then to his journalistic integrity¹⁷ by insisting that the embarrassing story alluded to in the text had never been confirmed. In the end, Perkins won the point with Hemingway, and the individual was referenced only by his first name (Berg 98). In addition, Perkins had to convince Hemingway to leave out the names of contemporary English authors, warning him from the basis of professional experience that, “An Englishman will actually sue for libel on the slightest provocation. This we know to our cost” (Bruccoli and Trogdon 42). Sometimes, however, the potential plaintiffs in a libel case were unknown to Perkins and therefore easily missed. Though Perkins was worried about the potential for libel in *Cross Creek*, and even made some changes to the novel in an effort to avoid legal hassles, “he overlooked the description of Zelma Cason, whose subsequent lawsuit kept Rawlings tied up in court for years” (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 15). Though the effort preoccupied Rawlings and cost her thousands, Perkins applauded her decision to take the matter to court rather than settle, referring to her ordeal as a “fight for freedom of expression” (589). Rawlings concurred and surmised that if she lost the case it would mean, “no writer could be truly free” (592). As she explained to Perkins, “I know that I could have bought Zelma off for infinitely less than it has cost me, but I felt I should be betraying all writers if I took the easy way out” (592). Always the pragmatist, when it seemed that Rawlings had won the case¹⁸ Perkins suggested a way in which she might capitalize on the disruption of the past few years: “We ought now to be able to get some literary publicity at any rate. We are sending the clippings over to the Publisher’s Weekly, and we can use them elsewhere too” (594). Thinking the ordeal was behind them, Perkins wondered aloud if the plaintiff hadn’t been the unwitting pawn of opportunists, encouraged by

¹⁷ Hemingway started out as a journalist in Toronto and also spent some time as a correspondent overseas.

¹⁸ Rawlings won the trial at the local level in 1943, but the Florida Supreme Court later overturned the verdict and Rawlings was made to pay just one dollar in damages (Tarr, *Max and Marjorie* 17).

others to sue because of the economic pressures brought on by the depression. In what is easily dismissed as an offhand comment lies a fitting example of the unfailing equity that guided Perkins in his constant effort to reconcile the demands of author and publisher.

Perkins always gave due consideration to both sides in a dispute, and, though his evenhandedness generally served him well as an editor, it exacerbated Wolfe's paranoia that the editor wasn't fully committed to his career. Wolfe could easily whip himself into a frenzy over legal matters, and the author was quick to threaten lawsuits over almost any perceived infraction. When Wolfe initiated a dispute with his literary agent over the misappropriation of royalties from the German edition of *Look Homeward, Angel*, for example, Perkins's display of compassion for the apologetic Madeleine Boyd gave the author an ax to grind.irate, Wolfe insisted that Boyd be confronted in Scribner's offices where he "upbraided her so bitinglly that Max felt compelled to restrain him" (Berg 193). Wolfe was furious with Perkins for intervening on behalf of the sobbing woman and blamed the editor when she sued for her full agent's commission a couple of years later, insisting that they should have made "the thief sign the confession of her theft" when they had the chance (Brucoli and Bucker 163). Shortly after the initial encounter with Boyd, Wolfe made Perkins promise to "help [him] in every way possible to keep [him] from this kind of shameful and ruinous invasion" in the future (171). Perkins agreed, though he tried, unsuccessfully, to counsel Wolfe that some measure of adversity was a part of life. Likely, the editor anticipated that charges of libel were imminent; "Since almost every word Wolfe wrote was autobiographical, nearly all his characters based closely on real people," there was always the threat of prosecution (Berg 312). Perkins doubted that Wolfe ever considered the risks at all, and he assumed the responsibility of shielding the writer from potential charges, once acknowledging to a friend of Wolfe's, John Terry, "but of

course it was up to me to guard Tom from legal dangers insofar as possible” (qtd. in Berg 312). Despite the editor’s precautions, Perkins made one major miscalculation that cost him and Scribner’s dearly in terms of Wolfe’s faith in his publisher. In 1936, Wolfe’s former landlady, Marjorie Dorman, issued a charge of libel against the author for his depiction of her as “Mad Maude” Whittaker in the story “No Door” (311). Before resorting to litigation, Dorman actually paid a visit to Perkins in which she expressed how hurt she was by Wolfe’s portrayal when the story first appeared in *Scribner’s Magazine*. Perkins was appropriately apologetic, and when she left it seemed as if things had been smoothed over with the offended woman. Thinking the issue resolved, Perkins was taken by surprise when Dorman decided to sue Wolfe after the story was republished in *From Death to Morning*, an anthology of the author’s short prose.¹⁹ Wolfe agonized over the legal proceedings in the Dorman case, and his anxiety sapped any creative energy that could otherwise be channeled toward writing. Perkins hoped that settling the suit would relieve Wolfe of his obsessive worry and prevent further interruption to his writing, and Scribner’s feared that the publicity of a trial might provoke similar suits, which had been threatened (312). Therefore, the editor counseled Wolfe to settle the lawsuit out of court on the argument that the “one important, supreme object” was to advance Wolfe’s writing and “Anything in furtherance of that is good + anything that impedes it is bad” (Brucoli and Bucker 233). Though Wolfe acquiesced, he continued to persevere over the issue, eventually concluding that Perkins’s advice was yet another example of the editor’s weak defense against his “enemies.” The Dorman case coupled with Wolfe’s unresolved bitterness over the Boyd affair fueled the writer’s growing delusion that Scribner’s was no longer committed to backing him as an artist. In actuality, quite the opposite was true. With legal fees, the cost of the Boyd

¹⁹ Perkins had reasoned that the story, when published in the magazine, had already reached a readership of 300,000, and he was surprised that Dorman would take legal action when it was republished in a book with an expected readership of only 30,000 (Berg 311-12).

affair amounted to \$5,000, all of which Wolfe was contractually obligated to pay, but Scribner's volunteered to split the bill with him in order to encourage a settlement (Berg 312).

Unfortunately, the publisher's gesture of support did not appease the disgruntled author, and Wolfe left the firm soon after. Though Perkins was not perfect at keeping his authors out of legal scrapes, the counsel that he gave authors who were involved in disputes demonstrates his ongoing attempt to reconcile the publisher's interests with what he thought best for the author's peace of mind and the future of his writing.

The Nature of the Game

Ironically, nothing tried the strength of Perkins's editorial relationships nor highlighted the editor's fallibilities more than his handling of the duties typically associated with an editor—proofing, promoting, and protecting a text. In many respects, the contention that arose between editor and author is emblematic of the publishing paradox itself. As viewed from the author's perspective, the metamorphosis from manuscript to book results in a bewildering sense of transmutation: "Nothing is quite like it. The thing is his, yet it is not wholly his; it is his creation which someone else had admired enough to beautify, to multiply, to make solid and permanent. The thing in his hand is himself detached, microcosmic, but one of thousands..." (Burlingame 109). Before a manuscript becomes a book it belongs wholly to the author, and in his mind it is perfect, whole, and endowed with infinite possibility. Publication, however, transforms his original conception into a "thing"—an immutable mass of printed matter from which he feels somewhat alienated. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that an author who expects perfection and finds something less, should blame the publisher—that invisible force between his vision and the flesh of print—for a book's shortcomings. The disillusionment of the author,

therefore, is a natural repercussion of the modern publishing paradigm. Further complicating the situation, however, was Perkins's professional obligation to support the publisher's position when it pertained to issues of financial consequence. When it came to such matters, Perkins usually rationalized that Scribner's was acting in the best interests of the author, but he intuitively recognized the danger in arguing from the publisher's perspective and opted instead to appeal to a writer's sense of reason, or, if that failed, simply attempt to ameliorate their concerns. Perkins managed the formalities of the publishing process in much the same way he handled rejections, by dispensing with any unpleasanties as quickly and definitively as possible then steering the conversation back to more agreeable topics. Though Perkins often cajoled his authors he never tried to manipulate them, and when tensions ran high he made it clear that the author was free to pursue a publisher that could better satisfy his needs. This open-handed approach to the editorial relationship made it clear that the author was under no obligation to the publisher, thus making it apparent that the publisher was acting in accordance with their shared interest—putting out a successful book.

Conclusion: Editorial Double Vision

The inherent tension between author and publisher constantly tests an editor's allegiance, but by maintaining allegiance to a higher purpose—the proliferation of great literature—Maxwell Perkins masterfully balanced the needs of both. Perkins refused to accept publishing's perennial conflict between art and commerce as a binary choice; rather, he viewed the respective positions of author and publisher as two takes on the same quandary—figuring out what was best for the book. Convinced that great literature was bound to appeal to a wide audience, Perkins considered the ultimate goal of author and publisher—reaching as many readers as possible—to be in alignment. Additionally, Perkins recognized that financial solvency was essential to the continued production of literature, but he also realized that undermining the integrity of an author's work for immediate commercial gain would only damage the reputation of both author and publisher in the long run. Therefore, Perkins utilized the competing interests of author and publisher as a system of checks and balances that helped moderate his editorial practice. The editor managed to maintain balance in his professional relationships precisely because he didn't privilege either the author's interests or the publisher's, he was sincerely respectful of both. Time and again Perkins's editorial practice reveals that the editor's greatest strength was his ability to strike a balance between his inherent passion for the literary arts, which enabled him to engage in the emotional experience of the author, and his innate pragmatism, which endowed him with the critical detachment necessary to act in the interest of the publisher. It is appropriate, therefore, to

adopt the term Malcolm Cowley coined to describe Fitzgerald's "distinguishing mark as a writer" to denote the editor's distinguishing quality as well: Perkins's editorial double vision. In much the same way that Fitzgerald endowed his fiction with dual perspectives, Perkins managed to oscillate between the point of view of the publisher and author with his unique ability to employ "the maximum of critical detachment...combined with the maximum of immersion in the drama" into his editorial practice¹ (qtd. in Bryer 213). The result was a balanced perspective that gave each party fair consideration yet refused to compromise the interest of either. Ultimately, it was this editorial double vision that enabled Perkins to navigate the many professional dilemmas and tensions spurred by the modern publishing system. Granted, there were some noteworthy personal, professional, and cultural circumstances that contributed to the editor's success; but it was Perkins's unique ability to serve the mutual interest of author and publisher by engaging the conflict between them that constitutes his greatest editorial achievement.

Personal Attributes

Perkins was not averse to the idea of service—in fact, he welcomed it—especially when there was something as precious at stake as the future of American literature. It has been said that the great editor "is an artist whose medium is the work of other men," and in many ways this is a fitting description of the approach Perkins took to editing (Wheelock 8). His democratic ideals about publishing necessitated that he respect the agency of the author, which left him no choice but to minister to the man first and the manuscript after. Generally, Perkins operated on the theory that what was good for the author was good for the book, and subsequently, what was good for the book was also good for the publisher. Therefore, he developed a holistic approach to

¹ Bryer quotes from Cowley's essay "Fitzgerald: The Double Man."

editing that maintained the publisher's interest while outwardly privileging the author's. In service to both, Perkins invested an inordinate amount of effort in providing personal support to his authors, rendering whatever assistance—be it financial, inspirational, emotional, technical, or editorial—that he thought might propel the writer toward success. Though Perkins was an employee of Charles Scribner's Sons, he served his authors as if they were his first priority, thereby earning their trust and loyalty. In return, the interpersonal connections he established with authors helped to foster a collegial atmosphere of professional loyalty that worked to the publisher's advantage. In effect, Perkins prioritized his commitment to making the most of his authors' potential, because he knew that the publisher's success was predicated on their success.

To effectively minister to the needs of his authors, it was essential that Perkins establish a constructive rapport with each, and his ability to cater to so many disparate personalities is a testament to the personal attributes that distinguished him as an editor. Perkins consistently developed intimate, interpersonal relationships with his writers despite the fact that they differed greatly in aesthetic ideals, writing styles, and work habits. To some extent, Perkins was able to foster beneficial editor-author relationships because he possessed certain, innate qualities that were universally appealing to writers. For instance, his reserved demeanor provided a welcome counterbalance to the mercurial temperament of most writers, and his self-effacing deference before a writer's talent and sympathetic regard for his plight appealed to sensitive egos. Diplomatic by nature, Perkins's intuition served him well when dealing with difficult individuals or situations. In addition to his ability to temper his approach to fit an author's mood, Perkins was something of a social chameleon, which enabled him to connect with authors across the broad spectrum of personalities presented. With utter sincerity, Perkins could highlight some of his qualities and downplay others to better accommodate a specific temperament. For instance,

he was aware that Hemingway viewed his career as no laughing matter, so the editor adopted a straightforward, no-nonsense tone whenever they were addressing matters of professional concern. Ring Lardner, on the other hand, did not take his publishing career very seriously, so to avoid coming across as too austere, Perkins laced his professional letters to Lardner with a playful tone that indulged his own sharp wit. The natural plasticity of Perkins's personality allowed him to tailor his approach to the individual author and assume whatever complementary role the particular editor-author relationship required. But Perkins's readiness to cater to the personal and emotional needs of an author far exceeded any motivation that financial incentive could inspire, and his patience with his authors' antics can only be explained by his intrinsic devotion to the cause of publishing. Helping an author to see a book through the press was a duty that Perkins regarded with utmost respect, for he held a noble ideal about literature as the means to promote a democratic society. The special role the author played in this scheme led Perkins to channel his efforts toward his interests, but at no point did he confuse the means with the ends, his sights were always set on the larger mission—producing literature worthy of inclusion in the democratic marketplace of ideas. Without this intrinsic drive, it is difficult to believe that the reserved Perkins would have managed to maintain such productive relationships with so many excitable individuals.

Professional Environment

Fortunately, Perkins worked for a publisher that was supportive of his author-centric approach to editing, and he enjoyed a professional dynamic that was conducive to the establishment of interpersonal relationships. Considering the impact that Perkins's professional influences had on his career, it is clear that the editor's work environment at Charles Scribner's

Sons played an important role in his success. Perkins felt very much at home at the publishing house, so much so that his daughter Bertha once wrote, “His office was his second home, or possibly his first home, since he spent many more accumulated hours there than anywhere else in the course of his life. He would no more have left Scribners than he would have deserted his wife and children” (Frothingham, King, and Porter xii). Perkins found the collegial atmosphere at Scribner’s to his liking, but, more importantly, he admired and respected the publisher’s values.² The culture at Scribner’s tended to reinforce many of Perkins’s own beliefs regarding the nature of the publication process. Roger Burlingame’s snapshot of Scribner’s culture in *Of Making of Many Books* makes it apparent that many of Perkins’s editorial views were consistent with the general consensus among editors at that time. For instance, Perkins adhered to the theory of his predecessor, William Crary Brownell, that an editor can tell as much about a book by meeting the author as he can by reading the manuscript because, as Brownell would insist, “Water can’t rise above its source” (Cowley, “Profiles – I” 34). In some cases—such as in response to complaints about advertising—Perkins simply followed suit and adopted the publisher’s protocols. But the most important aspect of Perkins’s professional environment that impacted his career was the small-business atmosphere that encouraged professional relationships based on trust and loyalty.

A family-owned and operated publishing house, Charles Scribner’s Sons endorsed interactions that were personal, direct, and contributed to an atmosphere of mutual respect. This professional environment worked to Perkins’s benefit, affording him the opportunity to interact

² Roger Burlingame notes that even the “characteristic geography” of Scribner’s offices conveyed the priorities of company president Charles Scribner II: “C.S. did not surround himself by genial salesmen as any good businessman would do. He surrounded himself by editors who, unless you know their weaknesses, are cool, cynical and generally formidable persons. The editors were, also, in inscrutable communion with the authors who are, of course, inimical to the ordinary procedure of any department. So a salesman, pressman, typographer or art man, approaching his chief, must first run the gauntlet of the editors’ eyes” (Burlingame 26)

with authors in ways that are truly unprecedented in modern publishing. As editor, and later vice president of the firm,³ Perkins was granted a significant degree of authority to act on the publisher's behalf; as Chard Powers Smith notes in his tribute to Perkins, "When you were talking with him you were talking with the firm" (Smith 86). As a direct representative of the publisher, Perkins was able to minimize bureaucratic inefficiencies that might delay the publication process and frustrate authors, which made him an effective ambassador for the company. In addition, Perkins's proven ability to leverage his influence in support of an author's agenda inspired faith in the editorial relationship. As a company, Scribner's enjoyed abiding professional associations that reinforced an author's sense of security at the imprint. Authors got to know the personnel at Scribner's, and they came to regard the publisher's staff as a sort of extended family, an impression that Perkins encouraged. The fact that Scribner's had been in the hands of one family for generations also inspired a sense of stability, assuring authors that their careers were safe in the care of an enduring family legacy. Most importantly, authors were loyal to Scribner's because they were loyal to Perkins; had the editor broken with the firm it would have been difficult to repair the trust in the author-publisher relationship that he helped broker.

The professional climate in which Perkins operated certainly had an appreciable influence on his career, for it afforded him the opportunity to interact with authors in ways that truly are unprecedented in contemporary publishing. Little more than a generation after his death, editors had already begun to mourn the passing of the Maxwell Perkins era. In 1989, for example, Gerald Howard appraised the state of the publishing industry with the provocatively titled essay "Mistah Perkins—He Dead." A somewhat cynical insider's look at contemporary publishing, Howard's account portrays Perkins's tenure as the industry's golden age, and he

³ Perkins was made vice president of Charles Scribner's Sons when Arthur Scribner, the brother of Charles Scribner II, died in 1932 (Cowley, "Profiles - I" 42).

ruefully argues that the absorption of small and family-owned publishing houses into huge corporate conglomerates changed the nature of the industry so dramatically that even Perkins's effectiveness as an editor would be uncertain in the current environment. Small-business trade publishing was once a relatively insular industry, Howard argues,⁴ and as long as "Scribner's was run by a Scribner, Putnam's by a Putnam, Doubleday by a Doubleday, Simon and Schuster by a Simon and a Schuster," the industry remained somewhat insulated from many of the most unsavory aspects of corporate capitalism (361). When these small entities merged or were acquired by large, profit-driven corporations, interest in the bottom line was amplified and the nature of the author-editor-publisher relationship was fundamentally altered. Pressure to increase revenue forced publishers to abandon their long-game strategy and replace it with a risky boom-or-bust approach predicated on the recruitment of big-name authors. Suddenly, Howard notes, "what used to be known as a gentlemen's profession [had] been transformed into a war of all against all" as publishers entered into bidding wars to tempt talented new authors with increasingly lavish advances (369). Casualties of this new paradigm were the attention and resources that once nurtured authors while they continued to develop their craft, for these were absorbed by the perennial search for the next big acquisition. Unfortunately, editors had to reallocate their priorities because the security of their jobs now rested on quarterly earnings reports rather than a cumulative track record of success. Inevitably, this weakened the editor-author dynamic, and as a result publishers began to view men like Maxwell Perkins as expendable. Now it is expected that an editor will shift houses several times during the course of his career, whether by choice or necessity. Even if an author follows his editor to a new imprint, it is impossible to recreate the professional dynamic in which Perkins thrived because of the

⁴ Howard likens the publishing industry during this time to "a peculiar archipelago off the continent of corporate America, subject to the same economic weather but governed by its own insular rules" (361).

irreparable damage inflicted on the author-publisher relationship. More recent trends—such as the demise of the corner bookstore, the rise of Amazon, and the uncertainty brought about by developments in digital publishing, print-on-demand, and self-publishing—are equally unsettling to publishing professionals. Therefore, it is hard to argue when Howard concludes that Perkins would find it difficult to work “happily or even successfully” in the contemporary publishing environment, “for *his* values—loyalty, honesty, taste, proportion, Olympian standards—are not always negotiable currency these days” (369). Though it may be tempting to describe Perkins’s era as a simpler time, each age has its challenges, and Perkins was not without his. In fairness, however, it must be acknowledged that Perkins’s success was attributable, at least in part, to the personal, direct nature of the business climate he enjoyed.

Historical Moment

Another factor in Perkin’s success that cannot easily be discounted was the impact of historic circumstance on his career—the serendipitous chance that he was introduced to a couple of progressive American authors at the very cusp of a domestic literary revolution. The sober disillusionment following the First World War sparked something of a literary awakening in the United States, leaving readers skeptical of romanticism and hungry for insight into the dual existence of beauty and suffering in the world. As the Victorian-era penchant for sentimentality and romantic melodrama gave way, readers grew more receptive to the commonplace themes and introspective features that are characteristic of modernist fiction. Perkins’s own literary influences inclined him toward literature that was reflective of life as it actually is rather than how it is wished to be, and shifting norms in public taste echoed his penchant for literary realism. When 1920 proved a watershed year for the publishing industry, Perkins was presented with an

historic opportunity to advocate for a new literary school. That year, publishers and their fellow tradesmen were shocked to find that Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, a book of "true realism coupled with satire of sacred institutions," had hit the number one spot on bestseller lists, topping recurrent favorites such as adventure novelists Zane Grey and James Oliver Curwood and romance novelist Gene Stratton Porter (Burlingame 136). To that point, romances and adventure novels had been certain bets in publishing, but the trend toward realism in fiction "upset the old guessing-game" in editorial offices (136). Likewise, nonfiction had begun to gain a legitimate foothold in the market,⁵ another indication of the public's newfound taste for serious subjects in literature (135). This unexpected departure from the trivial generated instability in the literary marketplace and created an opening for new voices to be heard in editorial boardrooms. Perkins's voice was among them, beginning with his radical push to publish *This Side of Paradise*,⁶ a curious mash-up of styles conveying the tragic disillusionment of the age with a glamorous nonchalance that was unlike anything the world had yet to see. Fitzgerald's debut novel has since been characterized as "An opening gun in the pro-youth, pro-freedom, and anti-Puritanism campaign" that followed World War I, but its initial reception distinguished him as a notable new author capable of capturing the spirit of America's youth in an era dominated by veneration of the "younger set" (Sullivan 661). Relatively successful in both a critical and commercial sense, *This Side of Paradise* undoubtedly bolstered Perkins's status at Scribner's, and his reputation for being somewhat prophetic in his acquisition of successful new authors was cemented with the controversial publication of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*—which proved yet another "index of the altered public taste" (Burlingame 137). By the 1930s, serious literature

⁵ By 1918, the popularity of nonfiction had grown so great that a bestseller list was newly established for that genre (Burlingame 135).

⁶ *This Side of Paradise* was published in March 1920, earlier that same year *Main Street* debuted.

had become the new popular standard, and “Scribners saw much of their patient growth in the past bear fruit on the best-seller lists,” including many books that were close to Perkins such as Wolfe’s *Of Time and the River*, Stark Young’s *So Red the Rose*, Rawlings’s *The Yearling*, and Douglas Southall Freeman’s *R. E. Lee: A Biography* (139). Perkins’s personal literary preferences were echoed in the changing tastes of post-war American readers, and by simply indulging his own aesthetic inclinations he garnered the professional clout necessary to continue promoting the literature that he loved.

In retrospect, Perkins’s early decision to take a chance on Fitzgerald proved the catalyst of the editor’s success. Though Fitzgerald did not necessarily remain profitable for Scribner’s in the short term, he tried to compensate by acting as a self-appointed recruiter for the house, helping to steer other profitable authors—most notably Hemingway—to the publisher. Perhaps the most important consequence of Perkins’s early decision to take a risk on the innovative Fitzgerald was the fact that he was granted the professional leverage to take risks on other avant-garde authors such as Hemingway because his initial gamble had paid off. Without the professional prestige garnered from the success of Perkins’s early acquisitions, it is unlikely that the leadership at Scribner’s would have allowed him to undertake a project as demanding or uncertain as that presented by Wolfe’s first manuscript. In effect, Perkins’s editorial capital increased as his reputation for promoting successful new authors grew, and his early investment in Fitzgerald proved a valuable nest egg.

For the Love of Literature

It may be tempting to conclude that Perkins was simply the right man in the right place at the right time—and certainly the serendipitous combination of his temperament, professional

environment, and historical moment contributed to his legacy—but the principal factor in Perkins’s editorial success transcends mere chance. The double vision that he applied to his editorial practice helped him to navigate the myriad professional tensions particular to modern publishing by allowing him to consider multiple perspectives when dealing with various conflicts without endorsing or disparaging a single point of view. Rather than choosing between the interests of author or publisher, Perkins unified their competing objectives into a mutually gratifying mission—the production of great literature. Perkins’s devotion to the proliferation of quality literature compelled him to find a middle ground in the underlying conflict between author and publisher without sacrificing textual integrity or commercial profitability. By acknowledging the value in each aspect, Perkins utilized the tension between art and commerce as a counterbalance in his professional practice that allowed him to preserve authorial agency without sacrificing the publisher’s financial viability. The stars may have aligned for Maxwell Perkins, but it was by virtue of his editorial double vision that he managed to capitalize on the unique opportunity that fate presented.

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