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FORUMS

FLUIDITY AND FORM IN MODERN LIFE: THE INTELLECTUAL VISION OF JERROLD SEIGEL

THE SHAPE OF A CAREER: AN INTRODUCTION

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[T]he pages that follow aim first of all to show that his career forms a coherent whole.
Jerrold Seigel, *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp*[1]

What does it mean to live a modern life? Countless books have explored the nature of modern society, culture, thought, and politics; the "philosophical discourse of modernity" and the "postmodern condition" have, in recent decades, been the focus of intense theoretical debates. Yet the implications of these concerns for the question of how, under modern conditions, human lives are actually lived—the material circumstances that make them possible,

[1] *PW*, 12. Throughout this forum, references to Seigel's main books will be given parenthetically using the following system of abbreviation: *RP* for *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism: The Union of Eloquence and Wisdom, Petrarch to Valla* (Princeton, 1968); *MF* for *Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life* (University Park, PA, 1993; first published 1978); *BP* for *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (Harmondsworth, 1987; first published 1986); *PW* for *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation, and the Self in Modern Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995); *IS* for *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2005); *MBL* for *Modernity and Bourgeois Life: Society, Politics, and Culture in England, France and Germany since 1750* (Cambridge, 2012); and *BC* for *Between Cultures: Europe and Its Others in Five Exemplary Lives* (Philadelphia, 2016).

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the relationships people enter into, the purposes they choose to pursue, and the significance with which they endow their efforts—is one from which contemporary scholarship has tended to shy away, as if such matters were best left in the hands of artists and novelists.

The originality and importance of Jerrold Seigel's extraordinary intellectual achievements lie, to a considerable degree, in the single-minded attention he has devoted to this very question, at least as it relates to the history of Western Europe. It is no coincidence that the titles of four of his books include the word "life" or "lives."[2] Like all of his work, these books testify to Seigel's virtuosity as a reader of texts and interpreter of art, his own extensive philosophical and literary erudition, and his deep knowledge of aspects of European history often downplayed by intellectual historians, such as social and economic history. Even so, the real signature of Seigel's work is his ongoing preoccupation with what the history of ideas can tell us about the character of modern life. Thus for Seigel, "Marx's fate" is not merely the story of the birth of modern socialism or historical materialism, but the chronicle of an extraordinary thinker's lifelong and ultimately failed effort to resolve the contradictions between "theory and reality, thought and the world" (*MF*, 387). In a similar vein, Seigel maintains that Marcel Duchamp's significance lies not simply in the way that he shattered prevailing artistic conventions, notably the idea that art is the expression of an artist's unique vision, but also and just as importantly in the way Duchamp used his creations to spin hermetic webs of significance that articulated his private obsessions, particularly relating to desire and sexuality. Perhaps one of Seigel's boldest claims is that even the postmodern motif of the "death of the subject" can truly be understood only in subjective terms—as a consequence, that is, of the fact that thinkers like Michel Foucault experienced the self "simultaneously in terms of radical liberation and of rigid constraint," leading them to forswear the very idea of subjectivity when it proved incapable of satisfying their aspirations for a completely unbounded form of emancipation (*IS*, 603). To borrow a term from the title of his most recent book, Seigel's project has been, throughout his career, to explore lives that are "exemplary" of the modern experience.

Though Seigel's work covers an unusually wide array of topics—from Renaissance humanism to bohemianism, from modern theories of selfhood to the nature of the European bourgeoisie, from avant-garde art to intercultural identity—it has continuously returned to a handful of core insights. First, Seigel maintains that, within a Western European context, the central problem of modern social relations has been the fluidity and concomitant uncertainty

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2 *Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life*, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930*, *Modernity and Bourgeois Life*, and *Between Cultures: Europe and Its Others in Five Exemplary Lives.*

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arising from the dismantling of corporate identities (notably during the French Revolution), which led society to be "reconstructed around individuals, not intermediate groups" (*BP*, 9). Seigel has, second, consistently explored the problems posed by modernity through a biographical lens. What distinguishes Seigel's work from other thinkers who, like him, seek to defend modernity's emancipatory potential—one thinks of Jürgen Habermas or Marcel Gauchet—is that he has generally eschewed sweeping theorizing in favor of the more intimate scale of the individual life history. This is in part because the dilemmas inherent in modern individuality make the ways in which especially lucid thinkers or artists have sought to navigate autonomy's uncharted waters of considerable interest to the nature of modernity. Yet at an even more fundamental level, Seigel's biographical focus is rooted in his insight that, as he once put it, important ideas are "deeply intertwined with the biography of their creators," making it imperative that we understand the "personal sources" from which they arise.[3] Seigel's postulate is, in a sense, that we cannot theorize modernity without examining the lives of modernity's theorists.

A third trademark of Seigel's work is his strong emphasis on the interplay between intellectual creation and social relations. Specifically, he has constantly returned to the question of the relationship between modern thought and art and the character of bourgeois society. Indeed, this question is so central to Seigel's thinking that it inspired *Modernity and Bourgeois Life*, his sole foray onto the terrain of social history. Yet while this interest might suggest some similarities between his method and that of materialist approaches to intellectual history, the reasons for Seigel's attention to the social embeddedness of cultural work is decidedly different. His concern is less with the epistemological problem of how social relations shape cultural production than with the ethical and perhaps even existential question of whether art and ideas are adequate to particular forms of life—whether, that is, they succeed in making sense of and giving meaning to a specific way of living, or, to the contrary, lay claim to a kind of existence that could never be realized in a given society—or in any conceivable society whatsoever.

Loosely paraphrasing Kant, one might say that, for Seigel, it is the peculiar fate of human society to give rise to ideas that cannot be avoided, but which, because they transcend all existing forms, can never be accommodated by an attainable set of social relations. The desire to merge art with life, as Seigel shows in several of his books, is an impulse to which the avant-garde is irresistibly drawn; yet this project is, in his view, ultimately contradictory and self-defeating, as art retains its ability to nourish aspirations for freedom precisely to the degree that boundaries between aesthetic form and ordinary life are preserved. Similarly, the notion of

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[3] Jerrold Seigel, "Autonomy and Personality in Durkheim," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48/3 (1987), 483–507, at 507.

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a self conceived as pure reflectivity—that is, a self capable of taking possession of itself through its own intellective powers, independently of any corporeal and social conditions—emerges as a temptation once selfhood becomes detached, Seigel contends in *The Idea of the Self*, from a broader cosmological framework.

These views suggest a fourth trait of Seigel's *oeuvre*: the way that, through the pursuit of intellectual history, he has simultaneously engaged in cultural criticism. It is not simply that Seigel takes positions in his work; his goal, rather, is to indicate the pitfalls or the possibilities to which particular intellectual and cultural projects lead, not least by evaluating them from the standpoint of their implications for lived experience. In this way, his work injects into intellectual history a dose of what Max Weber called the "ethic of responsibility": the conviction that it is the duty of scholars not simply to extoll the purity of an intention but to "give an account of the foreseeable results of [an] action."[4] Seigel's analysis of the implications of avant-garde art and postmodern theories of selfhood exemplify Weber's maxim.

It is precisely because Seigel's work is rooted in a distinct intellectual vision which, despite its deep erudition, transcends conventional scholarship by engaging in cultural criticism that the contributors to this forum deemed that a traditional Festschrift, consisting of loosely connected articles penned "in honor" of a particular scholar, was inadequate to the task of appraising his legacy. Seigel's work sets out not only to understand key moments in modern European cultural and intellectual history, but also to assess these achievements, evaluating them from a distinct normative standpoint. This forum's goal is to identify and reflect upon a handful of recurring concepts that Seigel has consistently employed in elaborating this original perspective: self, life, art, boundaries, chains of connection, form, consistency and discontinuity. It is to the exploration of these themes and the perspective they offer on his project as a whole that the contributors to this forum have, in honor of Seigel's astonishing career, dedicated their essays.

In this introduction, I will make the case—to which I will return in my other contribution—that a central component of Seigel's vision is his belief that the hallmark of modernity is the inclination of social relations, cultural expression, and forms of life in general to assume an amorphous, evanescent, and fluid character. In this context, the problem of how "form"—that is, the structures that endow life with the qualities of wholeness, coherence, and integration—might be achieved under such circumstances becomes a persistent cultural concern. The sway that this idea holds over Seigel's thought can, I argue, be better understood by situating his career in the broader trajectory of American academic culture, particularly the challenge to which the intellectual and social

[4] Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1958), 77–128, at 120.

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"forms" that had prevailed during the "golden age" of the American university following the Second World War were subjected during the 1960s and their aftermath. The point is by no means to reduce Seigel's work to a mere surface effect of its context. Rather, locating him in this period makes it possible to discern the cultural concerns that have shaped his vision—and which allowed him to achieve the unity and coherence in his own intellectual life that he has relentlessly tracked down in his books' subjects.

AN "ALMOST UNIMAGINABLE SENSE OF UNITY": HARVARD AND PRINCETON IN THE 1950S AND 1960S

"Personality and character," Seigel once wrote, "are rooted in early experience" (*MF*, 6), and books and ideas are, as his work constantly reminds us, the intellectual spaces in which the conflicts and concerns that define individual personalities find expression. Taking our cue from Seigel's own method, what can we learn about his thought by considering his formative years? What "symbols and patterns suggested by his own thinking or by that of people close to him" provide the clues to understanding "the coherence of his life history" (*MF*, 7)?

Jerrold Edward Seigel was born in 1936 and grew up in St Louis, Missouri. In 1954, he travelled to Cambridge, Massachusetts to begin college as a member of Harvard University's class of 1958. One of Seigel's classmates described, in a novel, their first day at Harvard:

> It was Monday, September 20, 1954. Eleven hundred sixty-two of the best and brightest young men in the world were lined up outside that monstrous Victorian Gothic structure known as Memorial Hall. To register as members of the future Harvard Class of 1958. Running the sartorial spectrum from Brooks Brothers to hand-me-downs, they were variously impatient, terrified, blasé, and numb. Some had traveled thousands of miles, others a few blocks.[5]

As his major, Seigel selected one of the college's most prestigious courses of study: the fabled History and Literature concentration. "History and Lit.," as it was commonly known, was launched in 1906 as the brainchild of the literary scholar Barrett Wendell. It was conceived as a conservative antidote to the reforms introduced by Harvard president Charles William Eliot's free elective system, which allowed students to graduate merely by passing a sequence of unrelated courses. Into the potentially disorienting educational autonomy Eliot's reforms had unleashed, History and Lit. sought to inject—to borrow a term from one of Seigel's recent books—a measure of "teleocracy" (*MBL*, 18–22); that is, an educational framework that would guide bright young scholars to carefully

[5] Erich Segal, *The Class* (New York, 1985), 5.

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defined intellectual ends. The core of the program consisted in a rigorous reading program, including "canonical" works such as the Bible and the landmarks of European literature (notably Shakespeare), as well as the study of Greek, Roman, and British literature and history. Justifying this carefully structured curriculum, Sterling Dow, a historian and archaeologist who chaired History and Lit. during Seigel's Harvard years, once remarked, "Chaos may be mystical and exciting ... but utter chaos is often only bewildering, especially to the young."[6] In addition to providing coherence to undergraduate education, the program also sought to effectuate a fusion of the humanistic disciplines. Its premise, as a 1958 article in the *Harvard Crimson* explained, was that a "natural intellectual union" exists between history and literature, and that, on this basis, a "synthesis of the disciplines" could be achieved that was more than a "combination."[7] In many ways, its approach was that of intellectual history, though its focus was confined to figures who could be safely considered "great." As one contemporary put it, "everybody from T. S. Eliot to Marx can be understood in terms of History and Lit."[8] This striving for intellectual synthesis found a concrete embodiment in regular tutorial lunches bringing together both students and faculty.

By the 1950s, the program had become a victim of its own success: as it continued to grow, the ideal of "synthesis" that had been its *raison d'être* was proving difficult to sustain. It had lost some of its leading lights: F. O. Matthiessen, the American literary scholar and author of the groundbreaking *American Renaissance*, committed suicide in 1950, while Perry Miller, the scholar of Puritanism and a leading figure in American intellectual history, was increasingly occupied with departmental responsibilities. To deal with rising enrollment, the tutorial lunch was replaced with a number of subject-specific gatherings. Meanwhile, literary studies were coming under the sway of the New Criticism, which emphasized literature's formal properties rather than historical context or author's biography. The historian Oscar Handlin, who taught in the program, argued that by the 1950s the "genuine point-of-view" that had characterized History and Lit. in its golden age had dissipated, rendering elusive the unifying ideal upon which it had been founded.[9]

In fulfillment of his degree in History and Lit., Seigel completed, in 1958, a senior honors thesis entitled "Sources of the Scene: The Historical Consciousness

6 Quoted in Corydon Ireland, "History and Literature Program Celebrates 100 years," *Harvard Crimson*, 12 Oct. 2006, at http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2006/10/history-and-literature-program-celebrates-100-years.

7 "History and Literature: A Synthetic Discipline," *Harvard Crimson*, 16 Dec. 1958, at www.thecrimson.com/article/1958/12/16/history-and-literature-a-synthetic-dicipline.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

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of Henry James." On the one hand, this thesis adroitly straddled the program's broad humanistic concerns. Reflecting the lingering influence of Matthiessen and Miller, Seigel's thesis dealt primarily with American thought and literature—topics to which he would never return. Yet because of its focus on Henry James, an expatriate who spent much of his adult life in England, the study was suffused with assumptions about European culture. Indeed, Seigel's interest in James lay precisely in the way that, having initially been drawn to European culture as an American, he came to evaluate American culture from a European perspective. The problem of boundaries, a recurring theme in Seigel's work, and specifically that of living "between cultures" (the theme and title of his most recent book), already preoccupied him in 1958.

Seigel's thesis also grappled in an intriguing way with the relationship between history and literature. The "scene" mentioned in its title was *The American Scene*, the book in which James recounts his travels in the United States from 1904 to 1905, after some twenty years of living in Europe. In James's "search for spiritual and artistic values,"[10] Seigel argues, the problem of the relationship between Europe and America overlapped with that of the relationship between art (and literature) and history. James, he maintains, believed that history was the wellspring of artistic values, and that this was why, intellectually speaking, James needed the Old World: "'Europe,'" Seigel writes, "becomes the setting for James' novels because only here can James find the past surviving sensibly enough to become the material of metaphor, the framework of the consciousness of the observer." In America, however, history does not exist—at least as a reservoir of meaning upon which artists, seeking resources for creation, might freely draw. For James, the problem of America was that of what art could be in a society that lacked a "sense of the past" as its most fecund source.[11]

Seigel's thesis thus provided an ingenious twist on the concerns of the History and Lit. program—using James to identify and problematize the respective relationships between history and literature in Europe and America (at least as cultural models), in a way that challenged the cultural status of "America" at the very moment when programs like History and Lit. were contributing to the establishment of "American studies" programs. Yet "Sources of the Scene" also staked out an approach to intellectual problems that would become the hallmark of Seigel's mature work, at the same time that it defined some of the anxieties with which his subsequent work would engage. First, Seigel's analysis of James was built around a paradox: that of the problematic relationship between art and

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[10] Jerrold Edward Seigel, "Sources of the Scene: The Historical Consciousness of Henry James" (unpublished senior thesis, Harvard College, Cambridge, MA, 1958), ii. I am grateful to Justin Davis for his assistance in acquiring this manuscript.

[11] Ibid., i.

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history in America, and the question of what art, in the absence of a pregnant sense of the past, could be. Most of Seigel's books explore how intellectuals and artists grappled with paradoxes that resemble the conflict he found in James between art and history, such as the tension between rhetoric and philosophy (*Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism*), abstraction and empiricism (*Marx's Fate*), and the dissolution and centralization of the self (*Bohemian Paris*).

A second theme that appears in Seigel's thesis concerns the nature of modernity itself, particularly the threat it poses to culture in the broadest sense of the word. It is always perilous, of course, to read a scholar's analysis of a writer as a ventriloquist's act; but the themes he emphasizes in James resonate too deeply with Seigel's later work not to give the modern reader pause. James, Seigel argued, believed that the absence of a historical sense meant that American artists had to find a "substitute" source of creative values. Since the nineteenth century, the most prominent substitute in American culture had been the idea of "nature," championed most famously by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Yet James had deep apprehensions as to the viability of this alternative. Due to the dearth of history, American society had no shared traditions, which meant that it lacked not only "poetry" but also "sociability"—that is, those forms of social interaction that acquire density and meaning through references to a common experience. As America's unique font of common values, "nature" was problematic because it was essentially noncultural: it transmits no meanings, creates no bonds, and while it may have "roots," it has no *past.* America's obsession with its natural environment did indeed give it a kind of innocence, but it was the innocence of brutes and savages—of a people for whom the lack of history signified a lack of culture, an absence of forms. Thus James, Seigel explains, is brought to the conclusion: "The presence of the void which is the result of the absence of history, makes any meaningful form impossible for America."[12] An antimodernist temptation lurks in the thesis: a conviction that only the past—which, in James's terms, could only be European—can provide culture, and that modernity—which is paradigmatically American—consists in the obliteration of culture and form.

In 1958, Seigel began his graduate studies in the History Department at Princeton in early modern European history, specifically the Renaissance. Here, he became the student of Elmore Harris Harbison, a Harvard-trained historian of the Protestant Reformation. In his senior year, Seigel had been assigned Harbison's recently published *The Christian Scholar in the Age of Reformation.*[13] Seigel later recalled what the book had meant to him: "it struck me so forcefully with its ability to find the center of arguments and debates, and to understand how intellectual and moral passions grow up in particular contexts to nurture

[12] Ibid., 33.

[13] E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Renaissance* (New York, 1956).

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insight and nudge people toward action, that I hoped right away I might become his student."[14] "Jinks" Harbison (as he was known) displayed many qualities that made a powerful impression on Seigel: "good judgment," a preference for "reflective understanding" over "novel interpretation," and an awareness of his own limitations as a scholar.[15] Over fifty years later, Seigel still opened a book with a recollection of how Harbison, "a deeply serious man with a broad streak of playful irony," had assigned him, in his second semester, the "boggling task of regaling the following week's seminar with ten minutes of reflection on the question: 'What is the bourgeoisie?'" (*MBL*, ix).

What seems to have struck Seigel most about Harbison was the "conviction" that his adviser brought to his scholarship, teaching, and life. The ultimate source of this conviction—a word Seigel and Theodore K. Rabb used in the title of the Festschrift they compiled in their adviser's memory—was Harbison's Christian faith. He joked, Seigel recalled, about being "the departmental Christian."[16] In a passage that Seigel found particularly revealing, Harbison once mused that one recognizes a "Christian who is also a historian" not by a philosophy of history or an interest in religious history (a topic that has rarely appeared in Seigel's own work), but rather by an "*attitude toward history*, the quality of his concern about it, the sense of reverence and responsibility with which he approaches his subject."[17] For Seigel, this "quality of concern" meant a "continual concern for the underlying meaning of history."[18] Evaluating this attitude in retrospect, he observed,

> In the days when the rather detached mood common to American universities in the late 1950s had not yet begun to give place to the passions and commitments of the 1960s, Jinks stood out as a person who believed that teaching and scholarship needed to be enlivened with some animating concern, and he told young historians that their students would want to know why the subjects they pursued mattered to them, as the people they were.[19]

Yet in addition to making him a beloved teacher and a compelling scholar, Harbison's Christian conviction was also, in his student's view, what gave his

[14] Jerrold Seigel, "Elmore Harris Harbison," in Patricia H. Marks, ed., *Luminaries: Princeton Faculty Remembered* (Princeton, 1996), 113–18, at 113.

[15] Theodore K. Rabb and Jerrold Seigel, "E. Harris Harbison," in Rabb and Seigel, eds., *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of E. H. Harbison* (Princeton, 1969), v–ix, at vi–vii.

[16] Ibid., v. Though much of the material in the *Luminaries* essay draws on the introduction to *Action and Conviction*, I have confined myself, when they overlap, to citing the latter.

[17] Ibid., vi, original emphasis. Rabb and Seigel cite (without referencing it) E. Harris Harbison, "Religious Perspectives of College Teaching: History," in Harbison, *Christianity and History: Essays* (Princeton, 1964), 3–34, at 31. The latter was originally published in 1950 as a self-standing pamphlet.

[18] Rabb and Seigel, "E. Harris Harbison," vi.

[19] Seigel, "Elmore Harris Harbison," 114–15.

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life its unity, its "shape"—a matter of abiding interest to Seigel. The reason for Harbison's "unique position" at Princeton and in the historical profession, Seigel averred, was the "organic harmony of his life," and it was "the profundity of his faith" that "helped to establish that organic relationship between personal conviction, teaching, and scholarship which was his hallmark."[20]

The "organic harmony" that he perceived in Harbison's life and career was mirrored, as it were, in the unity of vision that, in Seigel's recollection, characterized the Princeton History Department in these years—that is, until Harbison's untimely death in 1964. Reflecting on the sea change that has overcome academic culture in the past forty years, Seigel recalled the "now almost unimaginable sense of unity and common purpose that drew its members together, despite all their marked personal differences." He continues, "One could go from course to course, period to period and country to country, and still find a semi-homogeneous body of students attending lectures and doing readings that shared a few basic themes and assumptions; the bourgeoisie was always rising, modernity was a unified and recognizable phenomenon, and the West was the place where history unfolded." Assessing this lost academic world, Seigel ruminated,

> There was a certain narrowness in such ways of thinking, and a certain innocence too (which is not to say that they had only innocent effects); our academics today are more broadly open and diverse, and in some ways more sophisticated and self-aware. I for one welcome these changes, and I would not want to go back to that other day; in important ways I think Jinks would have welcomed them too. But in gaining these qualities something has also been lost. Perhaps remembering Jinks Harbison may put us in mind of what that something is.[21]

FORM AS CONTENT: SEIGEL AS RENAISSANCE HISTORIAN

It was in this milieu that Seigel conceived and wrote his doctoral thesis, "Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism from Petrarch to Valla: Studies in the Development of Quattrocento Thought and Its Classical Antecedents." Though directed by Harbison, his dissertation drew inspiration from other Princeton faculty, including the great Renaissance scholar Paul O. Kristeller and W. S. Howell, a student of English rhetorical traditions.[22] Seigel was also influenced by the work of the philosopher Richard McKeon, who had written

20 Rabb and Seigel, "E. Harris Harbison," v, vi.

21 Seigel, "Elmore Harris Harbison," 118.

22 See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York, Evanston, and London, 1961); and Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500–1700* (New York, 1961).

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a number of seminal articles on rhetoric's place in medieval thought.[23] Though this thesis, which Seigel defended in 1963 and which became the basis of his first book, is exquisitely learned and critiques contemporary historiography with what would become Seigel's distinctive subtlety, it also reflected, in its very subject matter, a set of values, a "conviction." The dissertation considers the way a handful of leading fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian humanists wrestled with a problem bequeathed by antiquity: that of the proper relationship between the contradictory cultural ideals that were Greek philosophy and Ciceronian rhetoric. Seigel left little doubt that simply by selecting this topic, he was affirming his own conviction—specifically, a commitment to the inherent worth of classical culture, which the humanists had devoted themselves to recovering. In his dissertation, he wrote, "Our ignorance of the classics and especially the rate at which this ignorance seems to increase as the aims and methods of education change would convince any follower of Petrarch that ours is an age of barbarism."[24]

This position notwithstanding, it would be grossly unfair to reduce Seigel's dissertation to a polemical defense of the classics. Its ambitious goal was to propose a reinterpretation of Renaissance humanism by examining the way its leading proponents sought to reconcile the competing classical ideals of philosophy and rhetoric. "Rhetorical training," Seigel wrote, "aims to increase and ennoble man's capacity to communicate with his fellows." Though it is also concerned with speech, philosophy emphasizes "human reason and understanding," and specifically "man's attempt to clarify and make more trustworthy his natural acquaintance with himself and his surroundings." "The orator," in sum, "is a speaker, the philosopher a thinker."[25] Not only were these ideals the legacy of the ancients, but the aspiration to unite them was as well: the pursuit of this union was particularly associated with Cicero, and it was this endeavor that his early modern epigones were eager to emulate.

Yet this quest for the "union of eloquence and wisdom" was riddled with tensions and contradictions. Indeed, Seigel's attempt to understand thinkers in terms of what Anthony La Vopa, in his contribution, calls their "conflictual coherence" is clearly evident in his work on Renaissance humanism. The motivations behind this effort to reconcile philosophy and rhetoric would seem relatively straightforward: wisdom must be eloquent in order to address and thus improve the lives of ordinary human beings, while eloquence must be wise lest it serve immoral ends. Yet this goal was beset with deep-seated tensions. To

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23 Richard McKeon, "Rhetoric in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 17/1 (1949), 1–32.

24 Jerrold Seigel, "Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism from Petrarch to Valla: Studies in the Development of Quattrocento Thought and Its Classical Antecedents" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, Princeton, 1963), 1.

25 Ibid., 2–3.

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begin with, no clear boundary exists between "speech" and "thought," a problem reflected in the fact that both words can translate what the Greeks called *logos*. Moreover, the very effort to unite these goals could throw into relief what their respective practitioners regarded as the other's shortcomings: the single-minded focus on truth could lead philosophers to become so abstract and quarrelsome that rhetoricians would dismiss wisdom as hopelessly impractical, while the orator's willingness to compromise truth and flatter opinion could result in philosophers bidding eloquence good riddance. Thus while the quest to combine eloquence and wisdom mobilized much of the Italian humanists' energies, it admitted no readily available answer.

Even so, Seigel maintained that consideration of this ideal offers us a deeper understanding of the humanists' intentions. Historians had often debated how the humanists' emphasis on "form" (i.e. rhetoric) related to their thought's "content" (i.e. philosophy). Some reproached them for placing form above content, while others sought to discern an elusive content in their writings that was difficult to reconcile with their attention to form (one version of this was a tendency to take their civically minded oratory at face value, a position best exemplified by Hans Baron's famous study *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, which Seigel challenged in an important article[26]). Seigel, by contrast, contended that for many humanists, form *was* content, in the sense that the pursuit of eloquence as an overarching ideal entailed a particular kind of intellectual commitment and a distinctive way of living. Men like Petrarch, Bruni, Valla, and others teach us "to think more broadly about rhetoric, and to understand what content may itself arise from or be imposed by a devotion to the culture of oratory."[27]

Seigel's interpretation of Petrarch's Ciceronian inheritance is particularly elegant. Scholars, he notes, have described the poet's ethical thought as a "chaos of contradictions" (*RP*, 52), especially because of his seemingly conflicting loyalty to the sublime rigor of Stoicism and the more pragmatic teachings of the Peripatetics. Yet this contradiction was, in fact, a kind of consistency, as the basis for these seemingly irreconcilable commitments was precisely Petrarch's Ciceronianism: while the Roman orator deemed Stoics the "only true philosophers," he regarded the Peripatetics' teachings as "closer to everyday life, and more intelligible to the men with whom the orator had to deal in the performance of his everyday tasks" (*RP*, 53). Petrarch found in Ciceronianism a way to express his own self-image: "the internal psychological conflict between the poet's human nature

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26 Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton, 1955), 2 vols. Jerrold Seigel, "'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni," *Past and Present* 34 (1966), 3–48.

27 Seigel, "Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism from Petrarch to Valla," 319.

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and his divine vision" (which, in Petrarch's case, unlike Cicero's, assumed a specifically Christian character) (*RP*, 54). Thus while "Petrarch yearned intensely for a higher plan of existence, he never ceased to admit that he was destined to remain on a lower, fully human one" (*RP*, 54). In his understanding, the point of the combination of wisdom and eloquence was that it could bring unity to these contradictory commitments. Seigel writes,

> [Petrarch's] view of human nature and human needs demanded that he proclaim both the ideal [of the unity of wisdom and eloquence] and the contradictions within it. Men were sometimes able to think and act as philosophers, sometimes not; the true moral philosopher, who was also the perfect orator, spoke to both conditions. To men in their capacity as rational creatures he announced the vision of a life fully in accord with wisdom; this vision demanded a recognition of the moral and intellectual inadequacy of rhetoric itself. To men in their everyday capacities . . . [p]hilosophy made smaller claims on their lives, and it did not demand that they banish the glory of eloquence from them. (*RP*, 57–8)

Thus in addition to making a particularly subtle contribution to the literature on the Italian Renaissance, Seigel also made a case for importance of the aspiration for unity and form as a central concern of intellectual history. The humanists' union of philosophy and rhetoric was a recognition—one to which Seigel gave his tacit approval—that abstract thought can lure human beings away from the practical matter of living. Yet what Seigel seems to have appreciated in the humanists was that their commitment to form saved them from advancing too far down the path of abstraction: hence their willingness—and in some instances, eagerness—as rhetoricians to articulate wisdom in forms that ordinary humans could understand and even enjoy.

DISCONTINUITY, INVERSION, FLUIDITY: THE 1960S AND BEYOND

Seigel published *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism* in 1968. Though it was his first book, it was also an endpoint as well: it was the last (and only) book he would devote to Renaissance history. Ten years later, with the publication of his biography of Marx, Seigel's conversion to modern European history was complete. It is tempting to seek the personal and psychological motivations for this quite dramatic and rare decision to change fields at a relatively early stage in one's academic career. Indeed, Seigel practically invites this kind of interrogation: in the introduction to *Marx's Fate*, admitting that "much of my own personality and experience have entered" into the book, Seigel further explains that the psychological approach he pursued to understanding Marx's life "has been shaped in part by having undergone an evolution that seems to combine consistency and discontinuity in my own life" (*MF*, 9). Needless to say,

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I make no claim to know the specific experiences to which Seigel is referring in this passage, and even less to understand what they meant for him personally (Thomas Laqueur, however, addresses this issue in his contribution). Yet if the private world of meaning alluded to in these words remains inaccessible to the reader, the public traces of this evolution can be gleaned from Seigel's writings. It is over the course of this evolution, moreover, that the origins of his broader intellectual enterprise can be discerned.

A context that undeniably shaped Seigel's intellectual evolution—as it did for many and perhaps most of his contemporaries—was the epoch-making cultural earthquake that we now refer to simply as "the sixties." Seigel's relation to this decade is curious. He never made the 1960s the primary theme of a book or article—indeed, only his Duchamp book is (mostly) set in the twentieth century. But allusions to this period are sufficiently frequent in his writings to suggest that it had a decisive impact on his thought from *Marx's Fate* onwards. In many ways, his work has been an attempt to grapple with the forces in modern culture that were laid bare in the 1960s and their legacy.

In a new preface written for the 1992 edition of *Marx's Fate*, Seigel invoked the "very different time—and different troubles" in which his biography was first conceived. The 1960s were a time "when radical challenges to authority seemed to promise renewal for our public and private lives, and when social activism and a focus on individual psychological growth came together in movements that sought—naively, perhaps—to combine both" (*MF*, ix). Though as we have seen, Seigel's interest in psychology, the self, and biography were already present in his reflections on Henry James and the Italian humanists, the 1960s seem to have given this interest a wider cultural resonance, along with richer theoretical resources. Decisive for his own thinking was the work of the German-born psychologist Erik Erikson, which (as we learn from Laqueur's essay) Seigel first encountered in Europe in the 1960s. Seigel explains, "No writings spoke more directly to this situation [i.e., the upheavals of the 1960s] than Erik Erikson's studies of how Martin Luther and M. K. Gandhi forged powerful revolutionary identities and programs out of personal crises that mirrored the breakdown of larger social and cultural systems." He adds: "Both the atmosphere of the 1960s and Erikson's work had an impact" on *Marx's Fate* (*MF*, ix). In his next book, Seigel noted that the contradictory elements embedded in the nineteenth-century idea of "Bohemia"—"poverty and hope, art and illusion, love and shame, work, gaiety, courage, slander, necessity, and the hospital"—are "ones we still recognize when we use the term: more recent incarnations like the Beat Generation of the 1950s or the hippiedom of the 1960s contained these real or potential elements, too," suggesting that "Bohemian styles are recurring features of modern life" (*BP*, 1, 5). Finally, the work Seigel devoted to Duchamp and to selfhood was formulated in response to a current of thought that first emerged in France in the 1960s and was

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imported into American academic culture under the label "postmodernism." Seigel was clearly aware that the ideas of thinkers like Michel Foucault gestated and acquired meaning amidst the "Marxist hopes and the differently utopian ones raised by the 1968 revolt" (*IS*, 622). Thus the point is not that Seigel engaged in a polemical relationship with this period; rather, the cultural and intellectual forces that shaped this era inspired him to reexamine history from this new and dizzying vantage point.

The 1960s were a period of intense creative renewal on American campuses, at the same time as they precipitated a crisis in the postwar model of higher education and the forms of scholarship it harbored. One historian explains, "The utterly unexpected challenge to assumptions of political consensus and to the authority of European high culture in the 1960s severely weakened the self-confidence and public standing of the social sciences and humanistic scholarship."[28] Yet this questioning of "European high culture" came not only from outside the professorate—from student radicals, hippies, and the counterculture. It also came from within the academy. It is striking, though hardly surprising, that Seigel's early career brought him into contact with some of the figures who would lead the assault on postwar academic culture. While Seigel was studying at Harvard, a Belgian graduate student named Paul de Man was serving as a teaching assistant for a popular literature course. Within a decade, he would become one of the leading figures of an influential strand of "deconstruction," questioning whether anything that could be called literary meaning existed beneath the fog of rhetoric and signifiers that texts emit.[29] In his dissertation, Seigel thanked a young historian at the University of Rochester named Hayden White for his "careful and perceptive reading" of an early chapter draft. Within a matter of years, White would set aside his earlier research on the medieval papacy and devote himself instead to demonstrating that history, under the guise of explaining the real world, was merely a branch of literature, defined by "narrativity" rather than objective truth.[30] In the published version of his dissertation, Seigel maintained that Petrarch had inaugurated a new "paradigm" in the history of humanism, specifically invoking *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the famous book that his Princeton colleague Thomas Kuhn

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[28] Thomas Bender, "Politics, Intellect, and the American University, 1945–1995," in Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske, eds., *American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines* (Princeton, 1998), 17–54, at 35.

[29] The course, Interpretation of Literature, popularly known as HUM 6, was taught by Reueben Brower. See Paul de Man, "The Return to Philology," in de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, 1985), 21–6, at 23.

[30] Seigel, "Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism," vi. Hayden White's most important statement is *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973).

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published in 1962. What Seigel took from this work was the idea that particular "models" of intellectual activity often create communities dedicated to exploring their consequences (*RP*, 223–4).[31] Yet many of Seigel's contemporaries believed the book's message was far more radical. One historian writes, "Although Kuhn"—and Seigel, one might add—"believed in a referential theory of knowledge and the progressiveness of science, the implication of his work was a loosening of the connection between object and the interpretation of it."[32] Belief in the objectivity of the humanities and the social sciences, the integrity and possibility of historical knowledge, and, by implication, the legitimate status of high culture was thus parrying an increasingly vigorous onslaught at the very moment that Seigel was bringing to fruition the work he had begun as a doctoral student.

Rhetoric, the subject of Seigel's dissertation and first book, was fast becoming a "contested site"—to use a term that had yet to become ubiquitous. From the Ciceronian perspective that was central to Seigel's work, "rhetoric" referred to the ancient art of oratory, the linguistic devices through which speech was made accessible, beautiful, and persuasive. Yet as "postmodernism" took its first breaths in the late 1960s and early 1970s, "rhetoric" acquired a decidedly different meaning. According to de Man, the role of rhetoric in the medieval *trivium* (which also included grammar and logic) was to introduce "a decisive but unsettling element" that "disrupts the inner balance of the model." Rhetoric can do this because of the "uncertain status of figures of speech or tropes, a component of language that straddles the disputed borderlines" between rhetoric and grammar.[33] For de Man, rhetoric refers, in short, to the non-denotive residue that undergirds all texts, rendering their meaning fundamentally undecidable and leaving the scholar no option but to propose readings that embrace rather than resist textuality's inherent polysemy. The growing popularity of ideas such as these among humanists, spurred by the initial American reception of "French theory," even managed to color the reception of Seigel's first book. In a 1972 review sprinkled with references to Saussure, Foucault, Levi-Strauss, and Barthes, Nancy S. Struever, a Hayden White student, claimed that though Seigel was addressing "the replacement of logic by rhetoric as the primary language discipline in the training of an intellectual elite," he failed to recognize that what stands out in humanism is above all a "peculiar self-consciousness about language." This feature of humanism was all the more remarkable, she suggested, in light of

[31] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London, 1962). Seigel also acknowledges the crucial help he received from Kuhn in his famous *Past and Present* essay, declaring, "Whatever virtues of clarity and order the final result may have are due primarily to Professor Kuhn." Seigel, "'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric?", 3 n.

[32] Bender, "Politics, Intellect, and the American Academy," 41.

[33] De Man, "The Resistance to Theory," *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982), 3–20, at 14, 15.

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the linguistic turn the humanities were then taking: "By a happy coincidence," she wrote, "our own age is also linguistically self-conscious: we are witnessing a profound reorientation in the general theory and descriptive science of language. Seigel misses the opportunity, it seems to me, to integrate his awareness of both subject and object, of method as well as topic."[34] While acknowledging the book's erudition, the review largely devoted itself to explaining the significance for Renaissance studies of Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* and other novel theoretical insights, leaving the content of Seigel's thesis largely unaddressed. Though Struever's was, of course, just one review, it indicates the intellectual headwinds with which Seigel's conception of scholarship would increasingly have to contend in the rapidly evolving academic culture of the day.

GIVING FORM TO FLUIDITY: SEIGEL'S MATURE WORK

Hegel, Seigel writes, believed that "modern life had destroyed the unity and harmony of the classical world" (*MF*, 23). For Seigel, this insight may have had a personal resonance: the new forms of life that had emerged in the 1960s seemed to have destroyed—or at least significantly undermined—that "almost unimaginable sense of unity and common purpose" that still seemed within reach in postwar academic culture. The work that Seigel produced in the aftermath of the tumultuous 1960s grappled with a new set of concerns that were only dimly adumbrated in his dissertation. A broad thematic unity can be found in the six books he has published since 1978: all are concerned with the fluidity, instability, and open-endedness of human life under modern conditions. Specifically, Seigel has repeatedly explored the ways in which new philosophical and aesthetic ideals sought to articulate the unprecedented freedom that modern life seemed to offer, while also warning that certain variations of these ideals could undermine the social and cultural foundations that had made them possible in the first place. In this way, a normative dimension crept into Seigel's work. Modern culture presented intellectuals and artists with two broad options. The first is to attempt to *give form* to the very fluidity that characterized modernity; that is, of finding ways to capture the mutable forces of modern life through rigorous technique, intelligible expression, and stylistic properties that are recognizably cultural. The alternative option consists in succumbing to modernity's fluidity, allowing the formlessness of modern life to infiltrate and conquer the realm of cultural expression itself. Before these two choices, Seigel could not feign neutrality: like Cicero and Petrarch, the former Renaissance scholar continued to believe

[34] Nancy S. Struever, review of Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism*, *History and Theory* 11/1 (1972), 64–74, at 64, 65.

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that "true learning"—as well as genuine culture—"must never turn its back on form."[35]

Although these problems are most in evidence in his later books, they make their first appearance in *Marx's Fate*. The problem of Marx, for Seigel, is that of unrealized form, symbolized by his inability to complete *Capital*, his masterpiece. The kind of fluidity with which Marx had to contend would, of course, eventually be that of capitalism itself ("all that is solid melts into air"), but far more central to Seigel's analysis was the way that philosophy functioned in Marx's life as a dissolvent of reality. The dangers of philosophy for life had already been a theme of Seigel's first book; yet in *Marx's Fate*, "philosophy" means something quite different. For Petrarch, philosophy was an aspiration for "uninterrupted coherence and consistency" (quoted in *RP*, 48). Philosophy, and particularly Stoicism, could rise above "everyday life" because the mind, collected into itself, can achieve a consistency that ordinary existence can only approximate. The implications of Hegelianism, to which Marx remained "indebted" throughout his life (*MF*, 390), were, however, radically different. Where Stoicism rises above ordinary life through focused concentration, Hegelianism does so by turning reality on its head. "Inversion" (*Verkehrung*), Seigel argues, is the key to Hegelian thought, as "the most characteristic expressions of Hegel's intellectual vision can be described as inversions or reversals: the discovery of unity in diversity, the transformations of negation into affirmation, the transition from fixed existence into the fluidity of opposites" (*MF*, 33). Hegelianism's significance for Marx was intellectual, but also existential. It captures, Seigel contends, the way Marx *lived* his early allegiance to philosophy, which expressed itself as a "mental derangement" or "psychic imbalance" arising from "a contradiction between the isolated subjectivity of individual life and the objective reality of the external world" (*MF*, 19).[36] Where Stoicism sought consistency in an inconsistent world, what Hegel called Reason (*Vernunft*)—that is, the essence of philosophical understanding—necessarily partakes in chaos, as it intuits the darker corners of reality that remain hidden to common sense.

Philosophy, in this way, shares an affinity with madness, a potent philosophical example of which Hegel found in Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. Noting that Hegel describes the "nephew" character as "disintegrated," Seigel observes that Hegel's insights about inversion confirm psychological theories suggesting that, for creative personalities, mental derangement is both a stimulant and a threat: "Creative people must face sometimes face the peril of 'coming apart.' They may displace a 'looseness of self,' a 'repeated slipping in and out of personal integration'

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35 Seigel, "Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism," 318.

36 This passage occurs before Seigel introduces the notion of "inversion" a few pages later, but it clearly anticipates the ideas that he believes are captured by this term.

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that seems sometimes to reflect an underlying security and sometimes a weakened sense of self" (*MF*, 37).[37] Along with madness, inversion is also tied to the idea of "youth": the conviction that "consciousness can realize itself by making war on the world," that philosophy (as the young Marx himself put it) is "turned against the world" (*MF*, 76). When Seigel says that the "atmosphere of the 1960s" shaped *Marx's Fate*, it seems likely that he was referring as much to this problem of "slipping in and out of personal integration," notably as it relates to youth's place in the human life cycle, as he was to Marx's radical politics.

The tragedy of Marx's life, in Seigel's view, is not, needless to say, that Marx never grew up, but that once he had, the sense of disintegration and chaos that had haunted him *subjectively* as a youth later resurfaced in his *objective* assessment of capitalism's nature—the fact that, as he put it in *Capital*, "that which seems irrational to ordinary common sense is rational and that which seems rational to it is itself irrational" (quoted in *MF*, 359). Thus while the mature Marx remained convinced that philosophy distorted reality and that the truth of the world could be found only in an empirical analysis of social dynamics, he found it equally impossible, particularly amidst the "topsy turvy" politics of the 1850s, to believe that "empirical experience" offered a "direct and accurate reflection of the real truth about society and history." Marx, Seigel concludes, was "caught between his philosophical vision and his materialist conviction" (*MF*, 362). In this way, Marx lived in the shadow of Democritus, whom he had first studied in his doctoral dissertation: the Greek philosopher had painted himself into a corner, convinced both that empirical reality was misleading and that philosophy had no purchase on the real world. Democritus resolved this tension by blinding himself; Marx did so by indefinitely expanding *Capital*'s scope, devoting his energies and declining health to a book that was impossible to complete. During the Renaissance, Petrarch and his fellow humanists managed to combine the competing ideals of eloquence and wisdom; Marx, a creature of modernity, never succeeded in marrying philosophy and empiricism. He strove to give form to the flux that surrounded him, to put an inverted world right-side up. But the shape of Marx's life, for Seigel, lies not in the form he achieved, but in the unity that beckoned just beyond his reach.

The problem of achieving form amidst the fluid forces of modernity recurs in most of Seigel's subsequent books. The nineteenth-century conception of Bohemia was, for Seigel, a liminal social space in which individuals could dramatize the fluidity of self and social relations which, in the wake of French Revolution's abolition of corporate identities, became constitutive of bourgeois life. *Bohemian Paris* (1986) thus considers the dissolution of the traditional

[37] Seigel is quoting the work of Donald Schon.

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parameters of self and society—and efforts to grapple with this problem. Its originality lies in its claim that Bohemia is less a critique of bourgeois society than a thematization and intensification of the fluidities already implicit in bourgeois existence itself. Seigel, in this context, finds the figure of Charles Baudelaire exemplary precisely in the way that, despite his fascination with the "vaporization" of self that bohemianism made possible, he nonetheless sought, through disciplined and demanding poetic works, to extract form from the flux of bourgeois–bohemian life.

In *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp* (1995), Seigel examined a figure he had touched upon in his previous book (*BP*, 384), but whom he now turned to as a forerunner of the postmodernist idea of "dissolving the self" (*PW*, 14). In Seigel's view, self-dissolution—as manifested, notably, in Duchamp's apparent denial that art was a form of self-expression—is in fact a particularly radical form of subjectivity that, like philosophy for Marx or poetry for some bohemian artists (but contrary to Petrarch's view of language), aspires to a form of freedom lying beyond the strictures of ordinary life—one that dissolves a "particular kind of personal identity, the kind most ordinary people seek when they . . . take as starting points the socially and culturally given elements of collective life that every individual finds at her or his entry into the world." Such an identity is achieved by casting off "the burden of reconciling contradictions that membership in complex cultures imposes on individuals" (*PW*, 13). Yet Duchamp's lesson is, for Seigel, that self-dissolution must find a way to express itself, through methods that, despite their unapologetic modernism, betrayed their own kind of formal purity. And Duchamp did so in ways that perhaps even Petrarch might have recognized: through the creation of a world of meaning that drew much of its appeal from its intensely private character. In Seigel's pantheon of exemplary lives, Duchamp serves both as a cautionary tale about the risks of self-dissolution and as a reminder, contra postmodernist nostrums, that even "death-of-the-subject" rhetoric can harbor a longing for form.

The Idea of the Self (2005) addresses on a much broader scale the concerns that shaped the Duchamp book, namely Seigel's disagreement with postmodernism's thesis about the "death of the subject." The problem of the self, according to Seigel, ultimately arises from the dissolution of ancient and early modern frameworks for reconciling the self's bodily, social, and reflective dimensions. Specifically, Ptolemaic cosmology "provided a theoretical frame in which resolutions that would be denied to moderns were still possible" (*IS*, 53). The modern problem of the self emerged once Newton and Copernicus had "left these ideal harmonies in ruins" and solutions had to be found for conceptualizing the self in all its multidimensionality that did not hinge on inscribing it in a cosmological order (*IS*, 54). It was, in short, the dissolution of this older intellectual framework that gave rise to the modern conversation about the self, in which the idea of

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a “fluid, unconstrained selfhood” articulated by postmodernists like Foucault and Jacques Derrida emerged as a tempting but always problematic position (*IS*, 631).

On the surface, *Modernity and Bourgeois Life* (2012) appears to be driven by a different set of preoccupations, as it constitutes an excursus into the realm of social history, by way of a highly innovative approach to understanding the significance of “bourgeois life” in European history. Yet it would hardly be an exaggeration to summarize Seigel’s argument in terms that resonate with his previous books: as a social experience defined by participation in the “network of means” and “chains of connection” that are the state, the market, and culture, bourgeois life gives form to the fluidity that becomes constitutive of modern existence once “teleocratic” social relations have given way to autonomous ones. The term “bourgeois” is, for Seigel, best understood as a “form of life” that thrives on the very fluidity that destabilizes traditional society.

Finally, the question of the fluidity of culture appears in Seigel’s latest book, albeit in a different and novel vein. Though the theme of *Between Cultures* (2016) is that of “intercultural” living—the need experienced by Europeans and non-Europeans alike, in the modern era, to carve out a space between their “home” culture and a different culture—the book is rooted in a kind of philosophical anthropology that presents human beings as cultural innovators. The intellectual tools that make it possible for individuals to inherit culture (notably their capacities for language acquisition) also allow them, Seigel maintains, to “transcend it, to seek new tools and new uses for old ones, new forms of speech and thought, new painting styles or new ways to interpret the past” (*BC*, 6). Fluidity no longer characterizes *modern* culture and social relations, but, Seigel now implies, *cultural expression as such*: the ambiguity and instability that inheres in all cultural creation means not merely that individual human beings are culture’s passive heirs, but also that they are fated to become the authors and arbiters of cultural meaning: “To gain social knowledge a person must act—to use Kant’s language—not just as a pupil but also as a judge, applying forms of conceptual understanding that make sense of what must sometimes appear as a fluid and unstable ground of interaction and experience.” Drawing on the work of the social theorist Martin Hollis, Seigel maintains that humans can acquire culture because they are capable of “intelligent agency,” “acting in ways that presume and develop the capacity to clarify the often murky meanings of their social surroundings, in order to make their way within them” (*BC*, 7).[38]

[38] Seigel makes this point (though giving it somewhat less centrality) in almost identical language in *The Idea of the Self* (22–3) and in “Problematizing the Self” in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999), 281–314, at 296–7. The essay by

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In *Between Cultures*, making form out of fluidity is no longer just a problem encountered in modern culture; it is the problem of culture *tout court.*

INTERPRETING SEIGEL: A THEMATIC VOCABULARY

This essay has argued that the dynamic between form and fluidity in culture is a central preoccupation of Seigel's intellectual vision, one that sheds light, moreover, on his intellectual trajectory. Yet it would be wrongheaded—and distinctly "un-Seigelian"—to attempt to reduce the multidimensionality of his *oeuvre* to a single reading. The premises of this forum are, first, that Seigel's work is informed by an original and important vision of the meaning and nature of modern European cultural and intellectual history and, second, that this vision can be plotted around a handful of themes that recur throughout his work. Each contributor has chosen to address one of these themes. While each theme is conceptually discrete and plays a distinct role in Seigel's thinking, it also provides a perspective from which Seigel's vision can be assessed in its entirety. Like Leibniz's monads, each specific theme mirrors the whole.

The themes addressed in the subsequent pages are as follows.

Self

Few historians have preoccupied themselves with the nature of selfhood as much as Seigel. His work shows that selfhood is an inescapable dimension of virtually all historical and cultural experience, yet that it also has a history. Intuitions such as these have led Seigel to argue that intellectual history has much to learn from psychology. Yet as interested as he is in Freud and psychoanalysis, it is in many ways the insights of ego psychology—and particularly the work of Erik Erikson—that informs Seigel's work. In most of his books, Seigel is concerned with the ways in which individuals achieve—or struggle to achieve—a sense of personal integration that allows them to preserve a sense of identity while also being able to engage with others and the world. By the 1980s, however, Seigel's interest in the self took a polemical turn. His investment in the idea of personal integration led him to view the postmodern theme of the "death of the subject" with profound skepticism. Seigel first examined this matter in a series of essays published in the 1980s and 1990s,[39] before addressing it at length in *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp* and *The Idea of the Self*. The postmodernist claim

Martin Hollis that Seigel draws on is "Of Masks and Men," in Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds., *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge and New York, 1985), 217–33.

39 These essays include "Autonomy and Personality in Durkheim," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48/3(1987), 483–507; "Avoiding the Subject: A Foucaultian Itinerary," *Journal of the*

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that the self is an illusion, Seigel contends, is made on behalf of an even more transcendent notion of selfhood—a "subjectivity that will not speak its name."[40] In his contribution to this essay, Gerald Izenberg—another intellectual historian who has placed selfhood at the heart of his scholarship[41] —argues that Seigel shows that a radical, unbounded subjectivity remains a permanent temptation in modern society, yet one that is fated to shatter against the limitations implicit in the notion of subjectivity itself.

Life

This term refers, in the first place, to Seigel's signature biographical method. With the exception of his book on the bourgeoisie, all of Seigel's work examines the lives of individuals or groups of individuals. Yet Seigel does not endorse biography as an end in itself; in his view, lives, like selves, tend, often asymptotically, towards coherence. The aspiration for integration and identity to which the self aspires is precisely what gives lives the "shape" that historians try to reconstruct. Yet as Anthony La Vopa, himself an accomplished intellectual biographer,[42] maintains in his essay, the paradoxical ground for this coherence is, for Seigel, conflict itself. What biographies reveal, in other words, are the struggles that define a thinker or artist's life project and which constitute the existential matrix from which their thinking and art emerge. "Life" has other valences in Seigel's thought as well. It is the term that, according to Seigel, ultimately gives coherence to the idea of the "bourgeoisie": the contradictory qualities attributed to this concept (individualistic and communal, innovative and traditional, etc.) can be resolved only if it is understood, he argues, not simply as a class, but as what Ludwig Wittgenstein called a "form of life," rooted in specific social contexts, mobilizing particular social tools, and expressing itself through a distinctive set of concerns.

History of Ideas 51/2 (1990), 273–99; "A Unique Way of Existing: Merleau-Ponty and the Subject," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29/3 (1991), 455–80; "The Human Subject as a Language-Effect," *History of European Ideas* 18/4 (1994), 481–95; and "The Subjectivity of Structure: Individuality and Its Contradictions in Lévi-Strauss," in Michael S. Roth, ed., *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics and the Psyche* (Stanford, 1994), 349–68.

40 Seigel, "Avoiding the Subject," 299.

41 See Gerald Izenberg, *Impossible Individuality: Romanticism, Revolution, and the Origins of Modern Selfhood, 1787–1802* (Princeton, 1992); and Izenberg, *Identity: The Necessity of a Modern Idea* (Philadelphia, 2016).

42 See Anthony J. La Vopa, *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762–1799* (Cambridge, 2001).

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Art

Four of Seigel's books are devoted primarily to artists, writers, or poets (by contrast, only two deal primarily with philosophers). Yet Seigel's perspective on this topic is never that of an art historian, or even of an intellectual or social historian of artistic movements. Rather, he is interested in the distinct set of cultural problems to which art provides access, particularly as it relates to the modern experience. Thus Thomas Ort, a historian of Central European modernism whose work has been inspired by Seigel,[43] observes in his contribution that Seigel "cares less about art itself than about the impulse of radical individualism in modern society revealed through it." Art thus becomes a prime context for understanding self and life. Art is one of the most culturally legible means through which personal integration can be achieved, though such efforts have become particularly paradoxical in modern culture, when the aspiration for self-dissolution becomes one of the characteristic means for attaining a distinctly modern form of identity. One of Seigel's main concerns is with the aspiration of some modern artists to erase the distinction between art and life, thereby absorbing the promises of freedom implicit in artistic expression into the flux of reenchanted existence. Yet for Seigel—and on this matter his position is explicitly normative—the fusion of art and life inevitably deprives art of its ability to illuminate life by virtue of its position outside life itself. Thus one might say, channeling Nietzsche, that Seigel is concerned with the "use and abuse of philosophy and art for life."

Chains of connection

Though this term appears only in Seigel's two most recent books, it is sufficiently important to deserve separate treatment. He maintains that the term "bourgeois" best applies not to a distinct social class but rather to a form of life built around what Simmel called "long chains of connection" and which Seigel dubs "networks of means." What business people, administrators, and professionals share, he maintains, is the fact that their lives are structured by participation in different, yet comparable, "networks of means" (respectively the market, the state, and cultural networks). Though it is less foregrounded than in *Modernity and Bourgeois Life*, Seigel returns to this concept in *Between Cultures*, when he observes that the ability of cultures to accommodate difference and mobility is the consequence of a "world connected by ever more extended and thicker networks of interaction and communication" (*BC*, 241). This aspect of Seigel's vision provides the broader social context for Seigel's understanding of self, life,

43 See Thomas Ort, *Art and Life in Modernist Prague: Karel Čapek and His Generation, 1911–1938* (New York and London, 2013).

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and artistic expression: specifically the idea that modern social relations are not "teleocratic" (i.e. ascriptive), but "autonomous" (or self-constituted). In his contribution, Theodore Koditschek, whose scholarship on the British middle class Seigel draws upon, examines both the originality and the limitations of Seigel's account of the European bourgeoisie.[44]

Boundaries

Seigel is fascinated by boundaries of all kinds, be they physical, social, conceptual, or psychological. He has examined the boundaries between philosophy and rhetoric in Renaissance literature, philosophy and life in Marx, and art and life in Baudelaire and Duchamp. His last two books make the case that crossing boundaries is a defining experience of modern life. But while boundaries (and the idea of "liminality") have been a major theme in postmodern and postcolonial thought, Seigel's understanding of the term belongs to a distinctly different register. Boundaries, for Seigel, are undoubtedly zones of ambiguity and fluidity (Baudelaire's artificial paradises, Foucault's limit experiences). But for Seigel, boundaries also make form possible. For Seigel, one of modernity's greatest cultural temptations is to call for the abolition of the boundaries that shape the complex structures which modern society generates. In her contribution, Debora Silverman, a cultural historian of European art movements whose work has frequently been in dialogue with Seigel's,[45] examines how the dialectic between the boundaries that are constitutive of bourgeois life and the bourgeoisie's constant need to transcend these very boundaries not only is a major theme in Seigel's work, but also can help us to understand the aesthetic project of the *fin de siècle* Belgian avant-garde, the focus of her current research.

Form

For Seigel, boundaries are constitutive of "form." The idea of form is central to Seigel's approach to intellectual history: literary, philosophical, and artistic production give form to lives that the historian can then reconstruct. Furthermore, Seigel, like Georg Simmel, sees the destruction of form as a very real potentiality in modern culture. Yet what interests Seigel most, as I argue in

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[44] See, notably, Theodore Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban Industrial Society: Bradford, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1990).

[45] See Jerrold Seigel, "'Spiritualizing the Material' and 'Dematerializing the World' in Modernist and Avant-Garde Practice: On the Wider Import of a Distinction Debora Silverman Develops in *Van Gogh and Gauguin*," *French Politics, Culture and Society* 24/2 (2006), 71–80. For Silverman see, in particular, Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992).

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my contribution, is modernity's Apollonian potential: the way in which, rather than yielding to Dionysian chaos, some thinkers and artists have managed to give form to this fluidity.

Consistency and discontinuity

The final essay differs from the others by assessing Seigel's career from an autobiographical standpoint—a perspective that is only fitting for a scholar who has repeatedly emphasized the irreducibly personal character of historical experience. The cultural historian Thomas Laqueur describes the Seigel he came to know and confide in as a graduate student at Princeton in the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s.[46] Recalling these years when, as a young man who was frustrated with the apparent meaninglessness of establishment politics (as well as his dissertation topic), he found an attentive conversation partner in Professor Seigel, Laqueur evokes the powerful opening chapter of *Marx's Fate*, in which Seigel considers Hegel's views about the centrality of "youth" to the human life cycle. The young man, Hegel wrote, "feels that both his ideals and his own personality are not recognized by the world, and thus the youth, unlike the child, is no longer at peace with the world" (quoted in *MF*, 18). Laqueur's recollections are particularly relevant to this passage, as he reveals the biographical secret, as it were, connecting the young Renaissance scholar to the mature biographer of Marx: while doing research in Rome in the late 1960s, Seigel first encountered Erik Erikson, whose ideas about the human life cycle shaped his work so profoundly, providing the conceptual framework for his second book and influencing his thought for years to come. Through these memories, Laqueur suggests that the notion that discontinuity, inversion, and dissolution may be necessary to achieve a deeper and more mature unity of self constitutes, perhaps, the personal matrix from which Seigel's distinctive outlook was born. Laqueur contextualizes, in this way, Seigel's conviction that for all the feats of abstraction and flights of imagination of which the intellect is capable, the life of the mind must always be assessed in terms of its implications for "ordinary" life and "concrete" selfhood. He reminds us, at the same time, of the fundamental humanism that lies at the heart of Seigel's intellectual vision—a humanism *bien compris*, but a humanism all the same.

[46] Laqueur is the author, notably, of *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, 1990), *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Brooklyn, 2003), and *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, 2015).

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