Mary MacLane, standing, with her brothers and sister (seated, left to right) John James, Dorothy Margaret, and James Whitby.

"I HAVE NEVER BEEN MYSELF" INTRODUCING MARY MACLANE

Julia Watson

Mary MacLane's literary fortunes have been as varied as her audacious and inimitable writing. In 1902, with the publication of *The Story of Mary MacLane—by Herself* (henceforth referred to as *Story*), which she wrote at nineteen, she was celebrated and widely read. A century later, by contrast, she is often dismissed as an outmoded, sensation-seeking writer of effusive style—and rarely mentioned in literary or feminist histories of Modernism. Regarded as the bête noire of Montana life writing and dubbed the "Wild Woman of Butte" for the scandalous revelations of *Story* and the fame and notoriety she acquired after it was published, MacLane in her young years was a literary sensation. She became one of the most popular and widely translated writers of the first decade of the twentieth century, lauded by Ernest Hemingway, Hart Crane, and Gertrude Stein as an important influence in their quests for a new American style. But her literary star sank in the Roaring Twenties as quickly as it had risen, and *Story* was out of print in the United States until 1991.

Mary MacLane, however, is more than a one-book literary curiosity. She published three book-length autobiographical narratives, and many of the short essays she wrote for the *Butte Evening News* in 1910–11 (several nationally syndicated) crackle with wry humor and complex insights. When a history of the emergence of a western subjectivity in autobiography is written (as it has not yet been), MacLane will deserve a place in it alongside such better-known early twentieth-century writers as Mary Austin (*Earth Horizon*, 1932) and Zitkala Sa ("Impressions of an Indian Childhood" and other essays of 1900 in *American Indian Stories*).[1] Indeed, as readers we need to find ways of reading life narrative that value the innovative experiments in self-making of MacLane's prose.

MacLane reworks the private form of the diary as a site of exploratory and boldly public self-presentation. And her keen eye for detail renders precise observations of objects, places, and people that memorably evoke the texture of everyday life in the early twentieth century. True, she does not fit the model of western writers who express an attachment to place and region as self-defining; Montana memoirist Mary Clearman Blew's sense of being embodied in place when she declares, "I am bone-deep in landscape," is not MacLane's perception.[2] Hers is more an *anxiety* of place, as I have elsewhere suggested.[3] MacLane's *Story*, centered on the place she called Butte-Montana, expresses irritation about the "forlorn" world of Butte with its "dry, warped people" (pages 14–15), its "sand and barrenness," and complements her sense of herself as a kind of "Nothingness" (148).[4] The citizens of Butte may not forgive this prodigal daughter's denunciations of their town or her walking out on it, repeatedly from 1902 on, for the "treacherous" glamour of Eastern cities, especially New York's bohemian Greenwich Village. But, although MacLane periodically left Montana, her writing is shot through with conflicting emotions about it, an anxiety of place that may be more truly "western" than romantic sentiment.

The Biographical Mary MacLane

Surprisingly, no full-length biography of MacLane exists, although Carolyn J. Mattern, Barbara Miller, Virginia Terris, and Leslie A. Wheeler have done shorter studies of her.[5] The contradictory contours of MacLane's life have fascinated some women critics, though most have focused on her life, not her writing, and tend to read her books as transparent self-reflections, rather than the performances of an artistic subject constantly in the making. Readers might turn first to the extraordinary website (marymaclane.com) developed by the late Elisabeth Pruitt's husband, Michael R. Brown, which contains extensive information drawn from her collection and research on MacLane's biography, published works, friends and influences, photographs, critical views of her work, and, oddly, multiple personality (Pruitt experienced dozens of personalities), as well as two important

collections of her early letters, notably to her publisher. Pruitt's 1993 edited collection of MacLane's writing was a groundbreaking revival of her work that contains several short essays, as well as the unexpurgated version of *Story*, and an extensive bibliography of writings by and on MacLane, to which this introduction is indebted.

When Mary MacLane died in 1929, aged forty-eight, in a rooming house in Chicago, *The Chicagoan* lauded her not as the New Woman of social revolution but as the original "New Female" of flapperism who started a revolution in manners that came to shape both the living and the writing of Modernism.[6] Her rise from Montana obscurity to international fame in 1902 was meteoric. Born in Winnipeg (Manitoba), Canada, on May 1, 1881, of Scotch and Canadian Presbyterian parents, MacLane had two brothers and one sister. Her father supported the family first by serving as an agent for the Canadian government, then investing in cattle herds and flatboats. When Mary was four, the MacLane family moved near Fergus Falls in western Minnesota, which she evokes in an affectionate recollection of 1889, her seventh year, "The Autobiography of the Kid Primitive," published in 1910. That was also the year that MacLane's father, James, died, leaving his family an inheritance that enabled them, in 1891, to move to Butte, Montana. There MacLane's mother, Margaret, married a longtime friend Henry Klenze, whose imprudent investments in mining and other fields eventually drained the family funds. Klenze later committed suicide (around 1925).

The MacLanes lived at 419 North Excelsior Street in Butte, where Mary, at Butte High School, wrote editorials for and edited the school paper, gave an oration on Charles Dickens, and developed a crush on her literature teacher Fannie Corbin. Thereafter, at home, she began writing, from January 13 to April 13, with an afterword on October 28, 1901, what she calls "a record of three months of Nothingness," the dated reflections that became her first book (228). Her "shocking" original title, *I Await the Devil's Coming*, was rejected by the publisher, Herbert S. Stone and Co. of Chicago, who substituted *The Story of Mary MacLane—by Herself*. In a letter the teenaged MacLane

protested to no avail the change of title and the omission of her dedication of her book "To the Devil Of the Steel-Gray Eyes, Who One Day may Come—Who Knows?—I Dedicate, with the Mad Love of A Young Weary Wooden Heart, This, My Book."[7] Published in April 1902 (in an edited form that excised some entries and her capital letters), the narrative was an immediate and controversial sensation, selling 100,000 copies in the first month.[8] Within a few years it had been translated into thirty-six languages and praised by leading writers for its startling freshness. Even the redoubtable H. L. Mencken, despite criticizing MacLane as a "Puritan wooed and tortured by the leers of beauty," praised MacLane's prose for its resilience, exuberance, and powerful language and saluted her as "the Butte Bashkirtseff," alluding to the precocious nineteenth-century Russian woman diarist.[9]

An immediate literary celebrity, MacLane moved to New York, where she became a focus of both criticism and praise. She was interviewed by Zona Gale, who contrasted the woman that *Story* had proclaimed a thief and gambler with "The Real Mary MacLane," whom she characterized as looking like "a Madonna and a pot of sweet lavender and a fall of old lace," a demure yet daring child-woman.[10] *Story* was analyzed by literary critics, threatened with censorship, and parodied in popular songs and cartoons for MacLane's frank, brazen, proud musings on sexuality, friendship, and, always, herself. MacLane's literary career of excess and notoriety was launched. The extent of her fame and scandalous reputation were such that the *New York World* ran a forum for reader response, "What do you think of Mary MacLane?" Living primarily in Greenwich Village, with some winters in St. Augustine, Florida, she enjoyed and flaunted her celebrity, making heralded appearances in fashionable places. In 1905, while summering in Rockland and Boston, she led the Fourth of July parade float, lying on a divan beneath a silk canopy as the crowd applauded.[11] She was so well known that "MacLaneism" became a term for rebelliousness in young women.[12]

But MacLane's literary achievements did not keep pace with her media celebrity and cosmopolitan life. Her 1903 book of

musings on life and letters, *My Friend Annabel Lee*, was a flop. Her editorials for various newspapers and magazines were syndicated around the country, but did not net her enough money to continue living well and she was reduced to what she called "Grim Penury."[13] From 1906 to 1909 she wrote dozens of letters to her publisher, M. Elijah Stone, protesting that she was reduced to pawning her clothes and pleading, with droll irony, to be paid. Finally remunerated, she returned to Butte late in 1909 where, after surviving a bout of scarlet fever, she began writing lively editorials for the *Butte Evening News*. Some of these reflections on her experiences east and west are memorable pieces, with titles such as "A Waif of Destiny on the High Seas" and "Mary MacLane Meets the Vampire on the Isle of Treacherous Delights" (Manhattan). Publication of a revised edition of *Story* in 1912 by Duffield and Co. of New York, with a new chapter on her life in the intervening decade emphasizing her self-invention, netted her some income.[14] She remained primarily in Butte, apparently visiting many of its seedy evening locales.[15] And she worked for years on the sequel to *Story*, titled *I, Mary MacLane: A Diary of Human Days*, which was published in 1917. But, despite its avowed feminism, it lacked the brash irreverence of *Story* and, in the new realism of World War I, was not successful.[16] It is now forgotten, despite some fine passages in praise of humble objects, such as one on her fondness for "a Cold Boiled Potato."[17]

MacLane also developed a project, based on a 1910 article, in which she characterized relationships with men as "a fascinating, fascinating game" that let her play the vamp and romantic aggressor.[18] A producer for Essanay Studios commissioned her to write a screenplay for the film produced in 1917 and released nationally in 1918. Flamboyantly titled *Men Who Have Made Love to Me*, it dramatized MacLane's romances with six types of men—a callow youth, a literary man, a decadent gentleman, a cave man, a bank clerk, and a husband—and starred MacLane herself in a ninety-minute feature.[19] It received a mixed reception and was banned by the censor in some states; in the short-lived public enthusiasm for vamps such as Pola Negri and Theda Bara,

it was soon forgotten.[20] Apparently the sole print of the film was destroyed in a fire and only ads and announcements for it exist today; two are on the website. Although its production encouraged MacLane to move to Chicago, she seems to have ceased writing and fallen into obscurity, as she predicted she would in a newspaper interview in 1902.[21] Wheeler notes her arrest for allegedly stealing dresses in 1919, and film historian Kevin Brownlow observes that her reported attire, a kimono, suggests she had had turned to prostitution.[22] Reportedly, she was addicted to gambling and died alone and friendless.[23] But Barbara Miller, drawing on the research of Virginia Terris, asserts that MacLane had an African American woman photographer friend who tended her in her last days in a Chicago roominghouse. With her death just before the stock market crash ended the Roaring Twenties, her work was forgotten until 1970s feminism brought a revival of interest in early western women writers.

Autobiographical Narrative, Lies, and Egotism in *Story*

Story is a narrative of the coming of age of a young woman, a process that constructs what we think of as the "life" of Mary MacLane. But the interpretation of what it meant to be her did not exist until she wrote it. That is, her text is a performance, not a factual biography, as is evident in her fantasies of the steely gray-eyed man-devil she awaits and her musings about the anemone lady. As she stated to Zona Gale, "I pose all the time . . . I have a hundred sides, and I turn first one way and then the other. . . . I have never been myself, excepting to two friends."[24] The precocious MacLane styled herself as a literary character whom I call "Mary" and in *Story* tried out several voices in the process of writing what she calls her "Portrayal," a self-portrait that in every sense "made" her. While Mark Twain dismissed autobiography as lies and damned lies, MacLane understood its strategic uses in creating a subject that only exists when put into language. Therefore, our interest is less in the factual truth of life in 1901 Butte that she portrays—though there is rich detail of everyday life for historians to mine—than in her interpretation

of the experience of being a woman alive there, at that time.

Where did MacLane encounter the radical notions that shape her self-presentation as genius, artist, bad girl—liar, thief, gambler—and frustrated sensuous woman? One source was the nineteenth-century European Romantic cult of the artist as genius celebrated in the poems of Lord Byron and the writings of women such as Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* and, above all, Marie Bashkirtseff. Born in Russia in the mid-nineteenth century, Bashkirtseff was raised in Paris and died at twenty-four, leaving behind diaries declaring her genius and expressing her desire to win fame and love as a great painter.[25] Insisting on the unique artistic gifts that distinguished her, Bashkirtseff declared herself the only person who could satisfy her romantic longing .[26] This notion surely struck MacLane, who praises Bashkirtseff but asserts that her own self-portrayal has "a stronger individuality" (77).

MacLane's self-presentation is informed by another literary mode, the pose of world-weary *ennui* developed in the poetry and essays of Charles Baudelaire and the Symbolists, such as Joris Karl Huysmans, who felt alienated from the middle-class bourgeoisie and its European cultural legacy, and were considered "decadent." While it seems unlikely that she read them, expressions of fin-de-siècle weariness were alive in popular writing at the turn of the century, even in far-flung Butte. Like a Symbolist vision of sterile civilization expressed as a desert landscape, MacLane described her setting in Butte "sand and barrenness." And its aridity was congenial to her own cultivation of an interior landscape of Nothing. When Mary announces, at both the beginning and the end of *Story* that she is "a philosopher of the peripatetic school, a thief, a genius, a liar, and a fool," like a jaded sensualist, she characterizes the "Nothing" of her outer and inner worlds as both a "bitterness" and a "burlesque-tragedy" (225).

While several critics have dismissed MacLane's *Story* as the writing of a pretentious egotist, I would argue to the contrary that, precisely because of its pleasure in self-exploration, *Story* remains fresh, frank, and funny. Consider MacLane's opening

declaration to the reader: "I, of womankind and of nineteen years, will now begin to set down as full and frank a Portrayal as I am able of myself, Mary MacLane, for whom the world contains not a parallel. . . . I have in me a quite unusual intensity of life. . . . I am a genius. . . . I have attained an egotism that is rare indeed. . . . I am quite, quite odd" (2). This self-presentation is striking for many reasons. It announces a subject asserting her difference from all others and her assured knowledge of herself. In women's autobiographical writing, that is a landmark moment. Many readers have reacted to MacLane's self-presentation as a kind of blind egotism, and indeed MacLane ironically counts egotism as an accomplishment. But her self-knowledge also admits, in the same passage, to miserable unhappiness, lies, and bad faith. Hers is the complex self-relationship of the autobiographer engaged in written self-creation, like Michel de Montaigne in his sixteenth-century *Essays*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his eighteenth- century *Confessions*, and Stendhal in his nineteenth-century *The Life of Henry Brulard* before her.[27] All build up increasingly elaborate self-portrayals emphasizing not the facts of external history but the paradoxical truth of interior experience: I am who I am. While MacLane's sense of the contours of that portrait would change over time, as in the 1912 revision of *Story*, her self-stylizing cannot be called lies, since it cannot be proven false—her inventions are part of her, experiments in self-making by one who is, in the best sense of the word, self-centered.

MacLane exploits the possibilities of autobiography, styling herself as a "bad girl" in contrast to other models of womanhood, such as the lady, domestic women like her mother, and the virtuous heroines of novels: "I long to cultivate my element of Badness," she states, wishing for "seven years of judicious Badness, and then death" (162). She states with amusement, "I am a plain downright thief" (102). But even in chronicling several petty thefts in *Story*, including the theft of three dollars from a woman of Butte who could afford it, she makes the occasion of her transgression a redemptive act, describing how she used the money to buy chrysanthemums for an Irish woman she befriended in Butte's Dublin Gulch area (104–6). MacLane's use of confession, then, is strategic, denouncing herself to win the reader's attention and to condemn moral pretension. In calling herself a "sham," a "fraud," a "liar" and a fool, as well as a genius, she shows her depth of self-knowledge and ability to play roles, as autobiographers have done throughout the centuries: "Every day of my life I am playing a part" (96).

As Mary Austin would do in *Earth Horizon* (and probably learned from her), MacLane at times speaks of herself in the third person as a created character both admirable and contemptible (126). In shaping a persona, *Story*, although written as a set of diary entries, has many features of an autobiography. It cultivates a self-conscious "I" and shapes the detail of everyday life into a story of self-discovery structured as a journey that anticipates an artistic destination. Parts of it are related to the spiritual autobiography of interior quest, pain, and longing for deliverance, with a project of redemptive confession, though hers is inverted as a blasphemous narrative of waiting for the Devil. *Story* also engages other modes of the autobiographical: the female coming-of-age story, the story of the growth of the artist's mind, and the literary self-portrait.

Remarkably, MacLane's "Portrayal" of "a creature of intense passionate *feeling*" is a completed book, rather than an open-ended private journal (228).[28] MacLane's literary style is a pastiche of many forms, combining incantatory lists and litanies with manifesto-like declarations calculated to both shock and entice. Her reader is invited to be both sparring partner and potential lover. Focusing on a domestic, everyday world, with its toothbrushes and porterhouse steaks, MacLane enunciates her difference from those around her and traces the emerging contours of a unique "I." For example, she calls on the Devil to deliver her from the tastes that define banal people who like "fried eggplant, fried beef-steak, fried pork-chops, and fried French toast," along with many other "ordinary," "nice," and "pleasant" things (133–34). Her genius consists, she asserts, precisely in her cultivation of Nothing (136). Mary defines herself negatively—not this, not that, not anything, through her exuberant

lists of particulars. Both Nothing and all to herself, she remakes the conundrums of self-portraiture for a new kind of subject, a young woman asserting herself as an independent literary presence.

Few literary scholars have discussed MacLane's writing at length. An exception is Patricia Meyer Spacks who, in *The Female Imagination* three decades ago, gave a sustained reading of *Story*. She characterizes MacLane as a prototypical woman artist struggling to carve out a space of self-expression distinct from the male tradition that dominated literature for two millennia. Spacks sees MacLane as engaged in active storytelling to shape a self through a Romantic ideal. While criticizing MacLane's "imaginings" as at times "grandiose, empty, self-indulgent, her prose unbearably self-caressing," Spacks acknowledges that what may strike us as narcissism was a form of self-preservation for MacLane in an environment hostile to, and dismissive of, women.[29] Spacks praises the frequent focus of MacLane's writing on the real, material world—her olives and onions—and the intensity of her self-creation. Readers might dispute eastern intellectual Spacks's claim that MacLane's "choice of Butte over Boston," when she returned to live there in 1909 was "the choice of fantasy over reality," a return to a marginal feminized existence.[30] Clearly Spacks had no inkling of the fast women and newly rich miners who walked the streets and haunted the brothels of Butte, memorably characterized in the narrative of a prostitute's life, *Madeleine*, and described in Mary Murphy's study of prostitution in Butte.[31] Despite taking MacLane seriously as a woman writer, Spacks' treatment of her is often harsh and dismissive. She diagnoses MacLane as a fantasizing allegorist compulsive about art and life, "masochistic," "solipsistic," and contemptuous of others.[32] But this rush to judgment may say more about the limitations of the critical moment of the early 1970s in which Spacks wrote than about MacLane. My essay on Montana women writers discusses MacLane as a writer reimagining the urban frontier as a site dramatizing her own anxiety of place, both discouraging her literary impulse with its "barrenness" and provoking her to engagement with its contradictions.

LOVE, SEXUALITY, AND THE BODY IN *STORY*

Much of the power of MacLane's writing comes from her engagement with her own body and the physicality of the material world. She voices self-expression in erotic terms at a time when women lacked visible public lives. At various points throughout *Story* Mary expresses desire for the love of three others: Fannie Corbin, her former teacher in Butte High School, whom she calls the "anemone lady" (29); the man-Devil (she capitalizes the name) with steely-gray eyes; and Napoleon. What this extraordinary cast of characters has in common is that all are remote from both her and Butte, and all designed to shock, titillate, and impress the reader with the intensity of Mary's passionate imagination. Her desire for the anemone lady is enclosed in memories of the past (Corbin has moved east) when her presence stirred Mary with "strange sweet passions" (72) of first love, provoking poetic sensations of music and lush visions (130). Mary describes the romantic friendship she feels for the anemone lady as "man-love" and "a strange attraction of sex" (131). Spacks interprets MacLane's "self-image of bisexuality" as characteristic of the artist and marking her "tragic" rather than "triumphant . . . difference from others."[33]

But according to Lillian Faderman, another critic of second-wave feminism who wrote a pioneering study of lesbian writers, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, MacLane is a proto-lesbian pioneer. For Faderman, the early MacLane in *Story* naively expresses romantic love for a woman, while her later sexual sophistication in *I, Mary MacLane* leads her to repudiate a lesbian orientation as "contraband," "twisted," a "warped" predilection.[34] Faderman focuses on Mary's declaration of her love for Fannie Corbin, the anemone lady, and her assertion of stirrings of "a convulsion and a melting within" in Corbin's presence (96). She reads young Mary's question, "Do you think a man is the only creature with whom one may fall in love?" (131) as a declaration of masculine-identified sexuality.[35] For Faderman, MacLane's disclosure of lesbian desire in *Story* is consistent with the nineteenth century's innocent view of romantic friendships between women, while her 1917 autobiography shifts, like the