

Meridel Le Sueur Essay

A Portrait in Five Portraits

ALISON HAWTHORNE DEMING



Marie, Julia, and Celestine Bregny. 1885.

Smudged and ghostly, the sisters are barely legible across time. No one is smiling. All are dressed in lace. The photo is fitting for a story that resists being told. But I am patient, having given up on unreliable sources and turned to fragments. Does that really say where I am in this quest to know a woman—Marie Bregny, buried in an unmarked grave in Valhalla, New York—who happens to be my maternal grandmother? How do I come close to her in space and time? How do I mark her life as an act of resistance to death? As an expression of continuity and belonging? This is why I write and stumble through my not knowing.

There is a lot I do not know, but I am resigned to find in fragments a picture of the whole. Perhaps this is a rationalization for the fact that I am not a good enough sleuth to turn up more factual material. Perhaps these women's lives have left little trace. And yet they lived remarkable lives, accomplished and courageous women who rode the Gilded Age right on into the Great Depression.



Greenwich Village's character as a refuge for artists was fixed in 1857 when the Tenth Street Studio Building was constructed between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, solely to meet the needs of artists. The idea of American art was not yet taken seriously among art connoisseurs, Europe still the nexus in the minds and wallets of collectors. But by 1878, the Paris Exposition would include a section of American Art, and times had changed. The studio building was designed by architect Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to study at the esteemed Ecole des Beaux Arts. He supervised the renovation of the Louvre for Napoleon III, before returning to New York. Hunt's design featured a glass-domed central gallery with studios radiating outward.

Not really a bohemian redoubt, the facility drew leading artists. Winslow Homer rented a studio, as did the Hudson River School artists Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt. William Merritt Chase opened a studio there in 1879, where he worked with his greyhound lounging by his side. The studios were cleaned up and opened to the public on Saturday afternoons, when the well-heeled and well-dressed came to consider the new works.

This was the New York of my grandmother's childhood. Her mother, Louisa Bregny, immigrated to New York from Paris in or around 1870 and settled in Greenwich Village. The French community was small, not organized, relatively prosperous. France meant art. America meant business. Little Italy, Little Hungary, Little Syria were a mile away. Bleecker Street was known as French Town, with Café de Paris, Au Chat Noir and Taverne Alsacienne as gathering places. France meant culture and class. Some of New York's best restaurants of the era printed a French version of their menu. Art and fashion looked to Paris for direction. Old New York was fading: A few farm animals still lounged in the grass—gaggle of geese, full-teated goat, Jersey milk cow—but Greenwich Village was increasingly the hub of creative enterprise.

Marie's father, Arsenne, who had also emigrated from France, had many jobs over the years, none sounding like a career. He is listed in census records over the decades as "crimper," "leatherer," "merchant," "agent for book house." In 1888, he used stationery that bore the header "Prof. A. Bregny & Co., Sole

Manufacturer and Sole Proprietor, Prof. A. Bregny's Anti-Asthmatic Powders." So it seems he was also a scam artist. By then the family had moved to 218 W. Forty-Eighth Street. Prof. Bregny's product must not have done the job because family lore says he suffered terribly from asthma and had to sleep upright in a chair in his last years.

The financial anchor for the family was Louisa, whose dressmaking salon ran from 1878 to 1929, employing up to sixteen women in a home-based business, eventually including my grandmother and her sisters. They created custom-made dresses for a wealthy clientele, cut cloth without patterns following the Paris designs of the season, and invited the clientele to fittings in the parlor. Perhaps a touch of peach brandy? Sometimes they outfitted entire wedding parties. Those were the nights my mother remembers, her mother cutting cloth on the dining room table until midnight while she retreated to the bedroom to cut photos of movie stars out of magazines.

I have seen no letterhead for Louisa's enterprise—though I do have an envelope with an engraved return address: *Mmes Bregny et Cie., 314 West 58th Street, New York*. That would place the letter around 1905, when their business address is listed at that location. Still the French branding, of course, as mother and daughter Bregny continued to run the *compagnie*. There were 35,000 dressmakers in New York City at the time. Most of them worked in tenement sweatshops. Few ran their own businesses. Fewer yet had a résumé including having been a dressmaker for Empress Eugenie, formidable second-in-command (as well as wife) to Napoleon III.

So many lost trades and goods caught my eye as I spun reel after reel of microfilm, searching for traces of Louisa, year after year after year coming into the small frame of light, then passing: water wheels, cordage and oakum, French calf skins, hominy, artificial eyes, buffalo robes, bonnet frame makers, importers of cuppers and leechers, gutta-percha goods, corset makers, silver chasers, wagon makers, tinsmiths, barrel dealers, willow ware, boot crimping, cod liver oil, importers of walking canes and Nobby natural sticks, hay and manure fork manufacture, horse collar makers, lace menders, cork cutters, cotton

gin bristles, diaphanous Haarlem oil (genuine), oculists and aurists, boiled silk, ship biscuit bakers, coopers, last makers, thimble makers, tripe dealers, drove yards, Paris white.

The grainy photo of the three sisters may be a first communion portrait, all three girls dressed with virginal veils of floral lace, their bangs freshly clipped. Marie is the smaller girl on the left, looking directly into the lens, her gaze deep and intense, a refusal to be sentimentalized. Raised Catholic in a French-speaking family, her confirmation into the faith did not carry her to eternity. Marie left the church as a young woman after a priest grabbed her breast. Where did I learn this? Perhaps from my mother, a very defended woman who would rarely speak about her mother. She resented being raised by a working woman, when classmates came from families in which women had leisure to spend with their children. Often when I'd ask my mother about her childhood, she'd rebuff me. Why would you want to know about that? Any bits of story that trickled through this dam were quenching.

Marie became a Christian Scientist, as did her sisters Celestine and Julia. Science, as she would call it, saved them, strengthened them. A faith established by the entrepreneurial Mary Baker Eddy that promised the self-sovereignty of Divine Mind as an instrument of healing: "Life in and of Spirit . . . the sole reality of existence." Illness is illusion. So, too, is death. Science was a system of belief attractive to a woman of strong will.

Marie lived to ninety-seven, refusing medical treatment except once, when at ninety-three she suffered from a debilitating bout of pneumonia. My mother arranged for the local doctor to make a house call. He prescribed an antibiotic. She took one pill, said, "They're setting me back," and refused to take more. Her fever spiked. She became delirious. "There are three crows sitting on the dresser," she complained to my father. "Please open the window and let them out." He did and she lived.



Is this an engagement picture? Marie looks the right age and is suitably embellished in lace to advertise her feminine beauty. It's likely that her mother designed and oversaw the making of that confection of a dress. There is a restrained formality in the pose. Her mouth seems to be either holding back a smile or gritting in determination. The eyes are fearless. Maybe she's laughing at the hat, the lace, the whole fem get-up. She did love hats. I can imagine she chose large ones because she was so short—"four-foot-ten," she used to boast, as if no one could believe how much vivacity could be contained in so small a package. She did not feel small to herself and projected that confidence through bold style.

In 1894, at eighteen, Marie entered an arranged marriage to Antonio Del Valle, twenty years her senior. That was three years after her sister Julia had sued her own suitor. Michael E. Kelly ran the marble yard outside of Calvary Cemetery where Arsenne was buried. As the story goes, they met when Julia accompanied Louisa to look for a monument for Arsenne's grave. A news article—the only

article I've turned up about any of the Bregnys—cites “a suit for \$5,000 damages for breach of promise.” Julia and her mother “said they had witnesses to prove that on numerous occasions Mr. Kelly introduced Miss Bregny as his intended wife.” Kelly made frequent visits to the family, at Louisa's invitation—“earnest entreaties” per Mr. Kelly—and he frequently took his friends. Shortly after he stopped visiting, he was surprised to receive from Louisa a bill for \$100 for dinners furnished to him and his friends. He said the whole thing was “a clear case of blackmail.”

I suppose Louisa was not about to be scammed. Her oldest daughter, Celestina, had run off to marry a gandy dancer on the railroad, a man who turned out to be a lowlife drunk. I don't know the disposition of Julia's lawsuit, but she ended up later marrying for love. To a chauffeur, much to her mother's disapproval. Louisa expected her daughters to rise in class through marriage, not fall. Perhaps Louisa had had enough of these shenanigans, so she took the marriage of her youngest daughter into her own hands.

Antonio Del Valle was Cuban, “a nobleman,” though it turned out he was “a black sheep.” That's how my mother described him, though she has proved, at times, to be an unreliable narrator of her family's story. Antonio had shamed his family, she claimed, and so they sent him away to live in Mexico. But Antonio and Marie hardly lived the lives of shamed exiles in Mexico City. They had a cosmopolitan life—Marie's happiest six years. She and Antonio were friends with Porfirio Diaz, the president of Mexico. Those were the years of his dictatorial rule, when he championed economic growth at the expense of rural and disadvantaged indigenous people. Diaz himself was a mestizo of Mixtec descent. During his long term in power, he flipped from being a champion of the indigenous to becoming their oppressor. Marie's social world was in his aristocratic orbit. Marie said he found her so charming that he gave her a horse as a gift. Once when I was a teenager—she lived with us in our Connecticut home throughout my childhood—she showed me a framed photograph of her standing proudly by the little bay *caballo's* side. I don't know much about their lives in Mexico. She once told me that when she and Antonio went to the opera, he took his Chihuahuas in the pockets of his dress coat.

What else? Marie gave birth to a stillborn baby, her first. I recall having seen a photograph of a dead baby wearing christening clothes. Or did I imagine that? Antonio died of tuberculosis. And that's about all I know. Except that, when cleaning out my mother's house for her final move, I found a red clothbound set of the complete works of William Thackeray, each volume stamped with the name Antonio M. Del Valle. Why did he have those books? Why did Marie keep them? Perhaps they shared the novelist's satirical take on high society, understanding their own position to be circumstantial and precarious. I can't help but make something of it, this shred of evidence suggesting something they valued.

Thackeray seems right for them. He portrayed outsiders who are trying to get inside, people living and loving on the margin of high society but absolutely central to its existence.



July 7, 1894, Mexico City, Marie Del Valle.

Immigrants were flooding into New York City during Marie's childhood. Mostly poor people, migrant workers, displaced by industrialization, famine, exhaustion of their land. They hoped to escape the confines of class that bound them at birth in Europe by coming to a nation where through work anyone could rise from poverty to wealth. Thus did commerce beckon. Many were rural people lacking the skills for urban life. In his book about the experiences of migrant workers in Europe and the erosion of the peasant class, *A Seventh Man*, John Berger writes:

The inhabitant of the modern metropolis tends to believe that it is always somehow possible to scrape a bare living off the land—unless it is a desert: or a dust bowl. The belief is part of the Romantic idealization of Nature, encouraged by the fact that the city lives off a surplus transported from the countryside and amassed in the city where it suggests the wealth of a cornucopia. The belief is far—in every sense—from the truth. Nature has to be bribed to yield enough. Peasants everywhere know this. Rural poverty means that there is nothing to bribe with. It is not a question of working harder. The further working of the land is withdrawn as a possibility.

They came from Italy, Ireland, Germany, Russia, Poland, Hungary. New York City in 1860 = 1 million; New York City in 1900 = 5 million. They came, 20,000 per week. Shopkeepers, fasteners, coffin makers, glaziers, miners, blacksmiths, clerks, millers, bricklayers, cotton fasters, seamen, coachmen, curriers, loom sitters, servants, boot makers, coopers, glovers, sign makers, bakers, brewers, porters, locksmiths, saddlers, bashers, butchers, servants. In my grandmother's youth, it was a city of shopkeepers, laborers, fasteners, bricklayers and coffin makers. And an occasional lady or gentleman. A boatload of 100 servants arrived from Ireland, most of them housed on deck for the journey. A boatload crammed with 1,000. How many died on the two-month voyage? Many immigrants arrived sick on "coffin ships."

Walt Whitman, walking by the docks as the torrents arrived, sang the joy of "the body electric" in this flood of newcomers. Embrace, embrace was his anthem.

The man's body is sacred, and the woman's body is sacred,
 No matter who it is, it is sacred;
 Is it a slave? Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants

just landed on the wharf?

Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off—just as much as you,

Each has his or her place in the procession.

Whitman's joy at seeing the dignity in every person is a central part of the American creed. The reality for many was joyless. Jacob Riis reported on New York's slums in 1890 in *How the Other Half Lives*. The tenements of the Lower East Side housed three-quarters of the city's population. A million immigrants lived in the tenements. Buildings that had housed five or six families were torn down and replaced with buildings housing twenty families. In the late nineteenth century, Riis wrote that the Lower East Side had the most population density on earth, "China not excluded." Tiny rooms with no windows or water. Shared outhouse in the yard. Streets known as Ragpickers Row, Bone Alley, Bandits' Roost, Blind Man's Alley. "Few glad noises make this old alley ring," Riis wrote.

Climb a dark hallway, burlap for wallpaper, pressed-tin ceiling—7,000 people in the building—oil cloth floor, home and sweatshop in three small rooms with no windows and no water. OK, maybe one window. Huge pot on kitchen woodstove for boiling diapers. Water hauled—from where? The front room, smaller than a master bathroom today, became a cramped mini-factory by day, a family working up to fourteen hours a day, runners bringing stacks of cut fabric, parts for garments to be assembled and returned to the manufacturer. Children worked alongside parents. Families took in boarders. Stitcher, finisher, presser. There were quotas to meet. If you have four dresses to make, and it's the Sabbath, do you stop to light candles and pray or do you finish the dresses?

The worried wealthy—"Will I die from TB if I buy the readymade dress?"—didn't have to worry. They had custom dresses made by their personal dressmaker. Choose the style, choose the fabric, choose the embellishment, choose the hat to match, choose the fit, choose the length. A thimble of brandy, perhaps, while leafing through the season's fashion book from Paris. Life in the tenements was not about choice. Lint in the poorly ventilated

sweatshops led to brown lung disease. Taverns and bars and whores. Twenty-five thousand pushcarts on the streets selling apples, chicken wings, beets, potatoes, lumps of coal.

At the same time, the other New York thrived.

Vogue, 1895:

From what I see of late, luxury is, if possible, growing apace, in the face of the financial calamities of which everyone complains. This state of affairs has attained such a point that small fortunes are spent on an opera cloak, a dinner dress, or a ball toilette.

. . . furs, laces, seed-pearls, brilliants, gold and silver passementerie, are all pressed into service to help trim fin de siècle opera cloaks.

Some of these wonderful and fairy-like sorties are made of flowered and embroidered Louis XVI satins, lined throughout with grebe, marabout, or lophophore feathers.

The coloring is so near perfection it seems . . . that milliners and couturieres have turned into artists, while artists are doing their best to be hailed as first-class couturieres.

A woman in full toilette reminds me of the great confectioner Pihan's bonbons, sweet inside and delightfully enveloped.

The Gilded Age, Mark Twain called it, for the shiny veneer that covered darker truths. The Civil War had been good for business in New York. Guns, medicine, ships, tents, steel blades, uniforms all put demand on markets. Business soared. Invention accelerated. The Civil War spurred steel and mining and railroads and shipbuilding and the first standardized sizes for clothing—an efficient way to provide uniforms for the troops. The Vanderbilt mansion went up on Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street, 130 rooms, a French-styled chateau. The “Ladies Mile” shopping district grew up on Broadway between Fourteenth and Twenty-Third Streets. Real estate values doubled between 1860 and 1870. Wealth moved north, business followed. And so, the two intertwined forces of growth leapfrogged their way uptown. As soon as the wealthy moved on, buildings once thought of as mansions were torn down to make “French flats” or apartment buildings. So many places, so many people, were treated as disposable to the thrilling advance of the metropolis.

New York City had been a zone of transformation since the Dutch took it over from the Lenape: A trout stream had become Canal Street. An Indian path had become Broadway. A tobacco field had become the Greenwich Village of brick rowhouses. A burial ground for plague victims had become Washington Square Park. The average American family lived on \$400 a year, while palaces went up on Fifth Avenue. Hat shops and dress shops followed. Immense amounts of money were spent on dresses and parties.

A woman's body was an emblem of a man's stature. It was a canvas on which wealth could paint its fantasies. No expense was spared to make that stature clear in the most grandiose terms. The Patriarchs were a group of twenty-five men from old New York money. Each hosted a ball with a guest list of four hundred. Guests arrived at eleven in the evening, had supper at midnight, and danced quadrilles until four in the morning. By Lent, the wealthy set went to Europe for a few months, the women visiting the atelier of Charles Frederick Worth for consultations about the next season's ball gowns, dresses of baroque detail and craftsmanship, gigantic multi-layered confections. A weekly fashion report I turned up at the New York Historical Society offers this delectable description:

Fashions from Paris, September 1866

Robes of white lawn with leaden-gray stripes vandyked above a jupe of the same material which is frequently vandyked itself; or of a lilac and white taffeta on a lilac jupe with a trimming of white lace, and a loose jacket of the same material as the jupe and similarly trimmed. For dinner and evening we have robes of thin watered silked, with brilliant color strips on a white ground, the train long, the corsage quite plain, with a band of the same color as the stripes of the robe, the sleeves very tight and especially so at the wrist. Other robes of gauze de Chambéry, of a pale green or mauve tint, and worn over a jupe of white taffeta, the corsage being of white embroidered muslin.

A more simplified elegance began to take over from the frilly and tiered and beribboned elaborations of the late 1800s. The skirt's circumference narrowed—more of the torso outlined by the cut of fabric. Before this, the dresses had been tight above the waist then falling to a fat bell, emphasizing a mystery below the female waist. Now the dress is fitted to the hip then flares in a graceful flounce

of tiers, ruffles, tucks, and ruching. Here a train sweeps from the left side of the skirt and folds under a sort of floral apron then reemerges and comes around to tie and drape—a kind of feminine bandage or bondage so gentled and subtly wrapped, the apple green flowered “apron.” These clothes make a mockery of male dress and servants’ dress and even furniture—here a curtain tassel, here a row of three oversized bows, here something belted and buttoned in ornate and useless ways. The body an instrument of cultural commentary—simultaneous adoration and suppression of female form and beauty and stature.

When Marie returned to New York from Mexico City in 1900, a young widow, the wealth party was still rolling and the city growing skyward. Sweatshops still thrived. By 1910, New York had 450 garment factories employing 40,000 workers. But the Bregnys retained their couturiere salon—stitcher, beader, sleeve, finisher, presser, a girl who worked as runner all day going out to get fabric samples from the garment district. Marie joined her mother and sisters in the business. Marie had a gift, my mother said, for cutting fabric with no pattern, for designing with respect for a woman’s flaws—a surgical wound, a burn scar, a humped back. She knew how to work folds and tucks and drape and corsages so that the eye would be drawn away from the unsightly, so that a pleasing form would embellish one less so. She got the fashion books each season from Paris, a full-colored page for each dress design. Were these licensed versions or knockoffs she was making? Customers arrived by chauffeur-driven limos. They ordered six or eight dresses, chose fabrics from the samples, and returned for fittings. My mother remembers “destitute French counts” (were those her words?) coming to the door to pick up gowns and deliver them to the mansions.

Perhaps the Bregnys made dresses for some of the guests at the 1903 horseback dinner party hosted by C. K. G. Billings at Sherry’s Restaurant. Thirty-six guests dined on horseback, trays attached to the saddles. They sipped champagne in tubes that ran from their saddlebags. Even the horses had a dinner party, their feed served to them in a trough. Perhaps the Bregnys made dresses for the party hosted in honor of a woman’s dog, the canine guest of honor wearing a

\$15,000 diamond necklace. I know they made dresses for the Steinway sisters. That is the only customer name I know.

It's often said that there were two New Yorks during the Gilded Age, that of the wealthy and that of the poor. There was a third: the maker class of artisans, tradespeople, and professionals—dressmakers, civil engineers, milliners, corsetieres, jewelers, teachers, blacksmiths, silversmiths, accountants—a striving class that could imagine for itself, if not wealth, then at least respectability and dignity in their work. The maker class essential to the performance of commerce that drove the city.



Marie as Carmen, 1912. George took photo at my home on 58th.

The caption is written in black ink with a fountain pen in Marie's hand. It's strange that she titles the photo in the third person, as if bearing witness to a life other than her own and simultaneously claiming it as having been taken at "my home." This is a message meant for those who would come after her. And this is the address for which she received a mortgage in 1905, my guess with collateral from both the business and an inheritance from Antonio she brought back from Mexico.

Her second husband, George Macnab, my grandfather, courted Marie for five years. They met at the Alliance Française, both of them eager to keep up their French. From his letters, it's apparent that his interests in her were passionate. He was a civil engineer for the city of New York, later supervising the construction of bridges and roads in North Carolina. Marie grew impatient with the courting. "Is this going anywhere?" she asked. He fell to his knees and wept. "Marie, forgive me. I am already married." He gave a story compelling enough to convince her—his wife was ill or mad or some such. He attended to the situation and they married in 1908. But George was not a good man, by my mother's account. As a child, he'd burned down a barn in Pennsylvania. As a father, he was largely absent.

But Marie had charm and wit and worldliness. She was a competent businesswoman and a skilled artisan. Since returning from Mexico, she had taken over the dressmaking business from her aging mother. Business directories begin in these years to list the Bregny Sisters or Bregny Mmes et Cie rather than Louisa Bregny as dressmakers. Strangely, even after the marriage, George and Marie continued to live in the Bregny household at 314 West Fifty-Eighth Street with Louisa, sister Julia and her husband, various boarders, and their Italian cook, Charlie Melino. Perhaps that was in the interest of the business, but it must have been cloying for George. The photo of Marie posing as Carmen was taken about the time George walked out on Marie and their two-year-old daughter, Travilla, who would become my mother.

"The whole story is manifest in every event." That's what I have written on a Post-it Note, and I do not know the source of the quote. If that's true, then the

portrait of Carmen might be seen as the story of Marie's life. *Carmen*, the opera premiering in Paris the year Marie was born, is the story of a free and defiant woman who follows her passions where she will. It was radical for its time in portraying the lives of an underclass of Roma smugglers and workers in a cigarette factory. Carmen has a wild spirit. She tosses a flower at José to seduce him, then tells him that love is like a rebellious bird and cannot be easily captured. In the last act, as Carmen pursues her love for another man, José murders her. He'd rather see her dead than free.

Whose idea was it that Marie pose as Carmen, a torrent of eyeletted petticoat frothing out beneath the fringe of her Spanish shawl, one shoulder bare? Marie certainly has the look in this photo of a woman not easily captured. She seems hard, strong, sure of her seductive power and of her self-possession. This is a dark Carmen. A don't-fuck-with-me Carmen.

George was an amateur photographer. My mother once found photos he had taken of black women sitting naked with their legs spread wide. Later in life, my mother asked George why he had left the family. He said he was afraid he would love my mother too much. Near the end of her life, my mother said, "I'm a very strange person. Something terrible must have happened to me when I was very young. Do you think my father abused me?" It's possible. Such matters were not discussed in her childhood home. But I sometimes wonder if Marie had made it clear to George that she would not tolerate debasement and so won her freedom.

What a strange setting in which to place a four-month-old for a portrait of mother and child, posing her on a boulder on the steep decline beside a city street. The hat wins the day, a feather plume five times the size of Marie's head, a fountain of ostentatious glamour. When I asked a cousin what she remembered of Marie, she said, "A formidable woman." Brilliant pale-blue eyes, jaunty attitude, always making an entrance with something witty to say. My mother hated this about her mother. She said it embarrassed her. "She never had time for me." Marie rarely held my mother, having read that it was unhealthy to do so and acquired a special swing to hold her so that touching was kept to a minimum.



Even in the photo, her touch is not tender and maternal, but rather that of a stage hand placing an object to grace the scene.

She wears a pleated overcoat so fitted it looks like a dress—the grosgrain ribbon along the front pleat opening in a gentle V toward the divine triangle. Or is the ribbon stitched onto the dress underneath? The coat has decorative silver buttons at the waist, nonutilitarian buttons, fitting for an artist whose body could become the work of art. Her face is radiant with the glow of oxytocin. But it is the hat, that grandiose pilferage of avian display that says, “See *me*, see what *my* body is capable of, but do not define me by motherhood alone.



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