The little “I” that suffered was but a part of me—
A fraction slight as a wavelet light on a world-encircling sea.
I may sorrow for it, as for others; there is pain man should not bear,
But the joy and the power of Human Life makes that an easy care.

“I Am Human,” 1904

Charlotte Anna Perkins Stetson Gilman was a woman of several names, many hats, and controversial fame. Initially acclaimed for her gifts as a poet and lecturer, she sealed her reputation by writing a series of books on women’s economic dependence, domestic confinement, and desire for public service. The theories that inform these efforts were wrung from her own difficult experiences as a woman, wife, daughter, mother, and worker.

Scholars have struggled over how to refer to someone who in her lifetime went by three different surnames. There is no perfect solution to this problem. “It would have saved trouble had I remained Perkins from the first,” she admitted late in life, and it is hard to argue with her. While many have opted to use “Gilman” consistently, I am reluctant to do so because she assumed this name at forty, when some of her most influential publications and many of her most
difficult challenges lay behind her. To call her “Stetson” throughout would be equally troubling, since she gladly shed that name when she took her second husband’s. Nor does “Perkins” seem appropriate for a woman who made her major public contributions under her married names. I have thus reluctantly settled on the one name she never relinquished, “Charlotte”; although uncomfortably intimate and informal, it at least avoids confusion with relatives or spouses.3

Today, Charlotte is remembered primarily for her haunting story “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” an anomalous tale that does little to indicate its author’s civic-mindedness or her profound aversion to psychological theories of identity—in deed, most of her works explore ways of countering the despair and madness documented in her famous story. She was rediscovered during the “second wave” of feminism partly for this story but largely for her insights into gender politics and issues that remain unresolved decades after her death.

In Charlotte’s own day, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and her other literary works received limited attention compared to her numerous polemical lectures and sociological treatises. A remarkably prolific author, she published in her lifetime nearly 500 poems, several dramas, roughly 675 fictional works, and over 2,000 works of nonfiction. She was widely hailed as the “brains” of the U.S. woman’s movement due to her arguments on behalf of women’s transformation from excessively feminine to fully human—a transformation whose acceleration she made her life’s work. She set her sights on women’s domestic, maternal, and wifely duties whenever she believed they unjustly restricted women to the home and hence prevented them from pursuing fulfilling work in the public sphere.

Prominent reform-minded authors held Charlotte in high esteem: William Dean Howells regarded both her profile and her mind as the best of all American women’s, Rebecca West declared her “the greatest woman in the world today,” and H. G. Wells’s first request upon visiting the States was to meet her. At the dawn of the twentieth century, her name routinely appeared on lists of the world’s most famous women; the suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt, who ranked first on one of these lists, insisted that Charlotte deserved the top spot.4

Yet she was and remains a polarizing figure, feted by some, lampooned or lambasted by others. By the time of her death in 1935, none of her numerous works remained in print, and several decades passed before their gradual recovery. In her final years, her once-radical views and her oft-reiterated message of public service had, by her own estimate, come to seem dated.

Most biographical accounts have suggested that, beginning with the triumph of Women and Economics (1898), Charlotte’s fame remained fairly constant throughout the early decades of the twentieth century and only began slowly to
wane after her one-woman journal, the *Forerunner*, ceased publication in 1916. My research suggests instead that she remained a well-known but controversial figure throughout much of her long career. For a period around the turn of the century, she earned mostly positive attention, but for the majority of her years on the public stage she was about as infamous as she was famous. Nor does my research suggest that she ever officially retired. Instead, it seems more true to say that her public finally tired of her, despite her recurrent efforts to reclaim the limelight and to her lasting chagrin. By 1929, Charlotte ruefully informed her only child that she had become a “back number.” Since a young girl, she had habitually compared her life to a text, but she had never anticipated her own remaindering.

During her final decade, Charlotte sought to correct persistent misunderstandings of her life and legacy by writing her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935). An uneven, unreliable, and opaque text, it makes for riveting reading if only because the stuff of her life outstrips in drama and complexity nearly everything she ever wrote. Padding out the facts with retrospective feeling, *The Living* offers a skeletal account of her personal history—her birth in 1860; her parents’ separation; her troubled, love-starved childhood; her aspirations to public service; her tempestuous marriage to a young artist; her difficulties mothering her newborn daughter; her nervous breakdown; her divorce and the ensuing scandal over child “abandonment”; her burgeoning career as a lecturer, writer, and reformer; international fame; her happy second marriage; her prodigious work ethic even as her fame waned; her reluctant retirement; her breast cancer diagnosis; her husband’s sudden death; and finally, in 1935, at the height of the Great Depression, her own carefully planned suicide (she “preferred chloroform to cancer”).

There have been subsequent attempts to flesh out this life story. Ann J. Lane’s 1990 biography, *To Herland and Beyond*, provides a thematic overview focusing intensively on Charlotte’s relationships. A 1980 effort, Mary A. Hill’s well-researched half-life, ends its account in 1896. While neither biography is exhaustive, both have made significant contributions to Gilman scholarship. Yet another important work, Gary Scharnhorst’s 1985 literary biography, freed me to concentrate on the life and the literature that best illuminates it.

Additional influential studies include Polly Wynn Allen’s monograph on Charlotte’s architectural feminism; Larry Ceplair’s edition of the nonfiction; Catherine J. Golden’s casebook, sourcebook, and co-edited collection; Hill’s edition of Charles Walter Stetson’s diary and her abridged edition of Charlotte’s letters to Houghton Gilman; Carol Farley Kessler’s study of Charlotte’s utopian feminism; Scharnhorst’s invaluable bibliography; and Denise D. Knight’s two-volume edition of the diaries, several editions of Charlotte’s works, and thorough
study of her short fiction. To this date, however, no comprehensive scholarly bi-
ography exists despite an exponential expansion of interest in Charlotte’s life and
works, which shows little sign of slowing.

To do, to strive, to know, and with the knowing,
To find life’s wildest purpose, in our growing.

“The Commonplace,” 1898

While visiting Charlotte’s grandson, Walter Stetson Chamberlin, in Los Alamos,
New Mexico, in the fall of 2001, I spent an exhilarating day in a rented storage
room filled to brimming with dusty relics. Box upon box of rare books vied for
space with letters, clothing, furniture—including the rocker in which Charlotte
whiled away so many of her days—along with various odds and ends. Amid the
jumble, I discovered a packing box filled with wooden jigsaw puzzles. Charlotte
and her second husband (and first cousin) George Houghton Gilman had spent
many a companionable hour in their twilight years bent over such puzzles, in-
cluding those sent as gifts by her lifelong friend (and her first husband’s second
wife) Grace Ellery Channing Stetson. My father collects wooden Victory© jigsaw
puzzles, so I arranged to purchase a half dozen from Mr. Chamberlin. The only
one I have yet to relinquish is missing two pieces, as noted faintly on the side label
of the box in what appears to be Charlotte’s hand.

This incomplete puzzle provides an apt analogy for my efforts to shape Char-
lotte’s life story. Although I have attempted to assemble all the pieces, there are
inevitable gaps. Several pieces have been inadvertently lost, perhaps still lurking
under some metaphorical carpet despite my best recovery efforts. Others were
intentionally destroyed, including crucial artifacts Charlotte herself discarded for
fear that they would prove misleading or, perhaps, too revealing. My version
is thus partial, not only for missing these components, but also because it is
shaped by my own interests and background. No single, coherent life story ex-
ists somewhere waiting to be accessed. There are instead fragments, red herrings,
possibilities.

In her autobiography, Charlotte makes her own attempt to impose retrospec-
tive form upon her story. The way she tells it, her life took shape prospectively—
that is, she claims to have lived her life according to a plot she had carefully
scripted. “It is a good and wholesome thing to plan out one’s whole life; as one
thinks it is likely to be; as one desires it should be; and then act accordingly,”
she advised elsewhere. “[Y]our future is very largely yours to make.” While still
a young girl, she charted her future as one of “absolute consecration to coming
service” to humanity, and she posited this “world service” as antithetical to domestic service. (Charlotte often relied on antitheses to make sense of her world; others on her list included mother/father, femininity/masculinity, home/work, marriage/career, private/public, and individual/collective.) She then doggedly pursued the unconventional course she had mapped for herself, despite several costly detours.

In order for self-making to emerge as a dominant theme in her autobiography, however, Charlotte needed to dwell on certain events and obscure others. She also had to believe that life lends itself to form rather than being inherently chaotic. Yet even the ultra-rational Charlotte could never fully grasp the complex forces that move us, including those that operate behind our back. Charlotte was the principal actor in her own dramatic story and helped to write its script, but she could not claim sole authorship, predict the outcome, nor prevent alternate interpretations.

Her first-person account, moreover, overlooks what one theorist calls “the narrative of the unconscious self” as well as “the third-person stories that problematize these selves.” A biographer has more room and more of an inclination to put all these versions into dialogue without seeking to unify them. Rather than producing a (singular) “life,” I have instead sought to illuminate the multiple and complex facets of what Charlotte called her “living.”

Charlotte preferred the term living to life. She insisted on this distinction because, she wrote, “[l]ife is a verb, not a noun. Life is living, living is doing. . . .” Doing is more important than being, and thus what matters is our active role in the world, not who we are in our most private moments. We only truly begin “living,” she argued, when we feel “well used”—when, that is, we find and perform our “right work in the world.” Only when we identify and fulfill our special functions in the project of social betterment will we achieve the happiness that ensues from participating in “the broad clean daylight of orderly social life; a range of feeling which,” she insisted, “covers all humanity in the past, lives in its world-circling activities in the present, and projects itself with boundless hope, assured and strong, into its marching future.”

Whenever Charlotte experienced this feeling of participating in human history and human progress, she felt that she was truly living. She believed so strongly in this distinction that she chose to substitute The Living for the conventional biographical term The Life in the title of her autobiography. By lingering over the shifts and contradictions in her story and by resisting the impulse to produce a tidy, unified narrative, this biography seeks throughout to honor her distinction between the verb form and the noun, the process and the product, the living and the life.
A man or woman to-day, who has no interest beyond the directly personal, is as out of place among real human beings as an ape would be—almost. Human life is not personal, it is social . . . not for a greedy little you.

“The Vision and the Program,” 1915

Charlotte’s challenges to conventional understandings of both life and self initially drew me to this project. She may have disdained the person she revealed herself to be in her private moments, but I continue to find that person fascinating largely because of this disdain. Reading through her papers for an earlier project sparked my interest in her construction of identity, a construction familiar to her generation but harder to access from our own post-Freudian, late capitalistic vantage point. For counter to our own private sense, Charlotte clung to a primarily public sense of self. Rather than prioritizing some “saturated and free interiority” accessed in isolation and considered co-extensive with identity, she derived her sense of self—and self-worth—from her perceived role in the larger world.

Indeed, she specifically and fervently rejected the psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity that seem commonsensical to us today, even as she paradoxically devoted many a diary entry and letter to scrutinizing who she was in her private moments and why she was so. Deeming Freud’s relief map of the self too cavernous and cramped for her capacious tastes, she schematized identity in a way that inverts our modern cartography: “The difference is great between one’s outside ‘life,’ the things which happen to one, incidents, pains and pleasures, and one’s ‘living,’” she mused in The Living. “Outside, here was a woman undergoing many hardships and losses, and particularly handicapped by the mental weakness which shut down on her again, utter prostration and misery. But inside her was a conscious humanity, immensely beyond self; a realization of the practical immortality of that ceaseless human life of ours, of its prodigious power, its endless growth.”

This map of identity turns our present-day notions of inside/outside inside-out.

Charlotte frequently maintained that she lived “mostly outside personality”: she considered personality a “limitation” and associated it primarily with individual, intense, but ultimately insignificant feelings, needs, and desires. She claimed to be happiest when she was unconscious of her personal wants and foibles, when she felt that she had “no personality” but was “simply being an active conscious factor in Life—in the great ceaseless stream. . . .”

She thus advocated holding “personality in abeyance”—by which she meant checking the inclinations that tempt us to put our selves first—as the surest route to health, happiness, and progress at both the individual and social level. As socially created beings, she maintained, humans could never be satisfied “trying to
feed a social hunger an ego meal” because, deep down, we really craved a larger slice of the pie than the portion allotted to each individual. She used the terms personality, individualism, and egotism synonymously to signify the stubborn, primitive urges responsible for all of modern civilization’s mistakes. To her mind, an ethical society could be predicated only on the recognition that human life is “collective, common, or it isn’t human life at all.” She admitted that the personal realm held some value and represented intimate relationships as healthful, sustaining necessities. But she insisted that they paled in comparison to the truly social relations that make us human.\textsuperscript{15}

In her own life, Charlotte reduced the ego’s portion primarily to rein in what she regarded as her needy, greedy impulses. She considered herself “a wreck on that side of me; the inside; the personal side,” so her shrinking and cordonning off of this personal side could be considered a self-protective gesture, shielding herself from further damage and preventing others from gaping at the wreck. With every hard knock, she reminded herself that the world outside ego was a less vulnerable place to reside. Lingering feelings of isolation and insufficiency could be offset by a philosophy that denied the significance of the isolated self. Suicidal wishes evident since at least her early twenties could be counteracted or at least forestalled by a mode of living that allowed her to feel she could, as she put it, “leave off being me.”

She thus repeatedly sought the assurances she offered the “Little Cell” in her poem of that name:

. . . you are but a part!
This great longing in your soul
Is the longing of the whole, . . .
You’ve been noble, you’ve been strong;
Rest a while and come along;
Let the world take a turn and carry you!

Like her little cell, Charlotte’s own longing for “the whole” or for “the world” usually arose from a deep-seated desire to rest her overwary and overburdened self. In her darker moments, she shunned the praise others offered her for living impersonally since her “personal life was so full of reproach and agony.” “I can’t live in my own company,” she confessed, “—it’s too unpleasant. I have to live for others. . . .”\textsuperscript{16} Her negative dialectic makes her embrace of human life’s social dimensions a necessity, not a virtue.

Public, social, and human functioned interchangeably in Charlotte’s lexicon as antonyms and antidotes for the private sphere she blamed for her own and other women’s woes. For example, she confessed to being a confident and “useful public
character” but simultaneously “such a poor dolorous unreliable shaky goodfor-nothing private character!”17 Ironically, while her treatises protest the separation of public and private spheres—given that separation’s potentially devastating effects on women prevented from pursuing public roles—she found this distinction enabling vis-à-vis her own understanding of self. If she could (but she couldn’t), she would have located her identity primarily and securely within the public realm she believed made living worthwhile.

Gender provides one explanation for why Charlotte felt she could never exclusively situate her self publicly, repeatedly hindering any easy folding of the self into the world. She worried that, from birth, women of her class had been trained to egotism as opposed to public service, to the extent that even she—for all her anti-individualism—still felt the ego’s pull. She identified her “particularly lively woman’s body” and her “woman’s heart” as palpable and occasionally pleasurable diversions from the “world feeling” that lifted her out and above such limits as time, space, embodiment, and personality.

She saw herself as engaged in a tragic tug-of-war between “The World and The Woman”—and the best she could hope for was an uneasy truce. At times, she felt immersed in the larger world; at other times, she felt imprisoned in her flesh, achingly aware of every bump, bruise, and boundary. Although she strove to present “the little tired lonely woman” as only a small portion of her identity, especially when compared with “the rapidly increasing rest of her,” it still remained an integral, ineradicable remnant.18 For Charlotte, the feminine stood in essentially the same relation to the human as the “I” stood to the “We,” making it difficult to disentangle her desire to subsume the self from her desire to shed a gendered identity she often considered a liability.

Charlotte’s difficulties transcending the personal only seemed to intensify her enthusiasm for the collective. In Human Work (1904), the book she considered her masterpiece, Charlotte outlines the compensatory, oceanic sense of identity she saw as the aim of human existence: “What we call altruism should be called . . . ‘omniism’: it is a feeling for all of us, and includes the ego. It is, if you please, an extension of self-consciousness, a recognition that my self is society, and my ‘ego’ only a minute fraction of the real me,” the remainder being occupied by the larger “We” she idealized but did not consistently experience, lone wolf that she was.19

Expanding and contracting, cheerleading for the collective “We” and bemoaning her “little me”—such vacillations set the tempo of Charlotte’s adulthood. The story of her life suggests that her desire for a selfless, service-oriented transcendence of personality remained elusive and yielded mixed results. Every time she
stumbled over an intense emotion or engrossing personal concern, she criticized herself for failing to measure up to her own standards.

At times, the gap between her aspirations and reality can make her appear a bit delusional. But at other times the tension generated by that gap inspired meaningful work as she imagined the synthesis of self and selflessness she had difficulty living. In these more productive moments, she extracted a general recommendation for social reform from her own self-abnegating insights, arguing that humans would never fulfill their potential until they grasped “that the permanent and holy thing in human life is not personality, but Humanity.” Her most influential sociological work thus criticized the competitive individualism of the capitalists and social Darwinists and touted the altruistic service so important to her own equanimity as indispensable to both social progress and human evolution.\(^{20}\)

Charlotte’s selfless ideal, therefore, deserves consideration not simply as a subjective coping mechanism or personal ethos but also as a historically specific philosophy she promulgated alongside other public intellectuals during the age of reform that defined her career. Her dualistic philosophy resonates with thinkers as diverse as the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer—who understood human psychology as a competition between the inherent faculties of “Egoism” and “Altruism”—and the Christian socialist Washington Gladden, who positioned self-love in opposition to benevolence.\(^{21}\)

Many of the female reformers populating the public sphere in increasing numbers around the century’s turn shared Charlotte’s faith in the power of association versus the scattershot efforts of individuals. Persuaded by evolutionary narratives, relying on maternal values, and trusting in the benefits of efficiency, they deemed progress inevitable with the help of a little collective elbow grease.

Yet even while she espoused similar ideals, Charlotte remained relatively distant from the contemporaneous movements that might have afforded the opportunities for self-abeyance and world-immersion she craved. For all her contributions to these movements, both theoretical and practical, she expressed qualms about suffrage’s narrow focus, socialism’s revolutionary politics, progressivism’s practical agenda, and feminism’s self-absorption. She felt the greatest affinity for two movements: the first, Edward Bellamy’s nationalism, which waned before her enthusiasm did; and the second, eugenics, which suited her only late in life, after she had narrowed her definition of collective humanity to include only fully functioning Anglo-Saxons within its circumference.

In certain respects, Charlotte represents a counter-trajectory to the pragmatists who drew on Darwinian and non-Lamarckian theories about evolution to promote pluralism, skepticism, tolerance for diversity, and individualism and in
so doing, as the historian Louis Menand has argued, helped Americans to “cope with the conditions of modern life.” Although also linked to reform, Charlotte’s ideas built instead on the antebellum Beecher tradition, combined Darwinian and Lamarckian insights, and ultimately dead-ended in xenophobia. Charlotte’s story is also the story of this counter-trajectory and her vigorous efforts to make and keep it viable.

The true scientific spirit is the perfect obliteration of self. . . .

“Our Most Valuable Livestock,” 1891

In 1899, Charlotte sent her cousin and lover Houghton her poem “Eternal Me,” whose title ironically comments on the speaker’s desire to shed the personal pronoun:

What an exceeding rest ’twill be
When I can leave off being Me!
To think of it! At last be rid
Of all the things I ever did!

Done with the varying distress
Of retroactive consciousness;
Set free to feel the joy unknown
Of Life and Love beyond my own. . . .

But Heaven! Rest and Power and Peace
Must surely mean the soul’s release
From this small labelled entity
This passing limitation—me!

A subject who longed to leave her self behind presents a unique challenge to a biographer: the very identity she sought to relinquish I have sought to recover. While Charlotte remained more invested in doing than in being, I have investigated what it meant to be a person who believed her self mattered most when she was doing things, even as she increasingly defined “doing” in more abstract and subjective terms.

In this recovery effort, I have often had to read against the grain, but in other moments, I have tried to approach Charlotte on her own terms. Thus, the stronger her sense of a discrete self, the more I explore its contours; the stronger her sense of identification with or alienation from the world, the longer my glance at larger circumstances. Yet even in her early, headstrong years, I have endeavored to
place her living in a wider context and to examine the extent to which her notions of identity and purpose meshed with those of her peers.

This comparative approach facilitates a better understanding of her definitions of both self and world as well as the degree to which the two ever merged—goals that are essential to my project. As a methodology, this approach honors her belief system while interrogating its potential idealizations, generalizations, and exclusions. Similarly, my focus on Charlotte’s inner life includes a thorough examination of the rationalizations, self-delusions, vanities, inconsistencies, phobias, and prejudices through and by which she (as who does not?) made her own “living” possible.25

The bulk of Charlotte’s papers are located at Radcliffe’s Schlesinger Library, though diverse manuscripts are housed in repositories in some dozen states. Several of the Schlesinger’s manuscript collections contain caches of letters and autobiographical documents written by Charlotte, her close friend and “co-mother” Grace, her ex-husband Walter, and her daughter Katharine—many hitherto un-plumbed for biographical evidence. The Schlesinger’s primary Gilman collection is remarkably extensive: Charlotte saved virtually everything, even jottings and doodles. Page after page of introspective letters and diverse manuscripts provide unprecedented access into who she was and what she wanted, making the writing of her life a tantalizing project for those interested—as I am—in the various ways a self can be fashioned.

Charlotte disdained biographers, especially the “Freud-poisoned” ones, comparing them to hyenas cackling over a carcass. In her hierarchy, to teach and uplift represented a writer’s highest tasks, while writing “to dig up the dead to vilify” constituted the basest. Writing this biography has required some digging, and not everything I have uncovered has preserved well. Charlotte held a number of objectionable views and made a number of questionable decisions. As I see it, however, a biographer’s task is not “to vilify” but to present a “thick description” of the subject’s life and times.26 By examining Charlotte’s “living” in detail and in context, I have attempted to provide both a thorough account of her particular life story and, simultaneously, new insight into the roles available to women vis-à-vis both the public and private spheres at the turn of the last century.

Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman was a child of her age, a product of her times even as she helped to shape them. Born roughly a century apart, we have traveled a long way together, and she has proven an engrossing, if occasionally exasperating, companion. While initially captivated by her dynamic, idealistic
worldview, over the years I have grown more aware, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, of the life she lost in living.\textsuperscript{27}

Still, she continues to speak meaningfully to pressing issues, including the work–family balance, childrearing, love, loss, marriage, divorce, faith, aging, and life’s meaning and purpose, offering solutions that at times belied her private anxieties. Yet even though she could not always reconcile her private and public personas, I have sought throughout this biography to emphasize their profound and complicated relationship.