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Victorian Talk: Human Media and Literary Writing in the Age of Mass Print

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Victorian Talk: Human Media and Literary Writing in the Age of Mass Print

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Amy Ruei Wong

2015

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Victorian Talk: Human Media and Literary Writing in the Age of Mass Print

by

Amy Ruei Wong

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Jonathan H. Grossman, Co-Chair

Professor Joseph E. Bristow, Co-Chair

"Victorian Talk: Human Media and Literary Writing in the Age of Mass Print"
investigates a mid- to late-Victorian interest in the literary achievements of quotidian forms of
talk such as gossip, town talk, idle talk, chatter, and chitchat. I argue that such forms of talk
became inseparable from the culture of mass print that had fully emerged by the 1860s. For
some, such as Oscar Wilde's mother, Lady Jane Francesca Wilde, this interdependence between
everyday oral culture and "cheap literature" was "destroy[ing] beauty, grace, style, dignity, and the
art of conversation," but for many others, print's expanded reach was also transforming talk into a far
more powerful "media." Specifically, talk seemed to take on some aspects of print's capacity to
float free from the bodies of individual speakers and endlessly reproduce across previously
unimaginable expanses. Yet talk—before the emergence of "talk media" such as the radio—
stayed rooted to human bodies for circulation and therefore remained unique from print in other

ways. Newly visible as strangely hybrid "human media" in this period, talk presented

opportunities for literary innovation and experimentation. My chapters explore Charles

Dickens's and William Makepeace Thackeray's chatty, editorial journalism; town talk and viral

publicity in Robert Browning's poetry; idle talk in Stevenson's and Mark Twain's adventure

fictions; drawing-room chatter in Ella Hepworth Dixon's and Oscar Wilde's Society comedies;

and journalistic disfluency in Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford's collaborative science

fiction.

The dissertation of Amy Ruei Wong is approved.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

> The telegraph and the printing-press have converted Great Britain into a vast agora, or assembly of the whole community.
> —W.T. Stead, in the *Contemporary Review* (May 1886)

> I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, "primary orality." It is "primary" by contrast with the "secondary orality" of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.
> —Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (1982)

In 1886, W.T. Stead, English newspaper editor and renowned pioneer of the New Journalism—a style both celebrated and criticized for its use of sensationalism to increase the visibility of social causes—had a euphoric vision for the modern-day press. He imagined that Victorian newspaper culture was greatly expanding Western civilization's most glorified ideal of community participation, the ancient Greek agora. As "a public, open space where people can assemble" for commerce and face-to-face talk, the agora was a marketplace and social center as well as a venue for conducting democratic procedures.[1] Stead's exuberant perspective, in its technophilic embrace of mass print media that had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century, elides an important distinction. Specifically, the "assembly" that print brings together is silent and dispersed, different from the embodied encounters of the agora. In Stead's description, the co-present world of everyday talk and the anonymized realm of mass print readerships slide each into the other, as if prefiguring media theorist Marshall McLuhan's similarly technophilic sense of new media as prostheses or "extensions" of the human body: the telegraph and the printing-press extend democratic participation first conducted amid the vocal assemblies of fifth-century

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[1] "agora, n.1," *OED Online*, March 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/4117?rskey=0j12iS&result=1. See also R.K. Sinclair, *Democracy and Participation in Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) on the procedures and spaces of Athenian democracy—such as the Bouleterion, an assembly house to discuss legislation located on the west side of the square, 13-23.

Athens.[2] In other words, Stead's elided difference between print and oral media suggests that print readily spreads talk outward into a conversation of the "whole community" that yet maintains, somehow, the embodied presence of face-to-face interactions. Newspapers—in their capacity to circulate far beyond the spatial limits of the human voice—could give heterogeneous bodies the means to participate in a broader national conversation across previously unimaginable distances.

"Victorian Talk" argues that popular literary figures of the Victorian period—from Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Robert Browning to Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Ella Hepworth Dixon, and Oscar Wilde—were deeply engaged with the complexities of mutual influence between the development of mass print culture and everyday oral culture. While scholarship on the Victorian period has examined the richness of print culture and literary ambivalence around the growth of mass readerships during the second half of the nineteenth century, little attention has been paid to an increased focus, among major Victorian writers, on quotidian and seemingly un-literary forms of talk such as gossip, town talk, idle talk, chatter, or chitchat around the same time. My study contends that the ways in which prominent Victorian authors thought about and theorized the relationship between print media and everyday talk produced a sense of "secondary orality"—usually associated with the advent of radio technologies—long before the twentieth century. The term "secondary orality," glossed in the second epigraph, comes from Walter J. Ong's well-known study on the impact of writing technologies on oral language, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982). In this influential work, Ong argues that writing and print changes or "technologizes" the nature of everyday speech. Secondary orality, in particular, describes the condition of this "new orality

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[2] See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Ginkgo Press, 2003).

[that] is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices," devices that "depend," in turn, "on writing and print." Although Ong is more interested in delineating the formal characteristics of "primary orality" that remained "untouched" by literacy and the technologies that depend on it, for the most part, he avoids the trap of primitivism or idealizing primary over secondary oralities.[3] In the context of his central interest in primary orality, it is sometimes easy to forget that Ong was no Luddite—in fact, remarking on the impact of writing as a technology on human consciousness, Ong claims that "[t]echnology, properly interiorized, does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it."[4] In such statements, we can hear the echoes of his mentor McLuhan's technophilia, as well as Stead's sense of possibility in imagining Great Britain's "vast agora."

"Victorian Talk" concludes with a look at a collaborative novel by Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, prominent fiction writers associated with the beginnings of literary modernism, in order to trace an arc in the "technologizing of the word" that stretches from the Victorian period into the twentieth century. Over a century before Ong coined the phrase and several generations before the mainstreaming of secondary oralities like the telephone and the radio, many Victorians were thinking rigorously about the effects of new print media on talk. The central focus of my study, however, is on the *literary significance* of such perceived effects. Not everyone was as optimistic as Stead about mass-market print, but as I show, a new and sustained attentiveness to the kinds of inconsequential chatter most readily associated with mass print yielded much in the way of aesthetic productivity and literary innovation. The proximity or sense of mutuality between mass print and unremarkable forms of talk is apparent from the

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[3] Ong's work was heavily influenced by classicist Eric Havelock's theory that, from Socrates to Plato, Ancient Greek culture experienced a shift from oral to written models of language and cognition.

[4] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 82.

proliferation, from about the mid-century onward, of newspapers and magazines that directly marketed casual talk in their titles. As Patrick Leary has pointed out in his study of *Punch Magazine* and the circulation of "table-talk" and print, "[t]he 1850s and 1860s represented a new stage in the expansion of [such circulation] and of the emergence of authors, actors, painters, and others as celebrities whose sayings and doings in private life could be successfully marketed."[5] Increasingly, talk explicitly became a mass-market ware through the promises of popular publications: for instance, the *Athenæum*'s "Literary Gossip," the *Critic*'s "Literary World: Its Sayings and Doings," or the *Illustrated London News*'s "Town and Table Talk."[6] Dickens's *Household Words*, published in the 1850s, borrowed a line from William Shakespeare's *Henry V*, "familiar in his mouth as household words." Thackeray's unprecedentedly popular *Cornhill Magazine*, which paved the way for new "family magazines" or "shilling monthlies" in the 1860s, promised its middle-class readers "what the world is talking about."[7]

In this climate of massified print *and* talk—each affecting the other in seemingly endless and untraceable rounds of circulation—Victorian writers began to focus more closely on the formal properties of these everyday kinds of talk. These developments reveal an interest in the textures of talk as media, rather than as a communicative channel or means for intersubjective intimacy. Often associated with emptiness, meaninglessness, or inconsequence, forms such as "chatter" tend to foreground their own materiality over and above their connection to a particular individual's expression. As Blakey Vermuele notes, other than its association with treacherous

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[5] Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian Britain* (London: The British Library, 2010), 57.

[6] Ibid.

[7] From Thackeray's prospectus to *Cornhill Magazine*, reprinted in the introduction to *Roundabout Papers*, by John Edwin Wells (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1925), xi.

effects, gossip is largely defined by its meaninglessness.[8] As a result of their status as emptied

out or contentless, such forms as chatter or gossip—both versions of Martin Heidegger's

Gerede—might seem more degraded than conversation, but they gain literariness in other ways.[9]

In pointing out a similarity between "poetic" and "phatic" language functions, Roman Jakobson

observes one way in which quotidian forms of talk might easily become literary. According to

Jakobson, both poetry and "phatic utterance"—phrases such as "Hello, can you hear me?" that

call attention to their own channeling—foreground the materiality of form over and above

content.[10] Poetry, then, associated with the highest aspirations of literary form, shares with

everyday talk the sense that words are material, suggesting the possibility that talk, too, might

serve literary, aesthetic purposes.

      To be sure, the Victorian focus on forms of everyday talk often entailed vexed feelings

about their attendant possibilities in literary contexts. For Dickens, Thackeray, and Robert

Browning in the 1860s, gossip and town talk provided an opportunity for literary, journalistic,

and poetic innovation, but also tended to be difficult "material" to bend toward their own artistic

and authorial purposes. Stevenson, however, whose *Treasure Island* (1883) forms the central

subject of my third chapter, wholeheartedly embraced "idle talk" as the highest art because of its

experiential, indefinite, and process-oriented logic. In his view, "idle talk" proves best at

narrating adventure romance's commitment to similar ideals concerning the importance of

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[8] Blakey Vermuele, "Gossip and Literary Narrative," in *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 150.

[9] *Gerede* ("idle talk") is inauthentic speech, the language of the everyday world that has no grounding in primordial being: "this discoursing has lost the primary relation of being [Sein] to the being [Seienden] talked about, or else never achieved it, it does not communicate in the mode of a primordial appropriation of this being, but communicates by *gossiping* and *passing the word along*" (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh [Albany: SUNY Press, 2010], 162-63).

[10] Roman Jakobson, "Linguistic and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: Technology Press of MIT, 1960), 351-77.

journeying over and above reaching a destination. A man renowned for his talk, Stevenson also wrote an essay, "Talk and Talkers" (1882), which boldly insists that "[l]iterature in many of its branches is no other than the shadow of good talk."[11] His sentiment posits a provocative reversal: that literature is more shadowy and insubstantial than ephemeral talk. More zealously, perhaps, than any other author of this period, Stevenson embraces the literary promise of ordinary talk.

Approach and Methodology

By drawing directly from what Victorian authors had to say about talk, my investigations are grounded primarily in a literary historical approach. "Victorian Talk" is further informed, however, by sociological methodologies that pay close attention to the formal operations of everyday talk. I believe that the Victorian interest in talk as media often finds productive resonances with research in the fields of "microsociology" pioneered by figures like Harvey Sacks, who invented conversation analysis (CA) in order to examine the formal complexities of social interaction in everyday contexts, or Erving Goffman, who published his influential *Forms of Talk* in 1981.[12] Both Sacks and Goffman are credited with breaking new ground in what David Silverman ascribes to Sacks as paradoxically complex and detailed examinations into unremarkable, daily interactions.[13] Where appropriate, my chapters either explicitly or implicitly

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[11] Robert Louis Stevenson, "Talk and Talkers," in *Memories and Portraits* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1906), 135. Subsequent references to this essay will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

[12] Goffman, especially, has enjoyed new attention of late among literary critics who take a more descriptive approach to texts, often associated with "surface reading," which, according to Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, involves "close readings that do not seek hidden meanings but focus on unraveling...the 'linguistic density' and 'verbal complexity' of literary texts" ("Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 101, no. 1 [2009]: 10). Heather K. Love ("Close Reading and Thin Description," *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 [2013]: 401-34) and David J. Alworth ("Melville in the Asylum: Literature, Sociology, Reading," *ALH* 26, no. 2 [2014]: 234-61) have pointed specifically to Goffman's own frequent recourse to literature to justify how his sociological research might invite modern literary critics to use his methodologies, in turn, to enrich new surface readings.

[13] David Silverman, *Harvey Sacks: Social Science and Conversation Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

draw on conceptual understandings or approaches from microsociological investigations of more

recent times—ultimately with a view toward illuminating literary historical sensitivities to the

complex formalisms of everyday talk. To give a few examples of what this might look like:

Mark Twain's narrative of a group of shipmates involved in sustaining a scene of storytelling

and conversation approximates Goffman's interactional view of talk, a delicate "arrangement by

which individuals come together and sustain matters having a ratified, joint, current, and running

claim upon attention, a claim which lodges them together in some sort of intersubjective mental

world."[14] In his *Roundabout Papers*, Thackeray identifies the passing along of gossip as a game

with structured rules, a sentiment shared by both Sacks and Goffman. A how-to manual by Mrs.

Hugh Bell (Florence Eveleen Eleanore Oliffe) from 1899 lays out suggested talk "moves" in

drawing-room settings in order to eliminate the awkwardness of "conversational openings"—

what Sacks calls "pickups"—and endings.[15]

    Microsociological approaches to talk also provide a useful counterpoint to the more usual

frameworks associated with talk in literary studies. Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of dialogism in the

novel have been particularly influential and productive; in Victorian studies, his own well-known

identifications of polyphony in Dickens's *Little Dorrit* inspired readings that range from Peter K.

Garrett's observations on dialogic plots and Patricia Ingham's linguistic approaches to gender

and class in the Victorian novel to Cheryl Walsh's identification of dialogism in Robert

Browning's poetry, Marjorie Stone's discussion of novelistic linguistic diversity in Elizabeth

Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, and Cynthia L. Bandish's study of multivocality in the

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[14] Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 70-71.

[15] [Florence Bell], *Conversational Openings and Endings: Some Hints for Playing the Game of Small Talk and Other Society Pastimes* (London: Edward Arnold, 1899). On "pickups," see Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*, ed. Gail Jefferson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 49-50.

periodical *Belgravia*.[16] While helpfully attuned to polyphony, Bakhtinian models for linguistic

diversity posit a somewhat absorptive model that flattens the textures of talk within the walls of

print. As Bakhtin himself wrote in "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1986), so-called secondary

speech genres, a category that includes novels and dramas, "absorb and digest various primary

(simple) genres," which he describes as "unmediated speech communion"—something closer to

everyday talk.[17] The use of metaphors of absorption and digestion to describe the presence of

everyday talk in print genres similarly tends to elide—as Stead's vision in the first epigraph

does—what aspects of talk cannot be assimilated to print.

In contrast, as Irene Kacandes has put it in *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk

Explosion* (2001), "[b]y attending to talk…sociolinguists [microsociologists] shifted notions of

conversation toward the interactional."[18] But perhaps because sociological attention to everyday

language is thought to have its origins in the twentieth century, studies like Kacandes's tend to

describe the literary incorporation of talk as a modernist and postmodernist invention. Kacandes

attributes a new interest in talk to "burgeoning [forms of] secondary orality" (such as radio or

television talk shows), and the ways in which these forms made literature more self-conscious

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[16] See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981); Peter K. Garrett, *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogic Form* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); Patricia Ingham, *The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Cheryl Walsh, "The Voices of Karshish: A Bakhtinian Reading of Robert Browning's 'Epistle,'" *Victorian Poetry* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 213-26; Marjorie Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 101-27; and Cynthia L. Bandish, "Bakhtinian Dialogism and the Bohemian Meta-narrative of *Belgravia*: A Case Study for Analyzing Periodicals," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 239-62.

[17] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 62.

[18] Irene Kacandes, *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 3.

about the distinctively interactional nature of face-to-face talk.[19] In my own view, the twentieth century was not exceptional in its literary experiments with talk's interactivity, and voice broadcasting and recording technologies were not simply catalysts for new ways of thinking about "primary orality."[20] Although not specifically about talk, Megan M. Quigley's account of "vagueness" in modernist novels as part of a "linguistic turn in fiction" traces the shift toward a literary interest in everyday language to a slightly earlier time. Quigley points to turn-of-the-century language debates as the immediate context for experimentations in linguistic vagueness made by authors from Henry James to Gertrude Stein:

> Ideal language theorists like Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell devised new formal languages and symbolic systems in order to avoid the "irregular, unperspicuous, and ambiguous" qualities of colloquial language, while pragmatists like Charles Sanders Peirce and William James believed that the logicians' efforts to avoid vagueness were futile and therefore chose to enlist vagueness as a tool.[21]

Like Quigley, I am interested in a historicized account of a literary interest in "colloquial language" (of which the "irregular, unperspicuous, and ambiguous" certainly form a part). But my account points to an even earlier interest—by about half a century—that was very much involved in debates about good and bad language, and specifically about whether mass print culture was causing degradations in everyday oral culture.

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[19] Ibid., 26.

[20] My own account is indebted to insights from Jonathan Sterne, who argues against unidirectional accounts of sound technologies causing intellectual and cultural paradigm shifts; just as important, intellectual, social, and cultural ideas in existence prior to the emergence of recording or broadcast technologies shaped the emergence of these technologies. See *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[21] Megan M. Quigley, "Modern Novels and Vagueness," *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 1 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008): 106.

To reiterate, "Victorian Talk" contends that the massive shifts in media culture in the second half of the nineteenth century—primarily in the realm of print and only secondarily with respect to sound technologies—went hand-in-hand with a new attention to the formal distinctiveness of face-to-face talk. In part a media history, then, "Victorian Talk" is also interested in the broader insights that communications scholars and media theorists have brought to bear on nineteenth-century media. John Guillory, for instance, observes that a full understanding of the modern-day "media concept" developed in the wake of later nineteenth-century new media forms:

> The proliferation of remediation by the later nineteenth century demanded nothing less than a new philosophical framework for understanding media as such in contradistinction to the work of art conceived within the dominant frame of mimesis. This new framework was provided by the idea of communication, which encloses all forms of media now, whether defined as art (painting) or nonart (informational genres, newspapers, and so on) or something in between (photography).[22]

In other words, previous distinctions between art and media became increasingly blurry in the nineteenth century amid dizzying rounds of "remediation." I argue, analogously, that just as art became communications at this time, so too did talk. John Durham Peters makes a similar point in *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999), when he traces an increased preoccupation with "person-to-person activity" as a direct consequence of technologies—like the telegraph—that could channel ideas across space at a scale that seemed greatly incompatible with the limits of the body.[23] At the same time that talk became one among

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[22] John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (Winter 2010): 346-47.

[23] John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 6.

many media, then, its particular rootedness to the body was intensified because of its difference

from forms of printed talk like newspaper gossip, chatty poetry, or dialogue.[24] This emerging

sense, among the Victorians, that forms of talk themselves were media was neither reducible to a

process of integration nor one of differentiation: talk became, at once, more like print through its

circulatory interdependence with print (a possibility that Stead imagines), and less like print

because of its stubborn anchoring to the "technology" of the body. My term "human media"

seeks to capture this intermediacy where talk, in the myriad degraded forms that were

"remediated" in mass print, seemed to float free from individual talkers and reproduce

themselves in the mouths of an endless and anonymous chain of other talkers; yet, at the same

time, such forms had not yet become separated from the body in the way of "secondary oralities"

produced by phonographic or radio technologies.[25]

In "The Critic as Artist" (1890, revised 1891), Oscar Wilde captures this very aspect of

talk's in-betweenness in an age of mass print through his use of the word "media" as he

discusses the work of actors. According to Wilde, the actor "takes the written word, and action,

gesture and voice become the media of revelation."[26] Wilde's appeal to the term media at this

time is somewhat striking. While he may not be thinking of media in exactly the same way as a

twentieth-century media theorist might, he in effect describes the remediation of print ("written

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[24] Joseph Vogl's theoretical investigation of how the invention of the telescope changed perceptions of the eye may provide a further analogy for what I describe here. Just as the telescope "denatures" vision, where "eye and telescope are both optical systems, and any natural difference between the two are erased," print communications denature talk such that both "systems" achieve a measure of equivalent difference ("Becoming Media: Galileo's Telescope," *Grey Room* 29 [2007]: 18).

[25] Similarly, as Roger Luckhurst argues in *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), the idea of telepathy as the meeting of minds through immaterial conveyance was "invented" by the Victorians as the possibilities of invisible transmission in various scientific and technological contexts were established (e.g., besides telegraphy, germ theory, heredity, x-rays, and ether physics).

[26] Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. J.B. Foreman (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 1033.

word") into talk (as "action, gesture, and voice"). In turn, talk is made up of distinct media itself, but it also acts as a "revelation" of what was already in print. As such, Wilde appears more perspicacious than his mother, who, in 1893, complained that "machinery, railroads, telegraphs, and cheap literature have destroyed beauty, grace, style, dignity, and the art of conversation."[27] For Lady Wilde, the modern conditions of the late-nineteenth century—in other words, too much technology and cheap print—necessitated a cordoning off of the pure arts of "conversation," a sentiment that Jacques Derrida might readily incorporate into his account of Western phonocentricism.

Through a focus on talk's encounters with Victorian literary print as ultimately a productive dialectic between two forms of media, "Victorian Talk" contributes to a growing body of scholarship on Victorian media history that has appeared in the past two decades. John Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003) and Richard Menke's *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (2008), for instance, are two important, literary historical inquiries into the impact of new communications technologies on Victorian writing and literature. Picker's scholarship, like mine, sidesteps the "esoteric debates" on the ontological status of speech and writing, and considers "the more palpable questions of how Victorians interpreted sound…and how it worked within but, often at the same time, against their acts of writing."[28] For Picker, scientific and psychological research on sound beginning around the 1830s combined with new "soundscapes" produced by the railroad, urban street noise, and sonic technologies—such as the microphone and the phonograph—made the Victorian era a

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[27] [Jane Francesca Wilde], *Social Studies* (London: Ward & Downey, 1893), 58.

[28] John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13.

particularly "auscultative age."[29] In similar fashion (though without a particular focus on aurality), Menke traces the ways in which new information and communications technologies including the penny post, the telegraph, and the wireless both influenced and were influenced by forms of realist fiction. In conceiving of talk as media, however, my project departs specifically from these studies by bringing attention to the perseverence of "old" media amid "new" media forms, and their impact on Victorian literary writing.

Far from becoming more attenuated or in any way replaced by the unprecedented increase in print at mid-century, then, everyday talk played an increasingly important role in shaping literary print's creative processes as well as its forms and genres. In terms of its stakes in understanding relationships between Victorian orality and print, my project shares some important premises with Ivan Kreilkamp's *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005), which investigates the ways in which the "voice" of the storyteller (of Walter Benjamin's imagining) persisted and even thrived in different forms within the landscape of nineteenth-century print culture. Kreilkamp argues that "[s]tudies of modern print culture have too often neglected voice, speech, and orality entirely or romanticized the vocal as a remnant of a lost and mourned, pre-modern past."[30] His study offers helpful theoretical articulations for my own investigations into talk's not only continuing but also growing presence amid the development of mass print. The primary point of departure that I take from Kreilkamp, however, is my interest in forms of orality that have never been privileged or mythologized. The kinds of chatter that I am interested in could not be farther from the authentic, communal voice that Benjamin invests in the storyteller.

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[29] Ibid., 7.

[30] Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

Idle, mass-market chatter is, in fact, much closer to the proliferation of information that Benjamin blames for the end of storytelling.[31]

Talk and the "Art of Conversation"

Lady Wilde endeavored to draw a clear distinction between the "art of conversation" and the degraded talk that was a direct consequence of things like "machinery, railroads, telegraphs, and cheap literature," but for many other Victorians, the line between "conversation" and "talk" was far blurrier. For the purpose of giving shape to my own arguments, I have adopted—to a degree—Lady Wilde's distinction, so that I might make my larger point that Victorian literary culture from the mid-nineteenth century onward evinced a greater interest in forms of everyday talk. In a way, what distinguishes talk from conversation seems almost intuitively apparent, even apart from the changing media contexts of the nineteenth century. According to S.I. Salamensky, whose edited volume offers one of the only wide-ranging, present-day theoretical considerations of talk as "everyday conversation," the association of talk with ordinariness actually produces the complexity of talk's many forms:

> *[T]alk* (as opposed, for instance, to *speech* or *discourse*) is traditionally coded as "familiar," "ordinary": informal, close-at-hand, common, pedestrian, everyday—more primary or originary for its proximity to us, perhaps, but seemingly also secondary, second-class, not for elevated usages. Talk is the popular discourse of the public domain; yet, free from central authority, talk may travel secret pathways, emerging "behind" one's "backe"…Talk is feared, and yet also dismissed as ineffective, ineffectual, "idle"— though on the helpful side, adequate "talk-stuffe" may displace or delay the active

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[31] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 89.

"rapier." Talk can be "empty," or falsely inflated—"big" or "tall"…Talk can also be

"small"—less offensive, perhaps, but no more admirable. "As the man is, so is his talke":

he talks the talk, but talk also bespeaks, re-speaks him.[32]

Salamensky's summary of talk's connotations, based on definitions from the *OED*, is worth

quoting at length, for it articulates many of the same ideas that I have found in my investigations

of how the Victorians were thinking about forms of talk. Going with some of the generalizations

in this list, if talk is "pedestrian," "second-class, not for elevated usages," and the "popular

discourse of the public domain," conversation, by contrast, is distinctive, elevated, and private.

In *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762-1830* (2011), Jon

Mee offers a cultural account of different models of conversation in the long eighteenth century,

and how these "patterns of conversability" were particularly important to the literature of the

period. From Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's conversational ideals of smooth circulation

and David Hume's civilized refinement to William Hazlitt's combative dissent and Leigh Hunt's

democratic sociability, Mee's account maps out in detail the highly structured complexities of

conversation at this time. *Conversable Worlds* closes with a challenge to the critical narrative

that the Romantic period was a time of "retrenchment" or retreat away from the iconic social

spaces of the eighteenth-century coffeehouse or the tavern (and into the "virtuality of print"),

contending instead that a strong sense of "bookshop sociability" persisted into the 1820s.[33] Most

relevant for my own argument, Mee traces the more dramatic shift away from these relatively

limited circles of conversable sociability to the development of a mass reading public around the

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[32] S.I. Salamensky, "Dangerous Talk: Phenomenology, Performativity, and Cultural Crisis," in *Talk Talk Talk: The Cultural Life of Everyday Conversation*, ed. Salamensky (New York: Routledge, 2001), 16.

[33] Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community, 1762-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30-32.

middle of the nineteenth century: "Bookshop sociability was a feature of literary culture throughout the period covered by this book, which did not in any meaningful sense witness the advent of a 'mass' reading public, more properly a phenomenon of the 1840s and 1850s, despite the alarms of writers like Coleridge."[34]

Again, while my aim is to trace a cultural shift toward a greater interest in everyday forms of talk alongside the development of a mass reading public, I do not wish to overstate the case by suggesting a sudden transference, in literary culture, away from "the art of conversation." From the time of the "conversable worlds" that Mee examines into the Victorian period, moreover, the terms "talk" and "conversation" often remained interchangeable. Coleridge's "Specimens of Table-Talk," for instance, compiled by his nephew Henry N. Coleridge, might be readily re-labeled "specimens" of the so-called Sage of Highgate's idealized conversation. In spite of the table-talk genre's use of the term "talk," these memoirs of a famous person's sayings generally adhere to the fairly elevated and controlled models of speech that Mee describes. And, a new genre of Victorian conversation manuals—ones aimed at a general, middle-class market from around the 1840s onward—were sometimes handbooks for talk (for instance, Stevenson's "Talk and Talkers" essay) and other times guidance for conversation (for instance, J.P. Mahaffy's popular *Principles of the Arts of Conversation*, published in 1887). As E.A.W. St. George has noted, however, in spite of the continued interchangeability of terms, these new Victorian manuals (and periodical essays) tended to place a greater emphasis on conversation or talk as a pastime, particularly one that involved upholding the social good of congeniality.[35] For instance, Roger Boswell's the *Art of Conversation* (1867) asserts that the

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[34] Ibid., 22-23.

[35] E.A.W. St. George, *Browning and Conversation* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 30.

primary purpose of conversation is "to make the time pass agreeably, for others as well as ourselves."[36] Similarly, Mahaffy—classicist and tutor to Oscar Wilde at Trinity College, Dublin—regards conversation as a "daily pleasure," a "recreation open to all."[37] In his handbook, Mahaffy insists that "not only is it agreeable to talk, but that it is a matter of common courtesy to say something, even when there is hardly anything to say."[38]

The notion of talk or conversation as a pastime (where, as Mahaffy would seem to suggest, the content—or even perhaps style—matters far less than the fact of talking itself) hints at a different role than that attributed to conversation in the eighteenth century and Romantic period. These Victorian handbooks regarded conversation as everyday practice, whereas theories on conversation by Hume, Hunt, or more famous literary figures like William Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Jane Austen, imagined conversation in more idealized contexts.[39] As a daily activity, un-elevated and unremarkable in content and in form, Victorian conversation as described in these handbooks take on many of the characteristics that Salamensky lists in her survey of the *OED*'s definitions of talk. Thus, although the present study's preference for the term "talk" reproduces Lady Wilde's overstated distinction between talk and "the art of conversation," the rationale behind this choice is to give stronger emphasis to what I argue to be

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[36] Quoted in E.A.W. St. George, *Browning and Conversation*, 19.

[37] J.P. Mahaffy, *The Principles of the Art of Conversation* (New York: Macmillan, 1887), 2.

[38] Ibid., 1-2.

[39] To be sure, Wordsworth's bid to present—as he outlines in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)—"the real language of men" distinguishes itself from the formalized, elevated language of poets like Alexander Pope or Jonathan Swift, but Wordsworth's "real language" is yet idealized as such and he is not interested in *Gerede*. As Mee points out, Austen's novels bring attention to the inadequacy of conversation and, in particular, the hazards of misunderstanding, but her central characters aspire to skilled, controlled conversation: her novels "[give] intense expression to the fraught nature of the conversable world, while continuing their valorization of the flow of talk" (*Conversable Worlds*, 211).

an expanding interest in commonplace, daily talk and the ways in which this talk moved in and out of the walls of commonplace, daily print.

Chapter Overview

"Victorian Talk" begins with an examination of two sets of literary journalistic series by the two most famous rival authors of the 1860s, Dickens and Thackeray. Dickens's "The Uncommercial Traveller" essays and Thackeray's "Roundabout Papers" were serialized, respectively, in the popular magazines that they launched—around the same time—as editors: *All the Year Round* (1859-95) and *Cornhill Magazine* (1860-1975). In these essays, both literary celebrities wrestle with anxieties about what I call the "massification" of talk—their concerns about widening circles of gossip perpetuated by mass-market print. Because Dickens and Thackeray had come of age in an earlier era, their own attempts to participate in the new economy of popular magazines prove particularly sensitive to the ways in which the increase in print material circulating in the 1860s seemed also to produce new forms of commercialized, wholesale speech. For both authors, these new forms of "mass talk" threatened to displace the individualized co-presence of face-to-face interactions. "The Uncommercial Traveller" and "Roundabout Papers" therefore try to imagine ways to restore or maintain this sense of co-presence in a modern world where the scale of both print and talk felt so enlarged as to seem worrisomely disconnected from the individual.

The second chapter, on Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69), continues with the subject of how expanded circulations of talk and print culture abetted the relatively new phenomenon of Victorian literary celebrity. Like many other notable poet-contemporaries of his—most famously, the laureate Alfred Tennyson—Browning regarded the increased

popularization of poetry through the journalism of periodicals and periodical reviews as a hindrance for artistic production. But unlike Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, or his own wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning did not achieve much recognition for his poetry until later in his life, and specifically after the publication of his massive epic of over 21,000 lines. With the publication of *The Ring and the Book*, the fifty-six-year-old Browning achieved an uptick in fame, largely facilitated by his savvy incorporation of town talkers—called "Half-Rome," the "Other Half-Rome," and "Tertium Quid"—as speakers of an entire third of the poem's monologues. The monologues of these gossips and prattlers have been typically ignored by Victorian and more recent critics alike, but I argue that they play an important role both within the seventeenth-century Roman world the poem imagines and the mid-Victorian world of the poem's reception. *The Ring and the Book* identifies town talk with an extraordinarily vital, galvanizing poetics capable of animating individual speakers into the collective production of a cause célèbre. In effect, through these speakers, Browning scripts the poetics of a nineteenth-century version of viral reception, anticipating what the literary town talk in the periodical reviews will say about his poem before they have a chance to do so.

My discussions of Dickens, Thackeray, and Browning, then, are largely about authorial struggles to exert control over the unruliness of mass talk. By contrast, the third chapter considers how Stevenson finds a way to wholly incorporate the unpredictable poetics of "idle talk" into a broader system of literary aesthetics. I argue that *Treasure Island* (1883) thematizes and incorporates talk within its narrative, connecting the experiential aspects of talk to that of adventurous action: the best talkers improvise according to the shifting conditions of their partners' language, and the best adventurers strategize according to the changing hazards in their environments. In both talking and adventuring, Stevenson identifies a poetics that privileges

process over ends, travel over destinations. I also consider some of the problems with adopting an open, experiential orientation in the face of discursive and physical violence, as imagined specifically in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). This so-called "Great American Novel" is not usually considered in relation to the burgeoning interest in adventure romance during the 1880s, but I argue that Twain was well-versed in the kinds of aesthetic and philosophical ideas around talk and adventure that Stevenson was exploring.

The fourth chapter brings attention to the world of *fin-de-siècle* drawing-room comedies—ostensibly the polar opposite of that of adventure romance—where, in the words of Oscar Wilde, there was "all conversation and no action," and "people sit in chairs and chatter."[40] A companion piece to the third chapter, the fourth chapter also considers a late-Victorian interest in a seemingly inconsequential form of talk, drawing-room chatter, in relation to highly gendered, popular genres. Whereas adventure romance identifies an ideal of idle talk with male homosociality, sketches and drama that took upper middle-class "Society" as their subject emphasize the merits of evasive forms of chatter, often associated with transgressive women and male dandies. Through analyses of Ella Hepworth Dixon's *My Flirtations* (1892), a series of episodic, first-person sketches chronicling a young woman's encounters with suitors and Oscar Wilde's Society comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (premiered in 1892; published 1893), I argue that two transgressive female types—the flirt and the adventuress—are held up as model artists working in the "media" of chatter. In spite of their liminal or even outcast status, these women maintain rather than tear down the conventions that hold Society together, exercising a remarkable control over the talk of others that enables them to avoid tragedy and narrativize their own comic endings. Like Stevenson's adventure romance, then, the *fin-de-siècle* drawing-room

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[40] Oscar Wilde to Beatrice Allhusen, early 1890 (on the subject of the similarity of his own life to his recently completed *Picture of Dorian Gray*), in *Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 425.

comedies I investigate are sensitive to a non-elevated form of talk's central importance to the shaping of a literary genre.

The final chapter turns to *The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story* (1901), a little known science fiction novel written collaboratively by Conrad and Ford (then Hueffer), which narrates the takeover of the world by an advanced race of Fourth Dimensionists—who, among other characteristics, speak with machine-like fluency and engage in telepathic communications. The novel provides a fitting end to "Victorian Talk," for it rejects the imaginative possibilities of talk as "human media," leveling a sharp critique against the influence of late nineteenth-century communications technologies on everyday talk. *The Inheritors* stages a confrontation between the perfected fluency of scripted talk recorded on a phonograph (what I identify as a precursor to broadcast radio), and the inevitable disfluencies of the human body in the practice of everyday talk. When the novel was first published, critics received it with disdain, largely because of the way in which many of its main characters were bad talkers: they seemed always at a loss for words, their disfluency marked by ample ellipses and dashes. In foregrounding the stubborn disfluency of the human body amid the various stages of talk's technologizing (through print culture and developing sonic media), *The Inheritors* specifically resists Stead's dream of perfect mass communications across a wide expanse of space. In the world that the novel presents, talk never evolves into a technologized fluency because it remains connected to individual bodies. While exploring many of the same issues around the impact of mass print on everyday talk that the Victorian writers also did, Conrad and Ford conclude with a dystopian loss of optimism about the promise of new media. In disfluency and the failure of embodied communication, however, these modernist authors discovered a positive aesthetics of vagueness capable of resisting the undesirable fluency of technologized talk.

CHAPTER ONE

Dickens, Thackeray, and the Rise of "Mass Talk"

> And there is so much Talk; so much too much…this superabundant generating of Talk.
> —Charles Dickens, "The Uncommercial Traveller"
> (*All the Year Round*, September 1860)

> Now among so many talkers, consider how many false reports must fly about: in such multitudes imagine how many disappointed men there must be; how many chatterboxes…
> —William Makepeace Thackeray,
> "Roundabout Papers" (*Cornhill*, November 1863)

When literary rivals Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray launched *All the Year Round* (1859-95) and *Cornhill Magazine* (1860-1975), their respective, massively successful magazine ventures, they were actively participating in a new surge of popular, middle-class periodicals. As sensitive observers of the ever-expanding market for print, Dickens and Thackeray packaged together serial fiction and informational articles in their so-called "family magazines," a new kind of periodical developed in the 1860s to appeal to each and every member of the Victorian household.[1] As historians have repeatedly emphasized, progressive developments such as the repeal of paper duties, the gradual implementation of universal education, and increased literacy during the second half of the nineteenth century created the perfect storm for the unprecedented proliferation—both in terms of volume and variety—in affordable print publications from around the mid century onwards.[2] From a more subjective

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[1] See Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), and Jennifer Phegley, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Literary Family Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004).

[2] See David Mitch's *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992) for a nuanced treatment of how literacy rates doubled from 1840 to 1900. While acknowledging the importance of reforms such as the state institutionalization of elementary

point of view, the rise of mass-market periodicals and commercial journalism caused many

Victorians to feel that they were simply drowning in print material. In April 1859, for instance,

an anonymous writer for the *British Quarterly Review* expressed concerns about "the flood of

Cheap Literature" whose "mysterious fecundity…cannot be accounted for in its volume, variety,

and universality by any ordinary laws of production."[3] Yet the epigraphs to this chapter, drawn

from Dickens's "The Uncommercial Traveller" and Thackeray's "Roundabout Papers" (both

series of first-person essays published in their new magazines), are concerned with the mass

circulation of *talk*. In comparison to mass print, what I refer to as "mass talk" in this period has

received little attention—despite, as my discussion will show, the ways in which Victorians like

Dickens and Thackeray perceived the two massified circulations of language to be intimately

dependent upon each other.

Dickens's and Thackeray's observations about talk, like the comment that the *British*

Quarterly Review writer makes about print, bring attention to a form of abundance that exceeds

human control and even apprehension. In Dickens's formulation, "Talk" personified evinces an

agency all its own; the human bodies that bring about its "superabundant generating" seem

notably absent. Thackeray, through repeating incredulous statements about talk's immeasurable

volume ("so many talkers," "how many," "such multitudes," and "how many chatterboxes"),

emphasizes the limits of his own cognition in conceptualizing growing amounts of talk. In taking

such perceptions as a point of departure, this chapter establishes the specific ways in which

"mass talk" became a new preoccupation and cause for concern, especially among well-known

literary figures. As major writers who rose to prominence before the 1860s, but who clearly

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education in 1870, Mitch's account also sheds light on the critical role popular demand played in bringing about eventual shifts in legislative policy.

[3] "Cheap Literature," *British Quarterly Review* 29 (1 April 1859): 316.

maintained their literary relevance with their late-career magazine launches, Dickens and

Thackeray provide unique voices for registering important shifts in the media landscape of print

and oral culture. I argue that through their respective editorial personae, "The Uncommercial

Traveller" (often shortened to "the Uncommercial") and "Mr. Roundabout," Dickens and

Thackeray give voice to a more widespread, growing concern about the massification of talk and

also imagine ways that they might productively position themselves, as individuals and as

literary celebrities, in relation to these new forms of talk.[4]

What, exactly, were the perceived characteristics of "mass talk," and why was it a cause

for such concern? According to Patrick Leary, one of the few scholars to bring attention to

difficult-to-trace exchanges between an evanescent oral culture of talk and the world of mid-

Victorian print, there was an increasingly palpable sense from within print culture itself that talk

was also expanding:

> From the time of the *Tatler* in the eighteenth century, organs of periodical literature had
>
> promised their readers, at least implicitly, the reporting of private things heard, or
>
> overheard, in the talk of the town. But in the busy, expanding, increasingly competitive
>
> world of the cheap periodical press in the 1850s and 1860s, promises of "gossip" and
>
> "talk" were to be found everywhere...The very word "gossip" in [the] context [of new
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> styles of "personal" journalism] had thereby lost much of its salacious meanings by mid-

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[4] My investigation of the ways in which the celebrity status of these authors heightened their sensitivities to "mass talk" builds on Picker's observations about Dickens's incorporation of Charles Babbage's notion of "the air itself as a library [of voices]" (*The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment*, [London: John Murray, 1838], 112) into works such as *Dombey and Son* as a way of working through his own anxieties about making his authorial voice intelligible within an increasingly populated, aural landscape. See "'What the Waves Were Always Saying,': Voices, Volumes, *Dombey and Son*" in *Victorian Soundscapes,* 15-40.

century, acquiring in its place the suggestion of "light" news, picked up here and there in the social round of London's cultural institutions.[5]

As I mention in the introduction, Leary identifies with "personal" journalism at mid century the rise of features whose very titles suggested chattiness, such as *The Critic*'s "The Literary World: Its Sayings and Doings" column, the *Athenæum*'s "Literary Gossip" column, George Augustus Sala's "Echoes of the Week" for the *Illustrated London News*, and Edmund Yates's "Lounger at the Clubs" for the *Illustrated Times*.[6] But more than this, these titles made "private talk" a selling point for a mass-market audience: that is, these new publications presented burgeoning forms of gossip journalism that essentially promised that the talk shared among intimates at literary clubs would become accessible to a mass audience via print circulation. In the view of many older Victorians, the overwhelming sense that there was "so much too much" talk or "[too] many chatterboxes" owed directly to the spread of these new, bohemian forms of journalism that the likes of Sala and Yates had pioneered.

To be sure, Dickens was a mentor to Sala and Yates, but both he and Thackeray were far more troubled by what they perceived to be the deleterious effects of too many people talking at once, especially about what they thought should be kept private. The first part of this chapter focuses on their misgivings, arguing that in "The Uncommercial Traveller" and "Roundabout Papers," Dickens and Thackeray explore the problems of mass talk as way of trying to understand their own recent, negative encounters with it (in particular, I make reference to the Garrick Club Affair, a controversy begun in the summer of 1858 that closely involved the two

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[5] Leary, *Punch Brotherhood*, 57.

[6] Ibid. See Joel H. Wiener, "How New was the New Journalism?" in *Papers for the Millions: The New Journalism in Britain, 1850-1914*, ed. Wiener (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 47-71 for a discussion of the bohemian style of Sala's and Yates's journalism as a precursor to the New Journalism. According to Wiener, the bittier and chattier writing that these men pioneered in their literary gossip columns would influence the brighter, catchier style characteristic of the New Journalism.

authors and mass print's facilitations of gossip and rumor). In short, I contend that their essays

theorize the ways in which the transfer of commercial mass media's large-scale ambitions into

oral culture was undermining the integrity of person-to-person interactions. That is, these

Victorian authors make observations about mass media's impact on what Niklas Luhmann has

called "co-presence" in human interactions with one another, where each participant in

communication perceives the physical presence of any other participant as a condition of their

interaction.[7] As a result of their large scale, "[mass media] not only circumvent interaction

among those co-present, but effectively render such interaction impossible for the mass media's

own communications."[8] To a degree, Luhmann's identification of face-to-face interaction as a

separate system of communication than mass media emphasizes their respective independence

from each another.[9] By comparison, Victorians like Dickens and Thackeray seem intensively

occupied with the interdependencies between mass print media and personal interactions. They

perceived discomfiting disjunctions between the centrality of physical presence to talk and the

normalization of absent bodies in the mass-market circulation of text. "The Uncommercial" and

"Roundabout" essays are deeply troubled by the ways in which print media's sense of absence

was undermining what was felt to be the greater authenticity of talk's natural co-presence. In

both Dickens's and Thackeray's estimations, the development of mass talk was the disturbing

result of print's negative influence on talk.

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[7] Luhmann contends that "presence is the constitutive and boundary-forming principle of interaction systems, and presence means that people's being together there guides the selection of perceptions and marks out prospects for social relevance," "Society and Interaction," in *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 414-15.

[8] Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, trans. Kathleen Cross (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 16.

[9] In "Society and Interaction," Luhmann divides social systems into society, interaction, and organizations, 405-36.

In subsequent parts of the chapter, I demonstrate that Dickens's and Thackeray's respective essays explore rather different approaches to contending with the problems they both note. On the one hand, the Uncommercial's *modus operandi* is to engage, as much as possible, in what he deems an uncommercial form of talk, specifically seeking out individuals who are non-participants in the world of print periodicals. These individuals are usually destitute or otherwise marginalized, and described in terms that suggest their exclusion from modernity: occupying "primitive" geographies either inside or outside of London, these uncommercial persons speak a language supposedly unadulterated by the influence of print. Ultimately, I contend that the Uncommercial views the talk that he has engaged prior to the act of writing as his primary social intervention against the supposedly less authentic, commercial interactions of mass talk. As such, "The Uncommercial Traveller" essays constantly disparage their own inability, as print, to bring about co-presence; the series undermines itself by challenging the increasingly commonplace notion that periodicals—unlike books—were capable of keeping up with the latest news and points of interest.

On the other hand, Mr. Roundabout identifies and embraces *within* mass talk a curiously uncommercial element. In the widespread, large-scale dissemination of talk, Mr. Roundabout sees the potential of returning to a powerfully uncommercial, old-world conception of communal ownership. He accepts, to a degree, the individual's impotence before the dizzying, modern circulations of mass talk; ironically, he adopts what might be described as a *laissez-faire* attitude toward bringing about less commercial interactions in talk. A self-proclaimed "prattler," Mr. Roundabout often participates gleefully in mass talk because he finds a way to see its disorder and invisibility as a boon rather than a threat to presence. That is, by participating in mass talk, an individual may reconstitute herself as part of a broader, albeit anarchic, communalism, where

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talk can belong to anyone and to everyone—something closer, perhaps, to Stead's "vast agora."

Mr. Roundabout also brings attention to the way in which mass talk divorces itself from

connections to specific bodies, playfully becoming something else than what it was before as it

flits in and out of the mouths of different talkers. Through an elaborate set of metaphors that

analogize the *Cornhill*'s circulation of mass print as a public dinner party, and the processes of

reading and talking as involuntary digestion, Thackeray's "Roundabout Papers" emphasize the

radical presence of such de-centered agency. In other words, the living communalism that Mr.

Roundabout specifically identifies with mass talk becomes a way of bringing alternative

"presence" to talk based on collective rather than individual bodies.

Theorizing Mass Talk after the Garrick Club Affair

The so-called Garrick Club Affair provides a vivid snapshot of both Dickens's and

Thackeray's feelings about the expanded circulations of print and talk on the eve of launching

their family magazines. In May 1858, Dickens, having decided on a formal separation between

himself and his wife, found himself the subject of gossip and lurid speculation. Thackeray, who

had heard the rumors about Dickens's affair with actress Ellen Ternan, allegedly became an

agent of spreading this gossip while at the Garrick Club.[10] On 12 June 1858, Yates, widely

known within literary circles as Dickens's protégé, published an unflattering sketch of Thackeray

in the penny periodical known as *Town Talk*. Among other barbs, Yates directly disparaged

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[10] Thackeray probably talked about Dickens's marital separation and potential affairs at the Garrick Club, but the various accounts of his specific comments present clear biases. Until Gordon N. Ray's "Dickens versus Thackeray: The Garrick Club Affair," *PMLA* 69, no. 4 (September 1954): 815-32, there were no comprehensive treatments of the controversy that strove to provide a more objective account—according to Ray, most accounts prior to his own are based entirely on Yates's testimonies. Following the publication of Ray's article, however, Edgar Johnson leveled charges against Ray for his own leanings in favor of Thackeray, in "Notes, Documents, and Critical Comments," *PMLA* 71, no. 1 (March 1956): 256-63. My own consultation of primary source documents at the Garrick Club Library uncovered that Ray sent a print copy of his article, with a handwritten note of address, to "Mr. W. T .D. Ritchie," Thackeray's grandson and on-and-off member of the Garrick Club himself.

Thackeray's talk, claiming that "his style of conversation [is] either openly cynical, or affectedly good-natured or benevolent; his *bonhomie* is forced, his wit biting, his pride easily touched."[11] Although Yates did not make direct reference to having overheard Thackeray's recent gossip at the Garrick Club Affair, Thackeray's subsequent letter to Yates indicates Thackeray's own sensitivities about what Yates may have heard him saying at the club: "Allow me to inform you that the talk w^h you may have heard [at the Garrick Club] is not intended for newspaper remark; & to beg, as I have a right to do, that you will refrain from printing comments upon my private conversation."[12] In another part of the letter, Thackeray informs Yates that he does not recall exchanging more than "six words" with Yates at the Garrick Club.

As Leary observes, Thackeray's letter tries to mount a partition between the privacy of talk at a literary club and the publicity of print culture, a move that mirrors Dickens's own ineffectual public statement, published in *Household Words* also on 12 June 1858 (and later reprinted in the *Times*), to address public rumors about his private life:

> Some domestic trouble of mine, of long-standing, on which I will make no further remark than that it claims to be respected, as being of a sacredly private nature, has lately been brought to an arrangement, which involves no anger or ill-will of any kind…I most solemnly declare, then – and this I do both in my own name and in my wife's name – that all the lately whispered rumours touching the trouble, at which I have glanced, are abominably false.[13]

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[11] Qtd. in Edmund Yates, *Mr. Thackeray, Mr. Yates and the Garrick Club: The Correspondence and Facts* (Printed for Private Circulation, 1859), 3.

[12] William Makepeace Thackeray to Edmund Yates, 14 June 1858, in *Mr. Thackeray, Mr. Yates and the Garrick Club*, 5.

[13] Charles Dickens, "Personal," *Household Words* 17 (12 June 1858): 601.

Both Dickens's and Thackeray's attempts to leverage the authority of writing to cordon off private from public talk prove unsuccessful. Dickens's statement would only spur more widespread talk about his private life, and Yates would continue to publish unfavorable comments about Thackeray and his clubland allies in popular print venues (even if Thackeray caused Yates to be officially "erased" from the ledgers of the Garrick Club).[14] Dickens's and Thackeray's reactions may seem naïve from our present perspective, but the renewed energy with which "The Uncommercial Traveller" and "Roundabout Papers" try to come to terms with this new kind of mass talk testify to their adaptability to the shifting media landscape. The mistakes of the Garrick Club Affair still haunting them as they launched their new magazines, these two famous authors were quick in developing a profound understanding that in an age of unprecedented print proliferation, talking and writing would only feed into each other in increasingly endless, untraceable, and unregulated circulations.

Under the guise of their essayistic personae, Dickens and Thackeray are able to observe and comment on, with a greater sense of objective distance, the kinds of injuries that mass talk was creating in society as a whole. Both "The Uncommercial" and "Mr. Roundabout" are deliberate exaggerations of Dickens's and Thackeray's generational difference from the younger bohemian writers; at forty-nine and fifty, respectively, Dickens and Thackeray were certainly older, but not by so much as to warrant the Uncommercial's claim as to his own exemption from all commercial goings-on, or Mr. Roundabout's designation of himself as a "praerailroadite" in "De Juventute" (October 1860, *Cornhill*). Talkative to the point of almost senile loquacity, the Uncommercial and Mr. Roundabout are chatty in the style of familiar essayists of the eighteenth

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[14] In the Garrick Club ledgers, members forced out of the club because had not paid their dues are listed merely as "resigned" so the listing of Yates as "erased" is unprecedented. The textuality of this designation rather highlights, however, the powerlessness of textual erasure before Yates's immense successes in pioneering new forms of gossip journalism based on giving readers what he referred to as the "the light and gossipy news of the day" (*Fifty Years of London Life: Memoirs of a Man of the World* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1885], 426).

century and Romantic period, such as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and William Hazlitt.[15] By adopting the personae of exaggeratedly old-fashioned talkers, Dickens and Thackeray are able to make arguments about how the modernity of Victorian mass media was destroying age-old forms of personal interaction.

In particular, both the Uncommercial and Mr. Roundabout focus on mass talk's failure to recognize the presence of other participants as a symptom of "wholesale" attitudes shared with mass print. In an "Uncommercial" essay known as "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre" (25 February 1860, *AYR*), the Uncommercial comments on the way in which oral interactions conducted at large scales preclude individuals from being co-present with one another. While at a popular theater on a Sunday to observe a sermon delivered to a working-class audience, the Uncommercial muses to himself: "'A very difficult thing,' I thought, when the discourse began, 'to speak appropriately with so large an audience, and to speak with tact. Without it, better not to speak at all.'"[16] Drawing on "tact's" etymological anchoring in the idea of "touch," the Uncommercial criticizes the preacher for being "out of touch" with his audience in a fairly literal way. When the Uncommercial indignantly disparages the preacher's inaccurate "suggestion of a dialect that I certainly never heard in my uncommercial travels," culled from interactions with the "supposititious working-man," he indicates communicative distance, alienation, and lack of co-presence between the preacher and the "working-man" (59). At a relatively large scale of participation, the preacher is unable to perceive the real "dialect" of working-men because he

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[15] In their introduction to *The English Familiar Essay: Representative Texts*, New York: Ginn and Company, 1916, William Frank Bryan and Ronald S. Crane consider Dickens and Thackeray to be the heirs of Romantic era essayists. Of the "Roundabout Papers," Bryan and Crane write: "They possessed the greatest charm of familiar writing—conversational ease that does not lack vigor or suppleness and still does not degenerate into vulgarity" (lvi).

[16] Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Papers, 1859-70*, Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens's Journalism, eds. Michael Slater and John Drew (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 4:59. Subsequent references to *The Uncommercial Traveller* essays will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

fails to get close enough, as it were, to touch them. The preacher's talk is wholesale, marketing itself to the largest number of people possible—much like *AYR* itself, which (according to Dickens himself) wished to be "interesting to the widest range of readers"—but in doing so, loses the intimacies available only through the physical proximity of bodily co-presence.[17]

John M. L. Drew offers the following explanation and context for the Uncommercial's specific use of the terms "wholesale" and "retail" to capture how scale affects personal relations:

> The "wholesale" method of dealing with people in large numbers, in aggregate, corresponds with the method forced on utilitarians, political economists and commercialists alike, in working with depersonalized figures and statistics. The "retail" method, by contrast, is the personal way of doing business involving both buyer and seller in face-to-face agreement, and as such has a human interest which wins the "uncommercial" seal of approval.[18]

Drew reads the Uncommercial's dismay—in "Refreshments for Travellers" (7 April 1860, *AYR*)—at the impersonal ways in which he is treated at a new railway station hotel as an indication of the Uncommercial's preference for more individualized interactions. The station is a place where "nobody is glad to see us, or sorry to see us, or minds (our bill paid) whether we come or go, or how, or when, or why, or cares about us" (83). The same distinction between impersonal and personal applies to the contrast the Uncommercial draws between the preacher's generic talk intended for a mass audience and the Uncommercial's own talk. The Uncommercial's confident refutation of the preacher's rendition of working-class "dialect"

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[17] This phrase is drawn from various advertisements for *AYR*. See Percy Fitzgerald, *Memories of Charles Dickens* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1913), 240.

[18] John M.L. Drew, "The Nineteenth-Century Commercial Traveller and Dickens's Uncommercial Philosophy," *Dickens Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (June 1998): 88.

suggests that in contrast to the preacher, he has successfully engaged in face-to-face talk, with physically co-present, rather than "supposititious working-men."[19]

Yet, as evident from other encounters the Uncommercial describes, the practice of wholesale forms of talk is not limited to those with social privilege. In "Tramps" (16 June 1860, *AYR*), the Uncommercial indicates the ways in which the patterns of wholesale talk have trickled down to the lowest ranks of society. The Uncommercial comes across a young "tramp," ostensibly an individual with nothing to sell, whom he describes as a "well-spoken young man" whose talk was delivered in "a flowing confidential voice, and without punctuation" (130). In characterizing the tramp's talk as "without punctuation," the Uncommercial draws a subtle link between the tramp's speech patterns and print, suggesting the great extent to which commercial print media has impacted the interactive capacities of individuals who might not read themselves. The Uncommercial records the following sample from the tramp's talk: "I ask your pardon sir but if you would excuse the liberty of being so addressed upon the public Iway by one who is almost reduced to rags though it as not always been so and by no fault of his own but through ill elth in his family and many unmerited sufferings it would be a great obligation sir to know the time" (130). The tramp's fluent talk is clearly rehearsed; his particular turns of phrases such as "if you would excuse the liberty" (a formulation he repeats five more times), "reduced to rags," "no fault of his own," and "unmerited sufferings" are clichés that issue straight from a sensational newspaper report. Automaton-like, he repeats these same, wholesale words to anyone who passes him, failing to account for the presence of the Uncommercial as an individual. The

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[19] The overall sense which the Uncommercial conveys of his own capacity to meet face-to-face with all manners of men has lead different critics—including Drew and John Sutherland—to link the Uncommercial with the investigative journalism of the 1870s and 1880s. However, as I hope to make clear as my discussion progresses, I see the Uncommercial's talk as not so much in the service of an investigative imperative of exposing the sordid social truths as in the service of engaging in the uncommercial activity of talk in itself.

tramp's words are deliberately generic so that they may be addressed to the largest number of people possible. Moreover, the Uncommercial's description of the encounter as a second-person account (e.g., "you discover him to be a remarkably well-behaved young man," "you give [him] the time," and so forth) heightens the sense of the tramp's talk as wholesale: any reader might have the exact same interaction with him.

Thackeray's "Roundabouts," which often take Thackeray's editorial duties as their subject, are more explicit than Dickens's "Uncommercial" essays in faulting the rise of commercial journalism for the increasing use of talk for wholesale purposes. Mr. Roundabout's commentary in "On Screens in Dining Rooms" (August 1860, *Cornhill*), for example, responds to a particular incident in which print transforms uncommercial talk—specifically, face-to-face, dinner-table talk—into wholesale form. What transpired began with Anthony Trollope unwittingly describing the talk exchanged at a monthly dinner held by publisher George Smith for *Cornhill* contributors to none other than Yates. Yates proceeded to write an unbecoming— and according to Thackeray, false—account of the dinner-table talk for the *New York Times* (published 26 May 1860) under the guise of "A London Correspondent." In particular, the most contentious bit made light of the "totally unread" Smith, who supposedly missed Thackeray's allusion to Samuel Johnson dining behind a screen, ashamed of his shabby dress. Smith, according to Yates-as-gossipy-correspondent, thought that Thackeray referred to someone named Johnson in actual attendance at his dinner party. The *Saturday Review* followed with an anonymous, third-hand account of that same dinner-table talk, ostensibly to illustrate the crude manners of American "Newspaper Gossip," but really in order to repeat the juiciest bits in full. Mr. Roundabout's complaint is that commercial journalism will eventually produce a chilling effect on intimate, face-to-face interactions if it continues to place such talk in the service of

wholesale purposes (Yates, after all, had co-opted his talk with Trollope, a private exchange with a friend, for printing literary gossip). In a world where talk is conducted for the sake of selling print copies, even the most intimate exchanges seem populated by threatening possibilities. In an undated letter to John Forster, Dickens's close friend and biographer, Thackeray confesses that in such a climate where talk becomes so easily distorted, manipulated, and disseminated, he was developing an general phobia of engaging in talk at all: "You didn't say anything unsatisfactory to me at all. What did I say that should bear such an interpretation? When I speak I'm so frightened that I don't know what happens, and sit down unconscious of what is done in the struggle."[20] In the Garrick Club Affair, "On Screens in Dining Rooms," and his letter to Forster, Thackeray remains consistently concerned with what he felt to be the insidious way in which mass print media could transform co-present, private talk into wholesale talk for myriads of invisible readers/talkers.

In another "Roundabout" essay, "Strange to Say, on Club Paper," (November 1863, *Cornhill*) Thackeray brings attention to the negative impact of mass print media's wholesale disseminations upon this larger, invisible audience. In particular, this essay satirizes the absurdity of individuals engaging in intimate forms of talk about other individuals who are completely unknown to them. In effect, Mr. Roundabout attributes to mass print media the rise of everyday individuals chatting about celebrities as if they were acquaintances co-present in their own lives. "Strange to Say, On Club Paper" parodies these particular forms of mass talk, conducted among everyday consumers of mass print, emphasizing the strange dissonance of co-present individuals conspiratorially talking not of one another or mutual acquaintances, but of others who—by way of the newly formed celebrity culture—are utterly absent from them, in the sense of both

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[20] Thackeray to John Forster, undated, in Letters Between Smith and Thackeray, Smith Elder Archive, National Library of Scotland. In this same letter, Thackeray berates Forster for a similar breach as Yates's during the Garrick Club Affair, accusing Forster of publishing remarks about his supposed lack of conversational wit and humor.

physical and social inaccessibility.[21] In this essay, Mr. Roundabout reports that on 27 September

1863, the *Observer* commented that the will of the late Lord Clyde (field marshal Colin

Campbell) was "written, strange to say, on a sheet of paper *bearing the Athenæum Club mark*."[22]

Contemporary readers would have recognized that the newspaper was hinting that Lord Clyde

had stolen paper from the club, for club paper can only be used at clubs themselves and Lord

Clyde died at Chatham. Mr. Roundabout imagines the following hypothetical gossip—spurred

by reportorial insinuation—occurring within the walls of the clubs:

> 'Notorious screw,' says Sneer. 'The poor old fellow's avarice has long
> been known.'
>
> 'Suppose he wishes to imitate the Duke of Marlborough,' says Simper.
>
> 'Habit of looting contracted in India, you know; ain't so easy to get over,
> you know' says Snigger.
>
> 'When officers dined with him in India,' remarks Solemn, 'it was
> notorious that the spoons were all of a different pattern.' (320)

In this imagined conversation, "everymen"—Sneer, Simper, Snigger and Solemn—talk about

celebrities as if they were intimate acquaintances. Lord Clyde's "[h]abit of looting contracted in

India" and his possession of differently patterned spoons are tidbits picked up from newspaper

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[21] According to Nicholas Dames, Thackeray's fiction was particularly attuned to the development, during the mid-Victorian period, of what we think of as "the celebrity sighting" and the special mnemonic functions that these "brushes with fame" provided for private individuals. Dames argues that Thackeray was consistently interested in how "the allure of a public world of fame extends its reach into and over a realm of memory and desire that is only putatively private" ("Brushes With Fame: Thackeray and the Work of Celebrity," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56, no. 1 [June 2001]: 24). Similarly I am arguing that Thackeray was also attuned to how the public "talk" of mass media was increasingly extending its reach into the private realms of face-to-face talk.

[22] William Makepeace Thackeray, *Roundabout Papers*, ed. John Edwin Wells (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1925), 318. Subsequent references to *Roundabout Papers* will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

gossip, but Snigger and Solemn present them as if they came from their own personal experience.

Mr. Roundabout's several additional lengthy paragraphs of imagined, everyday conversation stress mass talk's dizzying untraceability—and invisibility—from the perspective of any single individual. According to Luhmann, "[o]nly with the printing press is the volume of written material multiplied to the extent that oral interaction among *all* participants in communication is effectively and *visibly* rendered impossible."[23] Luhmann's comment on visibility is helpful for understanding Mr. Roundabout's almost compulsive drive to capture— even if through his own imagining—what people must be saying to one another as a result of reading the *Observer*. By affirming that it is the larger scale of print that "effectively and *visibly* render[s] impossible" the participation of large numbers of people in oral interactions, Luhmann suggests that print does *not* in fact preclude talk, but that it "effectively" does so because of the way in which it renders talk invisible. In other words, Luhmann implies that mass talk directly generated from mass print does occur, but that it is impossible to observe mass talk in its entirety from an individual's limited perspective. Simply put, at a large scale of participation all talkers will not be able to perceive and respond to all other talkers on a given subject, whereas at a small scale, they are all transparent to one another. Any individual participant lacks the omniscience to account in aggregate for mass talk in all of its numerous, fleeting iterations.[24] This lack of omniscience, I argue, drives Mr. Roundabout's anxious and copious conjurings, in his own mind, of what others unknown to him must be saying.

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[23] Luhmann, *Reality of Mass Media*, 16.

[24] In popularizing his idea that the air was a scroll or phonograph that recorded everything that was ever uttered, Charles Babbage noted this very problem of the limits of human perception when faced with oral forms that were fleeting yet disseminated everywhere at such large scale. For Babbage, only God possessed the omniscience to perceive everything that was ever said. See Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 16.

For the most part, Mr. Roundabout portrays his anxieties about the ways in which the wholesale imperative threatens the intimacies of co-present interaction with a degree of levity seemingly calculated to counteract Thackeray's own too-strong response to the Garrick Club Affair. The sense of paralyzing worry that Thackeray expressed to Forster in his letter, for example, is absent from exuberant tone of "On Screens in Dining Rooms," and Mr. Roundabout's imaginings of mass print's impact on everyday talkers in "Strange to Say, On Club Paper" are more humorous than anxious. The Uncommercial, however, takes similar ideas about print culture's effects on everyday talk and connects these effects to a kind of death.[25] In an anecdote from "Chambers" (18 August 1860, *AYR*), an essay that chronicles the lives of various tenants at London's Inns of Court, the Uncommercial focuses on a tenant who, much like a periodical, could "discuss the topics of the day by the hour" (164). The description echoes *AYR*'s motto, "The story of our lives from year to year." Without warning, the man is found dead from suicide in his chambers. Some paragraphs before this gruesome revelation, the Uncommercial makes a joke about printing his own body—as he moves from one article of dusty furniture to another—that suggests the uncanny transformation of the human body into print material: "Now they were so dirty that I could take off the distinctest impression of my figure on any article of furniture by merely lounging upon it for a few moments; and it used to be a private amusement of mine to print myself off—if I may use the expression—all over the rooms. It was the first large circulation I had" (162). The conceit that leaving one's bodily "impression" upon dusty

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[25] In a little-known essay called "The Tattlesnivel Bleater," Dickens provides a light-hearted parody of provincial newspapers that strikes a similar note to Thackeray's "On Screens in Dining Rooms" and "Strange to Say, On Club Paper." "The Tattlesnivel Bleater" gives a hubristic account of its London correspondent's capacity to draw out "natural" conversation from royalty: "The restraints of the Royalty are thrown aside in the cheerful conversation of the Bleater's London Correspondent, in his fund of information, in his flow of anecdote, in the atmosphere of his genius; her Majesty brightens, the illustrious Prince Consort thaws, the cares of State and the conflicts of Party are forgotten, lunch is proposed" ("The Tattlesnivel Bleater," *All the Year Round* 2 [31 December 1859]: 226). Of course, as "fund of information" makes abundantly clear, the correspondent's supposedly intimate talk with his subjects is mere artifice aimed at the goal of spinning conspiracy theories for the sake of making a dime.

"articles" of furniture is akin to circulating oneself in a print publication is somewhat eerie on its own, but it is even more so when considered alongside the fate of the man who talks like a periodical: he also attaches himself to furniture when he "hang[s] himself to his bedstead" (164). The association suggests that mergings between the human body and print material—whether in the Uncommercial's participation in print's circulatory patterns, or in the man speaking "topics" in periodical time—somehow makes the body less animate. That is, talk that repeats what is read in wholesale print has a way of brutalizing the talker himself. One final detail at the end of the sketch confirms the idea that print kills: the man's body is discovered because the other tenants began to notice his overstuffed, "choked letterbox." Conversely, the Uncommercial asserts that he receives the "liveliest personal impressions" from "talking of many things" with the different occupants. But the Uncommercial's "impressions" doubly mean the impact that talk makes upon his own body and the print impressions, in *AYR*, into which he transfers the talk he has heard. Hence, he conveys deep misgivings about his own role in facilitating circulations between print and talk. In relating what was, for him, co-present talk to a mass audience through print, the Uncommercial in effect circulates more "topics" that may become fodder for mass talk as absurd as the imagined conversations about Lord Clyde.

The Uncommercial's unhappy man who talks like a periodical, much like his "well-spoken" tramp, indicates the far-reaching the effects of mass print. Just as it is not merely the privileged members of society who adopt the patterns of wholesale address, it is not merely well known public figures who feel constrained to talk freely and intimately with others. Dickens and Thackeray perceived that in a society increasingly preoccupied with mass print and the allure of its grand scale, the most fundamental system of communication—face-to-face interactions that attend to the concreteness of co-presence—was experiencing a gradual extinction. These authors

predict in their essays that mass talk that takes its cue from print will increasingly fill the place of these fading, silenced, human-scale interactions. In "Refreshments for Travellers," when the Uncommercial pauses before Surrey Canal, where many have drowned, he takes a moment to crystallize a morbid image of what mass talk might look like in an era of mass print's ascendancy: "[w]hy do people get up early and go out in groups, to be blown into the Surrey Canal? Do they say to one another, 'Welcome death, so that we get into the newspapers'?" (76). The Uncommercial envisions a chorus of mass talkers making a generic, unison statement that privileges print culture above all else, including their own lives. The Uncommercial captures the idea expressed throughout "The Uncommercial Traveller" and "Roundabout Papers" that print's colonization of human speech and the attendant production of mass talk leave no room for experience of co-present talk.

The Integrity of Uncommercial Talk

In "Wapping Workhouse" (18 February 1860, *AYR*) the Uncommercial offers this description of an illiterate old woman, whose primary distinction is her imperviousness to print culture: "The elder of this pair [of old women], ninety-three, seated before an illustrated newspaper (but not reading it), was a bright-eyed old soul, really not deaf, wonderfully preserved, and amazingly conversational" (50). At first, the newspaper seems to block social intercourse between the woman and the Uncommercial, in that it serves as a physical barrier between potential partners in talk. But the description ends by showing how the Uncommercial and the old woman surmount this barrier; they engage—"amazingly" and unexpectedly from the Uncommercial's point of view—in what seems to have been lively, co-present talk with each other. The passage suggests that the keys to their conversational success are the woman's

illiteracy and possible blindness, suggested by her "not reading." But the Uncommercial also counters implications of the woman's blindness—whether to text and its secrets or to the physical world more broadly—with the description that she is a "bright-eyed soul," full of a certain kind of clarity that trumps the enlightenment associated with literacy.[26] In finally characterizing the woman as "really not deaf," the Uncommercial deliberately shifts associations of clarity and enlightenment away from the visuality of writing and reading, and toward the orality of talking and the aurality of listening.

In "The Uncommercial Traveller," figures like the old woman are examples of individuals, who, by virtue of their linguistic distance from wholesale print, offer the experience of uncommercial talk that fully honors co-presence. In referring to her as a "bright-eyed soul, not really deaf," the Uncommercial also attributes a moral clarity to the old woman that applies also to other uncommercial talkers in different essays. The old woman in effect serves as an allegorical embodiment of the kind of uncommercial talker that the Uncommercial seeks throughout his travels. Although the Uncommercial is not always explicit about pointing out the ways in which different uncommercial talkers are immune to mass print's corruptions, the idea is often implied. In aggregate, the Uncommercial's various descriptions of morally upright, co-present talk testify to the survival of such forms amid what seemed to be thoroughly wholesale, commercial systems of communication. As such, these uncommercial linguistic encounters based on small scale, face-to-face interactions form a kind of bulwark against the encroachments of mass print and the related development of mass talk.

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[26] Dickens satirizes the fetishization of literacy in a famous scene from *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), in which Betty Higden brags that the orphan Sloppy can "do the police in different voices" when he reads the newspaper out loud, ed. Michael Cotsell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 198. For Higden, Sloppy's ability to transform print into the liveliness of talk signals his worth to potential adoptive parents.

For the Uncommercial, the primary means by which uncommercial talk maintains its boundaries against wholesale influence is through a difference in temporal orientation. Scale alone, as we have seen in both the Uncommercial and Mr. Roundabout's examples, cannot offer protection from wholesale influence: face-to-face interaction can harbor as much a sense of "absence" as reader-writer interactions when it is made up of talk that either repeats or takes its cues from mass print. The specific sense that print is always belated in relation to talk is central to the very first "Uncommercial" essay, in which the Uncommercial describes his visit to a small, Welsh village called Llanallgo after the *Royal Charter* shipwreck upon its shores (28 January 1860, *AYR*). The talk that the Uncommercial engages with the reverend of Llanallgo, who supervises the burial of bodies, is specifically shown as having a hold on the present that print—despite journalism's grandest aspirations—could never hope to catch up to.

Brigid Lowe's description of the way in which the Uncommercial's account struggles with its own participation within the flurry of journalistic print that followed upon the heels of the disaster captures some of the temporal dimensions of print's perceived inadequacies:

> In self-conscious use of the journalist's jargon of "transparent" reportage—"Australian Trader and passenger ship, homeward bound...morning of the twenty-sixth of this October...at least five hundred human lives"—Dickens conjures the disaster as an official "event," but recognises nonetheless the inadequacy of such an account. His writing struggles to capture change, which is so "hard to imagine."[27]

Lowe observes that Dickens's "self-conscious" deployment of journalistic convention at once legitimizes and confounds the reportorial practice of capturing the present moment by organizing it into a newsworthy "event." Print journalism, in the Uncommercial's view, is therefore always

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[27] Brigid Lowe, *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy* (London: Anthem Press, 2007), 27.

subject to an internal tension, where journalism prides itself on its capacity for timeliness at the same time that print's static materialism resists change. Lowe describes, moreover, how the Uncommercial is "transfixed by a consciousness of the historicity of his own account," how memory constituted in print seems particularly late in its inability to "save" those who have already been lost at sea.[28]

In a word, Lowe notes the way in which the print of the Uncommercial's account registers its own belatedness in relation to the elusive "present" it seeks to capture, in spite of its perhaps equal investment in memory's orientation toward the temporal transcendence of eternal remembrance. I argue that the essay on the *Royal Charter* also emphasizes print's belatedness relative to talk as a way of pointing out the sacred integrity of the Uncommercial's own personal interview with the reverend at Llanallgo.[29] By associating his own "little record" with the "wreck of letters" that relatives desperately sent to the reverend (in hopes that the reverend could recognize the bodies of their loved ones), the Uncommercial makes an important point about his own print account's inability to convey feeling tied to his presence at Llanallgo. That is, just as the "wreck of letters" cannot recover the living bodies of loved ones, the Uncommercial's account of his talk with the reverend cannot recover the intimate presence of his person-to-person meetings with him. In the passage that follows, the Uncommercial describes his talk with the reverend as far superior to print in capturing, specifically, the eternal wisdom of Christian values:

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[28] Ibid., 28.

[29] According to the available textual record—a letter from one D.W. Irons from Wales—Dickens did not visit Llanallgo until the end of December 1859 (see note from Dent edition, 27). Dickens took, therefore, a significant amount of journalistic license when testifying to his first-hand witness of the reverend's charitable work immediately in the wake of the wreck.

I read more of the New Testament in the fresh frank face going up the village beside me, in five minutes, than I have read in anathematising discourses (albeit put to press with enormous flourishing of trumpets), in all my life. I heard more of the Sacred Book in the cordial voice that had nothing to say about its owner, than in all the would-be celestial pairs of bellows that have ever blown conceit at me. (32)

By asserting that he "read more…in the fresh frank face" than in the "anathematising discourses…put to press," the Uncommercial argues that a co-present interaction beats writing at communicating Christian charity. Moreover, in calling attention to the "five minutes" of co-present talk versus the lifetime of reading, the Uncommercial suggests that talk operates through a more efficient temporality than print when it comes to communicating something of moral value. In the second part of his description, the Uncommercial further elevates co-present interaction by disparaging print's attempts to constitute the vocality of "trumpets" and "bellows" from within itself.

Print, then, is always late relative to talk when seeking to convey presence. In the case of the reverend, the particular immediacy of his "fresh frank face" and his "cordial voice" facilitates the transfer of sympathetic feeling. The essay on the *Royal Charter* powerfully suggests that temporal difference—between the "presentness" of the Uncommercial's talk with the reverend and the lateness of all forms of print—can protect such talk against corruptions by print. Hence, the uncommercial, co-present talk that the reverend and the Uncommercial shared, even if subsequently reported in the wholesale print of *AYR*, is able to maintain its integrity as an exchange unaffected by mass print's less authentic, "absent" interactions. As the Uncommercial notes in his tirade against "anathematising discourses" in print, Christian feeling is best conveyed through the physicalized concreteness of person-to-person talk, and absent encounters between

readers and writers can never recover the same degree of feeling. Even in a comment that the

Uncommercial makes ostensibly to emphasize the speed with which he tries to capture this

feeling in writing, print's lateness is obtrusively apparent: "And he had swung the gate of his

little garden in coming out to meet me, not half an hour ago" (32).

The sense that print cannot recover the impact of talk's presence, moreover, is intensified

by the subjective ways in which the Uncommercial's account of Llanallgo draws on existing

conceptions of Welsh primitivism. Victorian Londoners held bleak views of Wales as a

backwards, uncivilized place. In 1859, the village of Llanallgo with its "little church of

antiquity" dating back to the sixth or seventh-century and mostly illiterate inhabitants must have

seemed quite remote in relation to the world to which the Victorian periodicals belonged.

Accounts of the shipwreck reported in mainstream journalistic publications including the *Daily

News*, *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Times* sensationally demonized the Welsh peasants as rapacious

plunderers.[30] Dickens's sympathetic portrayal of rural Welsh culture made a point of departing

from such negative views, identifying the largely preliterate conditions of Llanallgo as an

uncommercial asset. The Uncommercial favors the reverend and his illiterate family's talk for its

independence from the wholesale, mass talk of London's millions of readers. To the

Uncommercial, Llanallgo seems an idyllic, pre-commercial society that operates according to a

temporality measured by nature's rhythms (the reverend was "blown out of bed at about day-

break by the wind") and charitable Christian action (the "sweet and patient" work of identifying

and burying bodies) (30-31). As such, Llanallgo is portrayed as operating under a naturalistic,

pre-capitalist conception of time that remains more hospitable to uncommercial talk, as opposed

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[30] Lowe, *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy*, 34-36.

to London, which operates according to standardized, commercialized times set to new technologies in transport and communications.[31]

Not unexpectedly, then, the kind of uncommercial talk so easily conducted in a place like Llanallgo is exceedingly rare in commercialized London. Still, the Uncommercial manages to ferret out uncommercial talking partners amid individuals whose social identities and geographies within the city render them subjectively of the past, much in the same way that Llanallgo makes the reverend seem of a prior age. Specifically, as I have mentioned, the Uncommercial is most successful at finding uncommercial talkers among destitute, marginalized populations. He tends to describe the individual figures that he encounters in terms of their spatio-temporal difference from the middle-class London public. While taking a walk into East London in "Wapping Workhouse," for example, the Uncommercial comes upon an Orientalized underworld marked by spatio-temporal otherness: "I gave myself up as having lost my way, and, abandoning myself to the narrow streets in a Turkish frame of mind, relied on predestination to bring me somehow or other to the place I wanted if I were ever to get there" (44). By abandoning both a sense of destination and understanding of time as diachronic, the Uncommercial enters into a frame of mind that prepares him to engage in uncommercial talk with a young man who seems to emerge from prehistoric, antediluvian muck:

 I found myself on a swing bridge, looking down at some dark locks in some dirty

 water.[32] Over against me, stood a creature remotely in the likeness of a young man, with a

[31] See Jonathan H. Grossman, *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) on how Dickens's novels register dramatic changes in Victorian perceptions of time as a result of the expanding passenger transport networks, and Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008) on the close formal identifications between literary realism and telegraphic technologies.

[32] The "swing bridge" refers to the "Old Gravel Bridge." See Bertram Matz, *Dickensian*, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1906), 42.

puffed sallow face, and a figure all dirty and shiny and slimy, who may have been the youngest son of his filthy old father, Thames. (44)

Certainly, the Uncommercial's portrayal of this poverty-stricken "creature," which he later resorts to calling a genderless "apparition," makes problematic connections between poverty and pre-human or sub-human characteristics. The poor young man is, after all, shown as begotten from primordial river slime, completely cordoned off from civilized society.

Yet the Uncommercial's account of the talk he engages with "the apparition" subjects his own assumptions about him to no small dose of irony. Describing his approach towards "the apparition," the Uncommercial boasts of his own "great sensitiveness…to be equal to the intellectual pressure of the conversation," only to reveal, some short moments later, the disastrous communicative breakdowns that ultimately cut his talk with "the apparition" short:

> "A common place for suicide," said I, looking down at the locks.
>
> "Sue?" returned the ghost, with a stare. "Yes! And Poll. Likewise Emily. And Nancy. And Jane…Always headerin' down here, they is. Like one o'clock."
>
> "And at about that hour of the morning, I suppose?"
>
> …
>
> Here the apparition rested its profile on the bar, and gurgled in a sarcastic manner. "There must be somebody comin'. They don't go a headerin' down here, wen there an't no Bobby nor gen'ral Cove, fur to hear the splash."
>
> According to my interpretation of these words, I was myself a General Cove, or member of the miscellaneous public. In which modest character, I remarked:
>
> "They are often taken out, are they, and restored?"

"I dunno about restored," said the apparition, who, for some occult reason, very much objected to that word; "they're carried into the werkiss and put into a 'ot bath, and brought round. But I dunno about restored," said the apparition; "blow *that!*"—and vanished. (44)

The Uncommercial's questions are notably about place and time; like a dutiful reporter for a respectable, middle-class newspaper, he seeks to package suicides as newsworthy events and/or statistics. The apparition's answers resist, however, such wholesale packaging: mishearing the question about place, he proceeds to individualize each suicide by giving names, and instead of confirming the time during which these women jump, he answers that it depends on who is walking by. In this interaction, the apparition is an uncommercial talker who refuses to participate in the mass talk of middle-class culture even as he is confronted with it. The communicative breakdowns—the unexpected, unscripted negotiations and turns of conversation, moreover, bring about a stronger sense of co-presence. That is, the apparition's resistance to the Uncommercial's questions calls attention to the fact that the two of them do not share the same language, not only in terms of their dialect but also the social scripts they each follow. Their linguistic difference is further emphasized in the apparition's strong objection to the word "restored" and the Uncommercial's self-ironizing comment that he could not fathom why (in attributing the apparition's offense to "some occult reason," he only pretends not to know that his diction has sanitized workhouse suffering, in order to call attention to his and "the miscellaneous public's" inflexible understandings). As such, they are forced into a holistic experience of each other's difference, which ultimately manifests itself not only in more abstract linguistic and sociolinguistic ways, but also in the more physicalized sense of hearing and seeing differently.

In other words, their most awkward moments of confrontation compel them to notice each other, to be present with each other's distinction.

A physicalized sense of being in the same place and time with a talking partner, however, may also be derived from harmonious, amenable interactions. Certainly, the Uncommercial's talk with the reverend offers one example of harmonious, co-present interaction, though the conditions of the exchange involve the Uncommercial's spatio-temporal transportation out of metropolitan London and into primitive Llanallgo. In "Chatham Dockyards" (29 August 1863, *AYR*), the Uncommercial engages harmonious, uncommercial talk in London. Specifically, he describes his talk with—or more precisely, his listening to—a "wise boy" he renames the "Spirit of the Fort" (a moniker no less otherworldly than "apparition"), who, like the "apparition," seems oddly glued to, or emergent from, his environment. Of him and his talk, the Uncommercial writes:

> But for him, I might never have heard of the 'dumb-ague,' respecting which malady I am now learned. Had I never sat at his feet, I might have finished my mortal career and never known that when I see a white horse on a barge's sail, that barge is a lime barge. For precious secrets in reference to beer, am I likewise beholden to him…His manner of imparting information, is thoughtful, and appropriate to the scene. As he reclines beside me, he pitches into the river a little stone or piece of grit, and then delivers himself oracularly, as though he spoke out of the center of the spreading circle that it makes in the water. (290)

The boy's talk, anchored in his immediate experience of his environment (as the image of his voice's attachment to the rings of water suggests), fully honors the circumstances of his presence. In the Uncommercial's description of their interaction, topics arise "appropriate to the

scene" and are dependent upon their co-presence at the dockyards. Though certainly different from the Uncommercial's vexed talk with "the apparition," his talk with the "Spirit of the Fort" is similarly uncommercial because it is attuned to the shifting conditions of co-presence rather than beholden to some form of prior, textual scripting. There is nothing wholesale or pre-packaged about the boy's talk because it is meant only for the interlocutor that happens to be there with him at the moment.

In all of the examples of uncommercial talk I have discussed, the quality of "pastness" inhabited and possessed by the Uncommercial's talking partners seems to protect them from the commercial encroachments of print. Whether primordial, primitive, or having "passed on" from life, the reverend, the "apparition," and the "Spirit of the Fort" all present an alternative frame of temporal reference than that which the forward-looking newspapers and periodicals tried to produce—that is, as Mark Turner theorizes, "[t]he natural state of being for periodicals is change and movement, and newspapers and periodicals rely, to a greater or lesser degree, on the 'new' and on the very modern concept of advancement, of moving forward, of futurity."[33] Yet to understand the uncommercial talkers as "past" is to privilege commercial, periodical time—for the perception that they are past is just the same as the notion of print's belatedness discussed earlier, but from a point of view favorable to print's futurity rather than talk's presence. The Uncommercial illustrates these two ways of seeing the temporal disjunction between talk and print in his tense switch from past to present when developing the image of the "wise boy's" talk merging with the movement of the water. When focusing on what he learned from their exchange, the Uncommercial represents their talk as a past occurrence, but when focusing on the manner of the boy's talk, he makes a sudden switch to emphasize his talk's distinct hold on the

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[33] Mark Turner, "Periodical Time in the Nineteenth Century," *Media History* 8, no. 2 (2002): 184.

present. I argue that this switch in tense, which catapults the boy's uncommercial talk into a kind of always present, brings attention to print's belatedness within a frame of temporal reference that begins with the premise of talk as present. Here the Uncommercial suggests that neither the boy nor his talk is past, then, but rather, the "miscellaneous public" and its periodicals are belated.

If these uncommercial talkers are all, in some way or another, protected by their "pastness" from the corruptions of wholesale print culture, can it be possible for a talker such as the Uncommercial, literate and thoroughly immersed within the circulations of periodicals and journalism, to talk uncommercially too? Put another way, can any modern Victorian individual who is not hermetically sealed off from mass print fully maintain the natural co-presence of face-to-face interaction? In his account of his own sleepwalking in "Shy Neighborhoods" (26 May 1860, *AYR*), the Uncommercial provides at least some hope for such a possibility. He suggests that through certain, involuntary processes of memory, an individual might find a way to access a prior mode of linguistic expression unadulterated by the influence of mass print media:

> It is a curiosity of broken sleep, that I made immense quantities of verses on that pedestrian occasion (of course I never make any when I am in my right senses), and that I spoke a certain language once pretty familiar to me, but which I have nearly forgotten from disuse, with fluency. Of both these phenomena I have such frequent experience in the state between sleeping and waking, that I sometimes argue with myself that I know I cannot be awake, for, if I were, I should not be half so ready. The readiness is not imaginary, because I can often recal [*sic*] long strings of the verses, and many turns of fluent speech, after I am broad awake. (118)

While engaged in somnambulism, the Uncommercial observes himself (though we wonder how he is able to do so?) making up poetry and speaking a language in which he used to be fluent. The Uncommercial gives few clues as to the nature of this "certain language once pretty familiar," although ostensibly he could, since he claims that he recalls substantial "turns" of it after he is fully awake. Some insight into this language, however, might be gathered from an article on somnambulism Dickens wrote for *Household Words* in 1851, in which he cites instances of people reciting strings of poetry while asleep, and speaking what he calls "unknown languages."[34] While Dickens also remains vague in this essay about these kinds of "unknown languages," he *is* certain about one thing—sleep-talking's veracity: "[T]he truthfulness of sleep-talking may, we apprehend, always be relied on. In this state there is no attempt at evasion; no ingenuity exercised to disguise anything."[35] I argue that Dickens's sense of talk devoid of "evasion" and disguising "ingenuity" is similar if not the same as his understanding of uncommercial talk, which, in its careful attendance to presence, cannot be too concerned with hidden or prior-set motives.

In the same article from *Household Words*, Dickens clarifies that he does not regard such recollection as particularly mysterious, for he ultimately consigns these apparently "unknown" forms of orality to the resurfacing, merely, of "old associations."[36] Here he refers directly to associationism: a branch of psychology dating back to the eighteenth century that explored how the mind made connections in the process of memory-formation.[37] According to Nicholas Dames, Dickens and other nineteenth-century authors were particularly interested in a newer

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[34] Charles Dickens, "Somnambulism," *Household Words* 58 (3 May 1851): 136.

[35] Ibid., 133.

[36] Ibid., 136.

[37] David Hartley is usually noted as the founder of associationist theory.

brand of associationism that emphasized the mind's narrative orderliness, its capacity to recollect only pieces of the past that form a ready connection to the present, therefore enabling the Victorian subject to form a coherent sense of self. In such a view, even that which may be involuntarily recalled operates according to a broader logic that plots an autobiographically cohesive story.[38] As such, the Uncommercial's less-than-conscious recovery of a past language is an unproblematic recollection of a fluent form of talk that is somehow less accessible to his waking consciousness. In light of Dickens's interest in sleep-talking as the recovery of a more veracious, past language, I suggest that the Uncommercial's "once…familiar" language is his own talk as a child, at one time unadulterated by familiarity with mass print. From the Uncommercial's perspective, such talk—like that of the reverend of Llanallgo—is more honest than wholesale forms of talk, which tend to treat individuals as means to particular (and often hidden) ends. Whether in the mouth of the preacher who seeks to indoctrinate the largest number of working-class individuals into bourgeois respectability, or the tramp who seeks to swindle every man who passes, wholesale talk is full of "evasions." Even someone such as the man who discusses topics like a periodical practices some form of evasion in avoiding more intimate forms of interaction.

What, finally, are the stakes behind all of the uncommercial talk that the Uncommercial has sought out, if one of the central characteristics of this kind of talk is that it is irrecoverable within print media? These interactions, which retain a monopoly on presence to which print will always be late, serve as a bulwark against increasing disseminations of wholesale language. Since the Uncommercial essays repeatedly emphasize instances of uncommercial talk's success

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[38] See Nicholas Dames, "Associated Fictions: Dickens, Thackeray, and Mid-Century Fictional Autobiography," in *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fictions 1810-1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 125-66. See also Sarah Winter, *The Pleasures of Memory: Learning to Read with Charles Dickens* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), for further discussion of how Dickens's novels view serial reading as a form of associationism that can help audiences develop new social and political affiliations.

at maintaining its boundaries against print culture and wholesale language more broadly, they suggest the possibility of a struggle between commercial and uncommercial language, which makes its greatest gains within the arena of orality. That is, print's belatedness renders it irrelevant in the struggle between talk that maintains its natural hold on presence and talk that does not. In a word, the Uncommercial essays, though not themselves involved in the contest, signal that the confrontation between authentic, retail-oriented, uncommercial talk and inauthentic, wholesale, commercial talk is ongoing elsewhere.

I turn now to the full passage from "Arcadian London" (29 September 1860, *AYR*) from which this chapter's epigraph is drawn in order to underscore the way in which the Uncommercial essays gesture towards a largely invisible realm of oral interaction, where mass talk's oppressive effects upon the individual were daily increasing:

How do I know but there may be subtle influences in Talk, to vex the souls of men who don't hear it? How do I know but that Talk, five, ten, twenty miles off, may get into the air and disagree with me? If I get up, vaguely troubled and wearied and sick of my life, in the session of Parliament, who shall say that my noble friend, my right reverend friend, my right honourable friend, my honourable friend, my honourable and learned friend, or my honourable and gallant friend, may not be responsible for that effect upon my nervous system? Too much Ozone in the air, I am informed and fully believe (though I have no idea what it is), would affect me in a marvelously disagreeable way; why may not too much Talk? I don't see or hear the Ozone; I don't see or hear the Talk. And there is so much Talk; so much too much; such loud cry, and such scant supply of wool; such a deal of fleecing, and so little fleece! (187)

The Uncommercial conceives of "Talk" as threateningly elusive, which like the "[o]zone in the air," wreaks havoc upon the "souls" and "nervous system[s]" of individuals who may not even be aware of its presence. Wholesale in nature, this Talk seems invisible and even inaudible ("I don't see or hear the Talk") because it does not operate according to the co-presence of tangible, person-to-person interactions. Moreover, in specifically mocking the officious talk of Parliament ("my noble friend, my right reverend friend…") while taking seriously the very real way in which the emptiness of such talk ("such loud cry, and such scant supply of wool…so little fleece!") fails to improve lives in any materially concrete way, the Uncommercial points to larger social problems that may worsen should wholesale talk continue its incursions without a check.[39]

Of course, uncommercial talk in itself may not bring about social change on a material let alone systemic level. But the "Uncommercial" essays do suggest that talk attuned to co-presence alone can offer the necessary experience of authentic and often educative connections between individuals. The essays indicate that these kinds of connections alone can foster truer understandings between people, which may in turn guide materially impactful decisions. Whether listening to the humble reverend, the wise boy, or getting rebuked by the "apparition" on the bridge, the Uncommercial's willing engagement with each of these figures generates connective talk oriented towards the individual that serves as fortification against the alienating effects of wholesale talk. As the Uncommercial makes clear in "Arcadian London," Parliament's seasonal recess only offers, at best, a temporary respite from the overwhelming proliferation of

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[39] A similar critique of Parliamentary "talk" may be found in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), in which Ralph Nickleby attends a public meeting on resolutions to grant capital to the "United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery." At the meeting, speakers, humorously full of bureaucratic hot air, read out the resolutions and made their cases entirely in "wholesale" speeches, the crowds erupting with passion over the most trivial of issues (Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* [London: Chapman and Hall, 1839], 9-11).

mass talk in modern London. In order for his wish—that "the air will tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, remain untroubled by this superabundant generating of Talk"—to be fulfilled, there must be enough uncommercial talk released into the air to compete with these ongoing incursions of commercial talk (187).

The Communal Presence of Mass Talk in "Roundabout Papers"

Thackeray's second "Roundabout Paper," "On Two Children in Black" (March 1860, *Cornhill*), begins with spirited praise for the familiar essays of two earlier writers, Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) and James Howell (1594-1666). Mr. Roundabout is particularly fond of their talkative, egotistical styles:

> Montaigne and Howel's [*sic*] Letters are my bedside books. If I wake at night, I have one or other of them to prattle me to sleep again. They talk about themselves for ever, and don't weary me…I love, I say, and scarce ever tire of hearing, the artless prattle of those two dear old friends…Their egotism no wise disgusts me. I hope I shall always like to hear men, in reason, talk about themselves. What subject does a man know better? (16)

In discussing his enthusiasm for Montaigne and Howell, Mr. Roundabout notably ignores any sense of difference between the printed word and talk. His description slips seamlessly between the description of their words as "Letters" or "bedside books," on the one hand, and "talk" or "artless prattle," on the other. Unlike the Uncommercial, Mr. Roundabout is not bothered by notions of Montaigne's or Howell's "absence" from their letters: "they talk about themselves for ever" with an eternal presence that does not seem diminished, in the least, by the belatedness of print. The confidence with which Mr. Roundabout discusses Montaigne's and Howell's continuing presence, I argue, forms the basis for his understanding that talk's presence does not,

in fact, simply perish or vanish in print; rather, it becomes reconstituted through the bodies of readers. As if to signal his own liveliness, Mr. Roundabout refers to himself as a "listener," whose "hearing" very much determines the presence of these late sixteenth-century authors' talk: the conditionality attached to "[i]f I wake at night…" and "I hope I shall always like to hear" make Mr. Roundabout the agent of both Montaigne's and Howell's egotistical embodiments.

Once he has established a kind of historical precedent for how print might recover a sense of presence, Mr. Roundabout theorizes how his own "prattle" in print might do the same in a widely expanded context. Referring to a story about the titular children in black that he enjoyed telling to friends and acquaintances at dinner parties, Mr. Roundabout offers the following explanation of what will happen when he commits the story to print:

> I have such a desire to be well with my public that I am actually giving up my favourite story. I am killing my goose, I know I am. I can't tell my story of the children in black after this; after printing it, and sending it through the country. When they are gone to the printer's these little things become public property. (19)

Here, Mr. Roundabout's claim that he "can't tell [his] story…after printing it…and sending it through the country" shares some resonances with the Uncommercial's sense that print is belated and cannot recover the co-presence of private, dinner-table talk. The metaphor that he is "killing [his] goose," moreover, suggests the way in which print perpetuates a kind of death for talk. But Mr. Roundabout takes a significantly different tack from the Uncommercial when he insists on using print to transform his story into "public property": he "kill[s] [his] goose" on purpose in order that private talk may die, only to give rise to new form of publically owned mass talk. In especially remarking that he is "sending [his story] through the country," Mr. Roundabout underscores an important difference in scale between the world of Victorian periodicals and that

of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publishing. Accordingly, Mr. Roundabout seems to suggest, the letters of Montaigne and Howell function—even in the 1860s—as "bedside books" whose talkative presence tends to stay within smaller, more intimate bounds of circulation. But the kind of "talk" that the "Roundabouts" circulate makes a stark departure from the intimacies of private prattle; though the essays may assume a familiar tone with its readers, they aspire far beyond the reach of "bedside books."

Although, as we have seen, the idea that mass print could co-opt uncommercial talk for wholesale purposes was no doubt a source of anxiety for Thackeray, Mr. Roundabout's notion of mass talk as publically owned theorizes how mass talk could also generate some unexpectedly uncommercial effects. Specifically, if one of the characteristics of mass talk is that anyone and everyone can speak and circulate it, then it enables a new and radical kind of communal presence. The "Roundabout" essay, "On a Hundred Year's Hence" (June 1861, *Cornhill*), explores the ways in which this communal presence becomes manifest. The paper opens with an invitation to the reader to consider a game similar to our own modern "telephone," in which each participant listens to a story and then "writes down, to the best of his memory and ability, the anecdote just narrated, and finally the papers are to be read out" (150). Mr. Roundabout reports that "the variety of narratives is often very odd and amusing," and further suggests that if "the people who played the game in '60 all meet and play it once more in '61," the stories written down would diverge from one another even more, and also "writers will probably differ from themselves" (151). As in the case of "telephone" today, the game emphasizes the changeability of talk as a direct consequence of the fact that it must be carried through the inconsistency of human memory and subjectivity. But unlike in "telephone," the moral of Mr. Roundabout's game is not that one must exercise caution in oral communication; instead, Mr. Roundabout

indicates that he is absolutely delighted by the many creative distortions that mass talk enables, even when they reference himself. And, in a move that would certainly be unprecedented for Thackeray, Mr. Roundabout decides to participate in spreading as well as creating new lies about himself.

He regales his readers with a "wonderful [anecdote] regarding himself and his own history" (heard from an acquaintance at dinner), in which he makes a little boy into sausage meat and dumps a little girl into a river (151). "And this Mrs. Lynx can aver," Mr. Roundabout reports, "because she saw the whole transaction with her own eyes, as she told Mr. Jucundus" (152). Instead of critiquing these gossips and asserting his own, greater reliability, Mr. Roundabout states: "I have altered the little details of the anecdote somewhat. But this story is, I vow and declare, as true as Mrs. Lynx's" (152). In good humor, then, Mr. Roundabout shows his own, playful participation in the game of mass talk. To be sure, Mr. Roundabout's exaggerations in part mock the way in which gossip transforms truths into lies, but we can hardly miss his enjoyment in relaying and embellishing the anecdote. The "good" of mass talk's circulation, Mr. Roundabout would seem to suggest, is not to disseminate truth but to widen participation in endless transformations of the truth. The important point, then, is that Mr. Roundabout revels in both tossing himself into the pool of mass talkers and extending this mass talk to hundreds of thousands of others, through *Cornhill*, as ways of furthering and underscoring mass talk's democratic presence. The following passage, also from "On a Hundred Years Hence," illustrates Mr. Roundabout's impulses toward being a part of the crowd, and in doing so, extending that very crowd:

> In these humble essaykins I have taken leave to egotize. I cry out about the shoes which
>
> pinch me, and, as I fancy, more naturally and pathetically than if my neighbor's corns

were trodden under foot. I prattle about the dish which I love, the wine which I like, the

talk I heard yesterday—about Brown's absurd airs—Jones's ridiculous elation when he

thinks he has caught me in a blunder…This is not the highest kind of speculation, I

confess, but it is a gossip which amuses some folks…Some philosophers get their

wisdom with deep thought and out of ponderous libraries; I pick up my small crumbs of

cogitation at a dinner-table; or from Mrs. Mary and Miss Louisa, as they are prattling

over their five o'clock tea. (151)

This passage echoes his descriptions of Montaigne's and Howell's "egotizing" and "artless

prattle," suggesting a sense of historical continuity to the procedure of print materializing into

some form of oral presence. But by avowing that his "talk" was "not [of] the highest kind of

speculation," nor derived from "ponderous libraries," and by blending his own prattle with that

of "Mrs. Mary and Miss Louisa" at "five o'clock tea," Mr. Roundabout indicates his support for

mass print's transformation into a greatly expanded, distinctly public, and communal kind of oral

presence.

The dinner table, something that Mr. Roundabout expresses fondness for throughout his

essays, also acts as an important, central metaphor for Thackeray's overall communal vision for

Cornhill. In Thackeray's "prospectus" to the magazine, which he included opposite the contents

in the first issue, he stresses inclusivity much in the same way that Mr. Roundabout does when

he sits down with Mrs. Mary and Miss Louisa: "[a]t our social table we shall suppose the ladies

and children always present…we shall listen to every guest who has an apt word to say."[40]

Through harvest metaphors, the prospectus also emphasizes the *Cornhill*'s abundance, promising

to provide "the kindly fruits of the earth, which grow for all"; the magazine's name and cover

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[40] Thackeray, Prospectus, reprinted in the introduction to *Roundabout Papers*, xi.

design, moreover, both convey an old-world landscape of agrarian plenitude.[41] As Spencer Eddy Jr. has noted, "the sower, the hills of grain, the fruitful references to a 'harvest perennial' [in the prospectus] suggested an attractive, almost bucolic and Virgilian innocence to which the reader might escape from the grime and grind of London in the 1860s."[42] In the first "Roundabout," entitled "A Lazy, Idle Boy" (January 1860, *Cornhill*), Mr. Roundabout figures himself and publisher Smith as dinner party hosts magnanimously providing plenty of different print-dishes and drinks for all. In short, the *Cornhill* claimed that it had something for everyone, and that its stores would never run out.

Yet the central allegory of "A Lazy, Idle Boy" is a warning against overconsumption. Mr. Roundabout cautions readers against becoming the titular "lazy, idle boy," who has consumed far too many novels. Analogizing fiction as "sweets" best consumed sparingly, Mr. Roundabout describes how the boy, nose in a book, became "blinded to all the rest of the world…[even] the pretty girls with their apple cheeks, who laughed and prattled round the fountain" (4). This particular critique—that the boy is too preoccupied with print to engage in prattle—announces the *Cornhill*'s intention to offer print that encourages readers' presence within the world around them. That is, the *Cornhill* hopes that its nutritiously balanced offerings—"good plain wholesome tea and bread and butter," "wholesome roast and boiled" in the form of "facts as well as fiction"—will be digested into talk. The first "Roundabout" essay's marked concern about the passivity that may result from consuming too much novelistic print complements the prospectus's hope that the *Cornhill* will cater itself to all who would "like to know what the world is talking about."[43] By providing access to—and generating—"what the world is talking

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Spencer L. Eddy, Jr., *The Founding of the Cornhill Magazine* (Muncie, IN: Ball State University, 1970), 18.
[43] See note 7 of my introduction.

about," *Cornhill* seeks to build a living, communal presence outside of the walls of print.[44] In a marked departure from Thackeray during the Garrick Club Affair, Mr. Roundabout makes a point of recognizing the fluid channels between print and talk, even embracing the good that may come of facilitating their flow.[45]

The insistence that the *Cornhill* is essentially a public dinner party also develops connections between talking and eating that further refine the notion of communal presence that Thackeray identifies as an important, uncommercial effect of mass talk. Specifically, the process of digestion tends to undermine the notion of individual integrity in such a way as to allow the reimagining of presence as a collective instead of atomized state. When Mr. Roundabout proliferates connections between talking and eating in "On a Hundred Years Hence"—in "prattl[ing] about the dish I love," he talks about food; in "pick[ing] up small crumbs of cogitation," he eats talk; and in joining Mrs. Mary and Mrs. Louisa at their tea, he talks while eating—he suggests that talking, like eating, involves a process of consumption. In another passage, Mr. Roundabout boldly suggests that talking may involve a violent kind of cannibalism, such as when people enjoy negative talk about one another: "An acquaintance grilled, scored, devilled, and served with mustard and cayenne pepper, excites the appetite; whereas a slice of cold friend with currant jelly is but a sickly, unrelishing meat" (156). The idea that to talk is to consume or eat—especially with the specter of cannibalism looming—raises questions, about

[44] During his time as editor, Thackeray was notorious for shirking his editorial duties—in "Thorns in the Cushion," he chronicles his own frustrations with the huge volume of correspondences he must answer. According to Wells, it was a "patent fact that Thackeray was more interested in people and things, in life and living, than he was in providing 'copy' for the printer. [His acquaintances] could not reconcile their admiration for his genius and the excellence of his work to his spending so much time at drums and dinner-parties, on jaunts to Greenwich and Brighton and Paris, or in club chat" ("Introduction," in *Roundabout Papers*, xxi).

[45] Thinking of reading as eating and/or consumption is a far more common notion, so Thackeray's notion of talking as eating feels unprecedented yet familiar. See Terry Eagleton's essay, "Edible Ecriture," in *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety*, eds. Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 203-13 for some extended musings on the connection between the written word, cooking, and digestion.

what it means to digest or incorporate material to oneself, that have the potential to destabilize notions of individuated selfhood. That is, anxieties around the process of cannibalization query whether one incorporates the person he eats or vice versa; applied to talk, the relevant question is whether one incorporates talk he hears, or the talk incorporates itself to him. Put another way, the conception of talking as a form of vexed consumption takes the communal notion that anyone can participate in mass talk to its logical conclusion: ownership of talk becomes so radically de-centered that there is a sense that talk itself has more agency than the talkers themselves. As mass talk expands, then, it paradoxically becomes more commercial and less so: it becomes wholesale in the ways that I have already described, but in Mr. Roundabout's estimation, it becomes more uncommercial in how it levels distinctions between producers and consumers. That is, whereas mass print largely maintains a gap between those who write/sell/produce and those who read/buy/consume, mass talk does not, for at the moment of utterance, the "producer" loses ownership. Talk can be freely incorporated and transformed by the "consumer" about-to-talk. Mr. Roundabout brings attention to such leveling capacities of mass talk when he happily includes himself as one among many talkers spreading gossip. Finally, mass talk also resists usual economic logic in that can never be scarce and limited. Belonging to everyone (or really to no one, other than perhaps itself), and never running out, then, talk can become less and less commercial at greater and greater scales.

Mr. Roundabout's obsessions with eating as the proper metaphor for describing talk's de-individuating tendencies draw directly from contemporary understandings about food and nutrition. Appearing practically alongside Mr. Roundabout's many musings on talking and eating in the *Cornhill* were a series of articles on food by aural surgeon and philosopher James

Hinton.[46] In "Food—What it Does" (July 1861), Hinton argues that the food we consume cannibalizes or incorporates itself to us: "[W]e err when we think of ourselves as appropriating, using, living upon that which we eat," for once swallowed, "food actively builds itself into our frame, and brings its ready service to our need."[47] Hinton's re-framing, which strips the eater of agency, helps contextualize Mr. Roundabout's ideas around eating and mass talk. According to Anna Clark, Hinton's spiritual and philosophical leanings deliberately countered mid-Victorian notions of individualism and selfhood, especially Spencerian and Darwinian ideas on species individuation and competition. In Clark's words, "Hinton espoused a view of science challenging the Victorian focus on individual competition…he did not see a distinct inner will or life force producing the shape and forms of beings, or individuating them."[48] Central to Hinton's philosophical thought was the concept of vitalism, which held that all nature is permeated by a general life force that compels living things to survive. Put another way, Hinton rejects the notion of an individual will to live. In *Life in Nature* (1862, volume publication including Hinton's "Physiological Riddles" series for *Cornhill*), Hinton explains: "All nature, indeed...is visibly pressing around the plant and compelling it to live and grow. It has simply to receive and to be passive...it yields itself freely to obey."[49] Hinton's ideas on food, then—motivated by a grander philosophy against selfhood—enable Mr. Roundabout's suggestion that talk, like food, can build itself to individual bodies. In Mr. Roundabout's view, food and talk—as agents

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[46] Hinton was also famous for his openly held beliefs in favor of polygamy. See Anna Clark, "James Hinton and Victorian Individuality: Polygamy and the Sacrifice of the Self," *Victorian Studies* 54, no. 1 (2011): 35-61.

[47] James Hinton, "Food—What it Does," *Cornhill Magazine* (July 1861): 93.

[48] Clark, "James Hinton," 42.

[49] James Hinton, *Life in Nature* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1875), 72.

motivated by some unseen vital force—both work to compromise the idea of selfhood, gesturing instead towards a larger communal view of relations between living things.

Hinton's further elaborations on nutrition as an involuntary process in "Food—How to Take It" (September 1861, *Cornhill*) might also offer a model for understanding how Mr. Roundabout contends with potential misgivings about losing control of what one talks about, if talk, like food, should inhabit a person through its own kind of agency. Hinton avows that "the first rule in taking food" is "to gratify the natural inclinations," contending that despite advances in contemporary science, human instinct proves the most infallible means of judging what constitutes good nutrition.[50] Applied to talk, Hinton's logic would suggest that an individual need not exert himself too strongly in trying to choose the talk he engages, for the "mustard and cayenne pepper" of salacious gossip will naturally lose its power to stimulate the "appetite" if there is too much of it. Of course, Mr. Roundabout essentially makes the opposite point in relation to reading in "On a Lazy, Idle Boy"; by cautioning individuals against overconsumption, he grants at least some degree of agency to his reader. But at the same time, in "On a Hundred Year's Hence" Mr. Roundabout pokes fun at the *Cornhill*'s own attempts to regulate consumption of both print and talk:

> …we will try to avoid personalities altogether in talk, won't we? We will range the fields of science, dear madam, and communicate to each other the pleasing results of our studies. We will, if you please, examine the infinitesimal wonders of nature through the microscope…We will…talk freely about the gorilla and his kindred, but not talk about people who can talk in their turn. (157)

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[50] James Hinton, "Food—How to Take It," *Cornhill Magazine* (September 1861): 284.

Given his own gleeful participation in gossip just a few pages earlier, Mr. Roundabout delivers such aspirations with a bemused sarcasm that seems to undermine the *Cornhill*'s own efforts to regulate what gets circulated as print and as talk. Mr. Roundabout's description of the "infinitesimal wonders of nature" alludes, in particular, to a six-part series called "Studies in Animal Life" by George Henry Lewes (published from January until June 1860), and even gently mocks the series' aspirations toward circulating healthy discussion. In the first of these "Studies," Lewes informs readers, "Our studies here will be of Life, and chiefly of those minuter and obscurer forms, which seldom attract attention," and exuberantly enjoins them to obtain a microscope to observe these forms for themselves.[51] With confidence, Lewes assures readers, "[w]e shall never come to an end; our curiosity will never slacken."[52] But Mr. Roundabout's irony-laden promise that "[w]e will, if you please, examine the infinitesimal wonders of nature through the microscope" undercuts Lewes's and the *Cornhill*'s own project to offer the bread and butter of fact to its voracious readers. Mr. Roundabout concludes, none too despairingly, and even merrily: "People *will* go on talking about their neighbors, and won't have their mouths stopped by…microscopes and aquariums" (157). Thus, in "On a Hundred Year's Hence" Mr. Roundabout demonstrates that he harbors no naïve illusion of print culture as an effectual arbiter or regulator of talk. Perhaps he trusts, as Hinton does with respect to nutrition, the natural instincts of a great number of participants to restore a proper balance to their diet of talk. The system of mass talk will set itself right, through a process as natural, involuntary, and, above all, as uncommercial as digestion.

To be sure, Thackeray's apparent embrace of a *laissez-faire* attitude—through Mr. Roundabout—in relation to mass talk is not something that he achieves without reluctance or

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[51] George Henry Lewes, "Studies in Animal Life," *Cornhill Magazine* (January 1860): 61.

[52] Ibid., 63.

difficulty. Mr. Roundabout's ironic treatment of his own editorial hopes to generate what he felt to be less trivial forms of talk through factual mass print offerings stages his ongoing ambivalence over the whole matter. In Thackeray's final "Roundabout," "Strange to Say, On Club Paper," Mr. Roundabout paints a self portrait of himself as an old-fashioned literary figure among a vast multitude of talkers, an image that continues to present and work out Thackeray's ambivalence. Struggling to make his own voice heard, especially to confront the many inevitably "false reports" of "many chatterboxes" let loose by the insinuations of widely circulating print, Mr. Roundabout specifically asks his readers to think of him as a speaker in a classical agora, prefiguring Stead's 1886 vision:

> It is to this part of the text, my brethren, that I propose to address myself particularly, and if the remarks I make are offensive to any of you, you know the doors of our meeting-house are open, and you can walk out when you will. Around us are magnificent halls and palaces frequented by such a multitude of men as not even the Roman Forum assembled together…Into the halls built down this little street and its neighborhood the principal men of all London come to hear or impart the news; and the affairs of the state or of private individuals, the quarrels of empires or of authors, the movements of the court, or the splendid vagaries of fashion, the intrigues of statesmen or of persons of another sex yet more wily, the last news of battles in the great occidental continents, nay, the latest betting for the horse-races, or the advent of a dancer at the theatre—all that men do is discussed in these Pall Mall agorae, where we of London daily assemble. (319)

Mr. Roundabout's pose may indeed seem grandiose: as Dames argues, Mr. Roundabout's claim earlier in the essay that he "would have taken post under the statue of Fame…distributing wreaths to the three Crimean Guardsmen" is an audacious bid for authority, in which he

"defend[s]…fame itself, which is under attack from the deflations of the press; a more ancient concept of fame, depending on martial valor (Clyde's courage, the sacrifice of Crimean soldiers) must be protected from the depredations of mass publicity."[53] But Mr. Roundabout does not linger on the details of his own exalted position; instead, he expends far more energy describing the activity of his own audience members as they focus—not so much on him—but on their own talk with others. Above, he acknowledges the possibility that his listeners—equal participants in talk—can freely walk out of the meeting-house if they should wish, and imagines the "multitude" in the "Pall Mall agorae" talking among themselves about many different subjects, some more serious ("affairs of state," "quarrels of empires," "news of battles") and others more trivial ("quarrels…of authors," "vagaries of fashion," "the latest betting for the horse-races").

As with the exuberant goals Thackeray sets out in his prospectus for *Cornhill*, Mr. Roundabout's attempt to draw authority from a more "ancient" kind of "fame" or "valor" is more of a desire than a reality. While Mr. Roundabout pushes ahead with his speech, he recognizes that his approach is outdated, and the classical associations only serve to exaggerate and ironize his old-fashioned persona. In another part of the passage, Mr. Roundabout imagines—in an extended parenthesis—individuals within the multitude of talkers in disagreement with him: "(I perceive several of the congregation looking most uncomfortable. One old boy with a dyed moustache turns purple in the face, and struts back to the Martium: another, with a shrug of the shoulder and a murmur of 'Rubbish,' slinks away in the direction of the Togatorium, and the preacher continues)" (319). The fake Latin words for fake Roman locations in the Pall Mall Agorae—"the Martium," the "Togatorium"—again undercut Mr. Roundabout's exalted position below the statue of Fame. Yet, notably, Mr. Roundabout continues his prattle, even if he knows

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[53] Dames, "Brushes with Fame," 38.

he is just one talker amid the "many chatterboxes," signaling that he is not about to retire from public life.

Finally, the agora itself offers important insight into Mr. Roundabout's positive feelings about mass talk and communal presence. As discussed in the introduction, the agora—as a symbol of Athenian democracy—brings attention to community as living process. In imagining the exchanges facilitated by London's mass print culture as modern-day agorae, then, Mr. Roundabout is expressing at least some enthusiasm for democratic potential of mass print culture. Like Stead's "assembly of the whole community," Mr. Roundabout's vision forcefully collapses modernity and antiquity, commercial and pre-commercial communications, even if with greater ambivalence than Stead. Mr. Roundabout gestures toward the idea that mass print was changing the nature of talk, giving rise to new forms of oral media that uniquely swing back against the commercialism of mass print. That is, it is not simply that mass print may be thought of as a kind of virtual agora, but that it actually gives rise to forms of mass talk that, even if largely invisible at the scale of person-to-person interactions, cohere into an oral assembly of sorts. In this invisible assembly, people are co-present at a larger scale than has ever occurred before, though, at the same time, it is not an entirely unprecedented kind of presence. This collapse Mr. Roundabout ultimately imagines mass talk facilitating—between the ancient character of anarchic communalism and the modernity of mass media—offers a different way around the Uncommercial Traveller's shared concerns over the gradual disappearance of a past form of authentic presence.

CHAPTER TWO

Town-Talk and the Cause Célèbre of Robert Browning's Magnum Opus

> There prattled they, discoursed the right and wrong,
> Turned wrong to right, proved wolves sheep and sheep wolves.
> —Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, I. 639-40

The above lines from Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69) describe the

gossips and town talkers of late seventeenth-century Rome as they witnessed the proceedings of

a triple-murder trial. In 1698, according to historical records, one middle-aged Count Guido

Franceschini brutally slashed and stabbed to death his seventeen-year-old wife, Pompilia, and her

adoptive parents, Pietro and Violante Comparini. His defense was an alleged affair between

Pompilia and a dashing young priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, and the Comparini's schemes to

secure his wealth. As the dismissive tone of the description reveals, the "prattle" of these so-

called "world's-bystanders" egregiously misses the point of deliberation: they talk for the sake of

talking, and have little care for arriving at any semblance of moral truth.[1] Yet, *The Ring and the

Book*'s explicitly given premise is the reincarnation of talking voices, even if their prattle should

lead no closer to infallible judgment. In the first of twelve books, Browning *in propria persona*

tells the frame story of how he discovered the court documents (bound in an "old yellow Book")

of the murder case amid the bric-à-brac of a Florentine stall and devised a plan to animate this

"crude fact" into the "living speech" of ten dramatic monologues (I. 35, 85). Notably, a full third

of the nine speakers (Half-Rome, the Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid) are members of the

general public: the "prattlers" that Browning seems to deride. *The Ring and the Book*'s other

dramatic speakers, moreover, frequently call attention to the endless proliferation of "prattle" in

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[1] Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Thomas J. Collins and Richard D. Altick (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001), I. 642. Subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text by book and line number(s).

such diverse forms as "banter," chatter," "gossipry," "rabble-brabble, and "noise."[2] In late-seventeenth-century Rome and Arezzo (Guido's hometown), all of these forms of "town talk" made the triple-murder and the events leading up to it into something of a cause célèbre.[3]

This chapter attends closely to Browning's relentless preoccupation with generating such forms of seemingly inconsequential "town talk" in *The Ring and the Book*. Despite the pervasive presence of everyday chatter in the poem, there has been little critical interest in understanding its form or function.[4] From the time of the poem's publication to the present day, reviewers and critics have focused their attentions on the testimonies of Guido, Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope, often regarding the first three "gossips" as extraneous speakers in an already lengthy poem. I argue that what might be summed up as town talk in fact plays a large role both within the poem and also without—that is, in the world of the poem's reception. In spite of the poem's expressions of disdain for forms of idle prattle, town talk insistently courses its way through the veins of the poem with an animating power that urges itself outside the poem's walls. I am suggesting, therefore, that the poem's town talkers produce not only the cause célèbre of Guido's trial but also of *The Ring and the Book* itself. As such, this literary historical episode of

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[2] Each of these synonymous words are repeated in *The Ring and the Book* at the following frequencies: "banter" (2), "chatter" (3), "gossipry" (3), "rabble-brabble" (3), prattle" (6), and "noise" (specifically as talk, 16).

[3] Drawing from Leo Braudy's pioneering work on celebrity studies in *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), Joseph A. Boone and Nancy J. Vickers observe, "[g]ossip and rumor are the very bedrock of renown's formation and existence" ("Introduction—Celebrity Rites," *PMLA* 126 [2011]: 904).

[4] Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks are important exceptions. In their book-length study of *The Ring and the Book*, they include a discussion of how the general populace—the "crowd"—plays a crucial part in advancing the plot and furthering dramatic irony through their misperceptions, "The Tragic Stage: Comedy and the Crowd, Miracles and Molinism," in *Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of "The Ring and the Book"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 281-326. Ivan Kreilkamp brings important focus to the ways in which the poem blurs conventional separations between forms of orality and print culture, arguing that the lyric intimacy of Pompilia's illiterate "voice" is simultaneously extinguished by and figured through professional systems of print/writing. Kreilkamp brings attention to the lawyers—also speakers who receive little attention—but does not give an account of the orality of the first three speakers. See "'Hell's masterpiece of print': Voice, Face, and Print in *The Ring and the Book*," in *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, 155-78.

Browning's success illustrates the poet's canny understanding of the mechanisms of gossip and literary celebrity culture in the 1860s.

Although not Browning's most well known work today, *The Ring and the Book* was responsible for his late-in-life rise to literary fame. In 1868, the fifty-six-year-old Browning was very much caught up with the problems of public reception, for he was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a household name at the time. His now canonical earlier collections, such as *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Men and Women* (1855), and *Dramatis Personae* (1864), only received wider recognition among a middle-class reading public in the wake of *The Ring and the Book*'s extraordinary acclaim. The 1860s overall were an important turning point for Browning: on the one hand, it was a time for mourning the loss of his far more famous wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who died on 19 June 1861, but on the other hand, this was a decade in which he ambitiously sought to emerge from her shadow. Aggressively, he cultivated new literary connections, boldly breaking with his usual publisher, Chapman & Hall, to engage the hugely successful Smith, Elder & Co. for bringing out *The Ring and the Book*.[5] Browning also became an omnipresent guest at London dinner tables, gaining a reputation as an unusually boisterous and gossipy talker himself. In fact, the notoriously assertive energies of the poet's daily talk might have some bearing on his recognition of town talk's particularly vital nature, and is consequently worth noting.[6] Henry James was particularly vexed by what he described (in a letter to his sister) as Browning's "transparent eagerness" and "shrill interruptingness" in

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[5] George Smith, who had—with Thackeray—launched the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, was famous within the Victorian publishing world for his business acumen and personal charisma. According to Leonard Huxley, Smith and Browning were friends for a long while before their collaboration; Smith's prompt decision to offer Browning £400 an edition for *The Ring and the Book* signals the publisher's shrewd sense that the tide was turning for the poet (*The House of Smith, Elder* [London: Printed for Private Circulation, 1923], 156).

[6] For a study that links Browning's famously "tyrannic" style of talking with the forceful conversationalism of his later poems, see E.A.W. St. George's *Browning and Conversation*.

conversation.[7] For James, the excessive energy of Browning's talk seemed vulgar, but for others, its "eagerness" and "interruptingness" conveyed vital accessibility. In the *New Review*'s "Talk and Talkers Today" column from its August 1889 issue, G.W.E. Russell offers a description of Browning's talk that is fairly emblematic of this latter, more positive view: "It is the crisp, emphatic, and powerful discourse of a man of the world…Mr. Browning is the readiest, the blithest, and the most forcible of talkers."[8] On the eve of bringing out his most ambitious work yet, then, Browning was making the rounds on the London social circuit, "talk[ing] openly…of the poem and its progress," such that "rumour and speculation busied themselves with it as never before with work of his, and the literary world at large looked for its publication with eager and curious interest."[9] In short, he was already seeking to make *The Ring and the Book* the "talk of the town" before its appearance in print.

Fortunately for Browning, the periodical reviews proclaimed *The Ring and the Book* a great success, declaring that later generations would surely regard the poem as his magnum opus. Comparisons of Browning to Shakespeare abounded, and the poet himself became the proverbial talk of the town, leading eventually to what Edgar Fawcett facetiously dubbed "The Browning Craze" in an 1888 essay for *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. In my examination of *The Ring and the Book*'s extraordinary success at motivating its oft-ignored town talkers toward anticipating or even scripting the positive response of the public, I will first bring attention to the ways in which the poem emphasizes town talk as a vital process with an almost demiurgic, creative agency of its own—yet a process that also operates through the strikingly secular and modern logic of mass

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[7] Henry James to Alice James, 8 April 1877, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Penguin, 2000), 87.

[8] "Talk and Talkers Today," *New Review* (August 1889): 239.

[9] Charles Harold Herford, *Robert Browning* (London: Blackwood, 1905), 172.

media. With spark-like iterability, town talk within the poem animates different bodies into speech, producing the "event-ness" that is *The Ring and the Book*'s reason for being; that is to say, *The Ring and the Book*'s central "plot" is the talk around what happened, rather than what happened itself. In the second part of my discussion, I will indicate the ways in which the poetic structures of town talk within the poem are repeated in the periodical chatter immediately following the publication. Specifically, I argue that Browning identifies within the liberal formalism of reviews in the 1860s a paradoxical desire to be at once apart from the crowd and part of it, an impulse that also drives town talk. Through ultimately collapsing Victorian liberalism's rhetorical aspirations toward disinterested judgment into mere town talk, Browning finds a way to both anticipate and ironize the reception of his own work.[10]

Theorizing Town Talk in The Ring and the Book

In order to explore the role that town talk plays within the diegetic world that the speakers inhabit, I turn first to what Browning *in propria persona* has to say, directly, about the first three speakers. They are explicitly designated as town talkers, and not insignificantly, have pride of place, forming Books II-IV of the poem. They are less individuals, but synecdoches for larger constituencies: "Half-Rome" favors Guido; while his opponent, the "Other Half-Rome" favors Pompilia, her parents, and Caponsacchi; and finally, "Tertium Quid" holds a composite opinion that fails to convey any sense of a stable position. Browning's designation of their monologues as "sample-speech[es]" further emphasizes the generic nature of their talk (I. 865, 896). In an introductory description of these three speakers, Browning implies, moreover, that

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[10] See Herbert F. Tucker, Jr., *Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980) for an important critical discussion of anticipatory poetics in the Browning corpus. Tucker argues that Browning's "art of disclosure, an art that refuses its own finalities" is always seeking to move beyond the present moment and into the future (5).

these speakers lack any controlling consciousness behind the words that they utter. In particular, he analogizes their town talk to pulsating ripples that move along the surface of water after a stone has been thrown into it, an image that represents town talk as a disembodied natural force which functions independently of individual speakers' minds:

> Here are the voices presently shall sound
>
> In due succession. First the world's outcry
>
> Around the rush and ripple of any fact
>
> Fallen stonewise, plumb on the smooth face of things;
>
> The world's guess, as it crowds the bank o' the pool,
>
> At what were figure and substance, by their splash:
>
> Then, by vibrations in the general mind,
>
> At depth of deed already out of reach. (I. 838-45)

Town talk—here described as "voices," "the world's outcry," "[t]he world's guess, as it crowds" near the "splash" of incident—initially gathers around the "rush and ripple" of "fact," the stone. The image of the stone's long descent after hitting the water suggests the futility of its recovery as well as its inert state once it reaches the bottom. What continues to gain in energy, however, are the "vibrations in the general mind" of the crowd: a movement that mirrors and drives the vibrations of town talk that emanate outwards from a lost, central event.[11]

Through careful alternation between a focus on fact sinking away and on the "voices," "outcry," "rush and ripple," "guess," or "vibrations" of the crowd, these lines ascribe to town talk a force equal to that of originary fact. This passage also ignores the more chaotic aspects of "the world's outcry" and "crowds": voices "sound / In due succession" and town talk is subject

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[11] Patricia Rigg argues that "the shape of *The Ring and the Book* [as a whole] is…cone-like…formed by a series of concentric circles [of testimony]" (*Robert Browning's Romantic Irony in* The Ring and the Book [Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1999], 17).

to the strict sequence of "first" gathering around fact and "then" vibrating through "the general mind." The image of town talk's orderly pulsations outward coupled with the metric regularity of iambs beginning from "vibrations" and continuing into the next line had important implications for existing debates about the place of poetry—and literary art more broadly—amid a developing mass readership. In particular, the regularity of town talk departs from the common nineteenth-century complaint that the disordered noise of (literal and figurative) crowds disrupted the eloquence of poets. As early as 1805 in *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth invokes the poetic Muse to raise him "[a]bove the press and danger of the crowd," complaining that the "anarchy and din" of the city interrupted a poet's individual consciousness and inhibited poetic production.[12] In the first line of "Hendecasyllabics" (1863), the laureate Alfred Tennyson famously lamented "the chorus of indolent reviewers."[13]

Browning himself had long been interested in exploring the incommensurability between poetry and popularity. *Sordello* (1840), for example, chronicles the decline of the eponymous troubador, who could never recuperate his natural gift for song once the crowd discovered his talent. Through the "prattle" of Naddo, "busiest of the tribe / Of genius haunters," Sordello as "the thrice-renowned / Goito manufacture" becomes as self-conscious about fame as the nineteenth-century poet who would sell his wares in popular periodicals.[14] In "Popularity" (1855), Browning sanctifies John Keats's poetry by pointing out its clear distinction from that of

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[12] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), VII. 655-59, in *The Prelude: The Four Texts*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 288.

[13] Alfred Tennyson, "Hendecasyllabics," line 1, in *Cornhill Magazine* 9 (December 1863): 708.

[14] Robert Browning, *Sordello*, lines 821-22 and 481-82, in the *Poems of Browning*, eds. John Woolford and Daniel Karlin, 4 vols. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1:514 and 1:492.

his crowd-pleasing imitators.[15] In these earlier poems, Browning draws a clear line between true art and that which earns what he mocks as "[t]he world's good word" in "Respectability" (1855).[16] Browning's image of town talk as concentric ripples of water, however, treats the crowd's relationship with the poet very differently. In *The Ring and the Book*, the "voices…shall sound," and the noisy "prattle" of town talk produces the originary momentum that powers the poem's other voices. Here, the crowd might be said to enable—even inspire—Browning's art.[17]

A different description of talking crowds—this time by Half-Rome himself—brings attention to the bodies of talkers, and specifically their lack of agency. Here, town talk motivates the physical actions of people pushing their way into the church to view the slain bodies of Pompilia's parents:

> So, people pushed their way, and took their turn,
>
> Saw, threw their eyes up, crossed themselves, gave place
>
> To pressure from behind, since all the world
>
> Knew the old pair, could talk the tragedy
>
> Over from first to last…(II. 106-10)

The lines describe the age-old phenomena of sensational spectacle and its ensuing crowd of talkers. Yet the logic here seems back-to-front, for in Browning's sentence, talk is the motivating cause for the ensuing action of seeing (as in, "Since all the world /…could talk the tragedy," "So, people pushed their way"). That is, the lines emphasize town talk's originary vitality, as it

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[15] In "Popularity," line 58, Browning mocks imitators "Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes, and Nokes," concluding with Keats's authentic distinction in the famous last line, "What porridge had John Keats?" (*Robert Browning: Selected Poems*, ed. John Woolford, Daniel Karlin, and Joseph Phelan [New York: Routledge, 2013], 454-55).

[16] Browning, "Respectability," line 21, in *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*, 347.

[17] John Plotz's *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) is particularly relevant to the point I make here. As Plotz argues through an examination of how crowds show up in nineteenth-century literature, the perception of crowds was far from monolithic—not just "chaotic," crowds could also seem a "directed" force (2).

springs into action the bodies of the crowd. In contrast, the quick movement of the crowd's actions—especially the brevity of their gaze—"Saw, threw their eyes up, crossed themselves, gave place / To pressure from behind" makes the spectacle itself seem merely incidental to talk. Bodies who see and cross themselves are simply conduits for town talk's force. Their collective participation in the same gestures—made to seem even more homogeneous by the alliterative effects ("people pushed," "took their turn," "talk the tragedy")—only serves to further our sense that they function not so much as individuals but as interchangeable bodies.

The Other Half-Rome notes a similar lack of agency on the part of all of the townspeople when he describes the widespread impact of rumors that had circulated about Guido's mistreatment of Pompilia during their marriage:

> Who could… help noticing the husband's slouch,
>
> The black of his brow—or miss the news that buzzed
>
> Of how the little solitary wife
>
> Wept and looked out of window all day long?
>
> What need of minute search into such springs
>
> As start men, set o' the move?—machinery
>
> Old as earth... (III. 859-63)

Here, town talk—as "the news that buzzed"—disseminates the pathos-saturated image of the unhappy Pompilia at her window, a sentimental portrait that might easily call forth "springs" of tears. But Browning cuts the line at "springs" and through enjambment, launches into the idea that human emotions—specifically, the "springs" of Guido's jealousy—are machine-like. This bait-and-switch from sentiment to machinery disrupts the sentimentality of town talk's portrait of Pompilia, calling attention to its auto-generic nature. If Guido's rage is machinelike, so too is

town talk's sympathetic sentiment: trite and iterable, the emotion behind "the news that buzzed" might also "start" or "set o' the move" any human body.

"Old as earth," however, suggests something not mechanically modern but mystical—even creationist—about this animation of human bodies. According to Suzanne Bailey, the occurrence, throughout the poem, of images that suggest the proliferation of animated bodies and texts reflects Browning's engagement with Higher Criticism's "nostalgia for a living body"; that is, for the historical Jesus "who dissolves in time through testimony," leaving text as an inert monument to an unrecoverable body.[18] Most notably, the poem's understanding of its own project of imagining seventeenth-century voices as the resurrection of documents into living bodies both elevates and ironizes its own endeavor. In the above passage, the interweaving of theologically motivated images of resurrection with town talk's secular animations of bodies enables the secular animations to leach power from the divine ones. Although town talk's animations seem almost grotesque imitations of the voice of God speaking through His chosen, earthly subjects, they are, nonetheless, extraordinarily forceful in their own right.

In *The Ring and the Book*, town talk allows no one to escape its influence: not even those whose voices we might expect to transcend those of the crowd—Guido, Pompilia herself as she expends her last breath in a deathbed monologue, or the learned Pope Innocent XII. Town talk infiltrates and forms a part of Guido's speech and drowns out Pompilia's and the Pope's voices, despite the way in which these latter voices are supposed to approach closer than any others to truthful judgment. To a degree, Browning's general introduction of the speakers that follow the town talkers promises that a superior form of talk will follow:

So much for Rome and rumour; smoke comes first:

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[18] Suzanne Bailey, "Somatic Wisdom: Refiguring Bodies in *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Studies* 41 (1998): 578-79.

> Once let smoke rise untroubled, we descry
>
> Clearlier what tongues of flame may spire and spit
>
> To eye and ear, each with appropriate tinge
>
> According to its food, or pure or foul. (I. 943-47)

These lines—which allude to the Holy Spirit speaking through the apostles in "tongues of fire" on the day of Pentecost—suggest the possibility that humans might yet deliver divinely ordained speech. Yet "each with appropriate tinge / According to its food, or pure or foul" would seem to lessen the spiritual authority of these "tongues of flame" and link smoky town talk to fiery speech. Moreover, the metrical emphasis of three long stresses on "smoke comes first" attributes originary power to town talk (this time known as "Rome and rumour," a formulation that conflates the identities of the town talkers and their talk, suggesting that people are nothing more than their chatter). The lines indicate, also, that the "smoke" of rumor directly begets or enables the "flame" that will afterwards burn: only if we "let" rumor "rise untroubled" are we able to make out the other voices. In light of these countermining aspects, then, Browning's allusion to Pentecostal "tongues of fire" seems in part ironic. This irony raises the question as to whether or not these "tongues" are actually superior to Half-Rome's, the Other Half-Rome's, or Tertium Quid's. If we "descry" these new voices "clearlier," does it mean that they are, in fact, "clearlier" with respect to their veracity? And even if they should be more expressive, more authentic, or more truthful, how will they measure their impact next to that of town talk?

Guido, the first to speak after the town talkers, figures himself in relation to town talk as its victim. In his first monologue, Guido makes repeated reference to the disturbing presence of the town talk that everyday plagued him, casting himself as a helpless actor whose drama unfolds through the hands of "common gossipry" (V. 1822). He registers his own voice's woeful place

amid the overpowering "buzz" of talkers in Rome and in Arezzo. Of Caponsacchi's potentially

illicit relations with Pompilia, Guido claims, he knew nothing until town talk spelled it out for

him after the alleged couple had absconded:

> (By this time the admiring neighbourhood
>
> Joined chorus round me while I rubbed my eyes)
>
> "T is months since their intelligence began,—
>
> A comedy the town was privy to,—
>
> He wrote and she wrote, she spoke, he replied,
>
> And going in and out your house last night
>
> Was easy work for one…to be plain with you…
>
> Accustomed to do both, at dusk and dawn
>
> When you were absent,—at the villa, you know,
>
> Where husbandry required the master-mind.
>
> Did you not know? Why, we all knew, you see!" (V. 999-1008)

As Altick and Loucks and also Michael G. Yetman have noted, Guido artfully locates himself

within a "comedy" where the "chorus" of town talk has determined his role as cuckolded

husband.[19] By Guido's account, he tries first to settle his discovery of Pompilia's escape by

means of his hometown Arezzo's court procedures (which resulted in what he felt to be mild

punishments: Pompilia's containment at a convent and Caponsacchi's three-year exile from

Arezzo). But the pressures exerted by town talk prove impossible to ignore. Town talk forms a

large part of Guido's speech here—or, more precisely, he ventriloquizes its patterns with

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[19] In "'Count Guido Franceschini': The Villain as Artist in *The Ring and the Book*," *PMLA* 87 (1972): 1093-1102, Michael G. Yetman discusses Guido's masterful use of stock conventions from popular medieval and Renaissance dramas to garner sympathy for his own position as the poor, old cuckolded husband deceived by his young wife and her dashing courtly lover.

measured intention. His supposed quotation of town talk seems almost too perfect in the execution of its patterns. When he rhetorically addresses his audience with the phrase "to be plain with you," Guido mouths town talk's accessibility and mass appeal. His frenetic emphasis on privileged knowing ("you know," "Did you not know? Why, we all knew") captures town talk's paradoxical impulse to be at once confidential and plain, apart from the crowd and part of it—an impulse which I will discuss in greater detail in the second part of my discussion. Guido is perhaps less town talk's victim and more its shrewd casting director.

Pompilia, unlike Guido, attempts speech that transcends town talk's contamination. A common critical response—one that has recurred ever since the poem's publication—emphasizes Pompilia's lyricism, and how it sets her apart from all of the other speakers. One critical trajectory has focused on Pompilia's sainthood, her status as a "virgin martyr" capable of divine expression, especially through her extraordinary forgiveness of Guido.[20] A more secular point of view suggests that Pompilia is the individual soul who brings forth the truth of her own personal expression, regardless of audience expectations.[21] Either way, such accounts emphasize the distinction of Pompilia's speech from that of others, a distinction that Browning's authorial persona certainly encourages when he introduces her in the first book as "a soul [that] sighs its lowest and its last / After the loud ones…" (I. 1076-77). Yet Browning's reference to "the loud ones" gestures toward the ineradicable fact that within the poem, town talk always threatens to

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[20] Robert Buchanan praises the "immortal features of Pompilia (which shine through the troubled mists of the story with almost insufferable beauty)" ("The Ring and the Book," *Athenæum* [20 March 1869]: 399). Kay Austen details Pompilia's role as a traditional saint and martyr in "Pompilia: 'Saint and Martyr Both,'" *Victorian Poetry* 17 (1979): 287-301, while Charles LaPorte offers a deconstructive reading of how Pompilia knowingly deploys the generic features of virgin martyr hagiography in "Sacred and Legendary Artists: Anna Jameson and Barrett Browning in the Hagiography of Pompilia," *Victorian Poetry* 39 (2001): 551-72.

[21] See John Stuart Mill's famous distinction that eloquence is "heard," and poetry "overheard," in "Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties" (1867), reprinted in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1996), 348. Ann P. Brady in *Pompilia: A Feminist Reading of Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1988) foregrounds Pompilia's lyric individualism by arguing that "[l]ike Antigone, her self-direction puts her in opposition to society's values manifested in power" (15).

overpower Pompilia's expression, no matter how lyrical or even divine it may be: at the same time that the description confirms her orality's distinction, it figures her speech as a non-verbal exhalation that resigns itself before other, more robust voices. To borrow from Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), if Pompilia is the poet who manages to "[hold] up [her] name / To keep it from the mud," then she does so understanding the relative feebleness of her voice in the realm of public chatter that makes up *The Ring and the Book*.[22]

The Other Half-Rome's image of Pompilia on her deathbed, surrounded by town talkers, crystallizes this sense of her singularity's inefficacy. Again, as in the description that Half-Rome provides of the crowds at the church, the crowd by Pompilia's side are moved not by her veracity but by the vitality of town talk:

> But many more, who found they were old friends,
>
> Pushed in to have their stare and take their talk
>
> And go forth boasting of it and to boast.
>
> Old Monna Baldi chatters like a jay,
>
> Swears—but that, prematurely trundled out
>
> Just as she felt the benefit begin,
>
> The miracle was snapped up by somebody,—
>
> Her palsied limb 'gan prick and promise life
>
> At touch o' the bedclothes merely,—how much more
>
> Had she but brushed the body as she tried! (III. 48-57)

In this description, the Other Half-Rome reflects on the self-generative and endless iterability of town talk. The people who (again) "pushed in" at Pompilia's bedside "take their talk" as if the

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[22] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), III: 311-12.

talk already belonged to them before they "take" it, and, repetitively, they "go forth boasting of it and to boast." The heavy stress on phrases such as "Pushed in" and "go forth" as well as the trochaic inversions of "Old Monna," "Swears—but," and "Just as" make palpable the interruptive and preemptive force of the crowd. Their bodies obscure Pompilia's just as their town talk obscures her voice. The fact that Old Monna Baldi fails to touch "the body" and only "the bedclothes merely" offers but small relief from the onslaught of her "chatter." Finally, there is no meaningfully transcendent position from which to judge, as the Other Half-Rome is a town talker himself. The passage tracks the gradual merging of the Other Half-Rome's "chatter" with Old Monna Baldi's: he begins with reportorial detachment ("But many more…Swears"), then moves into paraphrase ("but that prematurely…merely") and finally ends with free indirect discourse ("how much more / Had she but brushed the body as she tried!").

In defining contrast to the exuberant iterability and totalizing reach of town talk, Pompilia's speech expends itself, once (and for One—God, her auditor). She herself expresses a heightened awareness of the limited power of her voice before town talk. Although she vows that "[her] last breath shall wholly spend itself / In one attempt more to disperse the stain" (VII. 932-33) on Caponsacchi's reputation, the potency of what town talkers say—which she describes some lines later—seems greater:

> That name had got to take a half-grotesque
>
> Half-ominous, wholly enigmatic sense,
>
> Like any by-word, broken bit of song
>
> Born with a meaning, changed by mouth and mouth
>
> That mix it in a sneer or smile, as change
>
> Bids, till it now means nought but ugliness

And perhaps shame (VII. 1329-35)

E. Warwick Slinn has argued that this "general appropriation of Caponsacchi's name" illustrates

the now-familiar deconstructive divorce between sign and referent; but more than this, here

Pompilia is dwelling on the process by which a proper name becomes disfigured through

gossip.[23] With an almost morbid, even scientifically abstracted curiosity, Pompilia attempts to

dissect exactly what happens to "[t[hat name," and how it becomes disfigured. Eventually,

Pompilia's thinking out loud reaches an understanding of town talk as a force that operates with

inevitability, an idea that complements the poem's prior images of town talk's animation of

interchangeable human bodies. At first, she ascribes some agency to the name itself ("got to

take…"), then implies that God imbues the name with an originary meaning ("Born with a

meaning"). Subsequently, she locates the power of transformation within the "mouths" of town

talkers ("changed by mouth and mouth") and finally settles on the personified agency of

"change" itself ("as change / Bids"). By maintaining a relatively neutral tone throughout the

progression of her comments, Pompilia expresses a certain acceptance of a name's inevitable

disfigurement in the mouths of vulgar talkers who barely seem to know what they themselves are

saying. In the last couple of lines of the excerpt, Pompilia's attention to what the name means

"now" offers what may be the only comfort—at least on earth—that may be had in relation to the

problem of town talk: since change seems to be talk's only rule, whether fair or foul, meanings

associated with Caponsacchi's name are all ultimately momentary.

        If Pompilia's encounter with town talkers reveals the exhaustion of lyric before the

comparatively robust nature of vulgar speech, the Pope's encounter with the same reveals the

relative lifelessness of written language. The hope that Pompilia places in the written word's

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[23] E. Warwick Slinn, "Language and Truth in 'The Ring and the Book,'" *Victorian Poetry* 27 (1989): 121-22.

capacity to overcome talk—"How happy those are who know how to write!" (VII. 82)—is essentially contradicted by the Pope's preoccupation with textual mortification.[24] The Pope begins his speech by relaying the curious ecclesiastical history of Pope Formosus's judgment, which directly dramatizes the problem of text as an unresurrectable corpse. As the Pope explains, after Formosus's death in 896, his successor Stephen ordered the corpse to be exhumed for a trial to determine whether or not Formosus had ascended to the papal throne legally. According to Pope of *The Ring and the Book*'s imagining, a Deacon served as "advocate and mouthpiece of the corpse" (X. 52), after which Formosus was declared an illegitimate Pope, only to be re-instated again by Stephen's successor, Theodore. Through the subsequent generations of papal judgment, the pendulum would swing from one position to the other and back again, depending on the endless reinterpretation of the ever-proliferating textual record, "[s]ince of the making books there is no end" (X. 9). Bailey identifies the Pope's interest in Formosus as a way of articulating his own hopelessly fallible judgment; via the connection that Higher Criticism makes between divine truth and a living body, Formosus's unresurrectable corpse symbolizes the failure of the Pope's textually based knowledge to animate a true judgment about Guido.[25] The Pope is duly aware that his speech, carefully culled from amassed textual precedents, fails to catch the spark of divinity. Yet in another passage, he wonderingly muses on the animative, spark-like impact of street gossip on human bodies:

> The chill persistent rain has purged our streets

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[24] The lawyers—Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis (Guido's defender) and Johannes Baptista Bottinius (Guido's prosecutor)—also complain that they are constrained by textuality. Presented as speakers in the process of writing a speech they will subsequently deliver, both men make plenty of observations on the relationship between textual and oral expression. In VII. 234-42, Archangelis imagines Bottinius in his study reading out loud, presenting a portrait of strained eloquence—the result of writing's unnatural disciplinary force on human speech. In IX. 1572-79, Bottinius ends his speech with nostalgia for a time when orality was supposedly more intimately connected to the body.

[25] The First Vatican Council, which convened in 1868, issued a formal definition of papal infallibility. Browning's Pope Innocent XII—with his heightened awareness of fallibility—undermines this proceeding.

> Of gossipry; pert tongue and idle ear
>
> By this, consort 'neath archway, portico.
>
> But wheresoe'er Rome gathers in the grey,
>
> Two names now snap and flash from mouth to mouth (X. 286-90)

Inclement weather may rid the streets of "gossipry," but "pert tongue and idle ear" will gather where it can. With a sexualized energy, "pert" suggests a reproductive, creative force that will not be drowned out by the "persistent rain."[26] The way in which the "two names" electrically "snap and flash from mouth to mouth" connote thunder and lightning, as if town talk itself is a form of weather fit to rival nature's storm. The description may again allude to the spark of divinity, here suggesting a kind of perverse proximity between the creative energies of town talk and of God. The Pope's emphasis on town talk's sequestration, conducted "'neath archway, portico" and "in the grey," does not seem to diminish its vitality—rather, town talk's concentration seems to intensify its spark. In *The Ring and the Book*, this authoritative religious figure questions whether or not he can voice a judgment that will be heard above that of the crowd. The Pope's uncertainty here seems strikingly different from the representation of the true poet in "How It Strikes a Contemporary" (1855) as "a recording chief-inquisitor" in the service of God, holding his own against "neighbour's tongues," "the town's true master if the town but knew."[27] In *The Ring and the Book*, the Pope himself—God's "recording chief-inquisitor" if there ever was one—stands reduced to monosyllabic expression ("Two names.../...steel strike") that echoes town talk's telegraphic "snap and flash."

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[26] As Joseph Bristow notes, in Browning's poetry, sexual creativity is often presented in conjunction with divine creativity. See "Histories and Historicism" in *Robert Browning* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1991), 67-127.

[27] Robert Browning, "How It Strikes a Contemporary," lines 36-40, in *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*, 441.

Paradox, Town Talk, and Browning's Liberal Reviewers

The Pope's image of gossips convening together in tight spaces to share in the intensity of spark-like talk captures an important paradox that structures town talk's communications. In particular, the image shows the way in which town talk gains potency from both asserting its confidentiality and from loosening that confidentiality in the act of communicative sharing. In other words, the image illustrates how the energy of town talk's "snap and flash" obtains both from its simultaneous refusal and willingness to share. Half-Rome's and the Other Half-Rome's town talk enact this paradox when they promise *and* share "exclusive" information with their auditors. My use of the term "exclusive" intends to capture associations culled from its deployment in journalistic contexts; specifically, the notion that certain information is not widely available generates sensational feeling. That is, whether or not the content of talk qualifies as sensational itself, the very perception of any content's exclusive nature can produce sensational feeling and its pleasures. For example, when Half-Rome opens with the command that his hearers "[b]e ruled by [him] and have a care o' the crowd," he increases the allure of what he will say (II. 1). In another instance, still repeating the town talk at Pompilia's bedside, the Other-Half Rome paradoxically affirms and negates exclusivity's narrowing of boundaries: "Someone, at the bedside, said much more / Took on him to explain the secret cause / O' the crime: quoth he…" (III. 91-93). In the act of communication—what follows "quoth he"—town talk is subject to the contradiction of trying to maintain the exclusivity of the "secret cause" while at the same time revealing it.[28]

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[28] There is a significant critical history of theorizing secrets as parodoxes that aids my thinking here. According to Georg Simmel in 1906, "[The] attractions of secrecy enter into combination with those of its logical opposite…Secrecy involves a tension which, at the moment of revelation, finds its release…Secrecy sets barriers between men, but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip or confession ("The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 4 [1906]: 465-66). More recently, Beryl Bellman has written that "[t]he practice of secrecy involves a do-not-talk-it proscription

Tertium Quid, however, is the most important practitioner of town talk's paradoxical

communicative procedures, for I contend that it is through him—and his anachronistically

Victorian identity—that Browning finds a way to push *The Ring and the Book* into the space of

its own reception. In his person, Browning subsumes the particular rhetorical patterns of the

Victorian liberal reviews into the paradoxical structure of town talk, ultimately suggesting that

the "chatter" of the reviews is nothing but town talk too. As a member of the Roman aristocracy,

and friend to church and government officials, Tertium Quid seems an unlikely candidate for

town talk: no gossip-monger in the marketplace, Tertium Quid imagines that he is capable of

making judgments that transcend the mere talk of both the lower and middle classes. Yet, it is

this seeming unlikelihood—and his concomitant expressions of his own superiority and

distinction from the "mob" of other talkers—that actually heightens his implication within the

paradox of town talk that I have been describing. More so than his colleagues Half-Rome and the

Other Half-Rome (Browning has, after all, already lumped Tertium Quid's talk together with the

other "sample speeches" in the introduction), Tertium Quid speaks town talk's dictum of offering

information not easy to be had:

> And nothing hinders that we lift the case
>
> Out of the shade into the shine, allow
>
> Qualified persons to pronounce at last,
>
> Nay, edge in an authoritative word
>
> Between this rabble's-brabble of dolts and fools
>
> Who make up reasonless unreasoning Rome. (IV. 6-11)

Here, he essentially enacts the same contradiction that the other town talkers have enacted, trying

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that is contradicted by the fact that secrecy is constituted by the very procedures [i.e., talk] by which secrets get communicated" ("The Paradox of Secrecy," *Human Studies* 4 [1981]: 22).

to maintain the exclusivity of his "authoritative word" while at the same time making it widely

known, "[o]ut of the shade into the shine." His boast that he will "edge in an authoritative word /

Between this rabble's brabble of dolts and fools" is ironized, moreover, by the fact that he

occupies, in the poem, a "tertiary" rather than intervening position. His judgment is no more

authoritative, from the point of view of the poem, than the "rabble's brabble" of Half-Rome, the

Other Half-Rome, or the crowds at the church or Pompilia's deathbed. In fact, we soon find that

it matters little what Tertium Quid will say at all: unable to offer any definitively new judgment

on the case, his talk collapses into Half-Rome's when he reveals his inadvertent leanings toward

Guido, a fellow aristocrat.[29] Near the end of his monologue, Tertium Quid comes close to

recognizing what the poem makes him out to be—just another town talker: "Only all this talk

talked, / 'T was not for nothing that we talked, I hope? /...(You'll see, I have not so advanced

myself, / After my teaching the two idiots here!)" (IV. 1636-40).

What is different, however, between Tertium Quid and the other town talkers, is that he

ascribes the distinction or exclusivity of his talk to his superior, "reasoning" intellect, whereas

Half-Rome and the Other Half-Rome seem to assert exclusivity as a kind of speech act in itself.

Tertium Quid imagines he possesses a privileged insider's perspective because his educated

capacity for "reason" enables him to sort through different viewpoints and come to an infallible

judgment.[30] The speech patterns that Tertium Quid engage in his monologue, however,

demonstrate that he "reasons" not so much as a seventeenth-century Roman aristocrat, but as a

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[29] As Rigg has pointed out, Tertium Quid's classist thinking quickly confound any hope that he will offer, after the clearly biased Half-Rome and the Other Half-Rome, "some order on chaos," for "social status is at the crux of the trial and has already been cited as the basis for Guido's foolishness" (*Robert Browning's Romantic Irony*, 67).

[30] In a foreword to John Updike's collection of essays, *Higher Gossip* (New York: Random House, 2011), Christopher Carduff connects the notion of privileged intelligence to a form of gossip. Describing Updike, Carduff writes: "The words of this privileged insider, this ideal reviewer, comes to us in the carefully weighted syllables of a well-schooled but largely self-educated connoisseur…and we lean in close to hear them, not only because we feel more intelligent and worldly in his company but because *he's got the goods*" (xvii).

middle-class Victorian liberal. He enacts a distinctly mid-Victorian liberal process of judgment, which Elaine Hadley explores in *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (2010). According to Hadley, from the years just before official formation of the Liberal party in 1859 into the 1880s, there emerged a specific set of practices—developed and consolidated by major liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold—that were supposed to define what it meant to think like a good, liberal citizen. Hadley identifies "liberal cognition" as comprising a series of "formalized mental attitudes" that the individual liberal subject had to enact in order to form properly liberal opinions, "such as disinterestedness, objectivity, reticence, conviction, impersonality, and sincerity."[31] The realization of these attitudes, Hadley points out, involves a limited set of rhetorical practices—many of which, as it happens, Tertium Quid adopts.

For one, Tertium Quid's avowed abstraction from the "rabble's brabble of dolts and fools" resonates with what John Morley, editor of the eminently liberal *Fortnightly Review* and later liberal statesman, ascribed to the ideal critic: "The speculative distractions of the epoch are noisy and multitudinous...the serious spirit must...disengage itself from the futile hubbub."[32] Here, Morley expresses the liberal ideal of disinterested detachment in the formation of judgment, the need to "[stand] in some sort aloof from the agitation of the present."[33] For another, Tertium Quid—much more so than the other town talkers—makes inordinate use of variations on the phrase, "on the other hand" or "on the other side" to structure the progression of his argument: some version of this phrase occurs at least seven times in his monologue.

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[31] Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 9.

[32] John Morley, "Mr. Pater's Essays," *Fortnightly Review* (1 April 1873): 470.

[33] Ibid.

Similarly, the words "either" or "neither" pepper his speech, occurring fourteen times in total and in contexts that emphasize the balance between assertions and counter-assertions: for example, "Who / Was fool, who knave? Neither and both, perchance," or "There are difficulties perhaps / On any supposition, and either side."(IV. 505-7; IV. 1581-82). Through such rhetorical emphases, Tertium Quid over-performs a Millian consideration of a matter from all of its different angles: according to Mill in his famous tract, *On Liberty* (1859), the individual can only approach (though likely never reach) infallible judgment by deliberately testing his opinions against contrary ones.

Tertium Quid is also fond of deploying what Hadley identifies as "the ventriloquial method," in which an individual specifically presents his opponent's argument as if it were his own to show how well he has inhabited different opinions before settling on his own.[34] Over and over again, once Tertium Quid has argued a particular position on a particular aspect of the case, he anticipates the other side by preemptively ventriloquizing the opposition. For instance, having argued that Pietro and Violante lived a decent life after Violante tricked her husband into thinking he had a daughter (in fact, Violante had adopted Pompilia from her prostitute mother), Tertium Quid fully inhabits the position of devil's advocate: "Here you put my guard, pass to my heart / By the home-thrust—'There's a lie at base of all'" (IV. 305-6). At another point, having offered an account of Guido calling officials to arrest Pompilia and Caponsacchi at the inn to which they fled, Tertium Quid begins a lengthy discourse from the point of view of an interlocutor that would argue Guido ought to have exacted his revenge then and there: "Here you smile / 'And never let him henceforth dare to plead,— / Of all please and excuses in the world / For any deed hereafter to be done— / His irrepressible wrath at honour's wound!...'" (IV. 1125-

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[34] Hadley, *Living Liberalism*, 149.

29). In both of these instances, Tertium Quid aggressively uses a prescriptive second-person address ("Here you put my guard," "Here you smile") to digest the opposition before it has had a chance to speak, an effort to discipline multiple perspectives under the aegis of liberal formalism.

Tertium Quid's position within the poem as only one of nine speakers ironizes his elaborate fantasies of inhabiting different perspectives while remaining, somehow, abstracted and distinct from them all. His failure to maintain, simultaneously, a position of interested involvement and of disinterested abstraction reflects a problem that mid-Victorian liberals were also interested in solving. Again to borrow from Hadley's useful coinages, mid-Victorian "liberal cognition" tried to achieve a paradoxical state of "abstract embodiment," a phrase that reflects the difficulty of remaining a fully concretized citizen in the "practical politics" of the day while also adopting a detached frame of mind to form impartial judgments.[35] In Hadley's description of her coinage, abstract embodiment is "a purposefully paradoxical neologism that seeks to encompass liberalism's desire for a political subject who is abstract (and capable of abstract thought) but also individual, abstract and yet concretely materialized, 'free,' though in its place."[36] Because of the difficulty of abstract embodiment, Victorian liberals placed great emphasis on political forms such as the periodical signature and the ballot box, both structures that enable some measure of embodiment as well as disembodiment, as a social citizen whose individuating identities are bracketed or hidden away. In his idealization of disengaging from the

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[35] Besides Hadley, other recent scholars on Victorian liberalism have commented on how thinkers wrestled with the contradiction inherent within disinterested judgment. See Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton University Press, 2001) on "ambivalence" in writers' conceptions of "a dialectic between detachment and engagement" (132); Lauren M.E. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) on the tensions between individual character and civic engagement; David Wayne Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) on aspirational "oscillations" between the "heroics of individualism" and "a practice of liberal many-sidedness" (33).

[36] Hadley, *Living Liberalism*, 18.

"futile hubbub," Morley too evinces an awareness of abstract embodiment's tall order, when he claims that the "effort after detachment naturally takes the form of criticism of the past, the only way in which a man can take part in the discussion and propagation of ideas."[37] Claiming that the distance between the "agitation of the present" and the past could render abstract embodiment's paradox more possible, Morley ultimately admits its impossibility in speaking of the "effort after detachment."

So, Tertium Quid's high aspirations to think abstractedly fall to the ground with a thud, as he is weighted down by his clear embodiment as a wealthy citizen. Imported into a Victorian context, Tertium Quid's inability to disengage himself from his aristocratic embodiment may very well be a critique of Matthew Arnold's dream of a "common humanity" that cuts across class lines in its pursuit of "sweetness and light."[38] This is not to say that Browning was not a liberal himself (at the solicitation of editor Andrew Reid in 1885, he wrote a sonnet called "Why I am a Liberal"), but that he was mounting an insider's critique against liberal practice's more extravagant beliefs in perfecting the process of judgment. The larger point I am making, ultimately, is not just that Browning critiques liberalism's fantasies, but that through the collapse of town talk's and liberalism's respective paradoxes in the person of Tertium Quid, Browning discovers a way to ironize what he knows will be the thoroughly liberal reviews of his own work. That is, through Tertium Quid and his particular failures, Browning suggests that the high-minded aspirations of liberal cognition may very well be symptoms of town talk's drive to be at once apart and part of the crowd; hence, Browning boldly suggests that his liberal reviewers-to-be essentially are mere town talkers themselves. Browning's absorption of liberal cognition into

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[37] Morley, "Mr. Pater's Essays," 470.

[38] See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), first published as a series in the *Cornhill* in 1867-1868.

town talk makes, importantly, a very specific intervention given particular developments in review culture in the 1860s.

In the 1830s, the *Athenæum* led the movement toward a new kind of review that eschewed political affiliation and aspired to make disinterested judgments, also in the realm of literary determinations. Unlike the most prominent reviews earlier in the century, such as the Tory *Quarterly Review* and its competitor, the Whig *Edinburgh Review*, a spate of new reviews founded in the 1860s—such as the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1865-1923), *The Fortnightly Review* (1865-1954), and the *Contemporary Review* (founded 1866)—adopted a characteristically liberal stance of disinterestedness and impartiality that was supposed to give due consideration to all different positions. This new generation of reviews also sought a wider reach in terms of influence, targeting a broader segment of the ever-growing middle class through adopting features associated with the successful shilling monthlies: shorter articles, fiction, and cheaper prices. As such, reviews in the 1860s became important literary tastemakers, such that poetic— and relatedly, personal—reputations could be made or unmade with great rapidity. In such contexts, where a poet's fame among a middle-class audience depended on the chatter of the reviews, Browning could not have missed the importance of courting their favor, regardless of how disdainful he might have felt about their undue influence. At the time of *The Ring and the Book*'s publication, Browning had witnessed at least several instances of the periodical press's inordinate power over how poets were talked about by the general public. The so-called "spasmodic" poets, for example, were "in essence...laughed to death," according to Linda K. Hughes, in the wake of W.E. Aytoun's negative review in *Blackwood*'s (March 1854) of the promising young poet, Alexander Smith.[39]

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[39] Linda K. Hughes, "The Impress of Print: Poems, Periodicals, Novels," in *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94-95.

A letter Browning wrote to his close friend Isa Blagden in August 1865 demonstrates his own sensitivity to the power of the reviews in establishing a yet-unknown poet's reputation. In particular, he comments on the free-flowing traffic between the reviews and the literary "talk of the town": "I suppose that what you call 'my fame within these four years' comes from a little of this gossiping and going about, and showing myself to be alive...When there gets to be a general feeling of this kind, that there must be something in the works of an author, the reviews are obliged to notice him."[40] With a characteristic truculence, Browning imagines his own talk exerting a significant force upon the reviews. That is, he refutes the overall impression shared among his contemporaries that the reviews made the literary talk of the town, instead claiming that *he* did—through his aggressive "gossiping and going about" the London dinner tables. What the reviews said in the aftermath of *The Ring and the Book*'s publication indicates the curious way in which Browning was right.

The first commentators on *The Ring and the Book* proved their adherence to the liberal script, inadvertently echoing the poem's Tertium Quid. Some critics felt the need to make their own pronouncements about the trial, as if they too were somehow absorbed into the world that Browning has imagined. Like a good, disinterested critic, John Addington Symonds in *Macmillan's Magazine* confidently takes his turn at "weighing the balance of conflicting evidence, to hear every side of the question," launching into his own consideration of Guido's guilt, Violante's chicanery, Pompilia's feelings, and Caponsacchi's intentions.[41] At great length, Symonds presents a series of questions that demonstrate his capacity to understand the issue

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[40] Robert Browning to Isa Blagden, 19 August 1865, in *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isa Blagden*, ed. Edward C. McAleer (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1951), 220.

[41] John Addington Symonds, "The Ring and the Book," *Macmillan's Magazine* 18 (1868): 268. Symonds was an expert on the Italian Renaissance; his own magnum opus was his seven volume *Renaissance in Italy* (1875-1886).

from all of its different perspectives:

> The question now remains, who was really guilty? Was the Count a monster or a dupe? Did he marry Pompilia with a base motive, drive her parents to desperation, worry her life out in his palace at Arezzo, forge letters in her name, lay a trap for her and Caponsacchi, and after being foiled by their truth and innocence, in the final resort wreak his spite by murder? Or, on the other hand, had Violante tricked him into the marriage, slandered him at Rome, and cozened him out of his rights by pretending that Pompilia was not her child? Had Pompilia really carried on a clandestine correspondence with Caponsacchi? Was the child not Guido's own heir, but the priest's bastard? And supposing all these questions answered in the affirmative, was the Count not justified, after insults and legal delays, in taking the matter into his own hands and blotting out the three faithless lives?[42]

In a virtuosic display of liberal cognition, Symonds inhabits assertions and then counter-assertions through an energetic volley of rhetorical questions (with a characteristic "Or, on the other hand" in the middle). He instantiates the liberal subject's quest for infallible judgment through first inhabiting every thinkable position. Above, each and every assertion is meticulously balanced with a counter-assertion: Was Guido "a monster or a dupe"? Did he marry with nefarious intent or was he "tricked by Violante? Did he commit forgery, or did Pompilia really write the letters? Was the child Guido's or Caponsacchi's? Tertium Quid, however—the most fallible of town talkers—has bestowed proleptic irony upon Symonds. To be sure, this *Macmillan*'s review was published in November 1868 after the release of the first volume— which features only the framing first book, Half-Rome, and the Other Half-Rome. More

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[42] Ibid., 268.

precisely then, Tertium Quid's unproductive obsession with balanced impartiality is more of an ironizing echo rather than an anticipatory one, though Browning had almost certainly, by then, fully conceived his Tertium Quid. In light of Tertium Quid's fallible town talk, I suggest that we might ultimately "hear" Symonds's volley of questions as town talk, even gossip: they are at once seductively withholding and plainly disclosing.

Subsequent reviewers remained hopelessly entangled within the formalism of Tertium Quid's liberal rhetoric and cognition. They extend, additionally, these same patterns into their judgments of the poem and the poet. In 1870, summing up his judgment of the complete poem, E.J. Hasell in *St. Paul's Magazine* (Anthony Trollope's family magazine begun in 1867 and modeled on the successes of shilling monthlies like the *Cornhill*) offers a statement no less noncommittal than any of Tertium Quid's equivocations: "If *The Ring and the Book* fails to fulfil the most hopeful anticipations raised in the minds of some readers by Browning's earlier poems, it nevertheless falsifies the auguries of ill which others have derived from them."[43] In the characteristically and intentionally un-controversial *Cornhill*, Frederick Greenwood formulaically structures his review in two parts, beginning with assertions as to the poem's merits, reiterating what "everybody has heard by this time…how original and how daring was the attempt," and proceeding with the poem's faults.[44] The *Cornhill* here demonstrates its allegiance to Thackeray's original prospectus, which—as mentioned in the introduction and first chapter—promises that the magazine will inform its readers "what the world is talking about." Greenwood's review, in concentrating on what "everybody has heard by this time" seems almost self-aware of its own circulation of reasoned, liberal judgment as a form of town talk. The *Times*'s judgments of *The Ring and the Book* perform the *Cornhill*'s balance of merits and

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[43] E.J. Hasell, *St. Paul's Magazine* 7 (1870): 377.

[44] [Frederick Greenwood], "Browning in 1869," *Cornhill Magazine* (February 1869): 253.

demerits writ small, in carefully weighted statements about each element of the poem: for instance, "his subtle analysis of character…at once delights and wearies," "his minute observation of cause and effect…argues want of spontaneity and inspiration, but contains within itself inherent beauties," and "his violent and defiant Realism...to some looks so like truth."[45] With no apparent sense of how Browning's depiction of town talkers has already ironized his statements before he has made them, the *Times* reviewer concludes, with liberal bravura: "We have endeavoured to do justice to this voluminous poem."[46]

While conflating work, poet, and man, J.H.C. Fane in the *Edinburgh Review* asserts with exaggerated liberal impartiality: "We admit the faults [of the poem] and deplore them, while we recognise in Mr. Browning qualities which assign him eminent rank in the intellectual order of men."[47] To locate Browning exactly within "the intellectual order of men" becomes an important preoccupation for the "disinterested" chorus of reviewers. For example, the *Illustrated London News*, a newspaper aimed at an even broader audience base than the periodical reviews or the *Times*, repeats the refrain found everywhere that Browning exceeds Tennyson in the dramatic "playing [of] individual characters in the attitude of self-disclosure," but falls below the poet laureate "in… powers of idyllic description and narration."[48] The *Times* attempts to pinpoint, precisely, Browning on a spectrum with other great poets of recent literary fame: "Greater than Coleridge or Clough, with both of whom his genius has some relation, he unquestionably is; but less than Tennyson even in his humanity—his great and constant redemption—he must be

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[45] *Times* (London), "The Ring and the Book," June 11, 1869.

[46] Ibid.

[47] [J.H.C. Fane], *Edinburgh Review* 130 (1869): 164-86.

[48] *Illustrated London News*, "The Ring and the Book," March 27, 1869.

confessed to be."[49] Each of these reviews seeks to convey precision in its judgments of Browning and his poem, avoiding statements that may seem too enthusiastic in such ways that might suggest anything other than careful, reasoned understanding.

To be sure, I am not saying that the culture of 1860s liberal reviewing held a monopoly on the notion of balanced judgment or of disinterested consideration, and all of the writers of the lines I am citing may not, in fact, have crafted their formulations with Millian or Arnoldian liberalism in mind. But I contend that on the whole, the acclaim with which *The Ring and the Book* was met evinces not unqualified excitement, but carefully meted-out statements like the ones I have cited, that seem, deliberately, to perform a reasoned impartiality as a way to validate the authority of their own judgments. Like Tertium Quid, these reviewers seem allergic to making stronger judgments—particularly about a poet not yet revered but also not ignored by the public—lest they should be classed with the "reasonless unreasoning" mob of other talkers.

The un-ironic tone of authority that so many of the reviewers adopt when referring to their own abstraction from the "rabble's brabble of dolts and fools" places them, nonetheless, within the paradox of liberal logic and of town talk more generally. Not infrequently, these self-proclaimed literary tastemakers express the paradox (unwittingly or not) of their own bid to elevate themselves above their own readers, while at the same time identifying with—or even exemplifying—these same everyday readers of such reviews. To give just a few examples, *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, a pioneer publication in terms of affordability, wide circulation, and middle-class respectability, proclaims that Browning's art is "not [yet] in accordance with the poetical taste and fashion of the age," yet at the same time, assures its readership that they are

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[49] *Times* (London), "The Ring and the Book," June 11, 1869.

among "the educated public" that will meet Browning with "measured and judicious approval."[50] Both Symonds and his colleague at *Macmillan's*, J.R. Mozley, assert with self-congratulatory aplomb, respectively, that *The Ring and the Book* requires readers with "patience and intellect…capable of weighing and comparing conflicting evidence," and that it "cannot be appreciated by the easy-going and somewhat indolent reader."[51] Yet *Macmillan's* was certainly no highbrow publication: like its slightly more successful competitor, the *Cornhill,* the shilling monthly aimed to capture the growing "middlebrow" audience in the 1860s. John Morley, moreover, held much sway over *Macmillan's* in the mid-1860s as a frequent contributor and publisher's reader; in 1883, he would become the magazine's editor after his stints at the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and his election as a Member of Parliament. The *Times* presents one of the most illustrative statements of the desire to be at once above and in the middle of the crowd: "To the British public 'ye who like him not,' who cannot stomach this poem, we can only say that we can sympathize with their palate, but we must pity them the loss of an intellectual treat."[52] In such statements, we can hear not only Tertium Quid's snobbery but also an echo of Half-Rome and the Other Half-Rome's seductive offers of exclusive talk apart from the crowd.

In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning thus takes a gamble on contemporary reviewers *not* noticing his suggestion that their valued practices of "abstract embodiment" were nothing more than a version of town talk that would win him fame. For the most part, they do not, and so they follow the script that Browning has already provided them (though, of course, Browning's

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[50] "The Ring and the Book," *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* 46 (1869): 473.

[51] Symonds, "The Ring and the Book," 262; J.R. Mozley, "The Ring and the Book," *Macmillan's Magazine* 19 (1869): 544.

[52] *Times* (London), "The Ring and the Book," June 11, 1869.

Tertium Quid is scripted from conventions already present in review culture). Here, however, I want to turn to at least one review that cannily evades liberal judgment, and which also shows an apt understanding of the key ambivalences in Browning's relationship with the processes of his own reception. The review, from the American weekly known as the *Round Table* (started by author, editor, and journalist Charles H. Sweetser in 1863), opens with a rejection of Victorian liberalism's cornerstone principle of arriving at correct judgment through mulling over different perspectives in one's mind:

> This book, like all the others, brings up the whole series of moot points anew, furnishes masses on masses of criteria, and leaves us at the last where we began…Moreover…the coins in this coffer might well puzzle the counter by their variety alone. There is such a display of erudition, acuteness, patience, impulse, keen analysis, poetic insight, and recondite fact in one inextricable jumble, as might well bid us despair of a conclusion. And, indeed, the critic would be bold who should attempt to sort out, label, and pigeon-hole all the characteristics of this many-sided mind, and exclaim into print, "Behold the statistical result. Here lies, tabulated, Robert Browning."[53]

Observing that both Browning and his work are like an immeasurable variety of coins, the anonymous critic discerningly refuses to judge ("tabulate") either man or poem. The reviewer's conception of Browning's book and "many-sided mind" as different kind of coins also understands the ambivalence at the heart of the poet's desire to both cater to and gain ascendancy over his British public. Specifically, the metaphor of mixed coins indicates Browning's simultaneous participation within the commercial economy that would win him fame and his tendency to invalidate that same economy. That is, if *The Ring and the Book* offers a coffer of

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[53] "The Ring and the Book," *Round Table: A Saturday Review of Politics, Finance, Literature, Society and Art* (9 January 1869): 25.

mixed coins, it agrees to circulate itself as a product that has commercial value, but one that the public cannot ultimately fix, even if it may fancy that it can. By saying first how his public will "tabulate" him, Browning tries to ensure through preemptive irony that the town talk of Victorian London will never know his true value.[54] Like the vibrations at the surface of the water, the town talk that the reviews circulated only moves farther and farther away from the stone that has already begun its long journey into the depths, before Half-London and his colleagues have even opened their mouths to talk.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In this concluding section, I want to bring attention to the afterlife of the town talk that Browning orchestrated around his magnum opus and himself and suggest that Browning manages to make, within *The Ring and the Book*, one additional anticipatory move: he scripts also the conditions of town talk's disappearance and the proliferation of writing that follows. In contrast to the first half of *The Ring and the Book*, the second half features speakers whose "talk" relies on or gives way to textuality. The monologues of the two lawyers, Archangelis and Bottinius, are given as they write the courtroom speeches they will later present (see note 24), and the Pope's philosophical arguments are, as I have mentioned, centrally concerned with the problem of textual evidence even as they are beholden to centuries of textual scholarship. In the final two books—respectively, Guido's final speech before his execution and Browning's epilogue-like narrative—town talk gives way to a kind of un-vital, textual myth-making. The poem therefore enacts the way in which town talk, spark-like but short-lived, vanishes rather quickly. Correspondingly, the fervor around *The Ring and the Book* would fade, and in the 1870s and 1880s, the contours of Browning's own fame would shift. Specifically, these were decades

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[54] The coin metaphor probably also plays with the work's central metaphor—that the "old yellow Book" is "pure crude fact," unalloyed gold, and that *The Ring and the Book* is the ring formed from the gold.

in which texts proliferated, especially book-length critical studies and guides produced by the so-called Browning Societies, scholarship that consolidated ideas about the poet that would last well into the twentieth century and win him a secure place in the English literary canon. In what follows, I offer some brief thoughts on the final two books and Browning's enduringly difficult relationship with the fame he had courted with ambivalence, as it began its transformation out of what has sometimes been viewed as "the incandescence of celebrity" into the "immortality of fame."[55]

Guido's second monologue is shot through with an urgent obsession with the idea of his own talk's impending demise. While addressing a cardinal and an abate who have come to visit him, Guido commands: "Let me talk / Or leave me, at your pleasure! talk I must: / What is your visit but my lure to talk?" (XI. 130-32). In characterizing their "visit" as his "lure to talk," Guido demonstrates the extent to which his talk seeks, still, to influence others and not to convey truth. A few lines later, he expresses his great frustration that he will not be able, essentially, to influence the town talk that he knows his execution will spark:

I use my tongue: how glibly yours will run

At pleasant supper-time…God's curse!...to-night

When all the guests jump up, begin so brisk

"Welcome his Eminence who shrived the wretch!

Now we should have the Abate's story!" (XI. 138-42).

Guido envisions fluid channels of circulation between his own speech and town talk: they feed off of each other, even if through an embroiled tangle of antagonisms. Guido's disdain for the crowd is palpable from his imperious command to "Let me talk, / Or leave me at your pleasure,"

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[55] Boone and Vickers note this common distinction between celebrity as ephemeral and fame as lasting (especially in the twenty-first century) while acknowledging the ways in which celebrity studies has complicated this binary ("Introduction," 904).

his resentment clear from his imaginings of "how glibly" other tongues will run at the dinner table, how they will prattle about his final moments as if his demise formed the most ordinary topic of conversation.[56] Unable to bear the thought that he will not be able to "use [his] tongue" anymore to engage this dinner-table talk on his own terms, Guido forcefully spews out his last words in an energetic bid to anticipate this talk.

Here, Guido's anxiety amplifies Browning's own concerns about the ways in which *The Ring and the Book* will be talked about. It seems appropriate, then, that in the first lines of the final book, Browning's authorial persona takes over immediately from Guido's final, sputtering remarks that end the penultimate book (Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours, / I am the Granduke's—no, I am the Pope's! / Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God,…/ Pompilia, will you let them murder me? (IX. 2424-27)). As he smoothes over the punctuated energies of Guido's desperate, last words, Browning narrates *in propria persona*:

Here were the end, had anything an end:

Thus, lit and launched, up and up roared and soared

A rocket, till the key o' the vault was reached

And wide heaven held, a breathless minute-space,

In brilliant usurpature: thus caught spark,

Rushed to the height, and hung at full of fame

Over men's upturned faces, ghastly thence,

Our glaring Guido: now decline must be. (XII. 1-8)

"Here were the end" of Guido's sputtering talk, these lines seem to suggest, whose fiery energies

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[56] Guido's sentiment here resembles that of the Renaissance bishop in "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," (*Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, 1845) who realizes he will have no recourse should his "nephews" decide not to follow his commands for his burial.

first explode and then meet with quick extinction, like a rocket which "ca[tches] spark" at its summit. Until the lines reach "Our glaring Guido," however, it is not entirely clear what exactly the unfolding rocket metaphor is meant to represent. Possibly, "[h]ere were the end" could also refer to the end of the poem's voices; after all, readers already know, because of the plan set out in the first book, that this is the final book. And, since nineteenth-century usage suggests a close link between the imagery of rockets and literary success, the rocket might suggest the end of *The Ring and the Book*'s public release and Browning's rapidly rising celebrity. For example, Abraham Hayward in an 1837 article for the *Quarterly Review* writes that Charles Dickens, with the consecutive successes of *Sketches by Boz* and the *Pickwick Papers* in 1836, "has risen like a rocket, and he will come down like the stick."[57] The OED gives another instance from *United States Magazine* in 1856: "We have witnessed the rising of many a literary rocket, shooting like a meteor across the zenith, to fall backward with a few disconnected stars fast fading into oblivion."

In both of these examples, the metaphor is invoked as much to describe a literary celebrity's rise as his fall. Both note a phenomenon—so familiar in our own time—of sudden but impermanent fame. What does it mean, then, for Browning to share this kind of "fame"—which so readily sounds like "flame" in the context of the rocket's explosive spark—with "glaring Guido's" fiery rise and extinction? Such identification seems counter-productive, if Browning aspired to more than short-lived recognition. A look at what happens in the poem after the chatter around Guido fades away might provide some answers:

> Then talked of, told about, a tinge the less
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> In every fresh transmission; till it melts,

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[57] [Abraham Hayward], Review of the *Pickwick Papers*, *Quarterly Review* 59 (1837): 518.

Trickles in silent orange or wan grey

Across our memory, dies and leaves all dark,

And presently we find the stars again. (XII. 15-19)

These lines directly extend the rocket metaphor to refer to town talk: they indicate that the "brilliant usurpature" from the lines before stands for a momentary condition in which the collective animation of the crowd—engaged in town talk—maintains a vital potency that rivals the flame of the heavens. After this moment, however, the town talk—and the cause célèbre it sustains—"melts," and "trickles in silent orange," in a synaesthetic articulation that confirms already robust associations between fame and aurality. These lines conclude with a highly aestheticized image of colors fading into the dark, and the restoration of divine light, in the form of "stars" as the brightest once "again"; overall, they convey a pleasant calm in the wake of town talk's disappearance.

Out of this calm, the poem seems to suggest, the production of text commences. Unlike in the first book, Browning's authorial persona takes up only a little space in the final one, and letter extracts from a Venetian visitor and the lawyers form the bulk of the monologue. The final book, then, enacts print's "usurpature" of the throne that talk has vacated. These letter extracts, according to Browning *in propria persona*, constitute "print that ends my Book," a claim that, with a wink, maintains the conceit that *The Ring and the Book* is a "book" that is not quite print itself. The Venetian visitor's letter, demarcated by the poet as text that differs from the orality of other voices in the poem, offers a description of Guido's final moments that, in contrast to Guido's own sputtering last words, seems improbably trite, mythological, and I argue, textual:

As he harangued the multitude beneath.

He begged forgiveness on the part of God,

And fair construction of his act from men,

Whose suffrage he entreated for his soul,

Suggesting that we should forthwith repeat

A *Pater* and an *Ave*, with the hymn,

Salve Regina Coeli, for his sake. (XII. 173-79)

With a metric regularity unusual for the jagged prosody of *The Ring and the Book*'s blank verse

speeches, the Venetian visitor chronicles the end of Guido in near-perfect iambic pentameter—

breaking only to linger memorably on his apostrophe to the Virgin Mary ("Queen of Heaven")—

as if to imbue the story with a rhythmic fixity that will ensure its longevity and rigid transmission

through the generations. In juxtaposition with the more often uneven, irregular energies that

power the rhythm of the monologues in *The Ring and the Book*, the Venetian visitor's letter

emphasizes the unchanging nature of textual accounts and their tendency towards conventional

forms of morality. Though it may be easier to commit such lines to memory, it is probably not

this Guido—with a "*Pater*," "*Ave*," or "*Salve Regina Coeli*" on his lips—that makes the most

potent, immediate impression upon the reader.

Browning's last direct address to his "British Public," which so many readers past and

present have taken straight as the poem's central message, is like the Venetian visitor's account

of Guido's salvation in that it proposes a moral too simple and conventional to seem convincing:

So, British Public, who may like me yet,

(Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence

Of many which whatever lives should teach:

This lesson, that our human speech is naught,

Our human testimony false, our fame

And human estimation words and wind. (XII. 835-40)

In contrast to the Venetian visitor's lines, however, these are exceedingly awkward lines. Trippingly, and somewhat clumsily, these lines didactically prescribe a lesson that "whatever" (rather than whoever?) lives should teach," thereafter clarifying (three times) their application specifically to humans, and ending with a couple of ungainly alliterative effects ("false, our fame" and "words and wind"). As such, the studied clumsiness of these lines ironize aspirations toward fixed moral lessons, and the way in which their irregularities mark their status as "talk" instead of text also undermines the content of these lines: essentially, these lines proclaim the insignificance of talk while seeming unable, from a formal point of view, to escape the trappings of everyday talk. What these lines achieve, then, is a difficult suspended position between a fascination with talk's insuperable vitality, on the one hand, and a sense of relief that it will soon fade away, on the other hand. Compactly, this address to the public holds together two aspects of town talk—its robustness, and its brevity—and suggests that they are ultimately constitutive of one another. In a word, we might understand town talk as intense: more powerful because of its brevity, and unsustainable because of its power.

Once talk has died out, Guido's final conversion into textual myth by the Venetian visitor prefigures Browning's own canonization as a poet by literary scholarship. From about 1870 onward, after the chatter of the initial reviews died down, new studies of Browning's poetry and handbooks to account for his style created a new wave of textual scholarship that sought to make—as Tertium Quid did—authoritative pronouncements as to whether or not Browning was to be ranked a great English poet for all time.[58] For the most part, these later critics confirmed

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[58] Alfred Austin, a notable exception in the general rush to canonize Browning, thought Browning was not a poet at all, but a prose-writer. This sentiment was later repeated by Oscar Wilde in "The Critic as Artist" (1890, revised 1891) in the following quip: "[George] Meredith was a prose Browning, and so was Browning" (1013).

earlier accounts that *The Ring and the Book* was Browning's most monumental work. Yet unlike Tertium Quid or the chorus of reviewers who chimed in immediately after *The Ring and the Book*'s publication, these new studies were notably more concerned with questions of posterity: for instance, what sort of innovations Browning brought to bear upon established poetic traditions, or how, with regard to *The Ring and the Book* in particular, the work represented the culmination of Browning's poetic methods.[59] As Patricia O'Neill pithily asserts, the result of this proliferation of textual scholarship was that "[w]hen Browning died in 1889, the whole machinery of his canonization was already in place."[60]

I am drawing a distinction, therefore, between the spheres of influence intended by the reviews following *The Ring and the Book*'s publication and by the textual "machinery" that effected Browning's canonization. The former seek an of-the-moment impact upon living oral culture and the latter an impact on records left to later generations. Although the earlier reviews are, of course, textual forms, their greater impermanence (both in terms of their subject matter, and also their form—as periodical reviews rather than studies) enables them to participate in and influence the literary talk of the town; that is, what well-read, respectable middle-class citizens were supposed to say to one another about Browning when *The Ring and the Book* first came out. Although it would be a strain to say that Browning somehow scripted not only the immediate talk around *The Ring and the Book*'s publication but also his own poetic legacy, Browning did, it seems, predict that textual "machinery" would follow the intense moment of town talk.

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[59] Hiram Corson, professor at Cornell who organized the first Browning Society in 1877, dedicated a study group to spend two years on *The Ring and the Book*. See Louise Greer, *Browning and America* (University of North Carolina Press, 1952). 167.

[60] Patricia O'Neill, "The Browningites," in *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 1.

But did he wish, finally, to be "made sure of, tamed, and chained as a classic," in the words of Henry James, in print left to posterity?[61] As we know from the Pope's speech, for Browning, textual accounts have lost an essential, unrepeatable connection to the vital, human body. Yet town talk, in spite of the way in which it powerfully generates the causes célèbres in as well as of *The Ring and the Book*, produces a hardly viable, alternative kind of fame. Following the *Round Table* reviewer, then, perhaps it is futile to "tabulate" Browning, for he successfully evades us if we should try to pin down what he thought of his late-won fame and the kinds of circulations between talk and print that produced it. I close this chapter by suggesting that *The Ring and the Book*'s alertness to town talk's unique powers, particularly enabled at greater scale through the print landscape of 1860s review culture, provides insight into perceptions of mass talk and celebrity formation at a time when such concepts were not yet naturalized as they are today.

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[61] Henry James, "Browning at Westminster Abbey," *Speaker* (4 January 1890): 12.

CHAPTER THREE

The Poetics of Idle Talk and 1880s Adventure Romance

> Literature in many of its branches is no other than the shadow of
> good talk; but the imitation falls far short of the original in life,
> freedom, and effect.
> —Robert Louis Stevenson, "Talk and Talkers"

Robert Louis Stevenson—as I mention in the introduction—elevates the phenomenon of

talk over and above any kind of literary endeavor. Again, Stevenson's sense of literature as a

"shadow" rather counter-intuitively assigns writing to the realm of the insubstantial and presents

talk as something more robust. Yet, as the quotation's emphasis on "life" and "freedom"

suggests, the substantiality of talk is of an unstable or changeable nature. This tension between

substance and ephemerality is further underscored in the essay when Stevenson describes the

way in which "the excitement of a good talk lives for a long while after in the blood, the heart

still hot within you, the brain still simmering" (150). A talk might live, ultimately, "for a long

while" but not forever. By contrast, "written words…remain fixed, become idols even to the

writer, found wooden dogmatisms" at the same time they are shadows; hence, talk's temporary

substantiality finds an oppositional tension in print's lasting insubstantiality (145).

Such tensions are at the center of this chapter, which investigates a special affinity

between the narrative poetics of late nineteenth-century adventure romance and the structural

capabilities of "idle talk" as media distinct from print. For Stevenson and other contemporary

writers of adventure romance, the concept of idleness held positive resonances—specifically,

idleness was attached to a notion of imaginative drift, which directly opposed contemporary

pedagogical theories on focus and attention. As Stephen J. Arata points out, idleness for

Stevenson meant the process by which "attention is diffused, not centered on any one object or

set of objects or ideas."[1] Idle talk, then, which drifts without fixed purpose or attention, is for

Stevenson the best and the most imaginative kind of talk. Although this chapter will discuss

Stevenson's philosophies on talk more broadly, when he discusses his talk, he often means idle

talk. Moreover, in his view, talk itself—in its relative freedom from the print's unchanging

form—is necessarily a more drifting, idle form. As such, following Stevenson, "talk" and "idle

talk" will often be interchangeable in the chapter.

I argue that Stevenson's yoking together of changeability and resilience in talk captures

the very qualities of the intrepid adventurer's embrace of hazard. In particular, the adventurer's

ability to adapt his actions to the instabilities in his environment is in a large measure what

allows his continued survival. In Stevenson's view, the ideal talker operates in the same manner,

responding to the changing whims of a partner in order to keep the life of a conversation going.

To a certain degree, then, the distinctly experiential poetics of both talking and adventuring

resolves the tensions of temporary substantiality, or changeable resilience: rendering oneself

vulnerable to the slings and arrows of fortune actually enables one to persist longer.[2] In the

discussion that follows, I examine the ways in which two canonical works of 1880s adventure

fiction, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry

Finn* (1885) experiment with translating the idle poetics of talk into their respective print

narratives—with varying results. Whereas *Treasure Island* imagines partially successful

translations that further the plausibility of adventure romance's commitment, simultaneously, to

transience and vitality, *Huckleberry Finn* observes the failures of translation to demonstrate a

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[1] Stephen J. Arata, "Stevenson, Morris, and the Value of Idleness," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, eds. Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 6.

[2] See Elinor Ochs on the need for a phenomenological approach that understands "ordinary enactments of language" such as everyday talk as experiences in themselves ("Experiencing Language," *Anthropological Theory* 12, no. 2 [2012]: 142-60).

knotty dependence of vitality upon transience—a central difficulty at the heart of a genre often thought to offer a smooth, easy and pleasurable read.

Together, Stevenson's and Twain's well-known works of fiction point to a transatlantic interest in talk as particularly suited to the narration of adventure stories. In general, discussions on vernacular and dialect forms in literature during the late-nineteenth century have focused on Gilded Age America, especially in relation to the rise of "local color" writing and the fragmentation of national identity. Thus, one of the secondary goals of this chapter is to link existing critical discussions of language and regionalism in *Huckleberry Finn* to a different context: British adventure romance's preoccupation with everyday talk. Both Norman Page and Gavin R. Jones make the point that British writers like Dickens or Thomas Hardy, though interested in setting down vernacular forms of speech, were far less concerned with conventions of accuracy—i.e., an attention to phonology, or developing new orthographies—but such a view obscures a more general but nonetheless active theoretical interest in rendering the unique qualities of talk into print that writers on both sides of the Atlantic shared.[3] Both *Treasure Island* and *Huckleberry Finn* evince an interest in translating talk into print as a new and difficult form of artistic transformation—one that resembles something like ekphrasis, the translation of a visual medium into a verbal one. I specifically adopt the terminology of "translation" (as opposed to the more familiar "representation" or "recording") to describe the rendering of talk, or aspects of talk, in print because translation signals a greater attention to preserving the artistic character of the original media. If, as these authors do, talk is understood as possessing an artistry all its own, its translation in print constitutes an ekphrastic-like relation with its own problems, primarily with respect to conveying fluid moment-to-moment interactions within a

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[3] See Norman Page, *Speech in the English Novel* (New York: Longman, 1973), and Gavin R. Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect in Gilded Age America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

form that, at best, offers a basis for interaction with long delays (e.g., the exchange of letters, or the publication of a critical review).

Although my inquiry focuses on two canonical works of literature, I situate their shared interest in talk's experiential, idle poetics within a critical movement that yet remains to be fully mapped out, the so-called 1880s "romance revival" whose most prominent advocates included Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, and figures lesser known today such as Hall Caine, Andrew Lang, and George Saintsbury (all of whom wrote essays in support of romance over realism and naturalism). In addition to sketching out aspects of a shared, transatlantic interest in the poetics of talk, my discussion of these two works in relation to one another contributes to the growing understanding of the late-Victorian "novel of incident" as a lively site of artistic experimentation. As Nicholas Daly contends in his study on the *fin-de-siécle* romance's affiliations with modernism, "revival" is a bit of a misnomer for it obscures adventure romance's specific engagements with contemporary developments.[4] Anna Vaninskaya similarly advocates for a "period-specific departure" for the 1880s romance.[5] In understanding idle talk as a crucial but thus far missed aspect of late-nineteenth century adventure romance, I share Daly and Vaninskaya's interest in expanding on the ways that a form often labeled pejoratively as genre fiction in fact developed significant literary critical interventions. In Daly's words, "the novel of incident…actually possesses a theoretical backbone."[6]

My discussion begins with Stevenson because his critical essays provide an inimitably helpful framework for understanding talk in relation to adventure romance in this period.

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[4] Nicholas Daly focuses specifically on the contexts of the New Imperialism, the rise of middle-class professionalism, and the expansion of consumer culture in *Modernism, Romance and the fin-de-siécle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

[5] Anna Vaninskaya, "The Late-Victorian Romance Revival: A Generic Excursus," *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 51, no. 1 (2008): 58.

[6] Daly, *Modernism*, 24.

Stevenson's centrality to the 1880s romance movement has been widely acknowledged, and hardly needs to be rehearsed here. Primarily, scholars have focused on the principles he delineates in his manifesto on romance, "A Gossip on Romance" (1882), and his essay, "A Humble Remonstrance" (1884), in response to Henry James's *The Art of Fiction* (1884). By focusing instead on "Talk and Talkers," I take a new angle on the poetics of romance that accounts for talk's central role in the furthering the romance enthusiasts' theorization of the adventure genre's foregrounding of temporary substantiality, transient vitality, or changeable resilience—whatever we may choose to call the tension. While critics like Robert Kiely have identified the depths of Stevenson's appreciation for "life as ungovernable circumstance" as motivating the author's understanding of the adventure-aesthetic as one that embraces vulnerability to hazard, no one has yet investigated the ways in which Stevenson comprehends talk in much the same way.[7] My scrutiny of "Talk and Talkers" will hone in on two characteristics that underlie Stevenson's expressed preference for talk's poetics over and above literary writing's. First, participants in talk ideally engage in moment-to-moment acts that "co-create" oral discourse, and second, the experience of interaction is shot through with a sense of heroic, aspirational striving that depends on the ultimate impossibility of success.[8] These two aspects of talk inform the various strategies Stevenson later adopts in *Treasure Island* to test the limits and possibilities of translating experiential idleness into print.

Following on the discussion of "Talk and Talkers," my chapter looks closely at an essay Stevenson wrote called "My First Book" (1894), part of a series originally published in the (appropriately named) *Idler* magazine, which featured a different guest author every month.

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[7] Robert Kiely, *Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 26.

[8] I borrow the concept of "co-creation" from sociolinguistic contexts to describe the way in which participants in talk at any given moment are involved in complex negotiations that mutually shape talk.

Against the still common view of *Treasure Island* as a work of immature authorship (a view that

the essay itself has unfortunately furthered), I argue that "My First Book" actually constructs a

story of the novel's origins that reiterates Stevenson's earlier articulations of talk's co-creative

and aspirational operations.[9] Finally, my analysis of *Treasure Island* points to the ways in which

the narrative wrestles with how to translate co-creative and aspirational poetics into print.

Treasure Island imagines itself as a form of "living print" that gestures towards what I

conceptualize as a hybridized, parrot-like text: one that is at once more dynamic and vital than

print but ultimately incapable of talk's ideally interactive responsiveness.

Stevenson's "Talk and Talkers"

"Talk and Talkers" opens with two epigraphs that contextualize Stevenson's ideas on

talk: the first is a quotation from James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791), and the second, an

apothegm from Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1732-1758). The first

epigraph—"Sir, we had a good talk"—quotes Johnson in reference to a contentious exchange

with other literary men the previous night. Although Boswell affirms Johnson's statement, he

also seems to level a slight critique against his mentor: "'Yes, sir, you tossed and gored several

persons.'"[10] Unlike Johnson, who could be ruthlessly combative in conversation, Boswell, as

Adam Sisman has pointed out, was "adept at steering the conversation in directions which would

stimulate Johnson to say something memorable…often it required him to play…the butt of

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[9] Peter Hunt, for instance, emphasizes Stevenson's basic adherence to adventure romance's generic conventions ("Introduction," in *Treasure Island*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Hunt [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], xxix). When Oliver S. Buckton suggests that *Treasure Island* marks Stevenson's "shift from dilettante bohemian travel writer to professional novelist," he intimates that the work lacks the skillfulness of his later novels ("Faithful to his Map," in *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: Travel, Narrative, and the Colonial Body* [Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007], 98).

[10] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (New York: Henry Frowde, 1904), 374.

Johnson's wit."[11] Boswell's congeniality is a better model for Stevenson's opening gambit in "Talk and Talkers," which holds that "to excel in talk" is "to be affable, gay, ready, clear and welcome" (145). In proceeding to remark on the ways in which talk can correct "public errors," and how talk in its ideal and most naturally expressed form is simply "the harmonious speech of two or more," Stevenson works within a well-established tradition that idealizes talk that is sociable and smooth flowing (146).[12]

The "harmonious" ideal also marks the importance of keeping talk going, a point Stevenson evokes through the second epigraph, borrowed from Franklin: "As we must account for every idle word, so we must for every idle silence."[13] Franklin, famous for his industriousness, speaks against idleness as stasis or a kind of movement that does not go anywhere. Stevenson's use of Franklin's apothegm, however, imparts positive connotations to idleness as a desired form of movement that does not get stuck on any particular aim but rather goes with the flow, so to speak. Stevenson's "Talk and Talkers" reappropriates aimless movement in talk as a desirable mode of engaging co-creatively and more broadly, maintaining sensitivity to the myriad transformations of an interaction as it unfolds. Even so, Stevenson was by no means alone, during his time, in attributing positive value to talk that moves with the indeterminacies of interactions. J.P. Mahaffy, for instance, also idealizes "the natural, easy flow of talk" and adheres to the principle of "following the chances of the moment, drifting with the temper of the company."[14]

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[11] Adam Sisman, *Boswell's Presumptuous Task* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), xvii.

[12] See Mee on Hume's associations between the smoothness of the commercial flow of goods and that of conversation (*Conversable Worlds*, 57-78).

[13] Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (Waterloo, IA: U.S.C. Publishing Co., 1914), 15.

[14] Mahaffy, *Principles on the Art of Conversation*, 4-5. Stevenson does not make a strong distinction between "talk" and "conversation" in his "Talk and Talkers," and neither does Mahaffy. See my introduction, 13-17. Johnson does

What is most innovative in Stevenson's essay, then, is not necessarily talk's collaborative sociability or open flow, but rather that the way in which Stevenson deftly interweaves the language of talk with the language of late-Victorian adventure romance brings fresh perspectives to more familiar models of talk. In the excerpt that follows, Stevenson describes idle talk's co-creative "flow" in terms readily applicable to the widely popular boys' adventure stories that preceded *Treasure Island* (for instance, the work of W.H.G. Kingston or R.M. Ballantyne, authors that Stevenson directly credits as influences in his epigraph to *Treasure Island*):

> From time to time…talk becomes effective, conquering like war, widening the boundaries of knowledge like an exploration. A point arises; the question takes a problematical, a baffling, yet a likely air; the talkers begin to feel lively presentiments of some conclusion near at hand; towards this they strive with emulous ardour, each by his own path, and struggling for first utterance; and then one leaps upon the summit of that matter with a shout, and almost at the same moment the other is beside him; and behold they are agreed. Like enough, the progress is illusory, a mere cat's cradle having been wound and unwound out of words. But the sense of joint discovery is none the less giddy and inspiriting. (154-55)

Here, Stevenson essentially reiterates the "harmonious" ideal—co-creation joins distinctions together. Talkers "strive with emulous ardour" but "each by his own path." They compete "for first utterance," yet find themselves "beside" one another. Above all, the passage suggests, it is not the point of agreement that matters, illusionary or otherwise, but the process of "joint discovery." But understanding the poetics of talk as adventurous in the manner of the late Victorian "novel of incident" produces new inflections. For one, the conventions of adventure

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make a distinction, as captured by Boswell: "'No, Sir; we had *talk* enough, but no *conversation*, there was nothing *discussed*,'" suggesting talk as emptied of content (472).

romance solidified during the 1880s constitute talk as a hearty homosocial experience, enabling

Stevenson to distance his "good talk" from common associations of effeminacy with smoothness

in conversation or the witty and refined conversability that Mahaffy and his illustrious tutee,

Oscar Wilde, were developing.[15] For another, the "revivalist" aspects of late-Victorian romance

lace Stevenson's conceptions of ideal talk with the heroism of bygone eras—of Walter Scott's

protagonists or even the courteous fellowship of King Arthur's knights of the round table.[16]

The inflections of heroism upon talk also produce the aspirational movement that

Stevenson deems a part of talk's unique poetics. In "Talk and Talkers," Stevenson describes the

way in which the best "talkers, once launched, begin to overflow the limits of their ordinary

selves, tower up to the height of their secret pretensions, and give themselves out for the

heroes...they aspire to be" (93). This vivid description of talkers—how they "launch,"

"overflow," or "tower up"—underscores the vigorous movement of their reaching and leaves out

the goal or destination they seek. For Stevenson, the heroism of talk lies in its imaginative

daring, precisely the quality that motivates the writing of adventure romance. In his well-known

manifesto on the genre, "A Gossip on Romance" (1882), Stevenson explains that romance "may

be nourished with the realities of life, but their true mark is to satisfy the nameless longings of

the reader, and to obey the ideal laws of the day-dream."[17] Here, he idealizes the same kind of

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[15] To be sure, "Talk and Talkers," does not confine itself to idealizing talk only between men or boys; the second part of the essay singles out old women as particularly apt at talking with "genial cruelty" and ends with the idea that "[m]arriage is one long conversation" (185, 189).

[16] Mee's chapter on William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt identifies Hunt's *Examiner* with "friendly social interactions" which, unlike those idealized by Addison and Steele, are "above" the concerns of commercial interactions—hence, for Hunt, "the trope of the 'round table'" can be understood as an aspect of 'the radical effort to resist specialization in periodical discourse, and recuperate a utopian sphere of unalienated labour'" (250-51). This observation on Hunt's radical politics may have some bearing on Arata's discussion of Stevenson and the socialist William Morris's shared valuations of idleness.

[17] Stevenson, "A Gossip on Romance," in *Memories and Portraits*, 156. Evidently, Stevenson (as well as many other "romance revivalists") regards the term romance as practically equivalent to adventure romance, perhaps because adventure perfectly literalizes the aspirational striving he identified at the heart of all romance genres.

aspirational movement as the talker's as he reaches with his "secret pretensions." Though

ostensibly much more ordinary, in its own way, talk, as much as adventure, offers the excitement

of openly exploring new worlds of experience. It is no accident, then, that Stevenson titles his

manifesto a "gossip" rather than an essay. Penny Fielding helpfully comments that Stevenson's

use of the word "gossip" in lieu of essay seeks to reflect "an exchange at a literary club," though

I believe that Stevenson's idea of a "good talk" extends beyond the confines of a literary

setting.[18] As Stevenson clarifies in "Talk and Talkers": "[T]alk is a creature of the street and

market-place, feeding on gossip; and its last resort is still in a discussion on morals. That is the

heroic form of gossip; heroic in virtues of its high pretensions; but still gossip, because it turns

on personalities" (153). Gossip is playfully attuned to surrounding contingencies—and makes its

adventures deftly into the street, the marketplace, *or* the literary club. Curiously, Stevenson

collapses the terms "talk" and "gossip": in the first part of the quotation talk consumes gossip,

and in the second, it seems that gossip consumes talk. The effect of this collapse is an expanded

understanding of gossip beyond its usual associations with trivial, scandalous, and often feminine

speech.[19] We see in gossip's high pretensions to moral importance an iteration of talk's

aspirational tendencies. Given this context, it seems that the form of "A Gossip on Romance"

tries to emulate idle talk as much as possible by journeying un-linearly from one point to another

(as if responding to the impulses of a talking partner) and aspiring upwards in pursuit of the high

task of delineating a philosophy on art.

　　　　Treasure Island seeks similar kinds of translations of talk's idleness into print, but the

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[18] Penny Fielding, "Introduction," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Fielding (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 4.

[19] According to Leary, by the middle of the nineteenth century the term "gossip" had lost much of its "older, salacious meanings" (*Punch Brotherhood*, 58).

story of its composition and its narrative evince a much sharper awareness of its own limitations. Stevenson's contemporaries, and particularly those who loved him, clearly honored the author's sense that it was impossible to fully capture any kind of experiential poetics in print. In numerous comments, friends and family praise Stevenson as a great talker, but none played Boswell to Stevenson's Johnson. These comments frequently take the tone of a polite refusal to write down his talk, as when Edmund Gosse asserts that he "cannot, for the life of [him], recall any of his jokes; and written down in cold blood, they might not be funny if [he] did," or, more to the point, when M. G. van Rensselaer and Jeanette L. Gilder express that "to mummify [his] beautiful, vivid speech is to do it deep injustice."[20] In the section that follows, I argue that this sense of injustice borne of the inadequate translation of talk into print is at the very center of Stevenson's account of *Treasure Island*'s production.

Talk and Literary Production in "My First Book"

"My First Book" indicates that *Treasure Island* was partly generated from talk. In particular, Stevenson calls attention to a daily scene of interactive oral exchange with his family during their extended stay at a cottage in Braemar, Scotland in the summer of 1881. According to Stevenson, the initial period of developing *Treasure Island* (then called *The Sea Cook*) involved quick writing at a pace of a chapter per day and after-lunch readings out loud. Every day, as he read out a portion of his story to his family, he would integrate their suggestions along the way in acts of co-creation that, I argue, mark his storytelling as an idle form of talk. In Sacks's model for conversation analysis, oral storytelling may be considered a form of talk because recipients of a story "actively reshape both the interpretation and course of an emerging story," such that

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[20] Edmund Gosse, "As Restless and Questing as a Spaniel," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. R. C. Terry (London: Macmillan, 1996), 52-57 and 54-55; M. G. van Rensselaer and Jeanette L. Gilder, "A Most Affectionate Observer," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Interviews and Recollections*, 118-22 and 121.

"stories are...not...self-contained descriptions but...modes of action situated within interaction."[21] Critics that have concentrated on the importance of authorial collaboration to the scene at Braemar, however, tend to miss the specific significance of orality to Stevenson's exchanges with his family.[22]

In bringing notice to his speedy chapter-per-day pace, Stevenson suggests rapid transformations between talking and writing. He also implies that his writing was done as much in the service of talking as vice versa. Writing for talking counters the more typical idea that publication is necessarily the destination or final home for a story. Rather, Stevenson's description of his father participating in the story's co-creation evinces a fondness for unfinished tales that idealizes the sense of process—over and above destination—intrinsic to the experiential operations of everyday talk:

His own stories, that every night of his life he put himself to sleep with, dealt perpetually with ships, roadside inns, robbers, old sailors, and commercial travellers before the era of steam. He never finished these romances; the lucky man did not require to! But in *Treasure Island* he recognized something kindred to his own imagination...and he not only heard with delight the daily chapter, but set himself acting to collaborate.[23]

Stevenson represents the world of his father's stories as one unburdened by modernity, "before

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[21] Charles Goodwin and John Heritage, "Conversation Analysis," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 284. See also Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capp, *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) on co-construction and co-narration involved in everyday conversation.

[22] Stevenson's late-in-life collaborations with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne on *The Wrong Box* (1889), *The Wrecker* (1892), and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) are especially well known; Stevenson also wrote three plays with W.E. Henley, *Deacon Brodie* (1880), *Beau Austin* (1884), and *Admiral Guinea* (1885). Victoria Ford Smith recently focuses on the intergenerational authorial dynamics between Stevenson and Osbourne and succinctly points to the co-creative artistry that "informed his role as a professional author—relationships between adult and child, between creative author and businessman, between a writer and his literary predecessors, [as well as] among multiple contributors to a text" ("Toy Presses and Treasure Maps: RLS and Lloyd Osbourne as Collaborators," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 35, no. 1 [2010]: 29).

[23] Stevenson, "My First Book," in the *Idler* 6 (August 1894): 7. Subsequent references to this essay will be cited parenthetically in the text.

the era of steam" which revolutionized not only modes of travel but also print culture. The remarks here seem to suggest that Thomas Stevenson, a lighthouse engineer and part of an older generation, had better access to the luxury of storytelling without the exigencies of publication. His romances could be "perpetual" and he never needed to finish them, for unlike his son, he was not subject to commercial demands for literary production—the same demands that Robert Louis Stevenson references in his derisive address to "my paymaster, the Great Public" at the beginning of the essay (3).

In the context of Stevenson's implied preferences—for the way in which talk enables co-creation, interactivity, and process—his claim that *Treasure Island* was not, in fact, intended for publication until the intrusion of Alexander Japp (a secret ambassador for *Young Folks* publisher James Henderson) comes as no surprise. According to Stevenson, although he and his family "recoiled" at including Japp in their circle of storytelling (Stevenson unconvincingly says it is because he thought *The Sea Cook* was not very good), Japp "carried away the manuscript in his portmanteau" when he left Braemar (7). Essentially, Stevenson suggests that if Japp had not come along, the story that eventually became *Treasure Island* would have remained as interesting daily talk. Under these circumstances, Japp emerges somewhat negatively as an interrupter of co-creative process. Like Coleridge's Person from Porlock, Japp disrupted the easy flow of creativity with a mundane commercial errand.[24] Soon after the interruption and the "positive engagement" of serial publication, Stevenson alleges that suddenly his "mouth was empty; there was not a word of *Treasure Island* in my bosom," notably focusing on his

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[24] Ironically, Alexander Japp once likened Stevenson's presence to Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner…[who] could fix you with his glittering e'e, an he would, as he points his sentences with a movement of his thin, white finger" ("Robert Louis Stevenson," *Argosy* 59 [February 1895]: 232). The significance that David Vallins ascribes to the "digressiveness" of Coleridge's conversation—evident from records of his *Table Talk* (1835) by his son-in-law and nephew—further throws into relief a sense of journeying that renders Coleridge and Stevenson similar as talkers ("Coleridge as Talker: Sage of Highgate, Table Talk," in the *Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Fred Burwick [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], 307).

incapacity for talk rather than his inability to write (8). In short, Stevenson claims that the talk was lost because Japp was going to translate it into print. Consequently, this episode by no means typifies writer's block, but carefully stages an important artistic clash between talk and print. The publication's "positive engagement" gave *Treasure Island* a written destination that destroyed the primacy of talk's always indeterminate poetics. In agreeing to print publication, even if reluctantly, Stevenson engaged talk in the service of a different kind of media that betrayed talk's experiential ideal.

Appropriately enough, the resolution to Stevenson's conundrum as to how to return to the volubility of talk after it had been marked out for translation into print would eventually come as a counter-assertion against the fixed destination to which *Treasure Island* was now bound:

> I was very indeed very close on despair; but I *shut my mouth hard*, and during the journey to Davos, where I was to pass the winter, had the resolution to think of other things and bury myself in the novels of M. Du Boisgobey. Arrived at my destination, down I sat one morning to the unfinished tale; and behold, it *flowed from me like small talk*; and in a second tide of delighted industry, and again at a rate of a chapter a day, I finished *Treasure Island*. (italics are mine, 8)

While en route to Davos, and engaged in other tasks—thinking of other things, reading popular detective novels by a French author—Stevenson recovered something of his earlier creative interactions. The process of journeying, both literalized in the physical travel to Davos and metaphorized as the mental indirection of "think[ing] of other things," opposed the fixed ending that Japp's interruption had occasioned. Yet it is significant that Stevenson is careful not to say that he was able to recover the easy experience of talk; his writing merely "flowed…*like* small talk." The simile abstracts the poetics of talk to show that the complete recovery of *Treasure*

Island's originary "small talk" at Braemar would be impossible. In other words, the emphasis that this description places on process may counteract, in a measure, the forces of arrival and destination that Japp had unleashed, but ultimately, any textual form of *Treasure Island* would not be able to translate the experience of talk that he and his family engaged during the narrative's initial period of co-creation.

By insisting that what his public had come to regard as his first literary success would never recover the experience of "good talk," Stevenson was seeking to undo a particular model of author-reader relations that the *Idler*'s "My First Book" feature embodied. The "My First Book" series desired expert, celebrity authors to share the methods of their production with a ravenous readership that wanted conventional explanations—that a spark of genius, perhaps, inspired a frenzied period of writing. In part, Stevenson's contribution follows this formula in that it offers up the tidy anecdote that *Treasure Island* was inspired by a map that he had drawn for his stepson Lloyd. However, as I have indicated, there is an important artistic translation other than that of the visual into the literary that commentators on "My First Book" have missed. In this piece, Stevenson clearly maintains talk's integrity as a medium that lends itself to artistic effects apart from print, operating through co-creative and ongoing interactions capable of undercutting more conventional notions of the individual authorial genius at work to produce his finished and long-lasting literary masterpiece.

Treasure Island*: Imagining Living Print*

"My First Book" belies *Treasure Island*'s meticulously executed attempts at translating talk's experiential qualities in print. From beginning to end, *Treasure Island* conscientiously considers and wrestles with the problem of providing readers the experience of daring

interactivity—so central, as I have identified, to both the poetics of adventure and talk—from

within the sealed boundaries of print. The very first chapter opens with a scene of a silenced

audience that calls attention to anxieties about non-interactive (or not co-creative) forms of

media. Soon after his arrival at the Admiral Benbow Inn, the pirate Billy Bones makes a habit of

drunkenly forcing his fellow lodgers to listen to horrific stories of his past adventures. The young

Jim Hawkins, *Treasure Island*'s primary narrator, describes how Bones would "slap his hand on

the table for silence" and "fly up in a passion of anger at a question, or sometimes because none

was put," disabling the free flow of talk.[25] According to Jim, "[h]is stories were what frightened

people worst of all"—stories "about hanging, and walking the plank, and storms at sea, and the

Dry Tortugas, and wild deeds and places on the Spanish Main"—but the irony, of course, is that

Treasure Island is much in the same vein (48-49). In retrospect and on second thought, Jim

decides to contradict his father's fears that Bones's stories would bring economic ruin to the inn,

claiming that "on looking back [people] rather liked it; it was a fine excitement in a quiet country

life" (49). I suggest that Jim's ambivalence over this opening scene of Billy Bones's storytelling

indirectly poses the question of whether Stevenson's story, in print form and closed to

interactions with audiences, will frighten and bring economic ruin, or entertain.

Either way, this opening scene suggests that there is something unsavory about curtailing

or discounting the talk of others. Moreover, the entrance of Doctor Livesey and his subsequent

confrontation with Bones indicates that one might silence others in talk in a less overtly

tyrannical manner. In a tone "perfectly calm and steady" the doctor puts an end to Bones's talk

with a threat that he will "hang at the next assizes" (51). The doctor's talk, in contrast to Bones's,

derives its power from institutional and textual authority—he is a certified magistrate, frequently

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[25] Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, ed. John Sutherland (Buffalo, NY: Broadview Press, 2012), 48. Subsequent
references to this work will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

pens letters, and practically pounces on the documents and treasure map that Jim eventually

retrieves from Bones. The monotone "calm" of the doctor probably aspires to be as immutable as

writing; this immutability reminds us, however, of what Stevenson called the "wooden

dogmatisms" of written words in "Talks and Talkers." The doctor's greatest ally in directing

institutional and textual authority against the free flow of talk is Alexander Smollett, the highly

un-charismatic captain of the ship, the *Hispaniola*, that will carry them all to Treasure Island.

Smollett wears the stinting nature of his talk as a virtue—"on his part, [he] never spoke but when

he was spoken to, and then sharp and short and dry, and not a word wasted"—but we get the

sense that there is little support in the story for such utilitarian regulation (98). Even here, the

cutting monosyllables that Jim employs to describe Smollett's speech mock his rigid control.

Together, Doctor Livesey and Captain Smollett make numerous attempts to silence the squire,

John Trelawney, whom they repeatedly chide for "blabbing," but significantly, to no avail (78).

Trelawney's "blabbing" triggers the central conflict of the story by attracting Long John Silver

on board the ship.

Notably, the squire claims in a letter that "'[b]y the merest accident, [he] fell in talk with

[Silver],'" an articulation consistent with Stevenson's understanding of talk, ideally, as an idle

process open to whatever hazards of interaction may come. Although the narrative does not

exactly condone Trelawney's inability to control the flow of his own talk (mostly, his "blabbing"

seems a comedic element) it also does not censure it. In fact, in an early confrontation between

Trelawney and Smollett, it is Smollett's suppression of Trelawney's talk that shuts down an

opportunity to uncover Silver's treachery. The captain berates the squire for telling everyone on

the ship about the map and location of treasure and curtly silences the squire's defense that he

had done no such thing. Jim, who is almost always correct in his judgment, confidentially

informs the reader that in this case, he "believe[d] [Trelawney] was really right" (92). Jim's retrospective narration of this incident also reveals the dramatic irony behind the captain's accusatory expression—"'the secret has been told to the parrot'"—since it is none other than the treacherous Silver that owns a parrot (91). In this brief but tightly woven exchange, Stevenson indicates that the discretion the captain envisions is nothing more than an obstacle to discovering the truth. More generally, the narrative treats the notion of "accidental" talk positively. Jim, in particular, engages in what I regard as a form of accidental participation in talk whenever he overhears talk that is not meant for him. Each of these moments of accidental participation proves pivotal to advancing the cause of the protagonists against the pirates, such as when Jim overhears the exchange between Black Dog and Billy Bones, Blind Pew and his mates, and most important, Silver and his associates—both on board and on Treasure Island.

In *Treasure Island*, the problems of "non-accidental" talk are shown to be the same as those of print or any other textual form. Both are iterations of the kind of restraint that characters like Livesey and Smollett place on the flow of talk's natural interactivity. My contention that *Treasure Island* asks readers to imagine it as a parrot-like text with more dynamism than regular print is based on Stevenson's deployment of the parrot motif in relation to three major characters: Silver; the marooned Ben Gunn; and Jim. Specifically, I see each of these three characters as a representation—or even a case study—that explores the problems but also the possibilities of translating aspects of talk's "freedom, life, and effect" in print.

I begin with Silver, the character most closely associated with the figure of the parrot and appropriately, as Smollett's antagonist, the most charming (silver-tongued) talker in *Treasure Island*. Jim's initial description of Silver, even before the reader becomes acquainted with his pet parrot, sets up the recurring connections that the narrative will make between owner and pet:

"His left leg was cut off close by the hip, and under the left shoulder he carried a crutch, which he managed with wonderful dexterity, hopping about upon it like a bird" (85). Largely because of his ability to parrot the different speech patterns of men he has encountered, Silver speaks with equal facility to aristocrats, men of professional distinction, and mutinous pirates. Like W.E. Henley, upon whom Stevenson based him, Silver had a "way of talking to each" (97). Lloyd Osbourne describes Henley in his memoirs as possessing a "quality…of exalting those about him; of communicating his own rousing self-confidence and belief in himself; in the presence of this demigod, who thrilled you by his appreciation, you became a demigod yourself."[26] Upon meeting Jim, Silver is not long in courting Jim's favor through talk:

> On our little walk along the quays, he made himself the most interesting companion,
> telling me about the different ships that we passed by, their rig, tonnage, and nationality,
> explaining the work that was going forward—how one was discharging, another taking
> the cargo, and a third making ready for sea; and every now and then telling me some little
> anecdote of ships and seamen, or repeating a nautical phrase till I had learned it perfectly.
> (89)

Silver is the master of "small talk," ably relaying bits and pieces of nautical expertise as well as cultivating intimacy by sharing gossip in the form of "anecdotes of ships and seamen." In teaching Jim specifically to repeat phrases until he learns them, Silver seeks to make Jim his protégé, passing on to him the capability of parroting different forms of talk.

The way in which Silver adapts his talk to the persons and situations of the interaction—not to mention his association with one of Stevenson's dearest friends—would seem to make him Stevenson's idle, co-creative talker. In a climactic confrontation with Captain Smollett, Silver's

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[26] Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of R.L.S.* (New York: Scribners, 1924), 53-54.

words explicitly broadcast the language of co-creation: "'We'll divide stores with you, man for man; and I'll give you my affy-davy, as before, to speak the first ship I sight, and send 'em here to pick you up. Now you'll own that's talking" (149). But Silver's openness to interaction is ultimately false, for Silver only pretends at co-creativity: his rather exaggerated awareness of talk's power to direct action gives him away. Silver focuses on securing particular ends through talk, so despite his charismatic "way of talking to each," Silver's talk is not truly responsive for it follows a systematic "dogmatism" of trying to control the outcomes of talk. While hidden in the apple barrel, Jim overhears Silver "addressing another in the very same words of flattery as he had used to [him]self," a detail which reinforces the idea of Silver's reliance on parrot-like repetitions rather than flexible adaptations (102). Silver's false interactivity, I argue, embodies the way in which texts may mimic a sense of talk's responsive qualities but fail at actually becoming any more adaptable. In this context, the coxswain's comment that Silver "can speak like a book when so minded" emerges less positively, and Jim's later claim that he could "read [Silver's thoughts] like print" is downright contemptuous (97 and 214). Through such associations, Stevenson calls attention to the proximity between talk that falsifies its own receptiveness and forms of print.

The posed interactivity of John Silver's talk bears some resemblance to that of Stevenson's oft-quoted epigraph to *Treasure Island*, which reads:

"To the Hesitating Purchaser":

If sailor tales and sailor tunes,

Storm and adventure, heat and cold,

If schooners, islands, and maroons,

And buccaneers, and buried gold,

And all the old romance, retold

Exactly in the ancient way,

Can please, as me they pleased of old,

The wiser youngsters of today:

--So be it, and fall on! If not,

If studious youth no longer crave,

His ancient appetites forgot,

Kingston, or Ballantyne the brave,

Or Cooper of the wood and wave:

So be it, also! And may I

And all my pirates share the grave

Where these and their creations lie! (37-38)

Although he addresses "the hesitating purchaser," Stevenson disavows that he directs his words toward any specific aim, whether commercial or personal. In the conditionals, Stevenson expresses appreciation for the reciprocity of interactivity by acknowledging readers' agency in determining the story's success. In the refrain, "So be it," Stevenson indicates acquiesces to a certain co-creativity in the process of reception. But Silver reminds us that such a sense of adaptability may be fabricated out of parroted speech, and the epigraph itself lays to the claim that *Treasure Island* is an "old romance, retold," made of textual parrotings from Kingston, Ballantyne, and Cooper. As such, it seems that *Treasure Island* cannot ultimately offer the reader the kind of co-creative experience available through talk alone. Still, we should not overlook the extent that generations of readers have become enamored with John Silver's talk—from

Henley's praise of "so smooth-spoken and powerful and charming" a figure to more recent critical appreciations of Silver's charisma. Just as Silver may charm with his talk, so too may the text compel readers to feel as if they are participants within it, even as they know they are not.[27] In Stevenson's own words from "A Gossip on Romance," the best romances enable the reader to "push the hero aside…[and] plunge into the tale in [his or her] own person" (268).[28]

If the parrot motif reveals the trickery behind Silver's talk, it points to a slightly different problem with the character Ben Gunn's strange talk, though a problem equally or even more linked to print or textuality. Gunn, like Silver, is an ex-member of Captain Flint's crew, but has been marooned for three years on Treasure Island before Jim encounters him. Also like Silver, Gunn fails to honor interactivity in talk but because of a psychology warped by long solitude. In talk, Gunn tends to play both himself and a long absent talking partner, imagining a second person response that essentially parrots his own first person. When he finally finds a real talking partner in Jim, Gunn's ingrained talking patterns disable any sense of co-creative spontaneity:

> "Just you mention them words to your squire, Jim"—he went on: "Nor he weren't, neither—that's the words. Three years he were the man of this island, light and dark, fair and rain; and sometimes he would, maybe, think upon a prayer (says you), and sometimes he would, maybe, think of his old mother, so be as she's alive (you'll say); but the most part of Gunn's time (this is what you'll say)—the most part of his time was took up with another matter"…Then, he continued—"then you'll up and say this:—Gunn is a good man (you'll say), and he puts a previous sight more confidence—a precious sight, mind that—in a gen'leman born than in these gen'leman of fortune, having been one hisself" (126).

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[27] [W.E. Henley], *Saturday Review* 56 (8 December 1883): 738.

[28] Stevenson, "Gossip on Romance," 268.

For Gunn, the harmonic distinctions among talkers that Stevenson deems crucial to "good talk" do not exist. As Jim later remarks of Gunn, "he kept talking as I ran, neither expecting nor receiving an answer," for Gunn has played the part of "I" and "you" for so long a time that the distinctions have blurred in his mind (127). Presented with a true "other" with whom he could ostensibly have a genuine talk—with all of the inherent instabilities of interaction—Gunn fails to recognize Jim's difference because he has too fully adapted to the absence of any talking partner. His frequent need to pinch Jim seems further evidence of his inability to conceptualize Jim as an individual apart from himself. Gunn's parenthetical, second-person reminders of what Jim should say to the doctor and the squire completely disregard Jim's co-creative agency in determining the direction of talk. Ultimately, in attempting to script Jim's talk, Gunn, just as Silver had before, tries to make Jim his parrot.

Gunn is in several senses the most literary and textual character in *Treasure Island*. First of all, he is a parodic Robinson Crusoe—the eponymous marooned hero of Daniel Defoe's 1719 adventure novel—while all of the other major characters are based on living or historical persons.[29] Moreover, Gunn's odd talk alludes to a genealogy of textual records that includes Defoe's novel as well as one of *its* sources, Captain Woodes Rogers's account of marooned Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk. According to Rogers, Selkirk upon his rescue "had so much forgot his Language for want of Use, that [he] could scarce understand him, for he seem'd to

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[29] In addition to Long John Silver as Henley, Stevenson claimed that Squire John Trelawney was based on the "real Tre," biographer and adventurer Edward John Trelawny (1794–1881) in a letter to Henley dated 24 August 1881, in *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Ernest Mehew (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), 191. It is likely that Doctor Livesey was based on temperance reformer Joseph Livesey (1794–1884) and Captain Smollett on Scottish writer and adventurer Tobias Smollett (1712–77). "Gunn" probably puns on Friday's mistaking Robinson Crusoe's gun as a deity deserving of worship in Robinson Crusoe (Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Evan R. Davis [Buffalo, NY: Broadview Editions, 2010], 225).

speak his words by halves."[30] Eric Jager argues that Robinson Crusoe, unlike Selkirk,

resourcefully avoids "the psychological and emotional strain" of solitude by actively engaging in

talk with successive partners: first his rational (as opposed to emotional) self, then a parrot,

Friday, and finally God.[31] In Jager's view, Crusoe finally finds an apt talking partner in God,

whose difference from Crusoe enables a true interactive exchange that prevents Crusoe from

meeting Selkirk's linguistic fate. Gunn, in contrast to Selkirk, does not "speak his words by

halves," but rather oppositely, speaks the part of two participants interacting in talk. However, I

argue that both Selkirk's too few words and Gunn's too many are really symptoms of the same

problem: both men desire another participant to supply and require a response, but are unable to

find one. Whereas "speak[ing]…by halves" mimetically obsesses over the partner's absence,

parroting oneself to supply the partner fantasizes his existence. In Gunn's world, as opposed to

Crusoe's, rational and emotional selves blur impossibly together, there is no parrot on the island

or Friday, and God seems noticeably absent. As evinced in Gunn's long speech to Jim above,

prayer serves the purpose of social signaling rather than intercourse with God.[32]

       Given Gunn's connection to Crusoe, Stevenson's adventure story may seem a

Robinsonade of sorts, a genre of fiction that imitates key aspects of Defoe's novel, often in order

to capitalize on *Crusoe*'s success. In deploying Gunn's interaction-deprived talk as comic relief,

however, I argue that *Treasure Island* primarily seeks to distance its own narrative from that of

the eighteenth-century ur-text of the adventure novel. By singling out Gunn as a character

trapped within networks of textuality, Stevenson seems to suggest that *Treasure Island* itself as a

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[30] Qtd. in Eric Jager, "The Parrot's Voice: Language and the Self in Robinson Crusoe," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1988): 316.

[31] Ibid., 319.

[32] Thomas Stevenson was bothered that Gunn was not a devout Christian character and expressed that Gunn needed to seem more evidently Christian in a letter to his son on 26 February 1887. See excerpt in *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Paul Maixner (New York: Routledge, 1998), 126–27.

whole somehow transcends Gunn's inextricability from text. Gunn, like Silver, calls attention to a problem of texts: like "written words," Gunn's talk consists of "fixed...idols, found wooden dogmatisms" that are unable to get outside of themselves. As talkers, then, both Silver and Gunn fail to meet Stevenson's ideal, even if they are trapped by different "dogmatisms"—Silver by his own scheming, and Gunn by his warped, recursive talking. Their mutual association with parrots only emphasizes the way in which they both seem to occupy a place somewhere between human and text.

It is Jim, finally, that serves as Stevenson's most idle—and ideal—talker. Like Silver, Jim talks with equal ease to everyone, whether the doctor, the squire, the murderous coxswain Israel Hands, Gunn, or Silver himself, but not as a result of prior ends in mind. As the narrative repeatedly demonstrates, Jim does not readily comprehend talk that is directed at some particular end. He rejects both Silver's calculated flattery and Gunn's frenetic bid to supply other people's responses. To Gunn's harried speech, Jim responds truthfully and confidently: "I don't understand a word that you've been saying. But that's neither here nor there; how am I get on board?" (126). In fact, if Jim were to have a *modus operandi* at all, it would be a way of talking and acting without any prior calculation, a certain thoughtlessness that enables him to adapt, as adventure requires, to any and all hazards of interaction. In making Jim the primary narrator of *Treasure Island*, Stevenson seeks a transfer of the qualities of Jim's "good talk" into the narrative itself. While the narrative owns that it is written, it stages from the start that it is writing that embeds an orientation towards co-creativity. This orientation, unfortunately, enables others to place restraints upon Jim's narrative. As the very first lines proclaim, in Jim's voice: "Squire Trelawney, Dr Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the particulars about Treasure Island...I take up my pen" (45). Jim's statement parallels Stevenson's

own deferred agency when Japp supposedly whisked away his manuscript—both Jim and

Stevenson write because others desire it, and both would rather talk for the sake of interaction

itself than to write for the sake of publication. As such, Jim reminds us throughout the story with

statements such as "I am not allowed to be more plain" that his is a narrative compelled and

restrained by others (99). Moreover, Stevenson claimed that he got stuck when writing Chapters

15-19, the very section in which Doctor Livesey interrupts Jim's narrative with his own account

of the events that happened aboard the ship after Jim follows the pirates onto the island.[33] This

claim links Livesey and Japp, both interrupters with authority based very much on print-enabled,

professional culture.

Alan Sandison has called *Treasure Island* "The Parrot's Tale," arguing that the death of

Jim's father early in the narrative prompts Jim to seek paternal figures to emulate or "parrot"

throughout the story.[34] Bones, Pew, Smollett, Trelawney, Livesey, and Silver all emerge as

competing figures that Jim ultimately rejects, but Sandison ultimately reads Jim's inability to

exorcise Silver from his dreams as evidence that Jim remains a parrot of Silver's. In Sandison's

view, the fact that Silver's actual parrot concludes the narrative with his resounding cry of

"Pieces of eight!" shows the presence of Silver as the father from whose shadow Jim could not

escape. Yet, I argue that the way in which *Treasure Island* sets up comparisons between parrots

and texts does not negate an essential difference that finally casts a "parrot" like Jim in a positive

light. Unlike texts, parrots, as living beings, *can* engage experience in time as it unfolds. Their

limitations do not owe to being trapped by the inflexibility of the print medium but to a lack of

mental sensitivity and sophistication. In a study of how parrots figure in eighteenth-century

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[33] John Sutherland, "Introduction," 16.

[34] Alan Sandison, "*Treasure Island*: The Parrot's Tale," in Sandison, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism: A Future Feeling* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 48-80.

periodicals, Manushag Powell traces a literary association of these birds with an "unthinking-though-articulate" presence, one that provokes response and engages openly in interaction though without any systematic, philosophical intent to do so.[35] According to Powell, the talk of parrots often proves dangerously uncontrollable and disruptive of authority. This is important, Powell points out, because such a characterization—simultaneously of danger and revolutionary possibility—reveals ambivalence towards "unthinking-though-articulate" talk. In noting examples of parrots as stand-ins for disempowered individuals (whether women, racial others, or members of the economic underclass) that may talk with unpredictable abandon, Powell illuminates a connection between parrots and the radical overthrow of dominant power structures. I argue that "unthinking-though-articulate" readily describes Jim, the mere son of an innkeeper whose talk, like that of the disruptive sort of parrot that Powell describes, offers a significant challenge to the textual authority of figures like Doctor Livesey.[36]

In the end, *Treasure Island* takes on all of the characteristics of parrots that I have described, both negative and positive. As print, its fixed words cannot access the co-creative instabilities of talk, and inevitably, like Gunn, it can only respond to an imagined response ultimately generated from within itself. Stevenson would likely allow that *Treasure Island* is a little bit like the charismatic Silver too, deliberate in its careful imitations of talk truly open to interaction. But above all, *Treasure Island* aspires to "talk" as Jim talks within the story: the "unthinking-though-articulate" speaker who is open to interaction without a hidden aim or

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[35] In "Parroting and the Periodical: Women's Speech, Haywood's Parrot, and Its Antecedents," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 27, no. 1 (2008): 63–91, Powell offers a brief "archive" of the parrot motif in eighteenth-century literary and periodical culture, and discusses the complex ways in which two female authors/editors, "Penelope Prattle" and Eliza Haywood, manipulate the motif for their own ends.

[36] Jim's orphan status (after his father dies, he abandons his mother) makes him particularly suited as Stevenson's mouthpiece for his own desire to depart from traditional literary forms. See Robert P. Irvine on how Stevenson's adventure departs from a prior tradition of adventure romance through the reconstitution of social hierarchies in natural, remote, and exotic settings in "Romance and Social Class," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, 27-40.

agenda—not even an agenda of maintaining an openness to interaction—yet all the same,

manages to speak an entirely innovative kind of language. It is, ironically, through its reaching

for this particular kind of impossible responsiveness—and its inevitable failure—that brings a

measure of success to *Treasure Island*'s experiment in capturing talk's untranslatable qualities.

Again, "talkers…tower up to the height of their secret pretensions, and give themselves out for

the heroes…they aspire to be." In talk and in adventure, it is not the destination that matters, but

the unending aspirational experience that receives no closure. *Treasure Island* always tries for

talk's living responsiveness, and never quite reaches it, but then again, that is the entire point.

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Very seldom have critics focused on the aspects of adventure in either Twain's *The*

Adventures of Tom Sawyer or *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in spite of their titles. The

transatlantic—even international—scope of the literary landscape by the end of the nineteenth

century, however, suggests unexplored connections between a work like *Huckleberry Finn* and

British adventure fiction.[37] Twain and Stevenson, certainly, were great admirers of each other's

work and moved within the same literary circles. It is, perhaps, more because of *Huckleberry*

Finn's status as an "idol" (to borrow Jonathan Arac's term) of quintessential American literature

that the work has not been mentioned in the same breath as the work of far less "literary" but

nonetheless relevant contemporary authors of adventure fiction across the Atlantic (H. Rider

Haggard, who published *King Solomon's Mines* also in 1885, for instance, or G.A. Henty, who

published five imperial adventure stories for boys in 1885 alone, including one on the American

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[37] Daly's study opens with a colorful anecdote about *The Ghost*, a play whose production in Sussex in 1899 involved the collaborative efforts of Henry James, Robert Barr, George Gissing, H. Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, H.B. Marriott-Watson, H.G. Wells, Edwin Pugh, A.E.W. Mason, and Stephen Crane, *Modernism*, 1-2.

Revolution).[38] And, in spite of many obvious structural similarities between *Treasure Island* and

Huckleberry Finn—for example, both feature aspects of the picaresque such as unrefined, boy

narrators and episodic adventures and include elements of a quest for father figures and

acceptable value systems—even these two works are not usually discussed in relation to each

other.

I demonstrate, first via an anecdote on Stevenson and Twain talking, and second an

analysis of a travel essay of Twain's from "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion" (1877-

1878), that Twain, during the time of *Huckleberry Finn*'s writing and publication, was

considering a similar set of ideas on talk in relation to adventure as Stevenson's. The anecdote is

of Stevenson and Twain convening to talk, in April 1888, in Washington Square Park in New

York City for approximately one hour—an episode that Stevenson would recall as a gossipy

meeting, "spent…among the nursemaids like a couple of characters out of a story by Henry

James."[39] Twain, too, would emphasize the intimacy of their talk in his *Autobiography*; Twain's

account of their talk specifically consolidates Stevensonian ideals on talk's idle freedoms and co-

creative poetics but also raises important misgivings about the project of translating talk into

print. "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion," a collection of four essays originally

published serially in the *Atlantic Monthly* from October 1877 to January 1878, draws even more

explicit connections between talking, idling, and adventuring: as the title of these essays suggest,

the "talk" in these essays matches the openness of his travels—he "rambles" according to the

whim of moment-to-moment discourse and drifts "idly" wherever the winds may direct his

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[38] In *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), Jonathan Arac demonstrates how twentieth-century criticism has perpetuated idolatry of *Huckleberry Finn* as an American classic that has lead to a critical blindness towards legitimate questions over the novel's fitness in educational settings.

[39] Qtd. in Leland Krauth, "Assaying Manliness: Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson" in *Six Literary Relations* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 168.

excursion. But the very first of these essays makes evident the fragility at the heart of talk that drifts idly and points to the ultimate unresolvability of transient vitality—the way in which talk always extinguishes itself as it is uttered, inescapably undermining its own vitality at every moment.

My analysis of *Huckleberry Finn*, then, contends that while Twain's so-called "Great American Novel" may share in the Stevenson's British adventure classic's interest—and even investment—in translating the poetics of talk in print, it departs from *Treasure Island* in its salient attention to theorizing translation's impossibilities rather than possibilities. As such, *Huckleberry Finn* deeply questions Stevenson's attempt to create something truly robust out of ephemeralities that exhaust themselves. According to Twain, such a project fails, in the end, to take talk's experiential poetics on its own terms.

Twain and Stevenson Talking

Their sunny afternoon in Washington Square Park was the two authors' only reported meeting, but both came away with fond memories of the encounter. Their congenial correspondences before and after the rendezvous indicate that they had a pleasant talk. It was Stevenson who first made the overture, writing to Twain and specifically praising *Huckleberry Finn*, "a book which I have read four times, quite ready to begin again tomorrow."[40] In this same letter, Stevenson entertains Twain with a tidbit that illustrates the Scottish author's appreciation for *Huckleberry Finn* as an auditory experience: when John Singer Sargent came to paint his portrait, Stevenson "insisted that *Huckleberry* was to be read aloud at the sittings," to the

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[40] Robert Louis Stevenson, *Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, eds. Bradford Booth and Ernest Mehew, 6 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 6:161.

bewilderment of this "very refined and privately French" painter.[41] Stevenson's enthusiasm for *Huckleberry Finn* displays a romancer's esteem for easy, pleasurable reading and disdain for the burgeoning Symbolist movement's ideals of difficulty and indirection (Stevenson quips that Sargent probably wanted to read Baudelaire instead). In claiming *Huckleberry Finn* as a work after his own heart, Stevenson echoed the feelings expressed by many of his fellow advocates of romance on his side of the Atlantic. A review for the *Athenæum* attributed to Henley, a friend also to Twain, deliberately withholds a description of any action in *Huckleberry Finn* so that readers may experience the "most surprising and delightful adventures" for themselves.[42] Andrew Lang considered *Huckleberry Finn* a "nearly flawless gem of romance and humour," and Walter Besant claimed that it was one of his favorite books because of its capacity to "seize…and hold [readers] with a grip of steel"—the reader does not have to exert any effort of his own.[43]

Twain and Stevenson's talk while seated on the bench that day—as recorded by Twain in his autobiography—further testifies to these authors' shared literary circles. According to Twain, he and Stevenson gossiped *about* the talk of literary figures they both knew and found that they were in general agreement about the capabilities of most authors, with some exceptions:

> I said I thought he was right about the others, but mistaken as to Bret Harte; in substance, I said that Harte was good company and a thin but pleasant talker; that he was always bright but never brilliant; that in this matter he must not be classed with Thomas Bailey Aldrich…Aldrich was always witty, always brilliant, if there was anybody present

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[41] Ibid., 162.

[42] [W.E. Henley], "Unsigned Review of *Huckleberry Finn*," *Athenæum* (27 December 1884): 855.

[43] Andrew Lang, "The Art of Mark Twain," *Illustrated London News*, February 14, 1891, reprinted in the *Critical Heritage: Mark Twain*, ed. Frederick Anderson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 249; Walter Besant, "My Favorite Novelist and His Best Book," *Munsey's Magazine* 18 (February 1898): 659.

capable of striking his flint at the right angle; that Aldrich was as sure and prompt and

unfailing as the red hot iron on the blacksmith's anvil—you had only to hit it competently

to make it deliver an explosion of sparks.[44]

Twain was notoriously critical of his widely successful contemporary, Bret Harte, whom he also

deemed an inept translator of dialect into print. According to one of Twain's biographers, Alfred

Bigelow Paine, Twain disdainfully reported, in reference to the time when he and Harte

collaborated on a play, "Bret never did know anything about dialect."[45] Thus, in Twain's

estimation Harte could neither talk well nor translate essential aspects of talk into print. Despite

Twain's disagreement with Stevenson over Harte's merits in relation to talking or translating

talk, it seemed that Harte was welcome company at least occasionally. William Dean Howells, in

his own memoirs of Twain, recalls a particular luncheon which included Twain, Harte as well as

Thomas B. Aldrich as a "happy time…of idle and aimless and joyful talk-play, beginning and

ending nowhere," a description that clearly echoes a Stevensonian ideal of process-oriented,

experiential talk.[46] Howells especially mentions that despite his pretensions to the contrary,

"Clemens's feathery eyebrows…betrayed his enjoyment of the fun" in response to a remark

made by Harte.[47] As evident from his conversation with Stevenson, by contrast, Twain was

unreservedly laudatory of Aldrich's talk; in particular, his esteem for Aldrich's wit and brilliance

resonates with Stevenson's praise of "Spring heel'd Jack," a type of talker that Stevenson

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[44] Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Harriet Elinor Smith, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 1:229. Subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

[45] Alfred Paine Bigelow, *Mark Twain: A Biography*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), 2:587. See Jones for a discussion of late nineteenth-century language and philological debates on dialect forms, and also Eric Sundquist's discussion of *fin-de-siécle* attitudes towards folklore, dialect, and vernacular in "Charles Chestnutt's Cakewalk," in Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 295-312.

[46] William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910), 6.

[47] Ibid., 7.

characterizes in "Talk and Talkers" as one who "changes and flashes like the shaken kaleidoscope" (157). Both are described in terms of energy, light, and instability, and both require a partner to bring about their dazzling talk—whether conceived in terms of striking a flint or shaking a kaleidoscope. Stevenson and Twain seem in agreement that talkers do not talk alone; the most brilliant of talkers are involved in some manner of co-creation.

Twain furthers a sense of sympathy between himself and Stevenson on what constituted "good talk" by describing how the two of them, quite literally, co-created a new phrase when they met:

> There on the bench we struck out a new phrase—one or the other of us, I don't remember which—"submerged renown." Variations were discussed: "submerged fame," "submerged reputation," and so on, and a choice was made; "submerged renown" was elected, I believe. This important matter rose out of an incident which had been happening to Stevenson in Albany. (229)

Twain's assertion that he does not remember who came up with the phrase first and that they tried several phrases until they agreed upon "submerged renown" represents their talk as a co-creative process through and through. Twain's uncertainty as to exactly how the talk proceeded or even what the phrase actually was consolidates a Stevensonian belief in the irrecoverability of experiential effects in print. The "incident which had been happening to Stevenson in Albany" also reflects important ideas about talk, print, and social class in America that Twain would have cared deeply about. Specifically, Twain recalls Stevenson telling him about his visit to a bookshop and encounter with the many cheap books and writings of a man named Davis of whom Stevenson had never heard. The bookshop owner gave the perplexed Stevenson a lengthy explanation on how Davis's renown was among the working classes and how this kind of

renown had deeper roots than the kind that Stevenson possessed:

> "You never see his name mentioned in print, not even in advertisements; these things are
> of no use to Davis, not anymore than they are to the wind and the sea. You never see one
> of Davis's books floating on top of the United States, but put on your diving armor and
> get yourself lowered away down and down and down till you strike the dense region, the
> sunless region of eternal drudgery and starvation wages—there you'll find them by the
> million...what the reviewer says never finds its way down into those placid deeps: nor the
> newspaper sneers, nor any breath of the winds of slander blowing above." (230)

Although not quite explicitly, by explaining the inconsequentiality of "his name…in print" and "advertisements" to Davis, the bookshop owner suggests that Davis's "submerged renown" depended on the talk of millions unknown to the bourgeois respectability of middle-class readers. In turn, print objects such as advertisements, newspapers, and reviews form reputations that "float" upon the surface of America's dominant middle-class culture. Through their discussion of "submerged renown," Stevenson and Twain discounted, to each other, the comparable lightness of their own "surface" renown and its inability to penetrate the depths of the lower-class world. Much like Stevenson's reversal in consigning literature to shadow and talk to substance, the bookshop owner's description ascribes impermanence to print and sturdiness to talk.

Yet the bookshop owner also hints at talk-shadows in this "dense region" of lower-class renown when he refers to it as a "sunless region." The association of shadows specifically with lower class and black dialects may be contextualized within broader controversies, during the late-nineteenth century, about the place of dialect forms in American language and literature. In a disparagingly racist article describing features of the "negro dialect" published in 1891, the *Atlantic Monthly* had the following to say about non-standard forms of English in general: "If

shadows of material objects are grotesque, even more so are the shadows cast by words from fairly educated lips into the minds of almost totally ignorant people. Display in utterance of these quaint word-shadows, if one may so call them, makes dialect."[48] According to Eric Sundquist, there is a characteristic ambivalence in this article about dialect: at the same time that the writer consigns dialect to "grotesque…shadows," perversions of some imagined standard of rectitude in language, he also lets on a certain fascination with the unknowability of these "shadows" to speakers and writers belonging to a dominant, white middle-class culture. In a manner similar to Dickens's uncommercial appreciation of talk in the London underworld, the writer seems fascinated by the "word-shadows" for their connection to a non-literate orality that possessed attractively secret and evasive qualities. The bookshop owner's notions of "placid deeps" and places inaccessible to "newspaper sneers" or "winds of slander" similarly intimate secrecy and evasion; the depths—whether they contain shadow, substance, or both, are ultimately unknowable to the likes of Twain or Stevenson. I will argue that this sense of irrecoverability— of talk that has evasively absented itself from text entirely—underlies *Huckleberry Finn*'s theoretical focus, on the one hand, on impossible translation between the two media, and on the other hand, the affective potential of this untranslatability.

Twain's "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion"

Like Stevenson, Twain was an avid traveler and travel writer. Typically, readings of *Huckleberry Finn* in relation to Twain's penchant for travel—his own articulated "impatience to move, move,—Move!"—turn to Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), a work that closely integrates autobiography and history completed during an interlude in the writing of *Huckleberry*

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[48] "Contributors' Club," *Atlantic Monthly* 67 (January 1891): 143.

Finn.[49] Although Twain's "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion" is a lesser-known work of travel writing, it presents a more germane set of ideas to the experiential poetics I have been describing so far. Completed approximately one month after Twain's return from a three-week trip to Bermuda with his friend, the reverend Joseph Twichell (they had returned home by end of May 1877 and Twain finished a draft of his essays by the end of June), "Some Rambling Notes" strives to convey an impression of being dashed-off rather quickly. The "rambling," haphazard nature of these "notes" are suggestive of adventurous disorder and openness to this disorder both in talk and travel: stylistically, the anecdotes and descriptions seem to drift according to the whims of moment-to-moment discourse just as Twain and Twichell themselves drifted "idly" wherever the winds directed their excursion. As Donald Hoffman points out, however, Twain took copious notes on his supposed "relaxation trip" from his exhausting lecture circuit, signaling that the writing was perhaps not quite so uncontrollably "rambling" and that the "excursion" was not quite so "idle."[50] In the first of the essays, Twain meticulously aligns the stop and flow of talk in terms of the functioning of navigational instruments in such a way as to anticipate Stevenson's interweavings of talk and adventure in "Talk and Talkers."

On board the passenger vessel *Bermuda*, Twain relates how they sailed out "into the midst of the Atlantic solitudes," placing special emphasis on the pleasures of disconnection from the communications networks that had become part of his everyday life: "No telegrams could come here, no letters, no news. It was an uplifting thought."[51] Twain's quick transition from this

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[49] Mark Twain to Jane Clemens and family, 1 June 1867, in *Mark Twain's Letters*, ed. Alfred Bigelow Paine, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917), 1:125.

[50] Donald Hoffman, *Mark Twain in Paradise: His Voyages to Bermuda* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 27.

[51] Twain, *Some Rambling Notes on an Idle Excursion* (Toronto: Rose-Belford Publishing, 1918), 9. Subsequent references to these essays will be to this edition and cited parenthetically within the text.

"uplifting thought" into an anecdote about the talk among shipmates positions talk as superseding print communications aboard the *Bermuda*. In contrast to Stevenson's exuberant assignation of print forms to the shadows of talk, Twain's sense of talk becoming foremost only in the absence of modern communications networks seems far less optimistic. Rather, Twain's conception of talk as a largely irrecoverable experience provides an example of Durham Peters's attribution of a new privileging of face-to-face interactions only when new communications technologies began, seemingly, to threaten co-present talk: "communication as a person-to-person activity became thinkable only in the shadow of mediated communication."[52]

Once at sea and away from the restrictive channels of modern media, then, Twain envisions that talk is free to flow into whatever directions it may happen upon. In describing how "the conversation drifted in to matters concerning ships and sailors," Twain weaves together the language of sea-faring adventure ("drifted," "ships and sailors") and talk (conversation) (9). When one of the shipmates makes a remark about compasses—"He said a ship's compass was not faithful to any particular point, but was the most fickle and treacherous of the servants of man. It was forever changing"—the talk gains momentum and leads a former captain into a long story (9-10). The captain's story, given by Twain as uninterrupted dialogue, recounts the humorous struggles of a naïve college student learning to be a sailor. Years later, the young sailor became the governor of Massachusetts. One day, the captain ran into the governor at a tavern, and made a bet with his friends that he would shake hands with the governor, not letting on about their prior acquaintance. The captain is met with a warm welcome, to the great surprise of his friends. The captain's story, too, is met on board the ship with "a great applause at the conclusion," but the talk then comes to a screeching halt: "Then, after a moment's silence, a

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[52] Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 6.

grave, pale young man, said,—"Had you met the Governor before?" (12). "Fickle" like the point

of a compass, talk is easily thrown off by off-color comments, subject to "treacherous" and

unknown conditions that may end it.

The description that follows of how the shipmates managed to extricate the talk from this

derailing moment makes explicit the ways in which Twain, like Stevenson in "Talk and Talkers,"

interlaces the language of talk and that of adventure. Twain's essay emphasizes, however, a

shared sense of uncertain fragility rather than aspirational heroics:

> The old captain looked steadily at this inquirer a while, and then got up and walked aft
>
> without making any reply. One passenger after another stole a furtive glance at the
>
> inquirer, but failed to make him out, and so gave him up. It took some little work to get
>
> the talk machinery to running smoothly again after this derangement; but at length a
>
> conversation sprang up about that important and jealously guarded instrument, a ship's
>
> time-keeper, its exceeding delicate accuracy, and the wreck and destruction that have
>
> sometimes resulted from its varying a few seemingly trifling moments from the true time;
>
> then in due course, my comrade, the Reverend, got off on a yarn, with a fair wind and
>
> everything drawing. (12-13)

The smooth operations of machinery are a metaphor for the flow of talk; the parts of talk

coordinate a whole system that stops working if any one of those parts malfunctions. It proves no

easy task to get the "talk machinery" going once again, and it seems, for a moment, that this

"derangement" might yield more permanent destruction of talk. But with co-creative effort and

negotiation, "at length a conversation sprang up." Notably, the evacuation of individual agency

in this articulation seems bent on emphasizing co-creativity. Once again, the talk begins anew

following a remark about a navigational instrument, this time a ship's chronometer, or "time-

keeper." And also yet again, the primary characteristic noted in relation to the timepiece is its delicacy and not its utility: the ease with which it may stray "from the true time" and the "wreck and destruction" that may result from "trifling" inaccuracies.

The idea that a chronometer may easily perpetuate "wreck and destruction" anticipates the dark turn that Twichell's story takes: while the captain's story detailed light-hearted social relations among men, the reverend's relays God's ineffable and unpredictable influence over the fates of men. The reverend tells the story of captain, his family, and faithful servant shipwrecked on a raft, adrift in the middle of the ocean (underscoring the way in which the talk was "adrift" just minutes before). In the nick of time, a ship rescues the party near upon the point of starvation. With a sense of foreboding, Twichell describes how there was "only one little moment of time in which [their] raft could be visible from the ship" (15). Just as before, the "grave, pale young man" throws the talk off course, this time, interjecting that he does not understand the Reverend's use of the metaphor of "God's chronometer" to describe the timeliness of the captain's rescue. He interrupts "the deep, thoughtful silence"—pregnant with the potential to yield further talk—with this derailing question: "'What is the chronometer of God?'" (16). The essay concludes with this second derailing, allowing the words of the "grave, pale young man" to continue the ring of a silence from which the talk never recovers.

The interruption of talk in this instance feels significantly different from the previous interruption. For one, the gulf between the tones of the stories—one humorous and light, the other serious and dark—produces a different mood among audiences (both the hearers aboard the ship, and Twain's readers). For another, whereas the first part of the anecdote about talk on the ship interweaves talk-interruptions and the vagaries of a compass, the second interweaves talk-interruptions and a chronometer's potential for perpetuating death and destruction. We get the

sense at the end of Twichell's story that the young man's final question brings about the "destruction" of the talk, its "machinery" halted for good. The way in which Twain implies that the destruction of talk is akin to a shipwrecked adventure imparts that the task of keeping a talk going is no trivial or ordinary endeavor. More than this, Twain's essay reminds us that Stevenson's good talk that "lasts for a long while" still only lasts "a while," and the destination of anything that "lives…in the blood" is extinction. Rather than a lively, robust interaction, talking in "Some Rambling Notes" is a delicate communion between human beings amid what Bakhtin describes as the adventure chronotope's "logic…of random contingency, which is to say, chance simultaneity [meetings], chance rupture [nonmeetings]."[53] It might be said that whereas "Talk and Talkers" concerns itself primarily with the exuberance of "meetings," "Some Rambling Notes" also points out the "nonmeetings"—the misses or the unpredictable futures that threaten to end interactions altogether.

Huckleberry Finn, Talk, and the Vital Poetics of Extinction

    Huckleberry Finn is a novel that depicts the gradual extinction of co-creative talkers, itself a work of print that "lasts," yet because of this, remains stuck within its own, fixed narrative. As such, whereas *Treasure Island* seems perpetually involved in an unceasing quest to get outside of the inevitable limitations of print, *Huckleberry Finn* feels like an abandoned translation of talk into print. The text ultimately signals that all traces of talk are extinct from it. As in the case of the first essay of "Some Rambling Notes"—where in the end, the "talk machinery" delicately sustained by a co-creative effort meets with destruction—the "talk" of the two characters in *Huckleberry Finn* most committed to sustaining the poetics of co-creation,

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[53] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *Dialogic Imagination*, 92.

Huck and Jim, is gradually attenuated out of existence. To be sure, the novel has been widely acclaimed, throughout its critical history, as a testament or repository of lost, oral vernaculars of Jacksonian America; no doubt Twain's own boast in his explanatory note about his "pains-takingly" executed distinctions between different dialects has contributed to the praise that has since been lavished on his precision at depicting oral forms.[54] As Gavin R. Jones notes, however, Twain's explanatory could easily be read as a "burlesque of the assumptions upon which dialect writing had depended since the early 1870s," in other words, an exaggerated—even parodic— rendering of realism's authorial convention of professing accuracy at representing dialects. Alongside such readings of Twain's explanatory as a mild parody, I argue that *Huckleberry Finn* ultimately makes no pretensions toward accurately or adequately translating the fluid, idle poetics of talk in print.

In the world presented by the diegesis, the kind of talk that Huck and Jim engage in together on their raft in the earlier scenes approximates—to the extent that it is possible—the co-creative "flow" of Stevensonian "good talk." For example, when Huck and Jim talk about King Solomon and the French language, Jim essentially instructs Huck in the poetics of co-creation. In this dialogue, it is Jim, rather than Huck, that proves the better talker in terms of attending to the experience of talk unfolding, for he apprehends what it is *not* to get stuck on a "point," to keep talk moving. From the progress of the interaction, it becomes clear that Huck begins to catch on—even if unconsciously—to the logic of co-creation. But at first, the fluency of the Solomon exchange is hindered by Huck's dogged focus on the "point" of the story:

> "But hang it, Jim, you've clean missed the point—blame it, you've missed it a
> thousand mile."

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[54] Twain also experimented with recording his own children's speech in his private journal entries, an activity which, according to Victor A. Doyno, aided in the construction of Huck's voice (*Writing Huck Finn* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991], 41).

"Who? Me? Go 'long. Doan talk to *me* 'bout yo' pints. I reck'n I knows sense when I sees it; en dey ain' no sense in sich doin's as dat. De 'spute warn't 'bout a half a chile, de 'spute was 'bout a whole chile; en de man dat think he kin settle a 'spute 'bout a whole chile wid a half a chile, doan know enough to come in out'n de rain. Doan talk to me 'bout Sollermun, Huck, I knows him by de back."

"But I tell you you don't get the point."[55] (95-96)

When Huck accuses Jim (who chooses to focus, for the moment, on the irrationality of Solomon's chopping a child in half) of missing the immutable point of the story, Huck refers, no doubt, to the conventional understanding that Solomon's ruse depicted his great wisdom. Although it appears that he cannot quite articulate what this dogmatic "point" is, Huck remains stubbornly stuck on it, and much like the "grave, pale young man" in "Some Rambling Notes," Huck's insistence threatens to end the talk (the charge that Jim has missed the point by "a thousand mile" echoes the entanglements of talking and journeying in "Some Rambling Notes"). In contrast, Jim's talk is marked by rich and adaptive engagement. Jim pluralizes Huck's "pints" in order to loosen Huck's assumption of a singular focus; in elaborating another "pint" that Solomon's decision to cut the child in half violates the original terms of the dispute over a whole child, Jim shows that there are any number of possible centers of attention that one may take at any given moment. Instead of responding to Jim's elaboration, however, Huck repeats his unconvincing stutter about the singular point, consequently returning the talk to a dangerous state of lost momentum.

Fortunately, Jim manages to rescue the "talk machinery" from such a fate, keeping it going with a co-creative response to Huck that playfully takes up Huck's notion of a singular

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[55] Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, eds. Victor Fischer and Lin Salamo (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 95-96. Subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

point only to overturn the orthodoxies of his logic:

> "Blame de pint! I reck'n I knows what I knows. En mine you, de *real* pint is down furder—it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat's got on'y one er two chillen: is dat man gwyne to be waseful o'chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it. *He* know how to value 'em. But you take a man dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. *He* as soon chop a chile in two as a cat." (96).

In this passage, Jim revises his own initial outburst against Huck's immutable adherence to "de pint" by deciding to make a singular "pint" of his own as if to meet Huck on his own terms. The "*real* pint," Jim argues, is that Solomon is a wasteful man because he can afford to be; if he were not rich, he would better appreciate the value of things. In offering a new "pint" for the story immediately after his exhortation to "blame" it, Jim employs inconsistency strategically to enact his adventurous versatility as a talker. Although he adopts Huck's language of enduring truth and depth (the *real* pint," "down furder," and "it's down deeper"), Jim does so in order to co-create with Huck and to prevent their talk from stalling. In other words, especially in light of Jim's pluralization of points at one moment and his disregard for the notion of a point entirely at another moment, I read Jim's commitment to a deeper point to rival Huck's as momentary as well. Thus, Jim floats the signifiers of truth and depth above their signified gravities simply to continue the idle play of talk. Stevenson's identification of "surface" as a key to "good talk" in "Talk and Talkers" exactly captures Jim's type of engagement with Huck: "[n]atural talk, like ploughing, should turn up a large surface of life, rather than dig mines into geological strata" (150). Moreover, Twain's famous "Notice" to *Huckleberry Finn*—"Persons attempting to find a Motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a Moral in it will be

banished; persons attempting to find a Plot in it will be shot"—repeats the ideal of keeping to the surface. In terms of a current critical idiom, we might conceptualize Twain's notice as enjoining his reader to perform a kind of "surface reading."[56] In short, Twain expresses a desire that his reader avoid getting mired in the depths of a singular point.

As Huck and Jim proceed to consider the French language in this same unbroken exchange, it becomes evident that for the moment, at least, Jim's strategy works, for Huck displays a growing aptitude for co-creation. The following excerpt shows Huck adopting a position of openness to Jim's argument about the nature of the French language:

> "Looky here, Jim, does a cat talk like we do?"
>
> "No, a cat don't."
>
> "Well, does a cow?"
>
> "No, a cow don't, nuther."
>
> "Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow talk like a cat?"
>
> "No, dey don't."
>
> "It's natural and right for 'em to talk different from each other, aint it?"
>
> "Course."
>
> "And ain't it natural and right for a cat and a cow to talk different from *us*?"
>
> "Is a cat a man, Huck?"
>
> "No."
>
> "Well, den, dey ain't no sense in a cat talkin' like a man. Is a cow a man?—er is a cow a cat?"
>
> "No, she ain't either of them."

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[56] See my introduction, note 12.

"Well, den, she ain' got no business to talk like either one er the yuther of 'em. Is a Frenchman a man?"

"Yes." (97-98)

An important shift takes place when Jim asks Huck, "Is a cat a man, Huck?" because the question indicates the point at which Jim takes up Huck's argumentative style only to turn the argument back on Huck. In the quick flow of talk, Huck takes this reversal in stride, agreeing to the conditions of shared agency by allowing Jim to take the position of questioner and himself the answerer. It looks as if Jim gets the better of Huck again, using Huck's own logic against him and arguing that if cats can talk to other cats, and cows to other cows, then men ought also to be able to talk to other men. When Huck answers "Yes" to Jim, he knows he is in trouble. Jim concludes with the following checkmate: "*Well*, den! Dad Blame it, why doan he [a Frenchman] *talk* like a man?—you answer me *dat*" (98). Huck has no answer except to extinguish their talk by closing the chapter with written narration: "I see it warn't no use wasting words—you can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit" (98). Huck's conclusion—which stages print putting a stop to talk—feels ineffectual and mean, a childish insult against Jim that only serves to heighten the sense of Huck as a sore loser in the argument. The silence that follows Huck's conclusion to the chapter rings out with the same, uncomfortable effect as that which ends the first "Some Rambling Notes" essay.

While in interactions, however, with characters far more literate and "literary" than himself such as the king, the duke, and Tom, Huck carries the flag of co-creative engagement. Yet, the way in which Huck depicts himself shutting down Jim's talk with print in the conversation about the French language anticipates the relation between these other characters and Huck. From the moment that the two conmen appear, Huck and Jim's "talk" drop out almost

156

entirely, for as talkers committed to co-creation, Huck and Jim must make room for the loquacity

of the king and duke (as well as the talk of other characters the king and the duke put them into

contact with—Sherburn, Boggs, the townspeople, and later, the Wilks family). Huck tells his

reader that he deliberately made space for the king and the duke's talk when he accepts the lies

that they speak: "It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor

dukes, I hadn't no objections, long as it would keep peace in the family" (165). Of course, this

declaration opting for the ease that comes with being open to the forceful talk of others rather

than the strife of opposition does not exactly replicate Jim's co-creative ethos; instead, Huck

seems to adopt what James M. Cox has described as the pleasure principle, a preference for

"good feeling, comfort, and ease."[57] Yet it becomes apparent, soon enough, that Huck is not

simply avoiding the unpleasant: when the king and the duke rehearse their Shakespeare out loud

aboard the raft, Huck clearly enjoys the show and even participates by learning the duke's

humorously inaccurate version of Hamlet's soliloquy. Of the king's performance, Huck writes,

"It was perfectly lovely the way he would rip and tear and rair up behind when he was getting it

off" and even includes himself in their shenanigans soon afterward in owning that "We struck it

mighty lucky: there was going to be a circus there that afternoon…so our show would have a

pretty good chance" (180). In his enjoyment and participation, Huck's interactions with the king

and the duke signal more than just an evasion of difficulty or even an adherence to pleasure or

ease. Huck reveals that he sees the king and the duke as co-creators, sharers in talk, perhaps even

co-conspirators that enrich and provide the "continual variety" that Stevenson idealizes as part of

good talk.

The king and the duke, of course, do not share such an orientation. They are talkers

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[57] James M. Cox, "Southwestern Vernacular," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Claude Simpson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 90.

always oriented towards particular ends, who, like Long John Silver, care for little else than to make their own fortunes. Also like Silver, the two conmen are adept (or at least, adept enough to fool their ignorant, provincial audiences) at parroting the speech of others, whether pretending to talk as Shakespearean actors, repentant pirates, or the brothers of the late Peter Wilks. A third commonality that the king and the duke share with Silver is that their talk is notably interwoven with literature, literacy, and print (Shakespeare, bills and advertisements, wills, and so forth). Paul Lynch, in a recent Bakhtinian reading of *Huckleberry Finn*, characterizes the language of the king and the duke's as part of a "literary, authoritative discourse" that opposes an "internal-persuasive discourse" that Huck shares with Jim.[58] In Lynch's analysis, Huck is involved throughout the narrative in a struggle for "ideological becoming" in which he sometimes accepts the literate/literary authority of characters such as the Widow Douglas, Judge Thatcher, the king, duke, and Tom but at other times, finds the internal voice of his heart, shared with Jim, to be more convincing. Lynch specifically reads Huck's participation in learning the *Hamlet* soliloquy and inclusion of himself and Jim within the first-person plural of king and the duke's point of view as "the authoritative word…forcing the assimilation of the internally persuasive word."[59] The reading, however, perpetuates the view that the literary can somehow absorb or assimilate, without any apparent problems of translation, all forms of discourse, making no distinctions between written and oral language. In charting the "struggle" between these two forms of discourse as if they were fully commensurable, Lynch elides important gulf between the fixity of print and the process of talk that the characters experience in the story-world of *Huckleberry Finn*. As in the story-world of *Treasure Island*, the more that the characters talk like print, the

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[58] Paul Lynch, "Not Trying to Talk Alike and Succeeding: The Authoritative Word and Internally-Persuasive Word in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*," *Studies in the Novel* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 172-86.

[59] Ibid., 180.

less they are able to practice an experiential poetics.

The talk between Huck and Tom Sawyer later in the narrative even more starkly demonstrates the idea that it is not so much that all-powerful literature "assimilates" talk into its domain but that literature fails to meet the ideals of talk. *Huckleberry Finn*'s treatment of Tom Sawyer casts him as an especially poor reader of adventure romance: that is, he fails to comprehend the genre's open orientation towards hazard. Tom makes his full entrance late in the narrative, and primarily contributes to the action by forcing an elaborate plan to free Jim from his captivity at the Phelps farm. Tom's plan, full of notions of how escapes should be conducted from cutting off Jim's leg and building a moat to baking pies with rope ladders in them, infamously delays Jim's rescue (later, it is revealed that Tom has known all along that Miss Watson had already freed Jim in her will). In a talk with Huck that echoes Huck's talk with Jim earlier, it is now Tom who accuses Huck of missing the "point" and Huck who plays the role of the more imaginative, co-creative talker. Tom begins by explaining to Huck why they must go about the rescue in the way that he has prescribed:

> "It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the *right* way—and it's the
> regular way. And their ain't no *other* way, that ever *I* heard of; and I've read all the books
> that gives any information about these things…Why, look at one of them prisoners in the
> bottom dungeon of the Castle Deef, in the harbor of Marseilles, that dug himself out that
> way: how long was *he* at it, you reckon?"
>
> "I don't know."
>
> "Well, guess."
>
> "I don't know. A month and a half?"
>
> "*Thirty-seven year*—and he come out in China. *That's* the kind. I wish the bottom

of *this* fortress was solid rock."

"*Jim* don't know nobody in China."

"What's *that* got to do with it? Neither did that other fellow. But you're always a-wandering off on a side issue. Why can't you stick to the main point?" (304)

Kevin Michael Scott has noted the way in which Tom Sawyer sticks to particular incidents in stories he has read as evidence of his commitment to the stylistic process of adventure romance, but I would argue that Tom's conflates incident and information, rather showing that he misunderstands the notion of changeability at the heart of adventure romance's idealization of process.[60] In Stevenson's view, as articulated in "A Gossip on Romance," incidents are the building blocks of excitement, novelty, and surprise. Unlike adventure, information strives to be stable and unchangeable; thus, Tom is mistaken in his belief that replicating the information of fiction is to honor his beloved adventure stories. His plans instead embody the exact opposite of adventure's capacity to surprise. Just as the king and the duke—as falsely interactive talkers— are like John Silver, Tom is arguably like Ben Gunn in that Tom's talk parrots literary print in such a way as to render his speech petrified and incapable of responding to other talking partners. In his talk, Tom accuses Huck of "wandering off on a side issue," and failing to "stick to the main point," even though "wandering" is exactly the kind of movement that adventure requires. In trying to return Huck to a singular "point" of attention, Tom employs the same strategy that Huck had previously used against Jim and in a similar manner, halts the drift of co-creative exchange. Committed to co-creation, Huck tries to engage with Tom's talk, but Tom's ends-based, inflexible talking proves utterly immutable:

"Why, Tom Sawyer," how you talk," I says; "Jim ain't got no use for a rope

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[60] Kevin Michael Scott, "'There's More Honor': Reinterpreting Tom and the Evasion in *Huckleberry Finn*," *Studies in the Novel* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 187-207.

ladder."

"He *has* got use for it. How *you* talk, you better say: you don't know nothing about it. He's *got* to have a rope ladder: they all do."

"What in the nation can he *do* with it?"

"*Do* with it? He can hide it in his bed, can't he? That's what they all do; and *he's* got to, too." (300)

Huck attempts to adapt his question for Tom—"Jim ain't got no use for a rope ladder," and then, "What in the nation can he *do* with it"—but both iterations of Huck's question are met with the same, rigid response that Jim has "*got*" to do it because that is what is done in the books. For Tom, what is written is always the final authority. Tom's retort—"How *you* talk, you better say"—signals the way in which Huck and Tom engage in different ways of talking: Tom's talk is constrained by literature, and Huck's actively engages the unfolding experience of an unstable and indeterminate environment. Tom's talk, unfortunately for Huck—and even more so for Jim—is one of the hazards that Huck's talk encounters and must engage. Huck chooses to take up the challenge that adventure romance endorses, seeking to maintain the movement of talk against Tom's best efforts to determine it into the rigidity of print: "Well," I says, "if it's in the regulations, and he's got to have it, all right, let him have it; because I don't wish to go back on no regulations" (300-01).

In *Huckleberry Finn*, the more restrictive talkers end up determining the direction of the talk and more problematically, as the novel so particularly demonstrates, the action of the plot. In *Treasure Island*, the ideal talker—Jim Hawkins—manages to hold his own against talkers that would like to control both sides of the interaction, but in *Huckleberry Finn*, similarly idle talkers

meet with gradual extinction.[61] As many critics including Richard Poirier have noted, "Huck's…voice first wavers, then nearly disappears, then returns as a sickly version of what we find in these opening scenes."[62] Characters like the king, the duke, and Tom seem to overpower Huck's and Jim's talk even as they attempt with a co-creative effort to maintain the poetics of drifting, idle talk—something like that in which Huck and Jim engaged together while themselves drifting idly on the raft. Countless readers have judged what I perceive as Huck's co-creative vulnerability to the words and actions of others as troublingly passive—critical discussions in support of this view tend to account for the way in which the historically specific setting of the pre-war American south renders Huck an accomplice in Jim's suffering.[63] Other critics, including Cox and more recently N.S. Boone, who understands Huck's actions as guided by "phronesis," a pragmatic philosophical idea, essentially, of going along with one's environment, focus on the principled nature of Huck and Jim's active non-actions.[64] While my own discussion does not exactly disagree with Cox or Boone's assessments—both articulate versions of adventure romance's open orientation—any critical focus on adventure as a principle tends to gloss over the significance of time and experience to Huck and Jim's interactions with others. In bringing more focus to understanding *how* an embrace of hazard plays out—whether it originates from an adherence to pleasure or phronesis—in the story-world of *Huckleberry Finn*, I perceive the extinction of Huck and Jim's talk from Huck's written diegesis as necessary to the

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[61] Although Jim's narrative closes not with *his* voice, but with Silver's parrot.

[62] Richard Poirier, "Huck Finn and the Metaphors of Society, " in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, 97.

[63] Leo Marx famously characterized Huck's acquiescence to Tom Sawyer at the end of *Huckleberry Finn* as part of Twain's own "failure of nerve" ("Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, 39). Another important critical position is that our discomfort with Huck's passivity is part of Twain's satirical intentions; see, for example, Laurence B. Holland, ""A 'Raft of Trouble': Word and Deed in *Huckleberry Finn*," in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 66-81.

[64] N.S. Boone, "Openness to Contingency: Huckleberry Finn and the Morality of Phronesis," *Studies in the Humanities* 31, no. 2 (2004): 173-88.

experiential poetics that adventure exalts. In contrast to Stevenson's contention that a "good talk" "lasts for a long while," Twain's acceptance—in "Some Rambling Notes" and in *Huckleberry Finn*—of extinction as the only possible "destination" of experience carries adventure romance's logic as far as it will go. In other words, Twain's characterization of co-creative talk as fragile rather than robust avoids defining the value of talk, an experiential medium, in terms of permanence or that which "lasts." The vitality of talk, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates, depends more centrally on its eventual extinction than on its unexpected robustness.

The way in which *Huckleberry Finn* presents extinction or ending as a constituent part of the experiential may seem to offer little comfort in the morally charged historical setting of the novel. The question that Twain seems to leave open is, can we can still take adventure romance on its own terms—not getting stuck on any "point"—if those that *do* get stuck on "points" seem to have a more active role in determining the course of history? Andrew Jay Hoffman helpfully identifies a sense of incompatibility at the heart of Huck's interactions with his environment: as "traditional hero" (by which he means an epic hero), Huck is a "creature of oral tale-telling, by nature ahistorical…in a fiction wholly unsuited to him."[65] Within the world that Huck narrates, it may indeed be the case that Huck's openness to interaction in relation to the likes of the king, the duke, and Tom constitutes a morally questionable, negligence of sorts.[66] But from the point of view of an adventure-based poetics, the extinction of Huck and Jim's talk is the factor that best contributes to our sense that their talk is uniquely vital. The logic holds that as life is in part defined by death, so too is a vital poetics defined by its eventual extinction.

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[65] Andrew Jay Hoffman, "Huck's Heroism," in *Bloom's Literary Characters: Huck Finn* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishing, 2004), 112.

[66] See Stacey Margolis, "*Huckleberry Finn*; or, Consequences," *PMLA* 116, no. 2 (March 2001): 329-43 for a discussion of *Huckleberry Finn* in the context of late-nineteenth century legal understandings of negligence as a new justification of liability in accidents.

The context of adventure romance's idle poetics also offers a way around seeing Huck's decision to author a book as some kind of capitulation to literary authority. The novel strongly suggests that the Huck that talks with Jim, the king, the duke, or Tom is long gone when the Huck that writes/narrates begins the story. Hence, the writing does not really overpower, absorb, or extinguish talk: it is more that talk has extinguished itself, and for good reason. Talk seems a kind of secretive "word-shadow," inaccessible but precious to the reader who will never encounter it in print. The lesson that Huck-the-narrator claims he learns at the very end is that books are not worth writing: "If I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more" (362). Here, Huck not only devalues the literary endeavor, but also tells us, significantly, that he is not about to write again. In effect, Huck constitutes the act of writing in terms of unrepeatability, a trait more inherent to talking than writing, because of the former's experiential extinction as it unfolds. The final words of *Huckleberry Finn*, "I been there before"—Huck's explanation for why he will not return to be "sivilized" by Aunt Sally—privileges the operation of experience, that which can only happen just once (362). Andrew Lang understood this very quality of unrepeatability as something that distinguishes *Huckleberry Finn* from other novels: "different characters do not return, as in other novels, and narrate their later adventures."[67] Just the same, the text remains behind, a record of talk that lasts—not without a power of its own, but not an adequate translation of vitality that has long disappeared.

What work, finally, does Twain's failed translation-experiment do for adventure romance? I have argued that *Treasure Island* imagines a way for print to capture some part of talk's "life, freedom, and effect" and that *Huckleberry Finn* testifies to the failure of translating

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[67] Lang, "Art of Mark Twain," 222.

any sense of talk's vitality in print, but particularly to show that the fragility is not so much a limitation as an essential part of talk's vital poetics. When placed in dialogue with each other, *Huckleberry Finn* questions the premise of *Treasure Island*'s bid to measure talk by qualifications derived from a system that privileges permanence. *Huckleberry Finn* thus redefines fragility and ephemerality as operating a poetics that—though not robust—is nonetheless capable of expressing adventure romance's significance (rather than its frivolity) as "literature of the moment." The robustness of a vital poetics is not to be found within its own operations, but within affective gains that it generates for readers: of loss, nostalgia, and the complex desire to repeat an experience especially because it has passed. It is another one of the knotty features of adventure romance that the expressed desire to read adventure again and again seems always to sit together with the notion that it is the kind of literature that one reads and then casts aside. Adventure romance affords the pleasures of a "reading…process…absorbing and voluptuous" that depends on readers feeling "rapt clean out of [them]selves" in the moment of their reading, yet when the moment has passed, readers wish to have this categorically unrepeatable experience once again.[68]

Stevenson's account of his own reading of *Huckleberry Finn*—that he read it four times only to return again to the beginning—enacts such a complex desire. Yet I suspect that Stevenson's praise for *Huckleberry Finn* expresses more than just the notion that the experience of reading Twain's novel was so good that he was trying again and again to repeat the experience. In "A Gossip on a Novel by Dumas" (1887), Stevenson explains that his own process of rereading *The Vicomte of Bragelonne* owed to the fact that the novel afforded him a different reading experience each time. It is easy to see *Huckleberry Finn* as a work especially

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[68] Stevenson, "Gossip on Romance," 247.

suited for this kind of rereading; as Stacey Margolis notes, Twain's novel codes its own

unrepeatability in terms of its reception: "If one reads the novel the first time as Huck, one must

read it the second time as Tom," for one cannot "unknow" Jim's freedom during his capture.[69]

Yet still, anything experiential always gets exhausted, and with every re-reading, there is one less

experience left to encounter. Especially in an interaction with a book, as opposed to another

person in talk, the "continual variety" of experience is limited by its one-sidedness—it is not a

co-creative process unfolding in the present of the reading experience.

> Stevenson's closing statements on Dumas's novel captures what it is to let go of the

knotty feeling of desiring to hold something as inherently slippery as experience:

> Upon the crowded, noisy life of this long tale, evening gradually falls; and the lights are
>
> extinguished, and the heroes pass by one by one. One by one they go, and not a regret
>
> embitters their departure…the inevitable end draws near and is welcome. To read this
>
> well is to anticipate experience. Ah, if only when these hours of the long shadows fall for
>
> us in reality and not figure, we may hope to face them with a mind as quiet![70]

By imagining the way in which the "heroes" of the tale depart without "regret," the passage tries

to exorcise the vexed desire the reader feels—a mixture of regret and embitterment—as "the

inevitable end" of the reading experience "draws near." Stevenson conceives of what it might be

to "welcome" an ending, and finds that it only makes the experience of reading romance better:

"To read this well is to anticipate experience." In full, the reading process that Stevenson

describes in this essay perfectly articulates what it is to have a rich appreciation of a vital poetics

of extinction: he holds on as long as possible to the desire to experience the text again, until

finally, all experiences are exhausted and he must let go. In the same manner that the specter of

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[69] Margolis, "*Huckleberry Finn*; or, Consequences," 333.

[70] Stevenson, "A Gossip on a Novel by Dumas" in *Memories and Portraits*, 245-46.

shipwreck darkens the tone of the "ramblings" on board the *Bermuda*, Stevenson's observation

that his reading process prepares him for death troubles an otherwise youthful and exuberant

essay. I contend that together, the tension of a desire to repeat the unrepeatable and the weight of

the existential render adventure romance significant even precisely because it is "literature of the

moment.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Aesthetics of Double-Talk in 1890s Drawing-Room Chatter

> I can't describe action: my people sit in chairs and chatter.
> —Oscar Wilde, Letter to Beatrice Allhusen

As Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* so aptly illustrates, the adventurous poetics of talk that Stevenson idealizes in *Treasure Island* has some severe limitations, particularly from the point of view of who is allowed to shape a historical narrative. In the present chapter, a companion piece to the last, I identify within the literary and oral culture of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism a strong interest in forms of drawing-room chatter that perform a regulative, social function—quite the opposite of idle talk—through tactics of evasion and distraction based, ultimately, on doubleness. In a manner similar, however, to the way in which idle talk stands more generally for talk in the world of adventure romance, chatter is a synecdoche for talk in the literary world of the 1890s drawing-room. In general, discussions of *fin-de-siècle* drawing-room talk have focused on epigrammatic wit, particularly of the male dandy, whose phrasings characteristically reverse and radically disrupt expectations set by social convention. I direct my attention, however, toward female talkers who may occupy the same social spaces as the male dandy or aesthete and share with him some aspects of his transgressiveness, but who promote, ultimately, what I describe as a conservationist, pro-social art of talk.[1] Stevenson, who ascribes adventurous, co-creative, and aspirational talk to a "boys' own" form of male homosociality, actually reserves the final paragraphs of his "Talk and Talkers" to consider exactly the kind of evasive yet regulatory female speakers I explore in this chapter:

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[1] Talia Schaffer's work on *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture and Late-Victorian England* (University of Virginia Press, 2000) is of particular relevance to this chapter. Although Schaffer does not directly discuss oral culture, I will refer throughout this chapter to her observations on female aesthetes' epigrammatic wit and evasive uses of language in my discussion.

The point of difference, the point of interest, is evaded by the brilliant woman, under a

shower of irrelevant conversational rockets; it is bridged by the discreet woman with a

rustle of silk, as she passes smoothly forward to the nearest point of safety. And this sort

of prestidigitation, juggling the dangerous topic out of sight until it can be reintroduced

with safety in an altered shape, is a piece of tactics among the true drawing-room queens.

(188)

Stevenson evinces a completely ambivalent, if not bewildered, attitude toward talk within the

feminized space of the drawing room.[2] Torn between a sense of awe and disdain for the skillful

"drawing-room queens," Stevenson at once appreciates the "brilliance" of her "conversational

rockets" and the extraordinary agility of her "prestidigitation" and "tactics" and thinks less of her

talk because it lacks adventurism's open and frank embrace. The talk of drawing-room queens, in

Stevenson's description, is simultaneously pyrotechnic and subtle, luminous yet deceitful as a

sleight of hand.

Stevenson's ambivalent characterization of these skilled, female talkers indexes late

nineteenth-century associations between socially transgressive types of women and brilliant talk,

associations that form this chapter's primary subject. The dazzling talk of the "drawing-room

queen" is a bit dishonest, but it is directed towards ensuring the "safety" of social interactions, a

word that Stevenson emphasizes by mentioning it twice. Stevenson's ambivalence, I argue,

captures an interesting formal contradiction between transgressiveness and conservatism that

uniquely defines the aesthetic of brilliant chatter that women supposedly circulated within *fin-de-

siècle* salons and drawing rooms of the literary elite. To be sure, Stevenson's observations refer

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[2] See Andrea Kaston Tange, *Architectural Identities: Domesticity, Literature and the Victorian Middle Classes*
(University of Toronto Press, 2010) for a discussion of the drawing room as an increasingly visible, public space
that signaled, through its material structures and decorations, women's work in areas such as household
management, domestic economy, and hosting important social gatherings.

more broadly to cultures of social interaction in upper-middle as well as upper-class homes where seasoned society hostesses were very much the center, but it is my contention that what he describes finds its fullest expression in literature directly connected to the 1890s drawing-room culture where the period's most famous and elite male and female talkers gathered.

The clever *badinage* of the late nineteenth-century English elite is the subject of one of Lucy McDiarmid's recent articles, which focuses specifically on two, well known Anglo-Irish talkers as well as literary figures, Oscar Wilde and Lady Augusta Gregory.[3] Making reference to Lady Gregory's own account of "London Table-Talk" in her autobiography, McDiarmid paints a picture of "dinner repartee, the wit of repeatable *bon mots*…a semi-public game that the 'leading minds' played when they met over a meal"; ultimately, McDiarmid argues, it was a world of talk that both impacted and was impacted by "political and cultural activities of England's—and Europe's—ruling classes."[4] In contrast, McDiarmid views Oscar Wilde's witty "repartee" as distinct from that of the politically connected and motivated Lady Gregory: "[Wilde's table-talk] did not supply the grounding for high politics" but was "an alternative to serious worldly business," an aesthetic practice that elevated the individual and his capacity to "charm" an audience.[5] This distinction that McDiarmid draws between Lady Gregory's sociality and Wilde's individualism points to a similar argument that I make about the more illicit-seeming women talkers that populate the talk-obsessed literature that depicts "Society"—a term that refers to the

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[3] Mahaffy ascribes conversational wit to the Irish nationality, *Principles on the Art of Conversation*, 32. Later, W.B. Yeats would quote Wilde as saying to him, at a dinner party: "We are a nation of brilliant failures, but we are the greatest talkers since the Greeks" (*The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* [New York: Macmillan, 1938], 118).

[4] Lucy McDiarmid, "Lady Gregory, Wilfrid Blunt, and London Table Talk," *Irish University Review* 34, no. 1 (2004): 68.

[5] Lucy McDiarmid, "Oscar Wilde, Lady Gregory, and Late-Victorian Table-Talk," in *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of Legend*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 57.

"dull yet dazzling" world of the London upper class—at the *fin-de-siècle*.[6] In spite of their uncertain membership within "Society," through their brilliant talk, these women expend extraordinary amounts of energy trying to "get back" and also, importantly, to manage the talk of others into positions of "safety" that ultimately maintain the very "Society" that seeks to marginalize them.

The present chapter takes as its textual focus two literary works that first circulated in 1892, Ella Hepworth Dixon's *My Flirtations* and Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (compositely titled *A Play About a Good Woman*), which feature, respectively, two controversial female character types that are also brilliant talkers: the flirt and the adventuress. Ella Hepworth Dixon, typically categorized as a New Woman writer, initially published *My Flirtations*, a collection of first-person comedic sketches that chronicle a young woman's encounters with different suitors, as an anonymous serial in *Lady's Pictorial* from 23 January to 30 April 1892. Subsequently, the volume publication was pseudonymously ascribed to "Margaret Wynman," a play on the protagonist's capacity to "win men." I focus on these earlier sketches of Dixon's because of the ways in which they bring explicit attention to the flirt's artistic management of talk that surrounds her and also because they take as their setting the world of *fin-de-siècle* talk. As the daughter of literary editor William Hepworth Dixon, this was a world with which Dixon was intimately acquainted, for she was exposed, from an early age, to salon culture in her childhood home.[7] Dixon's biographer, Valerie Fehlbaum, sheds light, moreover, on Dixon's own prowess as a witty talker in these settings, citing Francis Toye's comment that Dixon possessed

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[6] Joseph Bristow, "Dowdies and Dandies: Oscar Wilde's Refashioning of Society Comedy," *Modern Drama* 37, no. 1 (1994): 53.

[7] Valerie Fehlbaum's biography, *Ella Hepworth Dixon: The Story of a Modern Woman* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005) provides details of Dixon's childhood education, which was equal to that of her brothers. According to Fehlbaum, mong other experiences, Dixon studied abroad in Heidelberg and accompanied her mother to Ibsen plays—by all accounts, Dixon grew up privileged with literary company and "avant-garde" parents (18).

'something very like genius for social intercourse.'"[8] Similarly, Margaret Wynman in *My Flirtations* is the daughter of a famous artist, whose home serves as the gathering place for literary, artistic, scientific, and political illuminati of the day. Margaret is, as well, a talker who outwits all of her suitors.

At the center of Wilde's first, commercially successful Society comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, is Mrs. Erlynne—by Wilde's own designation, an "adventuress, not a cocotte"—who deftly talks her way back into Society after being ostracized for her murky "past."[9] Keeping from Society and Lady Windermere herself the secret of her identity as Lady Windermere's mother, Mrs. Erlynne evinces a knack for out-talking everyone, including the male dandies, through the dazzling distraction of her conversational "tactics." Like Stevenson's "drawing-room queen," Mrs. Erlynne launches "conversational rockets" that stun all other talkers into obeisance to her rules for what can and cannot be said. Similar to Dixon's *My Flirtations*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* deals explicitly with this regulative form of women's talk in a number of important ways, and is therefore especially suited to the concerns of this chapter. The first of Wilde's plays completely made up of conversation within the setting of upper-class, semi-private domestic spaces, its characters—compared to those of earlier, less successful plays such as *Vera, or the Nihilist* (1883) or *The Duchess of Padua* (1891)—evince a heightened

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[8] Ibid., 22. The extent to which *My Flirtations* is steeped within a world of humor and playfulness shared with male dandies and aesthetes also reflects Dixon's own versatility as a writer: not just a New Woman ideologue, but a "female aesthete," to borrow Schaffer's term, with her own particular uses of language and wit. According to Schaffer, female aesthetes' "[l]anguage experimentation may mean the employment of epigrams or archaisms for the purpose of displacing or camouflaging forbidden topics" (*Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, 4).

[9] Wilde insisted on this designation of "adventuress" in a letter actor and St. James's Theatre manager. See Oscar Wilde to George Alexander, *Complete Letters*, 515.

awareness about the art of conversation.[10] *Lady Windermere's Fan* also wrestles with the

problems and possibilities of a plot made up of "all conversation and no action." In *Lady*

Windermere's Fan and Wilde's subsequent Society comedies, talk is itself a significant topic of

conversation, where characters are constantly making distinctions between clever talk, trivial

talk, selfish talk, sentimental talk, serious talk, talking morality, talking scandal, talking business,

and talking politics.[11] As with the case of *My Flirtations*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* is ensconced

within the culture of *fin-de-siècle* drawing-rooms that Wilde, of course, frequented.[12] On 22

February 1892, the night of *Lady Windermere's Fan*'s opening at St. James's Theatre, Wilde's

play was met with a distinguished audience including not only literati such as Arthur Conan

Doyle and Richard Le Gallienne but also political celebrities such as Arthur Balfour and Joseph

Chamberlain (the Prince of Wales attended a few nights later).[13] The mythology surrounding the

event of *Lady Windermere's Fan*'s opening emphasizes the ways in which Wilde welcomed the

assembled theatre audience as if they were guests in his own drawing room, such that there was a

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[10] Ian Small observes that the dandies of the play share with Mahaffy an interest in the "form and effect of an utterance [as] its most important aspects" ("Introduction," in *Lady Windermere's Fan: A Play about a Good Woman*, by Oscar Wilde, ed. Small [New York: Bloomsbury, 2013], xxxii).

[11] See *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). To be sure, the characters of *Vera, or the Nihilists* also theorize and talk about talk, though not to the same extent. Prince Paul of *Vera* shares an almost identical line with Lord Darlington of *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "[L]ife is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it" (Wilde, *Complete Works*, 665).

[12] Dixon and Wilde shared many literary acquaintances—including Richard Le Gallienne, Edmund Yates, William Heinemann, Max Beerbohm, and John Lane. They also directly collaborated when Dixon contributed a number of essays to *Woman's World* during Wilde's tenure as editor from 1887 to 1889. As Fehlbaum and has noted, the nameless editor—of the fictional magazine, the *Fan*—in Dixon's novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, was likely in part modeled after Wilde ("Ella Hepworth Dixon and Oscar Wilde," *The Wildean* 26 [January 2005]: 41-50).

[13] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 108.

sense of continuity between the world of the play and the world of Wilde's distinguished social life.[14]

In this world of upper-class talk, Margaret Wynman and Mrs. Erlynne emerge as great artists working within the "media" of talk, ultimately finding ways to orchestrate the talk around them into narratives that end with conventional, comic resolutions: both *My Flirtations* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* conclude with marriages that reaffirm Society's norms of behavior. Dixon's and Wilde's mutual interest in conservationist aesthetic practices of women talkers who occupy social positions close to scandal indicates a distinct form of conversational artistry whereby scandal provides an occasion for the kind of presence from which female artists might circulate dazzling "conversational rockets"—ultimately, however, in the service of a protective, authorial function. These "rockets" powerfully distract away from dangerous forms of talk and provide a means of evading tragic outcomes. As Fehlbaum observes, the overall comedic effect of *My Flirtations* was not lost on contemporaries: reviewers, including Wilde's close friend, Robert Ross, declared that "a new humorist had arisen."[15] *My Flirtations*, as Fehlbaum also points out, is the humorous treatment of similar subjects that Dixon would consider with more gravity in *The Story of A Modern Woman*. In the words of the protagonist Mary Erle's friend, Alison Ives, "[w]ith a keen sense of the ridiculous, [women] would never fall in love at all; and as to improvident marriages, they wouldn't exist."[16] As scholars such as Kerry Powell, Joel H. Kaplan, and Sheila Stowell have helpfully pointed out in relation to Wilde's Mrs. Erlynne, she was a

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[14] See Alan Bird, "Lady Windermere's Fan," in *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (London: Vision Press, 1977), 94 and Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 108. According to Yeats in his autobiography, "The dinner table was Wilde's event and made him the greatest talker of his time" (121).

[15] According to Fehlbaum, contemporaries found Dixon's humor—particularly in her journalistic contributions to the *Lady's Pictorial* and *The Sketch*—to be a welcome distinction from the work of contemporary New Woman writers, which was often deemed too "morbid" (*Ella Hepworth Dixon*, 93-95).

[16] Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1894), 64.

character deliberately crafted as the antithesis to suffering and tragic adventuresses of Victorian melodrama (especially Blanche Faneuse of Pierre Leclerq's *Illusions*, performed at the Strand Theatre in 1890).[17] Both Dixon's flirt and Wilde's adventuress, then, uphold the deceptively simple suggestion that a woman really does not have to suffer, if she can redirect talk away from suffering. In the words of the puritanical heroine, Lady Windermere herself, talking about tragedy may be worse than acting within it: "Actions are the first tragedy in life, words are the second. Words are perhaps the worst."[18]

The Female Arts of Double-Talk

In an article written from the perspective of a perplexed male observer called "What Women Talk About," published in the *Leamington Spa Courier* on 29 January 1887, women engage in a form of double-talk that no man will ever be able to "puzzle out": "The shallow cynic sneers at women for their perpetual discussion on dress," but "he does so in ignorance as to what that subject covers. No man really knows, or ever will know, how far it can be extended."[19] Beneath this seemingly innocuous "discussion on dress," this article elsewhere suggests, is a kind of danger—"spite, envy, and malice" are everywhere present in women's talk, albeit in a

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[17] Kerry Powell brings attention to Mrs. Erlynne's pointed speech, in the fourth act, in which she explicitly rejects La Faneuse's conventional retreat to proper places for repentant women (either a convent or a hospital), enabling Wilde to "skewer the melodramatic morality upon which plays like *Illusion* were founded" ("Lady Windermere's Fan and the Unmotherly Mother," in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 25-26). According to Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, Mrs. Erlynne's "comic leave-taking" was emphasized by Wilde's costume choices—unlike Blanche Faneuse, dressed in mourning black, Mrs. Erlynne adorns herself with a hat with pink roses (*Theatre and Fashion: Wilde to the Suffragettes* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 18-19).

[18] Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan: A Play about a Good Woman*, ed. Ian Small (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), IV. 36-38. Subsequent references will be to this edition and cited in parentheses on the text by act and lines.

[19] *Leamington Spa Courier*, "What Women Talk About," January 29, 1887.

manner not usually apparent to men.[20] J.B. Priestley, novelist and radio broadcaster of the

twentieth century, makes a very similar point in an early essay of his, titled "Talking" (1926):

> [U]nder cover of their apparently bright prattle, their nods and becks and smiles,
>
> [women] are dealing thrust after thrust…A listening male would hear only polite chatter
>
> and would wonder what amusement there could be in such prattling, but the combatants
>
> themselves and any feminine hearers on hand can follow every move of this
>
> conversational chess, knowing as they do all the rules of the game.[21]

Priestley's comments—though coming a couple of generations after those of the author of "What

Women Talk About"—nonetheless capture this distinct, if stereotypical, sense that women have

a special ability to disguise dangerous talk under a veneer of "bright prattle."[22]

    The idea that women deal daggers under what may seem innocuous in talk is related to

but slightly different from Stevenson's description of the drawing-room queen's "conversational

rockets": there is, in both, a tension between an appreciation for brilliance and an unease about

dishonesty, but Stevenson does not evince much of an appreciation for doubleness. He seems

primarily interested in the ways in which "bright prattle" might allow for the avoidance of

danger (through navigation to "points of safety"), whereas these other accounts seem more

fascinated by the way in which women's talk can somehow precipitate safety and danger at the

same time. Before turning to the ways in which Dixon's flirt and Wilde's adventuress make use

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[20] Ibid. According to the OED, "double-talk" can mean "deliberately unintelligible speech," "gibberish," or "verbal expression intended to be, or which may be, construed in more than one sense." The descriptions of women's talk here combine both of these meanings associated with double-talk—the talk is meant to be unintelligible to certain parties but construed in two different ways by other parties.

[21] J.B. Priestley, *Talking* (London: Jarrolds, 1926), 67.

[22] Such paradigms may not seem remarkable, as a result of their continued familiarity. As Carla Kaplan points out in her book, *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), present-day linguistics tends to draw similar conclusions as figures from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century in asserting that women best men in conversational facility (8).

of such complexity as talkers in their respective social universes, I want to explore in greater detail this doubling of safety and danger in late nineteenth-century views of women's talk and point out that the flirt and the adventuress are characterological embodiments of this doubleness. As such, Dixon's and Wilde's uses of these particular character types to experiment with what aesthetic effects their talk might achieve draw from what was already a rich body of theorizing—both on these types and their association with clever forms of double-talk.

I argue that the preoccupation with female talkers' ability to speak doubly arises out of a few observable contradictions in late nineteenth-century discussions of women under the larger topic of "the art of conversation." On the one hand, women were associated with a quickness of intellect (perceived as native to their sex) that enabled tact and grace, important elements for ensuring smooth social relations. J.P. Mahaffy asserts that "quickness of mind" is "the proper attribute of women" and remarks that such "quickness" is especially helpful in bringing about easy interactions among strangers in obligatory, formal social settings such as the all-important dinner party. Similarly, Lady Wilde praises the skill of the hostess, on whom the entire success of an evening may rest:

> [The hostess] reigns supreme at her own table, that a woman requires most tact, experience, and varied knowledge of life and literature. Then it is her privilege to lead and guide the conversation; with swift tact to turn the course if rocks are ahead—to evade skillfully, encourage sweetly, repress gravely. And it is only a woman that can touch the curb with so light a hand that she checks without wounding.[23]

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[23] [Jane Francesca Wilde], *Social Studies*, 75.

177

Lady Wilde's account of the best hostesses clearly resonates with Stevenson's account of drawing-room queens, but there is no anxiety here about the dishonesty of her tact, only an idealized picture of her deft maintenance of pleasurable social interactions.

On the other hand, for all of a woman's "quickness" in talk, her conversation was also thought to be inferior to a man's because of constraints placed upon her experience. In the same study of social graces, Lady Wilde tries to turn women's disadvantaged access to public or professional lives outside the home into a social good for conversation: "[W]omen know little of the satiety of exhausted emotion, or of the cynicism and weariness of all things to which men who have drained the cup of life to the dregs"; consequently, Wilde argues, women—through an uncorrupted sense of wonder and naïveté—are in a position to raise men into higher forms of talk.[24] Much more negatively, James Payn finds women in general to be poor talkers, for "almost everything that is really interesting is tabooed to her."[25] Expanding on this point, Payn concedes that the best women talkers that he himself has encountered are those who have had the opportunity to widen their range of life experience: "There is a cynical saying that women are not worth looking at after forty, or worth talking to before; but as regards freedom of conversation...a woman is generally much older than that before she uses it with mankind."[26] He concludes, "Indeed, the most delightful female talkers I have ever known have been old women who have mixed much with the world."[27]

What writers such as Lady Wilde and James Payn seem to dance around is the fact that, by their logic, young women who have found ways to widen the scope of their own experiences

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[24] Ibid., 67.

[25] James Payn, "The Closing of Doors," *Forum* 7 (March 1889): 345.

[26] Ibid., 345-46.

[27] Ibid., 346.

might very well be better talkers—as good as, or even better than men, because of their natural

"quickness." The appearance of young, or still-young—beautiful, in any case—women of

experience who simultaneously threaten and give a thrill to her spectators largely through the

cleverness of her talk is therefore none too surprising; the tensions between women's quickness

and naïveté, experience and innocence, practically produce the desire for a woman who is at

once young, beautiful, and clever from experience. The flirt and the adventuress are two

particular iterations of this woman, and they both garner a large amount of interest within the

cultural imaginary at the end of the century, especially as figures capable of producing, through

talk, a unique, doubled aesthetic that also becomes a broader representation of these characters

themselves. In focusing on these characters, I make no claim that they are the only or the most

prominent female talkers skilled in the arts of double-talk; rather, I see them as related to

particular predecessors like the *mondaine*, the fashionable, epigram-wielding lady of the popular

novelist Ouida's imagination, and also the larger field of "female aesthetes" that Schaffer and

others have begun to map out.[28] The epigram itself might be viewed as a doubled form. As Lady

Wilde argues, it is "the strange combination of opposites; the daring subversion of some ancient

platitude."[29] Schaffer similarly points out that for female aesthetes, "epigrammatic

language...reverses the ordinary power relations of aestheticism" and serves as a "defense against

the [male] connoisseur's authoritative gaze."[30] While both of these identifications of the

epigram's feminist stakes emphasize its daring and efficacy against established conventions,

subversion codes a certain degree of caution that seems to resonate with safety. As such, the

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[28] Schaffer argues that epigrammatic wit traditionally credited to the genius of male aesthetes of the 1890s actually originated with Ouida's popular novels, which span a long period from the 1860s until the end of the century, (*Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, 122-58).

[29] [Jane Francesca Wilde], *Social Studies*, 70.

[30] Schaffer, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, 122.

epigram may very well manifest similar dynamics as the kind of double-talk that occupies the present discussion's main interest.

The same doubling of safety and danger observable in accounts of women's talk was attached to ideas about the process of flirtation itself. A statement from an 1870 article published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* aptly captures doubling in flirtation: "The great aim and end of flirtation is that nothing should come of it."[31] A sentiment not unfamiliar in our own day, the common phrase, "flirting with danger" captures a similar notion that flirts move toward but never cross an imagined boundary that marks the separation between safety and an abyss from which they cannot recover. The psychologist Adam Phillips, for instance, begins his account *On Flirtation* (1994) with a discussion of tensions between "[t]he fact that people tend to flirt only with serious things—madness, disaster, other people—and the fact that flirting is a pleasure."[32] A particular interest in understanding flirtation as a distinctly female art that involves maintaining a delicate balance of danger and safety emerged in the 1870s; the simultaneity of growing interest in women's double-talk was likely not just coincidental. At the same time that manuals on the art of everyday talk were being popularized, numerous manuals and popular magazine articles on flirts and flirtation emerged, with classificatory titles such as "The Flirt," "Flirts and Flirtation," "Flirting as an Art," "Flirtation as a Fine Art," "The Anatomy of Flirtation," "An Apology for Flirtation," "A Theory of Flirtation," and "Love v. Flirtation."[33] On the whole, these late nineteenth-century commentaries move away from eighteenth-century and Romantic era

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[31] "The Nemesis of Flirtation," *Gentleman's Magazine* (Jan 1870): 212.

[32] Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) offers a generalized discussion that primarily argues that flirtation occupies a realm of uncertainty and therefore possibility. Flirtation is "an attempt to-reopen, to rework, the [marriage] plot" that "make[s] room" for other stories (xxv). It works against endings, sustaining a "plurality" of options even if its continuation is a "notoriously difficult task" (xix).

[33] A search for "flirt" (and related term flirtation) on google ngram indicates a sharp increase around 1870 followed by a slightly decreased, but sustained frequency into the 1920s.

associations of "the flirt" (and its sister term, "the coquette") with female sexual danger and

risky, capricious behavior.[34] Popular "silver fork" novels such as Lady Charlotte Bury's

Flirtation (1828) offered up moralistic warnings against flirtation as a sign of sexual excess (in

this novel, a married woman's flirtations eventually lead to the loss of her husband and her own

death and too-late repentance). As the century progressed, however, greater appreciation was

accorded to the "art" and also the "science" of flirtation, both of which stressed flirtation's

requirements for control and skill. Various articles from books and magazines of the day

emphasize danger, on the one hand, and control, on the other: the flirt "throw[s] pointed knives

with the precision of a Chinese juggler"; possesses "a singular knack of driving young men

twelve in hand"; or flirtation may be defined as "the art of playing with fire."[35]

       Yet in spite of the way in which there is as much emphasis—if not more—on flirtation's

definitional safety (it is no longer flirtation, as the *Gentleman's Magazine* article suggests, if

"something"—whether marriage, misunderstanding, or illicit relations—should occur) as on its

proximity to danger, this aspect of the late-Victorian flirt's conservatism has been under-

theorized. Richard A. Kaye's book, *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and*

Edwardian Fiction (2002), provides much needed insight into the importance of flirtatious

poetics to Victorian and Edwardian literature and culture but focuses on the ways in which

flirtation enabled radical, progressive subjectivities: flirtation, in Kaye's view, was primarily "a

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[34] According to the OED, Samuel Johnson's definition of the flirt as a "pert hussey" emerged around the same time that "to flirt" began to signify "to play at courtship" in the 1770s; prior to that, "to flirt" simply meant to engage in a form of quick movement, "to propel or throw with a jerk," "to give (a person) a sharp, sudden blow," "to flick," or "to spring, dart [or] flit constantly from one object to another."

[35] "Flirtation as an Art," *Harpers Bazaar* (15 August 1868): 670; Albert Smith, *The Natural History of the Flirt* (London: D. Bogue, 1848), 100; Eustace Clare Grenville Murray, R. Mounteney Jephson, Henry Savile Clarke, &c, "Flirts," in *The Social Zoo* (London: Vizetelly, 1884), 2.

vehicle for the expression of 'dissident' sexualities" in late nineteenth-century novels."[36] An

argument like Kaye's offers a corrective to sexisms that linger onwards from Johnson's

definition of the flirt as a "pert hussey" (see note 34), but it fails to account for the numerous

references to flirtation's safety, especially in the journalism of the late-nineteenth century.

Similar to the author of the *Gentleman's Magazine* article, writers such as Paul Bourget define

the flirt's occupation in terms of her conservatism and not her dissidence: "[T]he day [the flirt]

discovers that the 'little ways' are turning out serious, she has but one pre-occupation, and that is

to put a stop to the whole thing."[37] Flirtation, according to E.C. Grenville Murray et al. in *The

Social Zoo* (1884), is merely "toying…with the passion of love."[38] Even earlier, Coke

Richardson in the *Cornhill* asserts in his "Theory of Flirtation" (1866) that "as much sentiment

should be indicated, and no more as can be safely ventured upon in case of a repulse."[39]

Although it may not always be explicit, what makes flirtation safe is its essential

grounding in talk. Such a conception follows Wilde's description of "all conversation and no

action," for once actions are taken, flirtation ends, as so many of the late nineteenth-century

theorists insist. One concrete way that these accounts signal that flirtation functions through the

artistic media of talk is their tendency to frame flirtation as drama. As Wilde's comment about

his only novel's dialogue-heavy form might suggest, his turn to drama shortly thereafter seemed,

in part, a move towards a genre more hospitable to his enthusiasm for "chatter." The frequent

references in periodical literature to flirtation as drama, then, situate flirtation strongly within the

arts of conversation. In "Flirts and Flirtation" (1869) published in *Temple Bar*, novelist William

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[36] Richard Kaye, *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (University of Virginia Press, 2002), 38.

[37] Paul Bourget, "The Anatomy of Flirtation," *Belford's Monthly* (February 1893): 430.

[38] Murray et al., "Flirts," 1.

[39] Coke Richardson, "The Theory of Flirtation," *Cornhill Magazine* (August 1866): 196.

Black presents flirtation as an on-stage comedy maintained for the sole purpose of amusement. According to Black, flirtation is, in both the sense of drama and of childish pastime, a "play" involving "sham quarrels," and "sham making-up."[40] Similarly, in Bourget's view, flirtation is an "operette" or an "innocent, insignificant by-play."[41] Both Black's and Bourget's identification of flirtation with comedy underscore theirs and others' perceptions of flirtation as an art that takes safety seriously. As I will show later in my analysis of *My Flirtations*, Dixon's Margaret Wynman—together with her sister—socially regulates male talk that threatens the art of flirtation's essentially comic mode, while also leaving room to explore from inside of comedy's "bright prattle" the dynamics of danger and tragedy.

In comparison with the particular incarnation of the late nineteenth-century flirt I am describing—a youthful, female aesthete skilled in the arts of double-talk—the "adventuress" possessed of similar traits had slightly earlier origins in the sensation fiction of the 1860s. For the most part, in these initial iterations—besides Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley, there were the likes of Ellen Wood's Lady Isabel of *East Lynne* (1861) and Wilkie Collins's murderous Lydia Gwilt of *Armadale* (1866)—the adventuress was universally censured as a villainess, very much "the woman who looks for chances of personal advancement, esp. by using her sexuality," as defined in the OED.[42] From the start, the adventuress was associated with doubleness. In an essay titled "Adventuresses" published in the *London Review* (August 1868), the author knowingly characterizes the stock adventuress as the "angel-fiend," a woman whose looks signal

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[40] William Black, "Flirts and Flirtation," *Temple Bar* 26 (April 1869): 61.

[41] Bourget, "Anatomy of Flirtation," 430-31.

[42] "Adventuress" on google ngram experiences a steady increase from around 1860 and peaks around 1920, and subsequently declines quickly afterwards. The OED also lists "a female adventurer" as a definition for "adventuress," but as far as I can tell, this definition was not really in use until the 1920s, when a number of adventure and detective novels featuring female protagonists appeared.

"a graceful, girlish person and caressing, childish manner," but hide "a will of steel and a conscience of India-rubber."[43] As this description so aptly illustrates, the most threatening—but increasingly attractive, as the century progressed—aspect of the adventuresses of Braddon's, Wood's, and Collins's fictions is that they looked the part of ideal, Victorian femininity while engaging in the most evil and heinous machinations. These sensation novels, though, contain their adventuresses by consigning them, in the end, to brokenness and suffering: Lady Audley and Lydia Gwilt end their lives in sanitariums, and Lady Isabel suffers repentance at the deathbed of her own son, a repentance heavy enough to send her to her own death shortly thereafter.

The adventuress of the 1880s and 1890s, however, became more and more a figure of fascination that attracted open admiration. In terms of sheer volume, references to real-life and stage adventuresses in newspapers and periodicals quintupled from the 1860s and 1870s.[44] Although the adventuress received less in the way of explicit, public theorizing than the flirt, she was certainly a stock character of sensationalized newspaper accounts and Victorian melodrama by the end of the century. Relatedly, as the character type was allowed to seem more attractive, she also became less threatening. By 1906, Jerome K. Jerome was able to offer a confident proclamation on her merits in his *Stage-Land*, a humorous catalogue of theatrical types: "True, she possesses rather too much sarcasm and repartee to make things quite agreeable round the

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[43] *London Review*, "Adventuresses," August 15, 1868.

[44] A search of the British newspapers digital archive for "adventuress" yields approximately 1,500 mentions from 1860-79, and nearly 7,000 mentions from 1880-1899. To be sure, this growing digital archive covers only about one-fifth of the total amount of print from British newspapers, but nonetheless, the dramatic magnitude of increase in number of mentions from the earlier to later period even in this small sample is a helpful indicator of growing interest.

domestic hearth…but, taken on the whole, she is decidedly attractive. She has grit and go in her. She is alive. She can do something to help herself besides calling for 'George.'"[45]

Perhaps a reference to George Osborne from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), Jerome mocks a "heroine" like Amelia's helplessness as much as he mocks the "hero" George's pompous masculinity and elevates the adventuress's (Becky Sharpe's, in this case) "grit and go." Jerome claims that his admiration for the adventuress is tempered by a disregard for her "sarcasm and repartee," but this claim also signals the central role that clever talk plays in her machinations. "Repartee" signals a biting form of quick-wittedness that is very much aligned with the epigrammatic brilliance of many of Wilde's characters; certainly, as I will indicate, Mrs. Erlynne's is unmatched by others' in the play. Much like the quick-wittedness of the experienced hostess's talk, that of the adventuress operates in a doubled manner: the biting wit of repartee sparkles at the same time it jabs. It is exactly this kind of intelligence in association with the adventuress that seemed to receive more and more attention in the press and in fictional contexts. Even as newspaper accounts and new plays continued to stress the inevitability of her conventional, tragic demise, they—as Jerome's account illustrates—made little effort to hide their feelings that she was far more amusing company than the impossibly good heroine.

A brief sampling of quotations from popular newspaper reports on real-life adventuresses may be sufficient to bear out this shift in attitudes: One "Nellie Laws" was "well-educated and well-spoken"; an adventuress posing as "Mrs. Gordon Baillie" in Scotland "propound[ed] her great scheme" and even managed to dupe the *Pall Mall Gazette* into sponsoring her aims; a "Russian Adventuress" by the name of "Golden Hand" is an "extraordinary woman who has been married no less than sixteen times"; Frederica Furneau was not only a "most notorious

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[45] Jerome K. Jerome, *Stage-Land: Curious Habits and Customs of its Inhabitants* (New York: Holt & Company, 1906), 80-81.

swindler" but also "a celebrated criminal" and "a genius of a liar."[46] In a highly sensationalized

recounting of Lola Montez—a "beautiful adventuress" of the 1840s—in the columns of the

London Journal in 1903, she is described as having gained so much "fame" that her "advent…to

Munich partook of the nature of an ovation."[47] In late nineteenth-century theater reviews,

actresses who played adventuresses were often lauded for their skill at portraying these

characters' clever speech and mannerisms, whereas earlier on, the primary concern seemed to be

whether an actress had made the villainess seem too attractive. The tendency to praise the

adventuress's skill at lying resonates in particular with Wilde's appreciation for the liar as the

most amusing of talkers, as articulated in "The Decay of Lying" (1891): "Bored by the tedious

and improving conversation of those who have neither the wit to exaggerate nor the genius to

romance…Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating

liar."[48] Arguably, the adventuress had become a distinct, female version of this liar-cum-aesthete.

In the words of Mr. Campbell, a character from Ella D'Arcy's "The Pleasure Pilgrim" (1895),

Lulie Thayer was an "adventuress, but an end-of-century one. She doesn't travel for profit, but

for pleasure. She has no desire to swindle her neighbour, but to amuse herself."[49]

 Newer fiction in the 1880s and 1890s that incorporated the adventuress also reflects this

overall sense of threat turned to fascination and fascination turned to amusement: as attention

was directed away from her villainy, the adventuress actually did become less villainous. Even

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[46] *Reynolds's Newspaper*, "An Adventuress," January 6, 1895; *Lloyd's Weekly*, "An Adventuress in Scotland," March 4, 1888; *Pall Mall Gazette*, "An Adventuress with Sixteen Husbands," September 30, 1887; *Illustrated Police News*, "A Notorious Adventuress," August 4, 1894.

[47] "A Beautiful Adventuress," *London Journal* (26 September 1903): 281.

[48] Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 980-81.

[49] Ella D'Arcy, "The Pleasure Pilgrim," *Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly* (April 1895): 43.Valerie Fehlbaum links Lulie Thayer's pursuit of amusement to the pleasure-seeking flirtation to Dixon's Wynman (*Ella Hepworth Dixon*, 99).

just the titles of some of these newer works—for instance, H. Ripley Cromarsh's "The Episodes of Marge: Memoirs of a Humble Adventuress" (1903) or Frank Moore's "An Amateur Adventuress" (1908)—signal the comparative levity of their crimes. In March 1881, the fashionable monthly magazine *Time*, edited by Edmund Yates, published a story called "An Adventure with an Adventuress," a short, first-person narrative told from the amused perspective of a man traveling in India who encounters—and then successfully abandons—a Russian adventuress.[50] This far less threatening, "end-of-century" adventuress also made her way into the American literary landscape. In an anonymous, first-person sketch entitled "My Experiences as an Adventuress" (1888) published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, the protagonist explains: "The ordinary adventuress adventures to gain by others' loss. An extraordinary adventuress, such as I am, adventures to benefit herself in spite of fate and to nobody's loss, save the waste of prophecy to the knowing ones who declare she will yet come to grief."[51] Hardly vindictive or malevolent, the adventuress of this particular story is also uninterested in using her sexuality to trick men out of their wealth: her "ventures" center primarily on finding ways to afford fashionable clothing, paying her rent, finding "honest employment" in journalism, and "passing" as a resident of Murray Hill. On this last point, she is a great liar, charmingly convincing others that she belonged to a station far above her own and deserved the approbation of New York's most elite social circles. Mrs. Erlynne, as I will argue in my discussion of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, takes her cue from these developments of the "end-of-century" adventuress: as charming a liar as the "cultured and fascinating" male aesthete Wilde describes, Mrs. Erlynne yet exceeds him through a doubled female language of safety and danger with a power to plot the entirety of Society's relations.

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[50] S.L.B. [pseud.], "An Adventure with an Adventuress," *Time* (March 1881): 677-84.

[51] Z. [pseud.], "My Experience as an Adventuress," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 42 (July 1888): 102.

Regulating Male Talk in My Flirtations

The extent to which the plot of *My Flirtations* focuses on maintaining safety—guaranteed through Margaret's and her sister Christina's evasions of too much "seriousness" or "sentiment" from men—indicates that Dixon draws directly from contemporary shifts in understanding about women's talk and flirtation just noted.[52] The various episodes of *My Flirtations* effectively illustrate flirtation's essential rootedness in security and stability as well as the importance of talk as the unique media through which such safety may be preserved. In the opening sketch, Margaret remarks that her flirtations never cross over into the dangerous territory of action because she successfully regulates the talk of her male suitors: "[The suitors'] devotion generally lasts from six weeks to three months. Why this thing should be I cannot tell. Some people say it is because I don't let them talk about themselves."[53] Here, Margaret establishes a notion—to which she adheres throughout—that her flirtations are entirely made up of games of talk that she always wins, and that there will be, consequently, nothing scandalous or shocking to reveal.

My Flirtations returns again and again to the idea that men—not women—are always on the verge of producing runaway forms of speech that usher in moments of crisis that women must manage. For the sake of protecting both themselves *and* these men from a host of different social perils, Margaret and her sister deftly manage the risks that male talk poses. One of the first suitors that *My Flirtations* focuses on is Mr. Hanbury Price, whom Margaret uncharitably describes as "middle aged in ideas rather than in person" (26). Margaret makes a point of what is disagreeable, specifically, about the talk of each of her suitors; of Mr. Price, she notes: "He also

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[52] Richard Kaye singles out "deferral" as flirtation's primary operation, which, like evasion, is a form of avoidance. Kaye reads flirtatious deferral in Victorian and Edwardian fiction, however, as an end in itself: a "libidinal loitering without intent" that in itself generates "powerful emotional associations and perilous consequences" (*Flirt's Tragedy*, 4). Kaye's account therefore focuses on the experiential aspects of deferral as equally important as the end-driven nature of marriage plots in the production of the novel during the second half of the nineteenth century.

[53] Ella Hepworth Dixon, *My Flirtations* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1892), 5. Subsequent references will be to this edition and cited in parentheses in the text.

liked to be thought what in early Victorian novels would have been called 'an agreeable rattle'; but then half of Mr. Price's conversation consisted of projects and invitations which somehow never came off" (26). The specific danger that such talk poses to Mr. Price himself is his own embarrassment when others should notice the gap between his affectation and action. For Margaret, the danger of Mr. Price's talk (besides being uninteresting) is its potential to launch into the question of marriage and the attendant unpleasantness of an "awkward interview" when Margaret would have to reject him (36). Fortunately, together, Margaret and Christina skillfully prevent the hapless Mr. Price from uttering those treacherous words:

> 'One of you young ladies will come with me in the grounds,' urged the ever-economical Hanbury, casting a sentimental and meaning glance in my direction. 'I'm afraid I've caught cold already,' I said with decision. And then Christina, with true nobility, came to my rescue, in answer to my appealing nudge: 'I will, if you like,' she said quickly; 'Peggy can't wander about in the dark and the cold tonight.' (35)

In this brief exchange, Hanbury Price's excessively romantic insinuation (satirically treated by Margaret's simultaneous emphasis on his stinginess) is evaded "quickly" and "with decision" by Margaret and Christina's skillful alliance.

Margaret describes Christina's sacrifice as "my rescue," a hyperbolic designation that seems specifically to draw from contemporary theories of flirtation that also conceptualize it as a dramatic, life-or-death encounter—with varying degrees of playfulness. The idea that Margaret's successful avoidance of the crisis of marriage-talk is a narrow escape from grave peril echoes Black's analogy of flirtation to a comedy that, if not sustained properly, may reach a sudden, tragic ending, "to the astonishment of one or both of the young people thus amusing

themselves."[54] According to Black, "It is as if a trap-door were suddenly to give way, letting one of the two drop into utter darkness, while the other still remains on the stage, with the laugh still on her face and in her eyes."[55] Black casts blame upon male vanity and too-forward talk in transforming comedy into tragedy—ultimately, it is a "catastrophe of his own making."[56] No femme fatale, then, the laughing woman on stage is not to be blamed for her flirtation, which artfully maintained the both of them within the safe bounds of comedy until the man's vanity broke through them. In the case of Margaret and Hanbury Price's flirtation, the woman—with the aid of her sister—deftly anticipates and saves them both from falling through the metaphorical trap-door.

Margaret and her sister find a rival in talk in the dandy Val Redmond, whom Margaret describes as "curiously pretty, incredibly malicious, and indisputably 'smart'" (48). A marked contrast to a bumbling figures like Mr. Price, Val's epigrammatic wit positions him as both an artistic associate and adversary for the flirt: both dandy and flirt pride themselves on always having a ready answer and never allowing conversation to fall into the uncomfortable realm of undue seriousness. A prototypical male dandy and aesthete, Redmond is closely associated with the objects of art and decoration that surround him in his home, as well as his tendency to objectify the "charming" people with which he surrounds himself. Yet, ultimately, Margaret takes issue with Redmond's dandyish art of talking also because of the male vanity she perceives at its center. On the one hand, Margaret acknowledges affinities between her own flirtatious vocabularies and Redmond's—she calls him "charming," a word Val "passed" around about Margaret herself (57); she displays her perfect understanding of the special valences of "smart"

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[54] William Black, "Flirts and Flirtation," *Temple Bar* 26 (April 1869): 58.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., 60.

in *fin-de-siécle*, upper-class society (48); she becomes one of Val's "departed 'enthusiasms'" (57) just as her own suitors are her "dear departed" (5). On the other hand, Margaret brings attention—twice in her sketch—to the "unease" that Redmond's talk produces: first, she observes that Val's tendency to "talk scandal" about "his bosom friends" is "a trait which makes society feel uneasy"; and later, she muses that "one had an uneasy feeling that his devotion was only meant for dinner parties" (50, 60). While Margaret makes plenty of allowances for hers and even Christina's ("tart of tongue," 2) affinities to Val, she is unequivocally critical of this "unease" that he universally inspires among those with whom he socializes, for it is a breach of the safety that is the underwriting principle of her talk.

Perhaps more important, Val's talk is a breach of communalistic ideals that characterize Margaret's and her sister's talk. Unlike the egoistical male dandy, the flirt of Dixon's narrative tries to ensure a safe environment of talk for all involved. Tara Macdonald has recently argued in relation to Dixon's work "though the dandy and the New Woman were often linked" as figures representing "the malleability of gender distinctions," the New Woman was distinguished in her "socio-political aims" to uphold a communalism opposed to the dandy's "cult of the self."[57] Margaret herself seems a flirt whose art is tempered by the "socio-political aims" of Christina, the New Woman figure of these sketches, who, notably, is reading an article called "Under-payment of Feminine Labour" in a periodical called *Twentieth-Century* when Margaret's wedding gown arrives in the final sketch. "Woman-like," Margaret narrates, "my sister throws down the 'Twentieth-Century' and we bend curiously over the box…" (166). Like so many of the earlier scenes, this final scene depicts the flirt and her sister as allies in furthering each other's aims. Here, "woman-like" claims communalism as a distinctly female trait, as opposed to

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[57] Tara Macdonald, "Doctors, Dandies, and New Men: Ella Hepworth Dixon and New Masculinities," *Women's Writing* 19, no. 1 (2012): 43-44.

the dandy's egoistic refusal of intimate affiliations, even of friendship: no bond is sacred enough to render an individual safe from Val's impressive but uncharitable "conversational rockets." Margaret's talk—just as brilliant as Val's, but intimately connected by sisterhood to New Woman political aims—seeks to maintain a sense of security in social interactions.

This clash between the flirt's sociality and the dandy's egoism plays out in a "catastrophic" scene that describes how Margaret and her sister extricate themselves from Redmond's social world by essentially co-opting his talk. In using the word "catastrophe" to signal what she perceives to be an inevitable break with Val, Margaret's language again makes use of idioms that articles like Black's use to warn against stepping beyond the bounds of flirtation. In Black's conception, "catastrophe" is the inadvertent result of male hubris, but in the Val Redmond sketch, "catastrophe" is something which Val himself is fond of bringing about as a kind of aesthetic destruction: Val is in the business of catastrophe-making, for he may "talk scandal" and drop a friend or lover through the trap-door without warning. Margaret's strategy to rid herself of the "unease" that comes with waiting for such catastrophe is to wrest control of catastrophe-making away from the male dandy. "But I am anticipating catastrophe," she states, signaling that she has not yet reached the point in her narrative in which she will relate Val's "rupture" with her, but also referring to a pre-emptive strike she and Christina launch against Val (57). The sisters perfectly engineer their own fall, so to speak, through the trap-door, anticipating Val:

> This London idyl lasted, I think, nearly two months, and then, as London idyls will, it came to a painless death. Its end was hastened by gossips and it was killed with a *mot*.

'Val Redmond's ambition was to start a salon in Sloane Street but he has only succeeded so far in running a restaurant,' Christina had said on one of her unamiable days.

Someone, of course, told Val.

The rupture left no sense of loss. (59)

In her comments about the inevitability of a "London idyl's" end, and its subsequent "painless death, Margaret demonstrates what she means by "anticipating catastrophe." Christina's "*mot*," unconvincing as an inadvertent remark from an "unamiable day," knowingly produces the catastrophe so as to end the "unease" on their terms and not Val's. As Joseph Bristow has pointed out, moreover, Christina's witticism against Redmond almost exactly repeats a jab that Wilde supposedly made against the French poet, Marc-André Raffalovich: "He came to London to found a salon and succeeded in opening a saloon."[58] Through her mimicry of a mean-spirited "mot" from the mouth of the era's most famous dandy, then, Christina re-purposes talk which produces unease and deploys it to ensure the safety of herself and her sister. A deliberately communal as opposed to egoistical move, Christina's "*mot*," according to Margaret, is "of course" relayed. Margaret's knowing and matter-of-fact regard for Christina's maneuver and her subsequent acknowledgment of her own safety in feeling "no sense of loss" evinces her assent to (and participation in) her sister's re-appropriations. In this particular situation, where catastrophe is inevitable, Margaret and Christina find that the safest way to manage it is to become the makers of destruction themselves.

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[58] Joseph Bristow, "Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction," *Victorian Studies* 52, no. 1 (Autumn 2009): 165. It is unknown if Dixon could have been present when Wilde made such a comment; according to Richard Ellmann's biography, Wilde is thought to have made this comment as his relations with Raffalovich were deteriorating as a result of the two men's involvements with the Decadent poet, John Gray in 1892 (*Oscar Wilde* [New York: Random House, 1987], 392).

The Redmond episode brings into relief an adversarial relationship between women's and men's talk that structures the entire plot of *My Flirtations*. The dandy is a bit of an anomaly, however, for male adversaries are not usually matches—in the least—for Margaret and Christina's teamwork. Yet in all of these games of talk, it is only the women who recognize that the true objective is to ensure smooth and safe social relations. Besides Price's and Redmond's vain, catastrophe-inducing talk, Margaret is met with crises of boredom in the provincial Doctor Styles's "suburban gossip" (73) and Albert Morris's "slow, fat, drawling voice" (108), and of disingenuousness in Julian Clancy's "gushing" (90) before celebrities and American Elisha Van Schuyler's endless "stream of talk" (119). In managing talk away from such crises, Margaret— and not her suitors—maintains Mahaffy's Western civilizational ideal of agreeable conversation, which he deems a duty for all talkers, "both men and women."[59] The playwright Florence Bell, most famous for her collaboration with Elizabeth Robins on *Alan's Wife* (1893), also wrote a manual called *Conversational Openings and Endings: Some Hints for Playing the Game of Small Talk and Other Society Pastimes* (1899), which emphasizes a similar ideal to Mahaffy's.[60] In her "handbook," Bell analogizes "small talk" to a game of chess, where women are "White," and men "Black," and defines the objective of the game as the avoidance of "the various small crises" of disagreeable conversation.[61] The "winner" may be Black or White, depending on who does a better job of maintaining a smooth flow of talk. Margaret's flirtations seem to operate very clearly and successfully according to the rules of such game-like, upper middle-class worlds

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[59] Mahaffy, *Principles on the Art of Conversation*, 1.

[60] Florence Bell also published a collection of plays called *Chamber Comedies: A Collection of Plays and Monologues for the Drawing Room* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1890).

[61] [Florence Bell], *Conversational Openings and Endings*, v-vi.

that Mahaffy and Bell uphold, while in contrast, her suitors either deliberately or accidentally undermine the rules.

The romantic Claud Carson, the most attractive of Margaret's suitors and writer of verses, provides the greatest challenge of all to maintaining safe and smooth drawing-room interactions, but Margaret meets him with a virtuosity that fully displays the flirt's aptitude for double-talk. She lets him talk to the point of jeopardizing her own commitments to safety and even invites peril into their conversation, but she never allows their talk to drop either of them down through the trap-door. From the outset, Margaret notably frames her flirtation with Carson as contained by comedy: "It was not very tragic. The first time I saw him and the last time I saw him I laughed; and the interval was not unamusing" (74). Two "laughs" mark the comic safety of the beginning and of the end: Margaret "was the only woman in the room who laughed" during her first encounter observing Claud Carson reciting his verses as he played the piano, and at the very end, upon Margaret and Christina's discovery that Carson already had a wife and child, the sisters share a laugh over a clever quip Christina makes at Carson's expense (79). The careful phrasings of "not very tragic" and "not unamusing" may evince a qualifying cautiousness that acknowledges the space the tragic occupies within the "interval" bookended by comedy, but ultimately the structure of comic-tragic-comic challenges the notion that flirtation easily finds itself ended, on the other side of safety—Black's fall through the trap-door or Bourget's "crisis which may transform the operette into an opera and the innocent insignificant by-play into a drama full of tears and blood."[62] Instead, Margaret's recursive progression from safety to danger and safety again suggests more flexible and nuanced possibilities for flirtation.

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[62] Bourget, "Anatomy of Flirtation," 430-31.

In between the two laughs that bracket this flirtation within the bounds of comedic safety, Margaret finds that she is not immune to Carson's fashionable charm. In talk, Carson deflects a "flippant" comment that Margaret makes, and Margaret subsequently enters into an extended tête-à-tête with him (80):

> We sat and talked for a long time in the twilight. It was the end of February, and the late afternoon was tinged with the pale, wondering light of an early English spring. The trees outside were swelling with purple buds, and through the black branches there was the gleam of a tender, rosy sunset. It was the time of confidences, and the kind of day one says all sorts of things one doesn't mean, in a soft, regretful voice, just because they sound well and seem to fit into the emotional hour. (83)

Margaret's account of this more risky period of sharing "confidences" is certainly no fall through the trap-door or crisis: the experience is presented as at once light and serious, where comic and tragic possibilities mingle together inextricably. On the one hand, in emphasizing that they did not "mean" the emotions they caught from the beautiful weather, Margaret is careful to indicate the safety of their flirtation. On the other hand, the passage does not discount the experience of actually feeling more romantic and turbulent passions. Margaret's romanticized descriptions of the setting—"the pale, wondering light of the English spring," or "the gleam of a tender, rosy sunset"—are interwoven with the more violent imagery of "swelling…purple buds" and "black branches," all of which indulge emotions in a way that enacts John Ruskin's conception of pathetic fallacy, "a falseness in all our impressions of external things" produced by "violent feelings" in the mind.[63] In making space to dwell inside these pathetic fallacies, Margaret yields to the risk of "violent feelings" that may very well belong more to tragedy than to comedy.

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[63] John Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," in Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 3 (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1872), 160.

Importantly, however, Margaret insists that it was double-talk—and this is what makes her a true artist, at least by Ruskinian standards. According to Ruskin, "the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is for ever nothing else than itself—a little flower, apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it, whatever and how many soever the associations and passions may be, that crowd around it," is a true poet.[64] In Margaret and Carson's talk—at least, as she describes it—the two of them simultaneously give in to emotion inspired by romantic "associations" with nature and recognize the falseness of these emotions. The narrative makes clear that it is not merely a retrospective realization of pathetic fallacy, for her "voice" is already "regretful" the moment she speaks risky "confidences." Margaret signals her own capacity to simultaneously indulge *and* distance herself from dangerous emotions through the arts of her talk. Thus, she depicts one of the most ostensibly risky interactions of the entire collection of sketches as a controlled and nuanced aesthetic practice.

Yet the tensions that inhere within double-talk are not without their costs to the individual. The recovery of entirely comic interactions are the subject of the final scene, but the flirt's narrative admits that the process is not entirely easy. Near the end of the sketch, Margaret and Christina observe Carson returning home to wife and child. "'So he is married—your modern Minnesänger,'" observes Christina "drily," but Margaret clearly indicates her own struggle to maintain composure: "'Apparently,' I said, shrugging my shoulders and gazing at the coachman's back. I was not to be outdone in imperturbability by Christina" (85-86). Recognizing her sister's vulnerability in this moment, Christina dutifully returns flirtation to its proper realm of comedy with a joke that turns on an appropriation of Carson's own musical verses. This joke enables an immediate return to laughter, Christina's "dry tones" recalling Margaret back from

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[64] Ibid., 163.

Carson's "thrilling tones" and into comic safety maintained by the fellowship of sisterhood (84, 80). Furthermore, the retrospective narration itself enables a broader recovery that involves the relation between author and readers. The passage that describes the time of their greatest "confidences" does not offer its readers any insight into the talk that they exchanged, even as prior scenes of their flirtation are given as dialogues. As such, the passage itself may seem a kind of flirtation between the author and reader in that evasion keeps author and reader safe from the embarrassments—the "awkward interview"—of emotional language. Though "not very tragic," the talk might have been, nonetheless, a little "tragic," and the narrative adamantly refuses to tell it as a way of bringing readers into the safety of comedy that Margaret and Christina have already restored in their own social world.

My Flirtations closes with the conventional comic ending of marriage. Margaret finally accepts a suitor, and he is, notably, "very silent" (156). A stockbroker by trade, John Ford's "conversation did not flourish," and "[t]alking," Margaret asserts, "was somewhat hard work" (158). In stark contrast to Margaret's other suitors, Ford's talk needs drawing out instead of management. In the concluding sketch, Margaret's narration suggests that the safety of Ford's relative silence enables her to take greater risks. Appropriately then, Margaret's engagement to John comes about in the midst of her placing a bet on a stock: "It came over me like a madness that I wanted to have a little gamble, and Mr. John Ford offered to give me a 'straight tip,' as he called it, about Patagonians. And I, who never possessed more than 1*l*. 10*s*. altogether during my whole life, felt quite dissipated and worldly and reckless as we discussed the 'little flutter' which I was to undertake" (159). With humorous exaggeration, Margaret describes "how excited, how dissipated [she] felt" as the fortunes of her "financial commodity" rose and fell. To her dismay, she discovers that Ford has bought more shares for her than she can repay, a circumstance that

leads her to explain—after having "a thoroughly feminine 'cry'"—that he had misunderstood her enthusiasm for gambling, for she had meant it only as a "joke" (159, 161). For Ford, the 50*l* that he had spent on Margaret's shares are of little consequence and he good-naturedly assures her that he can easily sell her shares to someone else. As soon as Margaret accepts Ford's offer to cancel her debts, she has just as good as accepted an offer for marriage.

Margaret, of course, is not the "dissipated" girl of her anecdote. The entire episode (down to her "feminine 'cry'") is staged in order to test Ford's fitness as a husband and is an allegory for her risk-taking after she has spent the entirety of her "flirtations" risk-managing. E.C. Grenville Murray et. al's account of the flirt during Ascot week describes a similar scene of gambling and marriage closely intertwined: "[A] flirt would do well to be careful about indulging in this form of dissipation, for men do not really like a betting-girl. Many a smart miss has thrown a good matrimonial chance away by unguardedly taking a bet which had been offered to prove her. Again, 'discretions' are awkward things, for if a girl loses, a gallant gamester is apt to demand a settlement in the shape of a kiss."[65] Margaret's charade essentially involves this very transaction: except, she is not "unguardedly taking a bet," but merely pretending to do so, and very much intends to reward her "gallant gamester." This final episode signals the end of flirtation, for when the flirt meets with a man whose talk needs no management away from social danger, she is able finally to take a risk in order to bring about the desired comic resolution.

The Adventuress's Dazzling Repartee in Lady Windermere's Fan

As drama, Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* takes the idea of talk as the primary driver of plot even further than Dixon's *My Flirtations*. In both, women who are anything but innocent or

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[65] Murray et. al, "Flirts," 10.

naïve leverage their skill in talk to occupy central, managerial roles in relation to their respective social—and literary—worlds. As I have argued, the flirt's ability to manage the risks of male talk—especially when she practices double-talk in the Carson sketch—emerges as a distinct form of artistry specifically identified with women in this period. The "adventuress" of Wilde's imagining is depicted as soaring to even greater heights of artistic achievement, largely as a result of her greater "experience." Mrs. Erlynne is identifiably a *fin-de-siécle* "woman with a past," a designation that the play directly connects with her conversational prowess. In the words of Mrs. Erlynne's suitor, Lord Augustus, "I prefer women with a past. They're always so demmed amusing to talk to" (III. 247-48). Like Margaret Wynman, Mrs. Erlynne is conscientious about the safety of social interactions, but the play suggests that her past transgressions provide her access to tragic registers that enable the greater complexity and potency of her double-talk. As such, the adventuress as Mrs. Erlynne embodies something of an ideal that satisfies, in her person, contradictory cultural desires for a woman talker who is at once interesting, youthful, experienced, transgressive, and conservative.

For the most part, however, scholarly commentaries on *Lady Windermere's Fan* have attributed Mrs. Erlynne's attractiveness to her originality rather than her ideality. While Alan Bird, Sos Eltis, and Kerry Powell all explore the ways in which Wilde's Society comedy borrowed heavily from contemporary melodramas (many no longer in print or never circulated at all after their performances), they also foreground the notion of Mrs. Erlynne's uniqueness: unlike the many adventuresses who abandon their children but recover maternal feeling at the end of the play and repent, only to die—more often than not—shortly thereafter, Mrs. Erlynne refuses to repent and continues to thrive beyond the close of the play. These accounts offer helpful detail on source plays that Wilde rewrites—they argue—with a new twist; besides

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Leclercq's *Illusions*, the likes of Victorien Sardou's *Odette* (1881), Sydney Grundy's *The Glass of Fashion* (1890), C. Haddon Chambers's *The Idler* (1890), as well as various stage adaptations of *East Lynne*.[66] What justifies Wilde's assertion that Mrs. Erlynne is "a character yet untouched by literature," according to these accounts, is Mrs. Erlynne's adamant refusal of her own tragic ending in the play's final act.[67] "Repentance is quite out of date," she famously quips, after she saves Lady Windermere, the daughter she had abandoned, from committing a transgression against her husband (IV. 251). Deciding to keep the secret of her true identity, Mrs. Erlynne wishes to have no tearful scene of reconciliation with her daughter and proceeds to secure her marriage to the play's good-natured, but none too witty Lord Augustus and through him, her monetary security and reintegration into society.

But Wilde's Mrs. Erlynne likely owes something to the broader shift in thinking about women talkers as well as about the figure of the adventuress that I have described. Wilde's boast that she was "yet untouched by literature" may not, necessarily, point to her originality, but perhaps her combinatorial embodiment. She is part and parcel of the "end-of-century" adventuress, the clever and beautiful woman whose "repartee" deftly extricates her from tragic circumstances and orchestrates the entirety of social relations into smooth, harmonious interactions. In another statement also to George Alexander, Wilde expresses his general understanding of the adventuress as a character instinctively concerned with safety. Providing a justification for why he wanted Mrs. Erlynne's status as Lady Windermere's mother to be

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[66] Alan Bird, "Lady Windermere's Fan," in *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (London: Vision Press, 1977), 92-113; Sos Eltis, "Lady Windermere's Fan," in *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 55-94; and Kerry Powell, "*Lady Windermere's Fan* and the Unmotherly Mother," 14-32. Bird locates Wilde in a tradition of Irish comic dramatists, including Congreve, Sheridan, and Goldsmith, and also comments on *Lady Windermere's Fan*'s relationship to *East Lynne* and the later *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) by Arthur Wing Pinero. Eltis's analysis focuses primarily on Sardou's and Leclercq's plays, and Powell gives the most comprehensive discussion of Wilde's many source plays.

[67] Oscar Wilde to George Alexander, February 1892, in *Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 287-88.

revealed only in the final act (an artistic choice that Alexander and many contemporary critics of the play would reject), Wilde writes:

> The cry with which Mrs Erlynne flies into the other room on hearing Lord Augustus's voice, the wild pathetic cry of self-preservation, "Then it is I who am lost!" would be repulsive coming from the lips of one known to be the mother by the audience. It seems natural and is very dramatic coming from one who seems to be an adventuress, and who while anxious to save Lady Windermere thinks of her own safety when a crisis comes.[68]

Here, Wilde makes clear that he does not regard the adventuress's concern for her own safety as a noxious trait; rather, he expresses his concern that Mrs. Erlynne's early identification as "mother" would sway a Victorian audience, since theater-goers—who were largely primed to idolize maternal self-sacrifice—would otherwise find her "repulsive." But as an adventuress, Wilde suggests, Mrs. Erlynne's cry would seem a "natural" bid for her own preservation.[69] In an earlier typescript version of the play (titled only as *A Good Woman*) from 1892, Lord Darlington specifically makes reference to Mrs. Erlynne as an adventuress: to Lady Windermere in the first act, he presents the "hypothetical" of a husband becoming an "intimate friend of a woman of— well, more than doubtful character, an adventuress, in fact."[70] As I show presently, Mrs. Erlynne's instincts toward preservation coupled with her transgressive past enable her to "win"—insofar as "winning" means navigating away from moments of social crisis—the game of talk against everyone else in the play.

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[68] Ibid.

[69] After the play's first performance, Wilde capitulated to Alexander and other critics who felt the same way, moving the relevation of Mrs. Erlynne's to Act II and even conceded that the "psychological interest of the second act would be greatly increased by the disclosure of the actual relationship between Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne," in a letter to the editor of *St. James's Gazette*, in *Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 522.

[70] Oscar Wilde, *A Good Woman*, earlier typescript of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) held at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 7.

The play opens on a scene that takes the idea that talk must be regulated as its central concern. The young Lady Windermere receives a visit in her morning-room from her attempted seducer, Lord Darlington, whom critics have identified as one of the play's dandies, as a consequence of his witty, epigrammatic speech.[71] As soon as Darlington opens his mouth, Lady Windermere tries to censure what she perceives to be his foolish, trivial talk:

> LORD DARLINGTON (*smiling*): Ah, nowadays we are all of us so hard up, that the only
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> pleasant things to pay *are* compliments. They're the only things we *can* pay.
>
> LADY WINDERMERE (*shaking her head*): No, I am talking very seriously. (I. 35-38)

Adhering, at the play's beginning, to the strict codes of conventional morality, Lady Windermere castigates Lord Darlington for his un-serious talk, for she herself takes the bonds of marriage "very seriously" and must not receive "compliments" from another man. Her attempts to rein in Darlington's talk, however, are humorously ineffectual: Darlington proceeds suggestively, proposing that they ought to "be great friends" (I. 65). Lady Windermere's response is yet another ineffectual protest against what she takes as Darlington's shallow overtures: "Don't spoil it by saying extravagant silly things to me" (I. 72). As Darlington exits, they share, with the newly arrived Duchess of Berwick, this brief exchange about trivial talk:

> LADY WINDERMERE: Why do you *talk* so trivially about life, then?
>
> LORD DARLINGTON: Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk
>
> seriously about it. (*Moves up C*.)
>
> DUCHESS OF BERWICK: What does he mean? Do, as a concession to my poor wits,
>
> Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean.

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[71] Darlington is fond of Wildean peripety, where "a given structure is rapidly turned upside down and back to front," so-called "Oscarisms" (Bristow, "Dowdies and Dandies," 54). See also Small, who describes the way in which "Darlington, and later Graham and Dumby, challenge the moral and social expectations of their audience" through verbal "flippancies [that] work by exposing the banality and moral complacency of Victorian drawing-room conversation" ("Introduction," xxix).

LORD DARLINGTON (*coming down back of table*): I think I had better not, Duchess. Nowadays to be intelligible is to be found out. Good-bye! (*Shakes hands with* DUCHESS). And now—(*goes up stage*)—Lady Windermere, good-bye. I may come to-night, mayn't I? Do let me come.

LADY WINDERMERE (*standing up stage with* LORD DARLINGTON): Yes, certainly. But you are not to say foolish, insincere things to people. (I. 189-99)[72]

Here, once again, Lady Windermere is pathetically unable to keep up with Darlington's wit. In fact, both women in this scene are thoroughly confused by Darlington's "Oscarism"—his reversal of Lady Windermere's assumption that to regard life seriously is to talk seriously about it. As Lord Darlington exits, Lady Windermere is reduced to a didactic and impoverished repetition of what she has essentially already said—some variation of "don't talk trivially," "don't talk extravagantly," or "don't say foolish things."

The remainder of the first act might be summarized as a series of unsuccessful attempts—by various different characters—to contain other people's talk. Lady Windermere cannot prevent the Duchess of Berwick from repeating the gossip she has heard about Lord Windermere's visits—and payments—to Mrs. Erlynne. And, when Lady Windermere discovers her husband's ledgers and sees that he has, in fact, been making payments to Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Windermere has a difficult time containing his wife's invective against the adventuress: "Margaret! don't talk like that of Mrs. Erlynne, you don't know how unjust it is!" (I. 365-66). And, a bit later, as she continues her talk and accusations against him and Mrs. Erlynne, he is reduced to an echo of what she has said to Lord Darlington before: "Margaret, you are talking foolishly, recklessly" (I.

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[72] Wilde added—by hand—Lady Windermere's imperative against Darlington's "foolish, insincere" talk to the earlier typescript version held at the Clark Library, bringing greater emphasis to characters' concerns about trivial talk throughout.

442). The act closes with Lord Windermere's strict regulation of his own talk: "I dare not tell her who this woman really is" (I. 504).

This series of failed regulations of talk brings into relief Mrs. Erlynne's extraordinarily successful management of other people's speech. As witty as—or even wittier than—the play's male dandies, Mrs. Erlynne never finds herself caught in a didactic stutter, and, notably, conducts her regulations of other people's talk in quite a different manner from Lord or Lady Windermere. Instead of launching imperatives against talking, Mrs. Erlynne effectively puts a stop to other people's talk by means of talking a lot herself, dazzling her listener into silence with—to borrow from Stevenson's articulations—"irrelevant conversational rockets." In effect, she defers or puts off indefinitely the "serious talk" that is likely to cause pain, navigating conversation to "points of safety" that she ultimately hopes will become permanent positions for herself as well as Lord and Lady Windermere. Her entrance into Lord Windermere's home as a guest at Lady Windermere's birthday party, also her first entrance into the play itself, readily fits in with Stevenson's description of the brilliant woman's management of conversation away from moments of crisis:

> LORD DARLINGTON (*C*.): You have dropped your fan, Lady Windermere. (*Picks it up and hands it to her*.)
>
> MRS. ERLYNNE (*C*.): How do you do, again, Lord Windermere? How charming your sweet life looks! Quite a picture!
>
> LORD WINDERMERE (*in a low voice*): It was terribly rash of you to come!
>
> MRS ERLYNNE (*smiling*): The wisest thing I ever did in my life. And, by the way, you must pay me a good deal of attention this evening. I am afraid of the women. You must introduce me to some of them. The men I can always manage. How do you do, Lord

Augustus? You have quite neglected me lately. I have not seen you since yesterday. I am afraid you're faithless. Every one told me so. (II. 145-55)

Without hesitation, Mrs. Erlynne smooths over potential moments of danger (Lady Windermere dropping her fan, and Lord Windermere's moralistic judgment of her "terribly rash" decision) with a barrage of "irrelevant" chatter about encounters with women versus men and Lord Augustus's neglect.

The motivations behind as well as the distinction of Mrs. Erlynne's skilled distractions in talk emerge more clearly when read in conjunction with the dandyish Cecil Graham's similar style of talk. Graham makes a very similar entrance into the Windermere home as Mrs. Erlynne, as he proffers an abundance of words that promptly produce, upon his listeners, a dazzled inability to respond. As, arguably, a stand-in for Wilde himself, Graham's opening speech underscores, in particular, a principled evasion of what he labels moralistic talk:

CECIL GRAHAM: (*bows to* Lady Windermere, *passes over and shakes hands with* Lord Windermere): Good evening, Arthur. Why don't you ask me how I am? I like people to ask me how I am. It shows a wide-spread interest in my health. Now, to-night I am not at all well. Been dining with my people. Wonder why it is one's people are always so tedious? My father would talk morality after dinner. I told him he was old enough to know better. But my experience is that as soon as people are old enough to know better, they don't know anything at all. Hallo, Tuppy! Hear you're going to be married again; thought you were tired of that game. (II. 99-108)

Before Lord Windermere even has a chance to speak, Cecil rebukes him for failing to ask him how he is.[73] He then proceeds, without interruption, to answer the unasked question, specifically

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[73] In the earlier typescript held at the Clark, Lord Windermere does ask Cecil how he is; therefore, Cecil's speech in this earlier version is, in a measure, less dazzling and preemptive.

by complaining that he is "not at all well" because he has been listening to his father "talk morality" at dinner. In this very first speech of his, Cecil indicates his preference for what the others would no doubt call "trivial talk" and his dislike for what his morality-obsessed father might prefer as "serious talk." By plowing over Lord Windermere's talk with preemptive force, Cecil seems to fear that Arthur is about to "talk morality" too, to the detriment of his "health." Tuppy—Cecil's derogatory and emasculating nickname for Lord Augustus—seems another candidate for overly serious talk—likely about marriage. Thus, Cecil turns next to Augustus and the subject of his intentions to marry in order to guide the conversation toward the safety of trivial talk before it has even started. In a similar bout of talk, Mrs. Erlynne cuts off Augustus as he tries to explain why he has neglected her, telling him: "No…you can't explain anything. It is your chief charm" (II. 157-58).

Both Mrs. Erlynne and Cecil Graham, then, silence Lord Windermere and Lord Augustus—two of the characters most prone to "talk[ing] morality"—in their entrances, out of a desire to preserve themselves and/or the social interaction from too much seriousness. Both the "woman with a past" and the dandy are extraordinarily successful at stymieing serious speech. Augustus leaves off "explaining" himself, pleased and surprised at his ability to charm Mrs. Erlynne; after Cecil's opening speech, he sputters out a didactic comment that Cecil was "excessively trivial," and then, confronted by Cecil's rejoinder about his marital history, makes an excuse about his bad memory and moves awkwardly away (II. 109, 114). Lord Windermere does not fare any better, making no response at all to Cecil's initial comments, instead turning to Lady Plymdale and haltingly making his exit: "I am afraid—if you will excuse me—I must join my wife" (II. 116). Though marginal to the play's plot, Graham's connections to Wilde's signature forms of talk would seem to offer further authorial sanction to Mrs. Erlynne's already

impressive talk in the play.[74] Like Graham and Mrs. Erlynne, the characteristic that contemporaries most commonly remarked on with regard to Wilde's famous talk was his ability to stupefy or hold his listeners spellbound with his dazzling monologues, leaving them silent or tongue-tied. According to Ellen Crowell, biographies in the wake of Wilde's death ventured to create "implausibly long reconstructions of Wilde's speech."[75] In Laurence Housman's memoir *Echo de Paris* (1923), for instance, thirty-five out of fifty pages are taken up with Wilde's talk, emphasizing his role as a "bewitching storyteller" that leaves little or no room for other voices.[76]

Cecil's allergies to "talk[ing] morality," however, do not appear to have any other stakes within the play than his general desire to remain a spectator to the concerns of marriage and fidelity. His particular evasions, like Val Redmond's, serve to underscore the "charm" of his own, male individualism; his lack of aspiration beyond this kind of individualism underwrites his marginality within the play.[77] By contrast, Mrs. Erlynne's evasions—especially of Lord and Lady Windermere's "talking morality"—may be similar in form and effect as Cecil's, but they are differently depicted as crucial to the play's plot, insofar as her talk keeps the play within the safe walls of comedy. There are two moments, in particular, when Mrs. Erlynne pulls back the curtain—so to speak—and displays the "serious" motives that drive her "trivial" talk, only to

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[74] Although a potentially apocryphal anecdote—circulated by costume designer Graham Robertson—Wilde supposedly wanted the actor who played Cecil Graham to join him and a few of his associates in the audience in wearing a green carnation on the opening night of the play. See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 365.

[75] Ellen Crowell, "Posthumous Playback: Oscar Wilde and the Phonographic Logic of Modern Biography," *Modern Fiction Studies* 59, no. 3 (2013), 483.

[76] Ibid., 496.

[77] In "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), Wilde argues for the compatibility of Individualism and (non-authoritarian) Socialism. Wilde's idea was that freed from the institution of private property, individuals would no longer be preoccupied with accumulating things and would direct their attention instead to "realising" themselves or simply being themselves. In light of this essay, Graham seems to be one of the individuals that exist in spite of capitalism's emphasis on things, an artist like Lord Byron that through his own "private means," was able to realize his "true personality" to a significant extent largely because the English did not know "what a great poet he really was" and so treated him with relative neglect (*Complete Works*, 1083-84).

contain this seriousness, ultimately, within the trivial. The first occurs in conversation with Lady Windermere in Act III, during the scene in Lord Darlington's rooms where Mrs. Erlynne tries to convince her daughter to go back to her husband. Finding that her talk—without revealing the secret of her identity—is unable to convince Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne moves her speech into a long, tragic monologue that is utterly distinct from both the moralistic and trivial talk that makes up most of the play:

> LADY WINDERMERE: You talk as if you had a heart. Women like you have no hearts. Heart is not in you. You are bought and sold. (*Sits L.C.*)
>
> MRS. ERLYNNE: (*starts, with a gesture of pain. Then restrains herself, and comes over to where* LADY WINDERMERE *is sitting. As she speaks, she stretches out her hands towards her, but does not dare touch her*): Believe what you choose about me…But don't spoil your beautiful young life on my account!...You don't know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at—to be an outcast! to find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one's face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed…You haven't got the kind of brains that enables a woman to get back. You have neither the wit nor the courage…
>
> LADY WINDERMERE *bursts into tears and buries her face in her hands.*
> (*Rushing to her*): Lady Windermere!
>
> LADY WINDERMERE (*holding out her hands to her, helplessly, as a child might do*): Take me home. Take me home.   (III. 140-78)

Through his meticulous stage directions (not included in unpublished versions of the play), Wilde makes a point of signaling the distinctiveness of Mrs. Erlynne's talk in this moment—her involuntary "*gesture of pain*" and struggle to hold herself back constitute the first time in the play that Mrs. Erlynne seems to lose control of her own speech and actions. In the lengthy appeal she then makes to Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne includes a description of what she has suffered at the hands of society, a gesture that opens the trap-door on the depths of tragedy for a moment so that her daughter might see what she should avoid. Mrs. Erlynne's metaphor of "find[ing] the door shut against one" resonates with the same binary conceptions that conceptualized the flirt who goes too far. In bringing focus to the "horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic…than tears," she emphasizes the proximity between tragedy and comedy and how easily one may slip from one side to another, and how Society seeks to make an individual's exile permanent. Finally, she marks the truth of Lady Windermere's limitations, that she "has neither the wit nor the courage" to "get back," essentially revealing, at the same time, that she herself *does* have "wit" and "courage" to bring herself within the walls of society once again. In this moment, Mrs. Erlynne's cards are fully on the table: she reveals to her daughter the secret motive behind her brilliant, evasive talk—yet, by Lady Windermere's infantile response, it is unclear how much she has understood. Rather, her immobilization and reduction to childish repetition signals a state of dazzled wordlessness none too different, perhaps, than Lord Windermere's or Lord Augustus's in face of Mrs. Erlynne's monologic entrance.

In the final act, Mrs. Erlynne again slips into a long speech delivered in a similarly tragic register, this time before Lord Windermere—and notably with much more deliberation. Here, again, her talk produces a similar effect on Lord Windermere. She out-talks him with the

brilliance of her quick shifts between tragic and comic registers, leaving him stammering at the end of her speech:

> MRS. ERLYNNE *looks at him, and her voice and manner become serious. In her accents as she talks there is a note of deep tragedy. For a moment she reveals herself.* Oh, don't imagine I am going to have a pathetic scene with her, weep on her neck and tell her who I am, and all that kind of thing…Only once in my life have I known a mother's feelings. That was last night. They were terrible—they made me suffer—they made me suffer too much. For twenty years, as you say, I have lived childless—I want to live childless still. (*Hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh.*) Besides, my dear Windermere, how on earth could I pose as a mother with a grown-up daughter? Margaret is twenty-one, and I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, or thirty at the most…No, as far as I am concerned, let your wife cherish the memory of this dead, stainless mother. Why should I interfere with her illusions? I find it hard enough to keep my own. I lost one illusion last night. I thought I had no heart. I find I have, and a heart doesn't suit me, Windermere. Somehow it doesn't go with modern dress. It makes one look old. (*Takes up hand-mirror from table and looks into it.*) And it spoils one's career at critical moments.
>
> LORD WINDERMERE: You fill me with horror—with absolute horror. (IV. 222-44)

"*With a note of deep tragedy,*" Mrs. Erlynne engages in the only truly "serious" talk within the play in order to put a stop to Lord Windermere's dramatically ironic invective about how she lacked a "mother's love…devotion, unselfishness, and sacrifice" (IV. 276-77). The immediate threat is that Lord Windermere will reveal her secret in a moment of "talking morality." Mrs. Erlynne is honest about her suffering a mother's love, feeling it still as she continues to hide the

sacrifice she made for Lady Windermere by standing in her place at Darlington's rooms, enabling her to escape. With the quick transition of a "*trivial laugh*," Mrs. Erlynne launches back into her "trivial" talk, once again firmly within the realm of safety. Without warning, though, her discussion of Lady Windermere's "illusions" and the discovery of her own heart slips back into the brutal honesty of "*reveal*[ing] *herself*" once again, and finally ends again with the flippancy of remarks about looks and fashion. These shifts in register are too much for Lord Windermere to comprehend. Like his wife, it is unclear how much he has understood. Unlike his wife, however, who seems—at least—to feel something elemental that causes her to revert back to the language of childhood, Lord Windermere merely falls back on what he does best, "talking morality" by naming Mrs. Erlynne a "horror."

Mrs. Erlynne's deft movements in talk ultimately produce almost hypnotic effects on Lord and Lady Windermere. They both do as she asks, retreating into the safety of their respective "illusions" about one another: Lord Windermere's view of his wife as an innocently "good woman," and Lady Windermere's view of her mother as an equally "good woman" who died giving birth to her. But importantly, neither of these retreats are conducted with any consciousness of wishing to remain safe: in fact, Lord and Lady Windermere's maintenance of their illusions *depend* on their inabilities to grasp Mrs. Erlynne's talk. More apropos of the "venture" in adventuress, Mrs. Erlynne's decisions—in these two rare moments of the play—to "*reveal herself*," to talk of the tragedy which she might suffer, are certainly risky. For if either of the Windermeres were to actually comprehend the shifts she was making between tragic and comic talk as well as the motives behind them, they may develop the agency to talk them all into tragedy. But since they lack the wit to understand such distinctions, they become subject to a kind of immobilized wonder before her talk's pyrotechnics. Although Lady Windermere reaches

a point of comprehending that words produce tragedy in the final act, she never comes to appreciate that such talk is optional: still stuck within her traditional understanding that morality requires her to confess her sins, she thinks she must tell her husband of her transgression and suffer "the second" tragedy. Where she ends up in terms of her understanding about talk is not so different, then, from where she was in the first scene with Lord Darlington. Against her husband, as he condemns Mrs. Erlynne, she directs an equally ineffective imperative as those that she directed at Darlington's "foolish" talk: "Arthur, Arthur, don't talk so bitterly about any woman" (IV. 68). Still, she is "talking morality," though her sense of what is moral has shifted to something like a code of sisterhood. As such, Mrs. Erlynne finally ushers Lady Windermere into a position of safety by replicating her moral talk: she tells her daughter to "pay [her] debt by silence," and Lady Windermere agrees because she feels that she "owe[s]" Mrs. Erlynne (IV. 331-33).

As I have noted, Mrs. Erlynne shares with Cecil Graham—and Wilde himself—a capacity for talk that dazzles listeners through taking up space as well as possessing a brilliance that evades distinct meanings. Yet much in the same way that Margaret in *My Flirtations* shares forms of linguistic talent with Val Redmond but not his disregard for community, Mrs. Erlynne directs her wit towards ensuring safety for herself and for others whereas Graham's wit does seem to achieve little else than to render unease in lesser talkers than himself. Regenia Gagnier attributes to Graham's "dandiacal banter" the "relief in a society in which serious language inevitably entails deceit, self-deception, or hypocrisy (with the exception of Mrs. Erlynne's truly "serious language, presumably).[78] But the relief is not borne out by the reactions that other characters have to Cecil: while the play's audience may feel a sense of relief in these scenes of

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[78] Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 121.

male "club talk," characters like Lord Augustus and Lord Windermere feel uneasy around Cecil. When Augustus makes his remark about his preference for "women with a past" and their conversational prowess, Cecil's response takes a form of bullying that Mrs. Erlynne's never does:

> LORD AUGUSTUS: I prefer women with a past. They're always so demmed amusing to talk to.
>
> CECIL GRAHAM: Well, you'll have lots of topics of conversation with *her*, Tuppy. (*Rising and going to him*.)
>
> LORD AUGUSTUS: You're getting annoying, dear boy; you're getting demmed annoying.   (III. 247-52).

Here, Cecil makes a jab at Mrs. Erlynne at the expense of Lord Augustus, reducing his less able conversational partner into monotonous repetition—but Cecil's out-talking others, unlike Mrs. Erlynne's, does not appear to have communal safety in mind. Possibly, Cecil ensures a kind of safety for himself, in that he "does not moralize, and does not act," to borrow from Gagnier's analysis. Alan Sinfield offers a related speculation, positing that Cecil's evasively antagonistic talk resists the foreclosure of a heterosexual marriage he does not desire. According to Sinfield, Cecil's claim that he could love a woman who would not love him back "all [his] life" indicates a strong "preference for relations that never get anywhere."[79] Thus, Cecil's talk may be a way of avoiding the tragedy that attends to action in the world. When Darlington's observes that he "talk[s] as if [he] were a man of experience," Cecil boldly asserts that he is, "[e]xperience is a question of instinct about life" as opposed to action (III. 347-48; 351-52). Graham's inaction fulfills an intellectual ideal that Wilde articulates in "The Critic as Artist" (1891), through the

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[79] Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 71.

character of Gilbert: "I said to you some time ago that it was far more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it. Let me say to you now that to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and most intellectual."[80] In a not insignificant sense, then, Cecil Graham's preference for talk and abstention from the kind of experience that Mrs. Erlynne has had guarantees him safety—that is, at least, from the "horrible laughter of the world" that Mrs. Erlynne has suffered.

Yet the play hardly tries to convince us that Cecil Graham's choice to refrain from any and all action is the best way to live. There is no doubt that it is the "woman with a past"—the woman who *has* acted—who forms the center of the play's interest. As Mrs. Erlynne makes her way into the Windermere home, she notably mounts a direct critique against the ways in which Cecil's talk makes others uneasy, and Cecil, surprisingly enough, seems chastened. In particular, Mrs. Erlynne makes a point of bringing the tedious, old Lady Jedburgh—Cecil's aunt—into conversation:

> MRS. ERLYNNE. So pleased to meet you, Lady Jedburgh. [*Sits beside her on the sofa.*] Your nephew and I are great friends. I am so much interested in his political career. I think he's sure to be a wonderful success. He thinks like a Tory, and talks like a Radical, and that's so important nowadays. He's such a brilliant talker, too. But we all know from whom he inherits that. Lord Allandale was saying to me only yesterday, in the Park, that Mr. Graham talks almost as well as his aunt. (II. 170-78)

Like Cecil, Mrs. Erlynne talks a lot about talk, cracking a joke about the old Lady Jedburgh, Cecil's aunt, who could not possibly be a "brilliant talker" (later, Mrs. Erlynne makes a comment to Lord Windermere about "what a bore it is to be civil to these old dowagers," II. 185-86). Mrs.

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[80] Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 1039.

Erlynne's false compliment, however, effectively coaxes Lady Jedburgh into a happy acquiescence on Mrs. Erlynne's conversational terms: "LADY JEDBURGH: Most kind of you to say these charming things to me! (MRS. ERLYNNE *smiles, and continues conversation*) (II. 179). Mrs. Erlynne showcases the way in which her wit may evade, without any manner of bullying, the most boring of talkers. Cecil notably feels "*hesitation and embarrassment*" when Mrs. Erlynne asks him to introduce her to his aunt, seemingly conceding the superiority of Mrs. Erlynne's conversational brilliance. A few lines later, he admits, "[t]hat woman can make one do anything she wants" (II. 181-82). In effect, Mrs. Erlynne's witty banter—in contrast to Cecil's— is far more inclusive in that it brings even the "old dowager" with whom no one wishes to talk into the smooth interactions of social intercourse.

More importantly, the play also indicates that Mrs. Erlynne is, quite simply, a more versatile talker than the male dandies—Graham, certainly, but also Darlington—who might present the stiffest competition. Because Cecil Graham strives to do nothing, he has no "past" and has never experienced, first hand, "the horrible laughter of the world." When Lord Augustus's reminisces to Cecil, "My dear boy, when I was your age—," Cecil peremptorily and perhaps even wistfully signals his own awareness of his existence purely in the present: "But you never were, Tuppy, and you never will be" (III. 280-81). Although Gilbert's aesthetic philosophy in "The Critic as Artist" argues that an individual might feel all of the deepest emotions that attend to real-life experience through art, *Lady Windermere's Fan* would seem to suggest otherwise. In the game of talk, Mrs. Erlynne bests Cecil, finally, *because* of her "past." As Mrs. Erlynne's virtuosic performances before Lord and Lady Windermere indicate, the "woman with a past" has access to a tragic register that no one else has because of her first-hand suffering. The

adventuress, then, is capable of becoming most brilliant talker in the play because she alone possesses the capacity to engage in the double-talk of tragedy and of comedy.

Because of this versatility, Mrs. Erlynne is uniquely positioned to assume an authorial role within the play: other than Wilde himself, Mrs. Erlynne has the greatest impact on the talk of the play's characters—what they say or do not say. Her influence on Lord and Lady Windermere's talk, as we have seen, has the effect of maintaining the play within the boundaries of comedy. From the point of view that Mrs. Erlynne determines the play's genre and orchestrates its aesthetic effects, she emerges as an artist *par excellence*. For, in the words of Gilbert once again, "Life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way to the wrong people. There is a grotesque horror about its comedies, and its tragedies seem to culminate in farce."[81] In Gilbert's estimation, the artist takes up his subject matter—whatever it may be, whether life, or another form of art—and beautifies it into something according to his or her "personal impressions." Mrs. Erlynne is an artist, then, because she takes up the sordid tragedy of her own life—and the potential tragedy of her daughter's—and transforms it, through talk, into a sparkling comedy.

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[81] Wilde, "Critic as Artist," 1034.

CHAPTER FIVE

Disfluency in Conrad and Ford's "Extravagant Story"

> "You don't understand. . . . She. . . . She will. . . ."
> He said: "Ah! Ah!" in an intolerable tone of royal badinage,
> I said again "You don't understand. . . . Even for your own sake. . . ."
> He swayed a little on his feet and said: "Bravo. . . . Bravissimo. . . ."
> —Ford Madox Ford, from *The Inheritors*
> before Joseph Conrad made edits

In 1901, when Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford's *The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story* was published, "[i]t was received by the English critics with a paean of abuse for the number of dots it contained."[1] So writes Ford in his memoir of Conrad, published in 1924, almost a quarter century after their collaborative efforts on the first of three novels they wrote together (their other co-authored novels, *Romance*, and *The Nature of the Crime*, were published in 1903 and 1909, respectively). The epigraph above is a snippet of conversation—between the narrator of *The Inheritors*, Arthur Etchingham Granger, and a "foreign financier" known as the Duc de Mersch—before Joseph Conrad edited out some of the "dots." Yet, critics lambasted the novel, even in final published form, for its frustrating vagueness, especially with respect to its dialogue. According to a reviewer from the *Daily Chronicle*: "The style is spasmodic, the dialogue gaspy; the interlocutors would seem to suffer from shortness of breath, as well as from confusion of ideas. We cannot find words strong enough to express our irritation at that asthmatic dialogue."[2]

Ford's memoir makes an important defense against such attacks, in which he specifically diagnoses a problem with English talk:

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[1] Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (New York: Ecco Press, 1989), 145. Subsequent references will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

[2] Review of *The Inheritors*, *Daily Chronicle*, July 11, 1901. The charge of a "spasmodic style" is a loaded reference to the "spasmodic" poets, a derogatory term coined by W.E. Aytoun in his 1854 review of Alexander Smith's poetry (see Chapter 2, 94).

We both desired to get into situations, at any rate when any one was speaking, the sort of indefiniteness that is characteristic of all human conversations, and particularly of all English conversations that are almost always conducted entirely by means of allusions and unfinished sentences. If you listen to two Englishmen communicating by means of words, for you can hardly call it conversing, you will find that their speeches are little more than this: A. says, "What sort of a fellow is . . . *you* know!" B. replies, "Oh, he's a sort of a . . ." and A. exclaims, "Ah, I always thought so. . . ." (143)

From Ford's point of view, what comes out of the mouths of Englishmen hardly qualifies as conversation at all, but a form of stilted, indefinite talk, which he sets down as utterances in a script-like fashion that almost resembles the work of conversation analysis (CA) developed by sociolinguists in the 1960s and 1970s. In Ford's imaginary exchange between A and B, there appears to be some intersubjective understanding about C that remains unspoken—but the dream of perfect understanding between individuals seems about as alien to Ford as it would be to Conrad. More likely, B has one thing in mind, and A another, and A only thinks that he knows what B has to say about C. The stilted focus of A's and B's efforts at categorizing "[w]hat sort of fellow" C may be, moreover, thematizes the difficulty of knowing others—and I argue that this difficulty in part motivates the "disfluencies" that characterize the talk in this imaginary conversation as well as in *The Inheritors*. I borrow the word "disfluency" from linguistics, which broadly describes any interruption to what is perceived to be the regular flow of speech: for instance, long pauses, pausing utterances such as *um* or *uh*, pauses to initiate remediations, or stuttering.

As Ford also explains in his memoir, the disfluencies of English talk owe to a collective fear that one's words might be set down too definitively or perhaps misrecorded in print: "For

anything that you say may be called to account" (143). In the novel, an underlying anxiety about

being captured by print directly issues from the culture of mass-market journalism that emerged

during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Granger is a (reluctant) hack-writer whose job

is to conduct interviews and write sketches of well-known political figures; the novel's avowedly

"extravagant" plot involves the takeover of the world by a new race of humans from the Fourth

Dimension who deftly manipulate the Fourth Estate for their own political ends. The

"Dimensionists," led by a woman with whom Granger falls in love, engineer the collapse of a

delicate system of geopolitical relations through orchestrating the actions of journalists and

politicians alike to bring about the destruction of a multi-national imperial scheme in Greenland.

The downfall of Western imperialism makes way for her race's "inheritance" of the earth. More

generally, the constant dynamic between characters involves repeated attempts to "get at the

inside of things" (the ironic avowed purpose of Granger's interview column, known as

"Atmospheres") in relation to one another, an identifiably investigative obsession that produces a

cat-and-mouse game that stalemates the network of world powers until the Dimensionists arrive

(18).

The novel's commentary on imperialism—both the mismanagement of the disastrous

1899 Second Anglo-Boer War and the "new" imperialism of politicians like Joseph

Chamberlain—has received the most critical attention. More broadly, as Robert Green notes, *The

Inheritors* expressed "Ford's unease over the increasing collectivism of English life, the State's

growing power over the individual" exemplified by Chamberlain's and reformer Beatrice

Webb's advocacy for what Ford regarded as cold and calculating management techniques,

whether over the unruly empire or English life at home.[3] For Green and others, the science

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[3] Robert Green, "Ford Madox Ford's *The Inheritors*: A Conservative Response to Social Imperialism," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 22, no. 1 (1979): 51.

fiction of the Dimensionist takeover undermines the serious political aims of the novel, although

the new race clearly allegorizes the likes of Chamberlain and Webb.[4] Also incongruous,

according to both Green and Rob Hawkes, are the novel's experimentations with literary

impressionism amid its political aims and plot of scientific romance.[5] I argue that the novel's

particular emphasis on disfluency and the threat of a mass-market communications system,

however, enables a certain coherence to emerge out of these seemingly disparate generic

elements.

Specifically, the novel points not only to print journalism but also to new/emergent

technologies such as the (wireless) telegraph, phonograph, and radio as, ironically, drivers of

disfluent, face-to-face communications. The grounding of the novel's concerns in real-world

communications technologies mitigates the apparently absurd presence of the Fourth Dimension

(capitalized as such in the novel and in turn-of-the-century/early-twentieth century parlance).

Theories on the existence of "higher space" in the late-Victorian period—which were not as

speculative or fantastical as we might at first imagine—often drew associations between the

Fourth Dimension and feats of communication across wide expanses.[6] For some scientists and

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[4] According to David Seed, "one reason for the neglect and critical suspicion of the novel lies in its use of non-realistic characters from the fourth dimension," a scientific extravagance that neither author would repeat in their other, more well-known texts ("Introduction," in *The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story*, by Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, ed. Seed [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999], ix). Subsequent references to the novel will be to this edition and cited parenthetically within the text.

[5] For Green, political aims are undermined by "too impressionistic and shadowy" a style, and the novel fails to be "articulate about the mechanics of fraud and jobbery" that it ostensibly sets out to critique, 56. Hawkes defends the text's innovative attempt to bring together the "high literary techniques of impressionism" and the "clear plotting" of popular scientific romance (*Ford Madox Ford and the Misfit Moderns: Edwardian Fiction and the First World War* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012], 74).

[6] As Linda Dalrymple Henderson has demonstrated, prior to the popularization of Albert Einstein's theories of relativity in 1919, the Fourth Dimension was largely considered to be an unknown spatial arrangement, and not time (*The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, reissue [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013], 1).

prominent journalists, even telepathy seemed plausible in a world of more than three dimensions. Perhaps not surprisingly, given his enthusiasm for the unifying reach of mass-market journalism, W.T. Stead was one fervent proponent of research into the Fourth Dimension and telepathic communications. This final chapter, in effect, explores Conrad and Ford's resistance to Stead's dream of mass communications: in particular, how these two authors turn the disfluency of the human body into a means of aesthetic resistance against the machine-like fluency of new communications technologies. I demonstrate that Conrad and Ford's novel specifically predicts—and critiques—a form of instantaneous, automatic fluency across wide expanses of space eventually realized in the radio broadcast. The novel ultimately posits a new understanding of the human body as resiliently disfluent—rather than defective or imperfect—because of its inevitable resistance to achieving a technologized form of fluency.

The novel's focus on the aesthetics of communicative pauses, breakdowns, or disjunctions is an experiment to carve out a distinctly human space that novels might affirmatively occupy in the face of the seamless talk that new technologies might soon create. Drawing on Linda Dalrymple Henderson's important observation that the Fourth Dimension became a "rationale for exploring new kinds of language in art, literature and music" and "justified some of the most advanced experiments of the era," I contend that this early novel of two pioneers in modernist aesthetics finds in disfluent talk an innovatively indefinite and vague perspective—one that is usually associated with literary impressionism, but not typically in the context of contemporary science and technology.[7] In sum, my chapter's focus on disfluency and new communications technologies includes two major objectives: first, to trace a certain loss of optimism about the transformative potential of mass media (and a recasting of talk as stubbornly

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[7] According to Jesse Matz, the varied and unstable definitions for literary impressionism among present-day critics reflect the concept's essential grounding in in-betweeness and indefiniteness, "a positive power to undefine" (*Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 17).

embodied media); second, to suggest an ignored but important scientific context for Conrad's and Ford's modern aesthetics of indefiniteness.

Interview Talk and Disfluency

In this section, I focus on what I call "interview talk" in the novel and trace the ways in which the novel posits the rather totalizing—and stultifying—impact of mass-market, journalistic culture on everyday dialogue. I argue that in Ford's view, the imagined conversation between A and B and the preoccupation with communicating something essential about C's identity is not merely an instance of one possible English conversation, but a proxy for *all* conversations—in a society overtaken by the newly ubiquitous personal interview. For many besides Conrad and Ford, the personal interview was a particularly nefarious type of mass-market journalism. As Matthew Rubery has indicated, by the 1890s the personal interview had become so culturally engrained as a mass-market form that it "dramatically influenced the way audiences thought about private life."[8] Drawing on Paul Atkinson and David Silverman's observations on a postmodern "interview society," Rubery observes the spread of an interview ethos in an earlier time—of a curiosity about other people's private lives, "a dynamic of intrusion and revelation"—beyond journalism and into more general relations among people.[9] By way of excerpts from *The Inheritors*, I demonstrate the ways in which interview talk produces a specific tension between the ideal of highly scripted fluency and a tendency to fall prey to disfluency. That is, interview talk's dream of fluent performance as marked in print generates, ironically and inevitably, more nervous, fearful, slow, and stuttering speech in person.

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[8] Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109.

[9] Ibid., 119. Specifically, Rubery discusses Henry James's sensitivity to the ways in which interview dynamics spread to personal relations outside of the journalistic contexts—reflected in works such as "The Aspern Papers" (1888).

Historians of the press have generally posited that the interview—either as a journalistic genre or tool for reporting—did not emerge fully until the later part of the nineteenth century.[10] To be sure, according to Nils Nilsson, if we define the interview as "the published result of a meeting between a representative of the press and someone whose views are related verbatim or with indirect quotations," the first was James Gordon Bennett's interview with Rosina Townsend, published in the *New York Herald* on 16 April 1836.[11] But, as Rubery indicates, the popularization of interview practices truly began with "the rapid growth of the newspaper industry," which "made it possible to devote more resources than ever before to the active pursuit of news and, consequently, for specialized forms of journalism such as interviewing to emerge."[12] Thus, the interview was very much a popular outgrowth of the mass press, coming of age in America around the 1860s and adopted a few decades later in England. On the whole, the English press had a more ambivalent attitude toward what many regarded as a crass, American invention. Even as pioneers of the mass press such as Stead and Edmund Yates were popularizing a British form of the interview during the 1880s, other members of the press were quick to censure the interview as brand of journalism that formalized and condoned snooping into people's private lives.[13]

An important aspect of Rubery's account of the interview in this period is his observation that alongside these criticisms of invasive interviewers, there were many interviewees who were

[10] See ibid. on Henry James and the interview form offers a succinct and informative summary on the rise of the interview, 111-20.

[11] Nils Nilsson, "The Origin of the Interview," *Journalism Quarterly* 48 (1971): 708.

[12] Rubery, *Novelty of Newspapers*, 112.

[13] There are various examples of these critiques—such as *All the Year Round*'s cries against "[t]he plague of interviewing"; artist Harry Furniss's 1893 cartoon, "Interviewed!" for the *Strand Magazine* in which a journalist focuses his magnifying glass upon a celebrity impaled by a feather pen and pinned down by tacks; and Charles Dickens's various parody papers such as *Peeper*, *Private Listener*, and *Keyhole Reporter*. Ibid., 113.

often just as complicit in the extending the boundaries of publicity into their private lives. Thus, interviewers and interviewees were playing the game together and observing the same strict rules as to how to create public personal narratives for mass audience consumption. Particularly on the British side, where concerns about respecting privacy remained in the foreground, the codification of the interview rules resulted in situations where more tended to be obscured than revealed. In part, Yates's "Celebrities At Home" feature for the *World* and George Newnes's "Illustrated Interviews" for the *Strand* reflect this sense of protective codification, both of which focused largely on the outward appearance, belongings, and surroundings of a "personality."[14] According to Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, through the popularity of such features "the interview developed from a controversial technique into an integrated facet of journalistic practice."[15] Rubery suggests, moreover, that the fictions of Henry James reflected the ways in which the codification of interview culture through such mass-market publications was part and parcel of a broader participation in interview dynamics in modern society. Commenting on James's *The Reverberator* (1888), Rubery writes:

> [C]haracters with virtuoso skill manipulate, misdirect, evade, and deflect questions
> without ever formulating a clear response that might put them at a disadvantage in terms
> of the balance of information. In this sense, the interview in James's fiction may not be a
> problem limited solely to interaction with the journalist but applicable to all conversation
> that relies on the tactics of withholding and revealing information with an audience, seen

[14]Yates's "Celebrity at Homes" series did not generally include any reported dialogue, focusing as much on the details of the "home" as on the celebrity herself/himself. The titles of these sketches reflect this equating of personality and domestic setting—for instance, "The Pope at the Vatican," "Victor Hugo in the Rue de Clichy," or "Mr. Darwin at Down." See reprints of *Celebrities at Home*, second series (London: Covent Garden, 1878). As James Mussell notes, the illustrations and descriptions for Newnes's "Illustrated Interviews" "recreates the biography of the individual through the objects they surround themselves with" (*Science, Time, and Space in the Late Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007], 74).

[15] "Interviews," in *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, eds. Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (The British Library, 2009), 308.

or unseen, in mind…the strategies of revelation and concealment have become almost second nature.[16]

These observations fully articulate Rubery's sense that Atkinson and Silverman's "interview society" was already a noted part of life at the end of the nineteenth century. In bringing attention, in particular, to techniques such as misdirection, evasion, and deflection in Jamesian conversation (not unlike that of drawing-room queens), Rubery suggests a kind of virtuosity or skill on the part of these talkers—to the point of the interview "becom[ing] almost second nature."

Yet, such an emphasis on the codification and broadening of interview talk tends to obscure the fact that the virtuosic flow of interview talk as generally reported in print was impossible in the face-to-face meetings on which interviews were supposedly based. Arnold Bennett's *How to Write for the Press: A Practical Handbook for Beginners in Journalism* (1899), which includes a chapter on "The Art of Interviewing," ostensibly provides insight into codified interview procedures, but also reveals—somewhat unwillingly, perhaps—that the ideal of a perfectly played interview game is ultimately only realizable in print. Bennett fully privileges the journalistic definition of the interview as a print genre over and above the face-to-face meeting that the word originally meant: "[A good interview] is an article which gives a faithful description of an actual meeting with a man or woman of some eminence in any given walk of life…and records their opinions on questions upon which they are recognized as authorities."[17] Although Bennett places some value in the "faithful description of an actual

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[16] Rubery, *Novelty of Newspapers*, 125.

[17] [Arnold Bennett], "The Art of Interviewing," in *How to Write For the Press: A Practical Handbook for Beginners in Journalism* (London: Horace Cox, 1899), 53.

meeting" and "record[ing]…opinions," he does not recommend any sort of verbatim account as might be expected.[18]

Rather, Bennett's handbook takes for granted as natural the curious practice of "writing dialogue" that purports to transcribe the "actual meeting," yet it is eminently clear that the transcription does no such thing. Citing one of five types of interviews, the "conversational" interview, Bennett writes:

> The conversational is probably the most natural, and in some respects it is the most difficult to write; for it requires some deftness in writing dialogue *to make it appear* as natural and easy running as it should be. It reports, *or pretends to report*, a leading question by the interviewer, and then *sets down in colloquial phrasing* the reply of the interviewee, with perhaps a remark as to the apparent mood of the latter in his speaking.[19]

Bennett's articulations make apparent the unresolvable tension between producing a true record of talk, on the one hand, and making it flow ("natural and easy running," and "colloquial"), on the other hand. Whether inadvertently or not, Bennett raises the specter of disfluency: the writer must "pretend to report" fluency to erase all traces of talk that was not "as it should be." A concern to minimize stiltedness emerges also out of Bennett's suggestion, later in his account, that it is best that an interviewer refrain from taking shorthand notes during the meeting, in order to relieve the interviewee from any sense of "worry."

In contrast to the all-too-fluent, evasive talk in James's fictions, interview talk in *The Inheritors* displays the cooling effect—on everyday oral culture—of words being "called to

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[18] According to Brake and Demoor, the use of direct quotations in news accounts did become more frequent at the "very end of the century," *DNCJ*, 308. Nonetheless, contrary to journalistic ethics in our own day, direct quotations were by no means the norm and many interviews integrated some mix of direct and indirect quotes, paraphrase, as well as made-up dialogue.

[19] Bennett, "Art of Interviewing," 56. Emphases added. The other types of interviews that Bennett lists are argumentative, interrogatory, one-sided, and descriptive.

account" in print. The novel is interested in the constitutive failures of interview talk's codified practices, pointing specifically to the duality of interview talk as always straining toward the flawless production of speech yet always buckling under that strain. The abundant ellipses and dashes signal characters' inevitable ineptitude in playing the game of interview talk. In spite of the ostensibly rigid and simple conventions codified in an "interview society," both Arthur Granger and the prominent literary and political figures he interviews are, by the rules of Bennett's handbook, thoroughly incompetent talkers. A reviewer in the *Scotsman* from July 4, 1901 complains that the entire plot of *The Inheritors* might be summarized as "characters [that] never seem quite to understand what they want to say or have a singular difficulty in expressing themselves."[20] What such reviewers miss, however, are the ways in which the novel purposefully turns this apparent deficiency of talk into a productive—even if inadvertent—resistance of the printed interview's desire to "technologize" everyday orality.

Although the official interviews that Granger conducts for his "Atmospheres" column do not occur until later in the novel, the opening scene strongly suggests his proclivities for engaging in interview-like scripts. Granger meets the Dimensionist woman for the first time as they walk together, observing a cathedral en route to Dover. In bits of repetitive talk punctuated by the pause of dashes that indicate his nervous disfluencies, Granger makes bumbling, formulaic attempts to categorize the woman by way of pinpointing her nation of origin: "'You Americans,' I began, but her smile stopped me" (1). An ensuing pattern of interaction—where Granger hazards a guess about some aspect of her identity and she indicates that he is wrong— essentially characterizes the remainder of the talk they share in the opening chapter (and arguably, every other interaction they have in the novel). Granger explains to his reader that he

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[20] *The Scotsman*, Review of *The Inheritors*, July 4, 1901.

regarded this particular interaction and generally any interaction to be a game of talk with a clear winner and loser. Petulantly, Granger expresses his surprise at discovering that he could not gain the upper hand in his talk with the Dimensionist: "In conversations of any length one of the parties assumes the superiority—superiority of rank, intellectual or social. In this conversation she, if she did not attain to tacitly acknowledged temperamental superiority, seemed at least to claim it, to have no doubt as to its ultimate according. I was unused to this. I was a talker, proud of my conversational powers" (2). Talk, above all, is a game of interviewing in the sense that one plays in order to establish his or her identity in hierarchical relation to others. As Granger continues to "wonder what type this was," the narration suggests that his disfluency becomes part and parcel of his cognitive processes in addition to his talk: "She had good hair, good eyes, and some charm. Yes. And something besides—a something—a something that was not an attribute of her beauty" (2). As they continue talking, he suggests more possible national and racial identities, some out loud and others to himself—Australian, English, Prussian, Semitic, Sclav, Circassian—even after she has plainly revealed to him that she "inhabits the Fourth Dimension" (3-7). Hardly an acceptable answer for someone following the conventional scripts of an interview that a reader of Bennett's handbook might conduct, Granger ignores her revelation and loses the game even when the Dimensionist is not playing at all. The strangeness of the Dimensionist's language—which I will explore in greater detail later—lies in part within its utterly truthful pragmatism and efficiency; by contrast, the rules of talk in Granger's three-dimensional world hinge on misdirection, evasion, and deflection. Thus, although the Dimensionist engages in an almost prophetic form of speech that unfolds Granger's future involvement in toppling the existing political order—Granger, fanatical in his adherence to the scripts of interview-talk, fails to hear her.

In spite of the fact that the novel opens with Granger's desire to conduct interviews as practically "second nature," Granger claims that he is a would-be novelist, a literary man possessed of ideals that transcend commercial demands. Much like Edwin Reardon of George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), Granger believes that becoming a journalist would mean "selling out" and abandoning his literary aspirations. But the opening scene betrays him as someone with strong inclinations toward journalistic culture. Even if he was not very successful at interviewing the Dimensionist, she was, after all, a particularly difficult subject. And so it seems no huge strain—in spite of his own protestations otherwise—for him to accept a commission, soon afterward, to conduct and write his "Atmospheres" of famous people for the highly successful newspaper, the *Hour*. The offer is relayed through Granger's friend, "the great Callan," a successful writer who churns out novels according to the public taste and who very much embodies a man poised to be interviewed at any given moment (15). But just as the narrative concentrates on Granger's disfluencies and nervous failures in his initial "interview" with the Dimensionist, the descriptions of Callan's interview talk and pose from Granger's point of view call attention to the seams in Callan's practice.

Granger's narration mocks Callan's slow, deliberate interview talk before a crowd of admirers: "He—spoke—very—slowly—and—very—authoritatively, like a great actor whose aim is to hold the stage as long as possible" (15). Callan's direct speech is similarly presented: for instance, "'A—remarkable woman—used—to—live—in—the—cottage—next—the—mill—at—Stelling'" (17) to some admirers, or "Photography—is—not—an—Art," to Granger as if an "utterance of a tremendous truth" (18). Callan's pauses, represented by dashes, are at once reminiscent of disfluent speech and telegraphic exchange, signaling his duality as an individual who cannot transcend the disfluencies of his own body although he very much desires to

communicate with the efficient speed of the wireless.[21] In *Ellipsis in English Literature* (2015),
Anne Toner notes that around the middle of the nineteenth century, the em dash was
standardized as an equivalent of the three-dot ellipsis (the more obvious figure for disfluency in
Conrad and Ford's novel), a development that supports my reading that dashes in *The Inheritors*
often signal disfluency.[22] In some cases, the use of dashes as disfluency is clearer than in other
cases—such as when dashes represent Granger's stuttering. With Callan, it is less obvious—
although he does, on occasion (as in "next—the—mill" above) leave out grammatical elements
in an aphasic manner. Moreover, Granger's marked impatience with Callan's talk imparts to it a
belabored quality that threatens to stall speech into a permanent stop. If not quite disfluent, then,
Callan seems on the brink of becoming so. The laboriousness of Callan's interview talk calls
attention to its rootedness in the human body, its inability, ultimately, to achieve the flawlessness
of talk reported in print even as it tries to do so.

Around the same time that the em dash became an acceptable substitution for ellipsis in
literary prose, the International Morse Code standardized the length of the dash in telegraphic
communications.[23] Within the contexts of both literature and telegraphy, then, the dash was
approved for multivalent uses. Granger's description of Callan, as he sits down to wire the editor
of the *Hour*, strongly emphasizes the popular author's enmeshment within the communicative

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[21] Yet disfluency and "telegraphic" style are not necessarily opposed to each other. In linguistics, "telegraphic"
describes a spare style of speaking—tied often to aphasia—that involves the omission of key grammatical elements
(Claus Heeschen and Emanuel A. Schlegoff, "Aphasic Agrammatism as Interactional Artifact and Achivement," in
Conversation and Brain Damage, ed. Charles Goodwin [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003], 235). A similar
sense for "telegraphic" is often used to describe Ernest Hemingway's spare prose.

[22] Anne Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 120. See also Toner's
discussion on George Meredith's innovative use of ellipses to create aphasic speech in novels such as *The Egoist*
(1879) and *One of Our Conquerors* (1891), 138-50.

[23] In 1851, the International Morse Code "standardized [dashes] to a constant length, equivalent to three dots,
replacing the variable lengths employed in the original form of Morse Code and eliminating potential confusion"
(ibid., 120).

tools of mass print media. Granger closely identifies Callan not only with the wireless telegraph (patented in 1897 by Guglielmo Marconi) but also with other technologies and objects of commercial literary production, including the Kodak camera (patented in 1888 by George Eastman):

> "I'll just send a wire to Fox to say that you accept," he said, rising. He seated himself at his desk in the appropriate attitude. He had an appropriate attitude for every vicissitude of his life. These he had struck before so many people that even in the small hours of the morning he was ready for the kodak-wielder. Beside him he had every form of labour-saver; every kind of literary knick-knack. There were book-holders that swung into positions suitable to appropriate attitudes; there were piles of little green boxes with red capital letters of the alphabet upon them, and big red boxes with black small letters. There was a writing-lamp that cast an aesthetic glow upon another appropriate attitude—and there was one typewriter with notepaper upon it, and another with MS. paper already in position. (18-19)

The things on Callan's desk actively bend their wills toward helping Callan achieve the "appropriate attitude," blurring the lines between subject and objects. Granger's image of Callan amid book-holders, boxes of letters, writing lamp, typewriter, and different types of paper in the "small hours of the morning" suggests a man who has merged with the communications system that disseminates his personality efficiently and wirelessly to the world. Callan's interview talk therefore encompasses constitutive disfluency and fluency, correlated respectively with the human body and increasingly efficient communications technologies. As Menke observes, such unsettling mergings of human bodies and new technologies were not uncommon in nineteenth-century fictions, specifically about telegraphy; after all, "even in the age of the telegraph and

photograph, the storage and transmission of information still depended on eyes, ears, heads, hands, and feet."[24]

Callan's disfluencies find visual analogues in Granger's descriptions of Callan's characteristically precarious poses. As Callan arranges himself in relation to objects (as well as people, his fawning admirers) always in anticipation of the "kodak-wielder," "[h]is face was uniformly solemn, but his eyes were disconcertingly furtive" (15). Granger, unlike the fawning group of people who are accessories to Callan's portraiture, is all too happy to point out the popular novelist's eyes, for he feels that he has gained the upper hand on Callan in the interview dynamic that constantly underlies their relationship. Some lines later, Granger gives his reader a full exegesis on what these eyes inadvertently reveal about Callan: "A sudden picture danced before my eyes—the portrait of the Callan of the old days—the fawning, shady individual, with the seedy clothes, the furtive eyes and the obliging manners" (17). Try as he may and in spite of his success and popularity, Callan is far from perfect at what Erving Goffman calls "impression management": the process of an individual seeking to influence what others think of them in an ongoing social interaction.[25] In effect, Callan's "furtive eyes" are the visual disfluencies that interrupt the technical artistry of his pose, complements to the dashes that interrupt or slow his speech.

The arrival of the Dimensionist woman to Callan's home completes Granger's unflattering sense that Callan is on the brink of losing control of his words and his impression management along with his words. She throws his strained, telegraphic dashes into chaotic disclosure: "She affected reverence for his person, plied him with compliments that he

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[24] Menke, *Telegraphic Realism*, 193. Quoting Charles Lewes, Menke points to a more general sense that telegraphic communications seemed particularly prone to human errors: "The element plays so considerable a part in matters telegraphic, that the human propensity to err find proportionately wide scope" (ibid., 194).

[25] See Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

swallowed raw—horribly raw," and then he "made little confidences as if in spite of himself;
little confidences about the *Hour*, the new paper for which I was engaged" (24-25). Acting like a
kind of poison, the Dimensionist's words spur the involuntary spewing out of Callan's "little
confidences." The moment signals a particular variant on disfluent speech: Callan shifts from
slow speech that nearly seems blocked by its own regulatory effort into unregulated disclosure, a
pattern associated with stuttering, which often alternates between blockage and streams of
fluency. Granger, a witness to Callan's embarrassment, is unable to recall important details of his
disclosure—crucial information about Duc de Mersch's development of his railway through
Greenland and his need for backing from the proper authorities, including the influential *Hour*—
in spite of the relevance for his own future role in managing the publicity around the imperial
scheme. Granger cares only to observe the dynamics of the interview that was unfolding so
poorly for Callan: "But it did interest me to see how deftly she pumped him—squeezed him dry"
(26). As such, both Callan and Granger are entirely consumed with encounters as either carefully
managed or aggressively interrogative variants of interview talk.

When Granger embarks on his first major assignment for the "Atmospheres" (an official
interview with Churchill—the old, foreign minister out of touch with the times and a stand-in for
Arthur Balfour in the novel's loose allegory), he finds himself in the position of an interviewee
the moment that he enters Churchill's home. He meets first with Churchill's aunt, with whom he
lives, who "seemed to catalogue me, label me, and lay me on the shelf, before I had given my
first answer to her first question" (41). When Churchill emerges, Granger sees the statesman's
face through the mediation of caricatures from the newspapers, again suggesting a society that
takes its understanding of the world first and foremost through the press: "A face familiar
enough in the caricatures suddenly grew real to me—more real than the face of one's nearest

234

friends" (42). Effectively, Granger here describes Niklas Luhmann's sense of a "background reality," created out of mass media forms, which serves as the basis from which "one can take off…and create a profile for oneself by expressing personal opinions."[26] In other words, Churchill's face becomes "more real" than those of Granger's un-caricatured close friends, for in the moment of Granger's recognition of Churchill, his face is composed both of the "background reality" shared by everyone who has seen the visual information presented in the press *and* Granger's personal viewing.

As much as interviewer and interviewee are fully implicated within the system of the press (and, ostensibly, familiar with the scripts of interview talk), their face-to-face meeting begins disfluently:

> I muttered that I feared he would find the process a bore.
>
> "Not more for me than for you," he answered, seriously—"one has to do these things."
>
> "Why, yes," I echoed, "one has to do these things." It struck me that he regretted it—regretted it intensely; that he attached a bitter meaning to the words.
>
> "And . . . what is the procedure?" he asked, after a pause. "I am new to the sort of thing." He had the air, I thought, of talking to some respectable tradesman that one calls in only when one is *in extremis*—to a distinguished pawnbroker, a man quite at the top of a tree of inferior timber.
>
> "Oh, for the matter of that, so am I," I answered. "I'm supposed to get your atmosphere, as Callan put it." (43)

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[26] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 65.

Their bumbling start neither squares with Granger's assertion of his usual prowess as a talker (except before the Dimensionist), nor with the expected manners of a political leader frequently caricatured in the press. But more than this, the content of what they discuss is their own defectiveness as interview-talkers—a marked departure from Granger's usual boastfulness. In the first "official" interview of the story, then, interviewer and interviewee are suddenly at pains to render themselves disfluent. Churchill's halting questions about the "procedure" and Granger's defensive response that he too is unfamiliar are suspect, especially in light of Granger's earlier conversation with Callan about his commission:

> "What Fox wants," [Callan] explained, "is a kind of series of studies of celebrities *chez eux*. Of course, they are not broken down. But if you can treat them as you treated Jenkins—get them in their studies, surrounded by what in their case stands for the broken lay figures and faded serge curtains—it will be exactly the thing. It will be a new line, or rather—what is a great deal better—an old line treated in a slightly, very slightly different way." (17)

Callan essentially conveys that there will be no difference between Granger's "Atmospheres" and Yates's "Celebrities at Home" feature. Callan's lazy translation of part of Yates's title into French signals that "Atmospheres" is just a new name for the same thing. Callan's further explanation humorously glosses over a number of logical inconsistencies: "This is to be—not a mere pandering to curiosity—but an attempt to get at the inside of things—to get the atmosphere, so to speak; not merely to catalogue furniture" (17). The "Atmospheres" series illogically aims to "get at the inside of things" and to include "broken lay figures and faded serge curtains" but "not…catalogue furniture." There is, in short, as little difference between "Celebrities at Home" and "Atmospheres" as between "Celebrities at Home" and "Celebrities *Chez Eux*."

I argue that Granger's muttering and Churchill's halting questions present instances of posed disfluency—ones that imply these characters' desires to seem inept at interview talk. Granger's careful descriptions of how Churchill "attached a bitter meaning to [his] words," "had the air…of talking to some respectable tradesman," or acted "as if he had forgotten my existence," all hint at a degree of scripted impression management on the statesman's part similar to Callan's "appropriate attitudes" (43-44). Later, Granger describes Churchill's phrases as "laboriously kind," and how "the man wished by these detached sentences to convey that he had the weight of a kingdom—of several kingdoms—on his mind" (44). Here, the em dashes that mimic Churchill's talk, slowed and weighted down by his cares, have a different valence from those in Callan's talk. Churchill's pauses seem intentional disfluencies that aim to showcase his authentic humanity: the affective burden of "several kingdoms" slowed the words of the aged ruler because he cared too much. This instance of a face-to-face meeting conducted explicitly for a newspaper column reveals an additional complexity to interview talk, which may capaciously contain actual and scripted disfluencies. Both Churchill and Granger play the conversational game of a particular form of interview talk with rules that falsify disfluent speech as a sign of authentic interaction.

This falsified form of disfluency in the Granger-Churchill interview points to the novel's own use of disfluency as aesthetic practice. Both Granger's and Churchill's efforts to seem unable to keep up with the rules of fluency prescribed by interview talk in print are artful performances that resist—ironically through its own scriptedness—the scriptedness of the journalistic interview. As I will indicate in the next section, the work that the novel does to privilege disfluency as an art form specifically opposes the kinds of communication in which the

Dimensionists engage, ones that ultimately resemble something like a proto-radio broadcast—fluent, scripted, and machine-like.

Technologized Talk and the Aesthetics of Disfluency

In *The Inheritors*, therefore, interview talk exhibits an unresolved allegiance to both fluency and disfluency. By contrast, the kind of talk that the Dimensionists engage reach a level of fluency that proves ultimately impossible for human speakers even with the technological aids that Callan surrounds himself with. As if to signal the inaccessibility of such fluency to non-Dimensionists like himself, Granger transcribes far less of Dimensionist direct speech in his narrative. When he does, their speech is plaintive, direct, and relatively free of ellipses and dashes. Often, Granger's narration points out the extent to which he did not hear or could not remember Dimensionist talk, and makes up for this lack by giving a secondhand account of what Dimensionist talk was like. He frequently resorts to the indirection of similes and metaphors in order to approach an understanding of Dimensionist talk, such as in his initial description of the female Dimensionist's talk:

> I can't remember her exact words—there were so many; but she spoke like a book. There was something exquisitely piquant in her choice of words, in her expressionless voice. I seemed to be listening to a phonograph reciting a technical work. There was a touch of the incongruous, of the mad, that appealed to me—the commonplace rolling-down landscape, the straight, white, undulating road that, from the tops of the rises, one saw running for miles and miles, straight, straight, and so white. Filtering down through the great blue of the sky came the thrilling of innumerable skylarks. And I was listening to a parody of a scientific work recited by a phonograph. (9)

Granger coordinates print and the phonograph as metaphors for her alien and inaccessible speech but seems to have some trouble working out the terms of his analogy. The narration engages the reader in the stages of his unwinding thought process: first, "she spoke like a book," then like "a phonograph reciting a technical work," and finally, like "a parody of a scientific work recited by a phonograph."

Granger's revisions and tentativeness, however, belie the structured way in which the passage suggests a media history of the phonograph's technological ascendancy: we go from a book to its remediation as a phonographic recitation to the phonograph itself exerting some kind of uncanny parodic agency against text. In other words, Granger's fumbling around to come up with a proper analogy to characterize the Dimensionist's speech neatly traces the history of phonographic invention, from the device's initial derivation from writing/print technologies to its use as an aid to print and finally to its independence as a potentially superior form of communication. To rehearse this history briefly, before Edison's development of the tin foil phonograph in 1877, emerging phonographic technologies did not involve the playback mechanism that became so central to the technology's association with the birth of the music recording industry ("gramophone" was eventually the preferred name for the device primarily associated with the playback function). In the 1840s, "phonography"—with an etymological meaning of "sound writing"—simply referred to a system of shorthand developed by Isaac Pitman to record talk in print. In the run up to what was called Edison's so-called "talking machine," inventions by M. Leon Scott and W.H. Barlow—as detailed in George Prescott's *Speaking Telephone, the Talking Phonograph, and Other Novelties* from 1878—only had the capacity to produce ink etchings that corresponded to the vibrations made by sounds. These

"logographic" etchings were then transferred to various other surfaces including glass, and finally wax—which eventually enabled the phonograph's "talking" capacities.[27]

The way in which phonographic technologies emerged, essentially, from writing technologies explains why the phonograph's many anticipated uses primarily conceptualized it as a device to help meet the demands of mass print culture, particularly the need for expedient record-taking amid a cultural landscape increasingly saturated by journalistic endeavors. According to George Gouraud, Edison's sales manager, the phonograph could help to alleviate the demands required of the modern journalist because it could allow the "newspaper man" to record ideas on paper when most convenient to do so:

> To a newspaper man, or anyone who has work of that kind to do, it is invaluable.
> Anybody who has to turn out every day a certain quantity of work knows the difference
> between working when you are ready for it, and having to work when you are not ready
> but must do so, because somebody is there who is waiting for you, and whose time is
> valuable.[28]

Gouraud also remarks on the phonograph's uses for speeding up the write-up for interviews, specifically commenting on his own experience in which a secretary wrote down an interview dictated from a phonograph, which subsequently went to print—he claims—without a single alteration: "It was sent to the *PMG* [*Pall Mall Gazette*] and printed exactly in the form which she took it from the phonograph, with the result of four or five columns which were heralded to the

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[27] George Prescott, *The Speaking Telephone, Talking Phonograph, and Other Novelties* (New York: D. Appleton & Company: 1878), 300.

[28] Colonel Gouraud, "The Phonograph," *Journal for the Society of Arts* 37 (30 November 1888), 32.

world as the first interview through the phonograph."[29] For the uses that Gouraud suggests, phonographic remediation is largely a means for furthering the ends of print, which remained the dominant form of mass communications.

The second stage of Granger's analogy, a "phonograph reciting a technical work," still primarily conceives of the phonograph as an aid to a print, or, at most—a kind of prosthetic enhancement of print. But when he imbues phonographic speech with parodic agency, phonographic technologies have superseded writing. Prescott presents several possibilities for phonography's ascendancy over writing, imagining that the technology could help overcome both spatial and temporal limits to communication. He imagines: "Friends at a distance will then send to each other phonograph letters, which will talk at any time in the friend's voice when put upon the instrument."[30] Turning toward more occult matters, Prescott also remarks: "How startling, also, it will be to reproduce and hear at pleasure the voice of the dead!"[31] Such a sentiment echoed Edison's own idea for a "Library of Voices," which would preserve the speech of famous individuals for future generations—"the voices as well as the words of our Washingtons, our Lincolns, our Gladstones, etc."[32]

These imaginings of the phonograph's extended capabilities beyond print—to communicate intimately with friends at a distance, or with loved ones who have died—begin to

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[29] Ibid. The interview, as written up in the *PMG*, reveals some of the tensions that I discussed in the previous section. On the one hand, the interviewer admits, in a preface to the supposedly verbatim interview, to inevitable disfluency in oral interactions: "And, by the way, the phonograph is no flatterer. If your utterance be faulty or slovenly, it lets you know as much in a twinkling"; on the other hand, the interview itself, written out as quoted dialogue between the interviewer and Gouraud, shows no evidence this "faulty or slovenly" speech, and the interviewer elides the editorial labor—no doubt done by himself and/or his secretary—required to produce the print account's fluent dialogue: "The phonograph itself dictated to the typewriter all that had been spoken; and a few hours later a faithful report of the conversation, in MS. Form, was placed in the interviewer's hands" ("The First Interview Recorded by the Phonograph," *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 24, 1888, 1).

[30] Prescott, *Speaking Telephone*, 305.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 114.

resemble telepathy, another aspect of Dimensionist speech in *The Inheritors*, as well as popular

scientific conceptions of the Fourth Dimension that were circulating at the time. As ideas about

"higher space" became more accepted into the mainstream in the 1870s and 1880s, they were

taken up as concerns by amateur scientists, journalists, members of the spiritualist press, and

literary authors, greatly expanding the imaginative possibilities associated with the Fourth

Dimension (the most famous literary work on the Fourth Dimension from this period was Edwin

Abbot's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, published in 1884).[33] In particular, W.K.

Clifford's mathematical discoveries, Charles Massey's translation of Johann Karl Friedrich

Zöllner's *Transcendental Physics* into English in 1882, and Charles Hinton's popular

publications did much to further general discussion on the Fourth Dimension and its

ramifications.[34] As Mark Blacklock has rightly pointed out, both Hinton and Stead did much to

link the Fourth Dimension specifically with ideals about the expansion of community and of

communications. Hinton—influenced by his father James's philosophies on the

interconnectedness of humans with nature (see Chapter One)—forged connections between the

notion of space that transcended the physicality of three-dimensions and a communally based

form of altruistic behavior. According to Blacklock, the younger Hinton brought about a

"heuristic coupling of the willed suppression of perception of the physical self and the ethical

suppression of selfish desire."[35] Put another way, the Fourth Dimension's dissolution of the

privileged materiality of three-dimensional space became a rallying point for the adoption of a

more transcendent or universal form of community. Through his adoption of Kantian

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[33] Mark Blacklock, "On the Eve of the Fourth Dimension: Utopian Higher Space," in *Utopian Spaces of Modernism: Literature and Culture, 1885-1945*, eds. Rosalyn Gregory and Benjamin Kohlmann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 36.

[34] Ibid., 36-49.

[35] Ibid., 41.

frameworks on the limits of the mind's perception, Hinton evinces a clear investment in the ethics of coming up with ways to apprehend the existence of that which is real beyond the forms of three-dimensional space and time. For Hinton, this inaccessible noumenal world (in Kantian terms) is "something more fundamental, more real," "something more than all the forms in which it [the noumenal] shows itself."[36] Hinton's desire to understand the Fourth Dimension is therefore a spiritually inflected desire for a wholeness that he believes to be thoroughly good.[37]

Stead extended such ideals about wholeness into the dream of perfect, expanded communications. As I mention in the introduction, for Stead mass-market newspapers were an important step toward realizing an idealized vision of "whole community" in the form of a "vast agora." Telepathy, for Stead, constituted an even more perfect and universal system of communication than the press. As Roger Luckhurst has pointed out, in Stead's view, telepathy was a "democratic prosthesis," one that, much like electricity, "annihilated time, abolished space, and it will yet unify the world."[38] In his essay, "Throughth: Or, on the Eve of the Fourth Dimension," published in the *Review of Reviews* in April 1893, Stead lists a number of occult phenomena including telepathy—as well as clairvoyance, automatic handwriting, crystal vision, and psychometry—as direct evidence of a Fourth Dimension: that is, the problem of seemingly impossible transferences, from a three-dimensional point of view, might be solved by the alien materiality of higher dimensions. In other words, what may seem to be the invisible transmission of words through the air might actually have a visible basis that can only be seen from the perspective of a Fourth Dimensionist. Stead's neologism—"throughth"—makes an effort to

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[36] Charles Hinton, *The Fourth Dimension* (London: George Allen & Co., Ltd., 1912), 1.

[37] Dalrymple Henderson's book offers insight into early-twentieth century artists and writers across the globe that linked the Fourth Dimension to a sense of "cosmic consciousness"—including the Jewish-American painter Max Weber and the Russian mathematician P.D. Ouspensky (*Fourth Dimension*, 291-306, 377-386).

[38] Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 135.

capture the sense of "motion through" or "interpenetration" in popular theories about the nature of the Fourth Dimension, a concept that has clear resonances with Stead's interest in unobstructed communication.[39]

"Throughth" might very well apply to Granger's odd description of the landscape in conjunction with the Dimensionist's talk—again, the "commonplace rolling-down landscape, the straight, white, undulating road that, from the tops of the rises one saw running for miles and miles, straight, straight and so white. Filtering down through the great blue of the sky came the thrilling of innumerable skylarks." This particular vision is not so different from Stead's exuberant description of "rifts in the limits of our three dimensional space," the "light of four dimensional space…pouring in upon us," or "spirit manifested through matter."[40] But Granger's "throughth" lacks the optimism of Stead's, as does Granger's view of Dimensionist communications. Granger is horrified to find that the Dimensionist characters recall lines from one another's talk, even when they have not been present to hear that talk. Even more threatening, the Dimensionists evince an uncanny capacity to verbalize Granger's private thoughts out loud—a capacity that the novel renders distasteful through its "othering" as feminized speech, a somewhat embarrassing thread that issues from a broader context than the misogyny often attributed to Ford (I will explore this thread in greater detail later). The loss of privacy that thought-reading involves, however, would seem to solve an interview society's problem of "get[ting] at the inside of things" that Granger and other characters attempt by way of their imperfect, disfluent talk. A "perfect" form of communication, telepathy eliminates vagueness and facilitates greater intimacy between individuals. As Pamela Thurschwell has argued, at the *fin de siècle*, there were close interrelations among the interests in "the occult

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[39] W.T. Stead, "Throughth: Or, On the Eve of the Fourth Dimension," *Review of Reviews* (April 1893): 427.

[40] Ibid.

world, innovative technologies of communication and intimate bonds between people."[41] Yet, as Granger's and Churchill's pretended disfluencies perhaps inadvertently hint, while both men might aspire to out-talk most of their talkers, they do not actually desire the fluency of "throughth."

In *The Inheritors*, telepathy notably does not achieve the perfect communications of "a vast agora," but a cold and nihilistic exchange of pure fact: "I heard the Dimensionists described: a race clear-sighted, eminently practical, incredible; with no ideals, prejudices, or remorse; with no feeling for art and no reverence for life; free from any ethical tradition; callous to pain, weakness, suffering and death, as if they had been invulnerable and immortal" (9-10). The truthfulness of Dimensionist talk in Conrad and Ford's novel fails to reach the intimacy that Stead anticipates and which H.G. Wells eventually envisions in *Men like Gods* (1923), his scientific romance on a utopian society with beings "beautifully unwary in their communications. The ironies, concealments, insincerities, vanities and pretensions of earthly conversation seemed unknown to them."[42] Rather, the Dimensionists achieve a mechanistic and de-individuated form of fluency that Granger's associations of their talk with new communications technologies specifically seeks to emphasize. The narrative's sensitivity to the constantly evolving possibilities of such technologies—and the fluid sense of continuity between printed talk, telegraphy, phonography, and telepathy—enables its predictive formulation of radio talk as the shape that Dimensionist talk most closely resembles.

To be sure, wireless telegraphy—used by the British army during the Second Anglo-Boer War, shortly after Marconi's patent—relied on the discovery of electromagnetic waves, as would

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[41] Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920 Invention of Telepathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

[42] H.G. Wells, *Men Like Gods* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 1923), 95.

the radio; hence, I do not wish to overstate the novel's "predictive" capabilities. Moreover, it was only a few years later, on Christmas Eve 1906 that Reginald Fessenden would send the first voice broadcast. Nonetheless, *The Inheritors* seems early in critiquing the collectivizing aspects of fluency later associated with broadcast radio. According to Sarah Wilson, for instance, Gertrude Stein in the 1930s and 1940s opposed "the idea of radio as a kind of public sphere" and how "broadcasting seemed to be unstoppable in its promotion of social connection" through its unification of multiple voices through a single channel.[43] More specific to the form of radio talk, Goffman points out the way in a radio announcer is "intended to be a perfect speech machine"— whose duty is to offer a "simulation" of error-free "fresh talk," an impossibility for humans without the aid of a script.[44] Such radio talk characteristically tries to hide the fact of its own script, pretending at a form of spontaneous but fluent speech: "[t]here is yet no worse crime that an announcer can commit than to sound as though he is reading."[45] The association of Dimensionist talk in *The Inheritors* with "the phonograph reciting a technical work," imagines exactly this form of robotic fluency that—like a radio broadcast—takes its cue from the scriptedness of mass print culture. Granger perhaps comes closest to describing radio talk when he refers to the Dimensionist woman's talk as a "current" (11).

As I mention above, the novel sharpens its critique of robotic fluency through its association with the female speech. What might be termed a "techno-feminine fluency" appears—in the novel and more broadly in the cultural imaginings of the period—as male disfluency's undesirable "other." The othering of fluency—by way of technology and by gender—problematically serves as a somewhat awkward device that pivots disfluency in the

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[43] Sarah Wilson, "Gertrude Stein and the Radio," *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 2 (2004): 261, 262.

[44] Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, 223.

[45] Ibid., 238.

novel from undesirable limitation to valuable aesthetic. For Granger, the Dimensionist woman's

talk makes her seem like a female automaton that is at once intoxicating and revolting. The

phonographic woman plays on the fairly common trope of the female automaton in the literature

of the *fin de siècle*. Jill Galvan demonstrates, for instance, that women—both as spiritual

mediums and intermediaries for communication technologies (telegraph operators, typists,

phonograph users, and telephone workers)—seemed particularly suited for becoming automatons

because of Victorian perceptions that women were less rational, and less strong-willed.[46] The

logic was that if women's consciousness was more easily evacuated from their bodies, then it

would be easier for their bodies to become mere channels for communication.[47] More specific to

the development of the phonograph, Picker suggests a genealogy of "mechanical voice

reproduction and artificial femininity" from 1877 to Apple, Inc.'s Siri. Picker cites Edison's

early use of the phonograph to develop a talking female doll (a commercial failure), alongside

famous fictional creations, such as Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's "future Eve" with golden

phonographs for lungs and Jules Verne's La Stilla, whose operatic voice was recorded on

phonographs and played alongside her images after her death.[48] Picker also brings particular

focus to a little-known story by E.E. Kellett of a "lady automaton" that probably served as the

model for George Bernard Shaw's Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* (1913)—the play that would

inspire the film *My Fair Lady* (1964)—to draw broader connections to the present.[49]

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[46] See Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[47] At the same time, Galvan argues, women's supposedly superior sympathetic capabilities also made them desirable "channels" who could provide the means for uniting minds and hearts, often across great distances.

[48] John Picker, "My Fair Lady Automaton," *ZAA* 63, no. 1 (2015): 91-92.

[49] Ibid., 92-99.

Another one of Granger's characterizations of the Dimensionist's talk—"It was rather as if she had learnt a speech by heart and had come to the end of it" (11)—would seem to fit snugly with the likes of Doolittle, who does, however, prove her humanity after all as she tells Higgins: "Well, you have [my voice and appearance] on your gramophone and in your book of photographs. When you feel lonely without me, you can turn the machine on. It's got no feelings to hurt."[50] By contrast, the nameless Dimensionist is not only inhumane, but also involved in an important role reversal with Granger: the woman determines how the men will talk. Granger's proliferating descriptions of her talk—as phonographic, as automatic, as technological—are therefore ineffectual attempts by the male protagonist to fit the Dimensionist woman into conventional paradigms of male-created female automatons. In spite of, or rather because of, Granger's ineptitudes, though, male disfluency emerges as a defense of humankind against mechanistic, female fluency.

I have intimated, however, that such fluency seems the product of continuous evolution from the scripted nature of interview talk, where characters like Callan seem very much invested in becoming as fluent as the Dimensionists through his technological prostheses. But the novel's "othering" of fluency through its association with a monstrous form of technological femininity creates a clear boundary between the humans and the Dimensionists, a line that the plot's ending also underscores: Granger watches the woman disappear into the Fourth Dimension, leaving him behind with all of the other men that she has manipulated into orchestrating the world's collapse. The likes of Granger, Callan, Churchill, or the Duc de Mersch can never evolve to communicate as the Dimensionists do. Even the male Dimensionist of the story, the editor of the *Hour*, Fox— whose talk Granger describes as "sibillating" (32) and who regularly enters "fits" and spews

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[50] George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Penguin, 2000), 100.

"gibberish" (131)—in the end loses the game to the female Dimensionist. The boundary ultimately ensures a somewhat tragic end for such men; for in the economical words of the Dimensionist to Granger at the novel's close, "We have to go our ways; you yours, I mine" (154). But Granger's inability to cross into the Fourth Dimension is at the heart of his stubborn humanity. This seems to be the fact that many of *The Inheritors*'s first reviewers missed. Granger's spasms, gasps, and confusions are the very proofs of his un-technologizable humanity—the body's inability to produce fluent talk without the aid of a text, as a phonographic recording might.

The vague aesthetics of the novel, then, are inextricable from its incorporation of the Fourth Dimension, which ultimately functions less as a conceit of science fiction as an occasion for contending with the near future of communications technologies. In a brief remark on the style of the novel, Blacklock writes: "*The Inheritors* attempts to represent higher space in the traditionally mimetic mode of fiction and it is noticeable that it struggles to do so."[51] The "struggle" to which Blacklock points seems, in fact, an essential part of the novel's mimesis. As a narrator in three dimensions, Granger struggles to tell the story of Fourth Dimensionist invasion with fluency and completion, for he lacks a wholeness of perspective. Like the narrator "A Square" of Abbott's *Flatland*, who cannot convince his two-dimensional colleagues of the third dimension, Granger cannot readily tell us about the Fourth Dimension. Hinton, in pointing out this Kantian problem of how to understand a higher dimension from the position of a lower one, also decides to narrativize the problem with dashed disfluency: "Now this higher—how shall we apprehend it?"[52] Conrad's own comments about the novel in response to *The New York Times*'s negative review offer some additional evidence that disfluency serves a mimetic,

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[51] Blacklock, "On the Eve," 50.

[52] Hinton, *Fourth Dimension*, 1.

aesthetic purpose at the same time that it emerges, in talk, out of an opposition to science and technology:

> [T]he business of a work striving to be art is not to teach or to prophesy (as we have been charged, on this side, with attempting), nor yet to pronounce a definite conclusion. This, the teaching, the conclusions, even the prophesying, may be left safely to science, which, whatever authority it may claim, is not concerned with truth all, but with the exact order of such phenomena as fall under the perception of the senses…But in the sphere of an art dealing with a subject matter whose origin and end are alike unknown there is no possible conclusion. The only indisputable truth of life is our ignorance.[53]

In claiming that art—through uncertainty—reaches a greater truth than the "perception of the senses," Conrad not only disputes the authority of science, but also materialist perspectives in fiction.

The Inheritors's particular engagements with the "science" of communications and disfluency's resistance to new media point ultimately to a more complicated account of modernist indefiniteness that might provide a more nuanced understanding of the much discussed vagueness in both Conrad's and Ford's other, more canonical works. In particular, Kreilkamp's reading of Heart of Darkness (1899) as an "Edison-haunted, electrical text" where disembodied, phonographic voices ultimately fail to recover the human agency of the oral storyteller points to a similar separation between technologized voices and human speech.[54] As different as The Inheritors may seem from Ford's The Good Soldier (1915), the relationship between Granger and the Dimensionist evinces some similarities to that between the narrator James Dowell and his wife Florence. Dowell clearly associates Florence with femininity

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[53] Joseph Conrad to the New York Times, August 24 1901.

[54] Kreilkamp, Voice and the Victorian Storyeller, 201, 179-205.

technologized by mass print media—"just a mass of talk out of guide-books, of drawings out of fashion-plates"—and further describes how she would "give out [the information she read] in floods of bright talk" much like the Dimensionist's "current of speech."[55] Dowell himself, as noted by countless readers, famously tells his story in the manner of un-linear, inconsistent talk—and is disfluent at the novel's haunting close: "I didn't know what to say," he claims, as he allows Edward Ashburnham to move offstage to kill himself, and peremptorily chalks his disfluency up to his English restraint.[56] As in *The Inheritors*, the male narrator's disfluency seems at once a marker of linguistic dysfunction and of aesthetic innovation—a knotty tension that neither novel resolves, but which retains the very indefiniteness that disfluency also holds.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

I conclude—both this chapter and the dissertation—with some reflections on this foregrounding of disfluency at the close of the Victorian period and the broader implications that this opens up in view of the larger trajectory of talk's expansions I have traced. As I have argued, the way in which talk in *The Inheritors* resists technophilic dreams of perfect communication presents a somewhat decisive shift away from the optimism that Victorians like Stead channeled. Less obviously, *The Inheritors*'s self-consciousness about talk and, relatedly, its status as a collaborative authorial endeavor undo many of the ideals that Stevenson ascribed to talk's idle form. With respect to both the style of their novels and stories of their origins, whereas Stevenson pins to idle talk a harmonious fluency, Conrad and Ford call attention to talk's collaborative disjunctions. Again, Stevenson's story of *Treasure Island*'s origins in "My First Book" imagines a scene of talk in the form of co-creative oral storytelling as the narrative

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[55] Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, ed. Thomas C. Moser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142, 93.

[56] Ibid., 294.

embodiment of adventure's process-oriented poetics. The accounts that Conrad and Ford offer of their own collaborative storytelling also emphasize lively oral exchange; in 1930, Ford reminisced: "we had got so used to reading our own works aloud to each other that we finally wrote for the purpose of reading aloud the one to the other."[57] Further, Ford based the narrator of his story "Seraphina"—which would later become their third collaboration, *Romance*—on Conrad's style of talk, and Conrad defended *The Inheritors* as an "experiment," which, like "adventure, signals the idea of form-as-process.[58]

But the Conrad-Ford collaborative process could not be further from Stevenson's ideal of harmonious fluency. In a letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad describes the odious burden of collaboration: "the expenditure of nervous fluid was immense. There were moments when I cursed the day I was born and dared not look up at the light of day I had to live through with this thing on my mind."[59] To Olive Garnett, an author herself and Edward's sister, Ford is more explicit about the strenuous contact between their voices: "we speak nearly in each other's language as it is possible for two inhabitants of this Babel to do."[60] Modern-day England, in Ford's view, was a Babel insofar as failures of intersubjective exchange were the norm, even in the context of intimate friends that only "speak nearly in each other's language." By all accounts—Conrad's, Ford's, as well as their friends—the partnership was a difficult one, marked

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[57] Qtd. in Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1:114.

[58] Ibid. and Joseph Conrad to the *New York Times,* August 24 1901.

[59] Joseph Conrad to Edward Garnett, 26 March 1900, in *Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924*, ed. Edward Garnett (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill Co., 1928), 168.

[60] Qtd. in Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford*, 1:129.

by conflict, criticism, Conrad's bouts of depression, and tensions between the two couples during their long stays with one another.[61]

The difficulty at the heart of disfluency in the novel—its simultaneous status as a failure to communicate and a boon for literary innovation—was also reflected, then, in their authorial collaboration. The begrudging and often pessimistic attitude that both authors took toward collaboration yet reinforced their mutual interest in the failures of intersubjective connection as enabling a new, literary style. Of the co-authors, Ford was more explicitly invested in ordinary, everyday talk as an important locus for the mining of such productive failures. In a later part of his memoir on Conrad, Ford provides the following elaboration on why talk, in particular, is the form that best exemplifies disjointed subjectivities: "[N]o speech of one character should ever answer the speech that goes before it. This is almost invariably the case in real life where few people listen, because they are always preparing their own next speeches" (201). Ford's explanation suggests that the imagined persons A and B that he references earlier in the memoir do not, in fact, know if they share the same conception of C because they are, in all likelihood, not listening to one another but formulating their own next response. What Ford points out here is similar to what Stevenson values in talk, in that both authors are sensitive to talk's distinction from print as unrepeatable language that unfolds in time. But whereas Stevenson revels in the flow of talking partners adapting one to the other, Ford calls attention to the blockage that may result from the cognitive burdens of simultaneously listening and preparing a response. In effect, Ford's disfluency rejects Stevenson's robust poetics of adventure but claims for talk a different kind of aesthetic capability.

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[61] Ibid., 117-30.

I believe that these two moments—of Stevenson's characterization of talk as idle and Ford's developing understanding of talk as disfluent—index the wider literary historical course that my dissertation traces. The works of Dickens, Thackeray, and Browning all point to the widening possibilities of Victorian talk amid print's dramatic expansions in the 1860s, the sense that talk was gaining almost superhuman strength from its disembodied circulations in and out of print. Although these well-known Victorian writers were ambivalent about the iterative strength of talk "massified" through print, their preoccupations with mass-market forms like gossip indicate that they were sensitive to the fact that literary resistance against such forms would be futile. Thackeray would realize, as he contemplated the role that his *Cornhill Magazine* would play in the lives of his reading public, that gossip in a mass market also democratizes "what the world is talking about" and, as Browning indicates in *The Ring and the Book*, town talk contains the creative energy to spark the "art" of a cause célèbre. For each of these writers, the perceived massification of everyday talk brought about degradations in oral culture, but their sense of such transformations as inevitable and their awe at talk's greatly expanded reach spurred them to find ways to adapt their literature and literary careers accordingly.

Stevenson's (and, relatedly, Twain's) carefully theorized attention to talk's idle and adventurous drift evinces far less apprehensiveness about talk's transformations in an era newly cognizant of the world's expanded number of chatterboxes. In Stevenson's view, talk was and would always remain freer than print and consequently suffers no attenuations in the age of mass print—rather, talk and print become involved in a mutually sustaining and aesthetically productive dialectic. I analyze both Dixon's and Wilde's interest in drawing-room chatter as similarly reveling in the aesthetic possibilities of this dialectic. If Dickens, Thackeray, and Browning found it difficult to control the talk that circulated in and out of their literary creations,

these later Victorian authors found that print culture had freed talk from the coterie constraints of conversation, enabling opportunities to focus on the singular aesthetics of seemingly degraded and meaningless forms of orality. In the late nineteenth-century adventure romances and drawing-room comedies that I discuss alike, talk's uniqueness lies in its capacity to move language along—in *Treasure Island*, talk drifts while print gets stuck, and in *My Flirtations* or *Lady Windermere's Fan*, talk smoothens over the stutter of didactic convention and even powerfully ushers the plot of a story through to its resolution. Talk, importantly, remains fluent and strong in these works of literature, a corrective to what Stevenson calls print's "found wooden dogmatisms."

In view of this general progression of talk's expanded powers in an era of mass media's birth, then, *The Inheritors*'s focus on disfluency as talk's most distinctive attribute is noticeably contrary. But the novel's focus on disfluency as perpetuated, in part, by fears of being captured in print also snaps back to the moment of Thackeray's confession to John Forster around the time of the Garrick Club Affair: "When I speak I'm so frightened that I don't know what happens, and sit down unconscious of what is done in the struggle." Both Thackeray's letter and Conrad and Ford's novel focus on the cooling effect of increasingly efficient communications technologies, but what emerges after the span of about half a century is a rather decisive rejection of talk's imbrication with new media forms. Disfluency, according to Conrad and Ford, must be embraced as a distinctly human capability (rather than disability) that renders an important separation between our talk and the imminent fluency of new communications technologies. In the context of the more recent history of disciplinary boundaries, the idea of everyday talk as something that occurs elsewhere from new media may seem an unremarkable facet of the study of language and literature. Yet it may be well to consider that in our own age of revolutionary digital

communications and social media, new forms of "technologized" talk—tweets, snapchats, or yik

yaks—might constitute a revival of interest in the imaginative possibilities of "human media."

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