Real Talk: Direct Discourse and the Victorian Novel

By

Alexandra Irene Dumont

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Professor Kent Puckett, Chair
Professor Grace Lavery
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Abstract

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This dissertation proceeds from the idea that, although it is everywhere present and routinely discussed, we have nevertheless neglected to talk, thoroughly, about “talk” in the Victorian realist novel. It also proceeds from the idea that we have done this because it is precisely what such novels, and Victorian culture more generally, have taught us to do. Talk, I argue, both as a subject and a mode of novelistic representation, is cast as an other to the novel, one that is simultaneously alien to and containable within the realist text. As a verbal activity, talk suggests an orality that is quotidian and amorphous, a flow of words submerged in the social world that elicits it. This formlessness and sociality render talk an ideal figure for the vast, teeming “life” to which the realist novel refers, and whose heterogeneity is as much a model as a vexation for novelistic form. As a textual formation within the novel, I argue, talk as direct discourse functions as a “real fictional object”: a place in which the language of the novel shifts from a mode of representation to an object thereof, and consequently becomes at once more and less “real.” For authors like Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, and Henry James, such ambiguities provide a means of navigating realism’s competing imperatives of extra-textual reference and aesthetic self-sufficiency. Talk’s minor quality allows it to animate the novel’s rhetoric even as that rhetoric disavows talk as mere chatter, gossip, or report.

My focus on talk, then, is a way of getting at a larger and in many ways more elusive subject: Victorian realism and the critical discussions thereof. Though talk as dialect or idiolect has an important place in the critical history of realism, it has not been the defining marker of either the realist mode or the putative formal sophistication of the Victorian novel. I begin my project by considering the primacy accorded by novel theory to free indirect discourse, and suggest that literary criticism’s obsession with this form stems in part from the parallels between free indirect discourse itself and the methodology of those who have theorized it. Conversely, I argue, direct discourse has been read as a mere starting point, from which narrative complexity evolves. Yet it is because, not in spite, of this basic or minor quality that talk is fundamental to the realist novel. I examine the function of these minor forms of talk and direct discourse in the didactic stories and political essays of Harriet Martineau, the aphoristic “parables” and omniscient narration of George Eliot, and the “impressionizing” fictions and all-consuming style of Henry James. I trace the ways that Victorian realism casts talk as a foil for its more totalizing forms, arguing that in centering itself around this vanishing, minor object, realism centers itself around an absence. It is not, then, the presence of the world in the text that makes the realist novel possible, but rather the world’s absence that makes space for the novelistic real.
For my family.
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Introduction

I. Forms of Talk

“With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer the far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.”

- George Eliot, *Adam Bede*

The opening lines of *Adam Bede* describe the work of the novel in essentially visual terms. The drop of ink is a mirror in which “far-reaching visions of the past” appear, and the author produces not a story, but a scene; an image which might be taken in all at once. The novel’s lingering second paragraph, a description of Jonathan Burge’s workshop, is therefore imaginatively condensed, both by the analogy of writing to vision, and by the temporality implied by the “single drop of ink”—the words on the page will be only as many as this finite quantity of liquid can produce. The ensuing lines, which depict Adam and Seth Bede in greater detail, also perform this act of simultaneous expansion and contraction, positing their descriptions as reproductions in language of things that could be taken in instantly by an observer on the scene: “It is clear at a glance that the next workman is Adam’s brother.”

But this narrative dwelling on the visual details of the scene is punctuated by another kind of detail altogether: the singing, in Adam’s “strong baritone” of the morning hymn of Bishop Thomas Ken: “Awake, my soul, and with the sun/Thy daily stage of duty run;/Shake off dull sloth…” These lines are the first we get from Adam, the first lines spoken by any character in the novel, and they both invite the reader to consider the specificity of Adam’s character and his singing body (“Such a voice could only come from a broad chest, and the broad chest belonged to a man nearly six feet high…”), and manifest this specificity through words that are not Adam’s own, and that have been spoken and sung by many others before him.

It gives us a way of thinking about Adam that at once focuses our attention more narrowly on the moment in which Adam speaks, or sings, locating us not just in June 18th, 1799, but in this moment of that day, the moment in which these words, their precision ensured to us by quotation marks around them, are spoken by this body, and also makes this moment an iteration of others in which these words appeared.

The next words uttered by a character are different altogether: “There! I’ve finished my door to-day, anyhow.” They are nothing fancy—just talk. If Adam’s song locates him both in the moment of singing, the now of story, and also in the long expanse of time that seems to flow under and around the now of any Eliot text, Seth Bede’s (as it happens, incorrect) assessment of his work would seem to exist in another register entirely—pedestrian, un-pretty, infused with no

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particular style or meaning. It may tell us something about Seth, but it doesn’t tell us much about *Adam Bede*; about its larger aspirations or aesthetic vision. And yet *Adam Bede*, like all novels, especially all realist novels, requires such moments. They are the places in which vision, style, etc. would seem to step aside and allow us to see the object itself. They feel, that is, like the “real thing.” My dissertation argues that this kind of “talk”, moments of direct discourse in which the quotidian, even the banal, punctuates the text, are in fact the foundation on which realist world-building is laid.

This is a project about novels. It is also a project animated by the idea of “talk,” and by the myriad ways that talk animates the novel itself. But although they are both made of words, talk is not quite the novel’s *thing*, not least because its medium, speech, is often cast as the other to the printed forms in which the novel appears. Even as a representation, rather than an instantiation, of oral language, the novel might seem to offer a less “pure,” more mediated version of its object. Too much talking turns the novel to drama, or something like the extended lyric. Talk, in other words, is something the novel does, but not something it does better than other genres. Why then proceed from talk, when it seems a relatively minor part of what the novel, in all its variety, can be?

It is because, not in spite, of this “minor” quality that I am interested in talk and the Victorian realist novel. Both as an orality that must be sidelined or contained as print stakes its claim for cultural and aesthetic dominance in the nineteenth century, and as a textual formation that is necessary to, but marginal within, the larger formal structures of the novel, “talk” functions as a foil for the complexity, sophistication, and relative permanence of its linguistic others. One of the primary questions animating this project is how the relationship between the Victorian depiction of talk as a social activity, and its deployment of talk as a form might illuminate realism’s simultaneous dependence on and disavowal of such minor-ness. My dissertation is concerned primarily with two forms of talk: The first is direct discourse, perhaps the “purest” form of speech in the novel. I focus on direct discourse, as opposed to free indirect discourse or other kinds of reported speech, both because of this purity—that is, direct discourse’s clear demarcation of the language of reported speech from that of the rest of the novel—and because of direct discourse’s relative obscurity in critical discussions of the novel, and the novel’s own aesthetic or ethical sidelining of direct discourse. The second form of talk is oral speech, a language that is both absent from the novel and central to it. The nineteenth-century novel, I argue, is interested in “talk” as a minor type of oral utterance, a kind of formless, ongoing speech that is both ubiquitous, and, in its individual manifestations, disposable. Opposed not only to the relative permanence and mobility of print, but also to more delimited or complex forms of speech, talk suggests an orality that is quotidian and amorphous, a flow of words submerged in the social world that elicits them. If “speech” brings to mind discrete enunciation, oral public performance or the object of the “act”, talk suggests an activity whose borders are far less clear. This formlessness, I argue, the ongoing, fluvial nature of talk, makes it both a model and a specter for the novel, whose own heterogeneity constantly strains its formal bounds. Talk’s formlessness, too, along with its implicit sociality, renders it a figure for the vast, teeming, “life”

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6 My use of the word “pure” here is not meant to indicate that speech is any more or less conveyed by free indirect discourse. It is rather to acknowledge that direct discourse is generally described in narrative theory as the thing itself—“just” speech—while free indirect discourse is a sophistication of that thing, made possible by a kind of hybridity: “We hear in ‘style indirect libre’ a dual voice, which, through vocabulary, sentence structure, and intonation subtly fuses the two voices of the character and the narrator.” (Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977], 26.)
to which the realist novel refers, but which it cannot contain. And this is precisely the point: A figure of formlessness that is nevertheless contained, given form, within the novel, talk allows the novel to both instantiate and pose itself as an alternative to the vitality, messiness, and vulgarity of life itself.

If “life itself” might be said to be the subject of the realist novel, then talk as direct discourse highlights the complications of the ways in which the novel intersects with its subject. Direct discourse often provides the novel with the “real” of dialect or idiolect, or allows it to toggle between individual and type. It refers, in so doing, to both the real of the extra-textual world—people from Manchester talk like this, miserly lawyers talk like that—and to the real of fiction—this character, and this character alone would say, has said, this thing. It is this last sense of its reality—these words are what someone “has said”—that makes direct discourse at once the most and the least real thing in the realist novel. Being so close to a reproduction of the object of representation, words represented in words, it is on the one hand an instantiation of a sort of mimetic fantasy, the thing transported onto the page. And yet, when direct discourse is fictional, its fidelity to the real of story, its status as the speech of this person who is not one, and of her alone, renders it unreal—or at least fictional. Unlike a description of London or even of a glass of milk, direct discourse does not instantiate an object which may exist in the world. It is in fact crucial to direct discourse’s specificity that, even if the world may produce the same kind of speech, even the very same words, the moment of enunciation in the novel is entirely unique. And unlike omniscient narration, direct discourse need not be taken as true. It can be a lie, a mistake, etc. It must, however, for the text to function, be taken as real. Though the content of the words can be put into question, the status of the utterance as utterance—what was “really said”—remains intact. The quotation mark itself, the inverted commas surrounding the utterance demarcates this division between the true and the real, between language as representation and language as object. And yet the quotation mark denotes a certain distance from the utterance’s origins, a mobility to what is quoted. As Susan Stewart writes, “…the quotation lends both

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7 See, for instance, the figuration of “life” in Middlemarch: “Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.” (George Eliot, Middlemarch [New York, Penguin, 1994], 788.)

8 This is, in a different form, essentially the argument Catherine Gallagher makes about reference and character in the novel: “The referential claim of the novel, its stake in the world outside the text… attaches to classes of persons, whereas the fictionality of the novel, its disavowal of personal reference, defines the individual characters.” (Catherine Gallagher, “George Eliot: Immanent Victorian,” Representations 90, no. 1 [Spring 2005]: 62)

9 As Colin McCabe writes,

   In the classical realist novel the narrative prose functions as a metalanguage that can state all the truths in the object language those words held in inverted commas and can also explain the relation of this object language to the real… What I have called an unwritten prose (or a metalanguage) is exactly that language, which while placing other languages between inverted commas and regarding them as certain material expressions which express certain meanings, regards those same meanings as finding transparent expression within the metalanguage itself. Transparent in the sense that the metalanguage is not regarded as material; it is dematerialised to achieve perfect representation—to let the identity of things shine through the window of words. For insofar as the metalanguage is treated itself as material it, too, can be reinterpreted. (“Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses” in Contemporary Film Theory, ed. Antony Easthope [New York: Routledge, 1993], 54).

10 Marjorie Garber writes that, “What Derrida calls ‘saturation,’ full presence, is by his argument never possible in any citation. But in the special kind of citation known as quotation, a citation of a citation, the dehiscence and the
integrity and limit to the utterance by means of its ‘marks.’ In detaching the utterance from its context of origin, the quotation marks textualize the utterance, giving it both integrity and boundary and opening it to interpretation. The quotation appears as a severed head, a voice whose authority is grounded in itself, and therein lies its power and its limit.”

If Stewart’s discussion of the quotation seems primarily concerned with the quote as a marker of an utterance’s origins in another text, this only highlights the ways in which direct discourse implies the novel’s ability to present and contain language “from elsewhere;” to be the context that renders newly or differently meaningful the flow of human speech. Yet the quotation in this context has no “other” origin. Or, rather, its origin is double, and doubly unreal.

My focus on talk, then, is a way of getting at a larger and in many ways more vexing subject: Victorian realism and the critical discussions thereof. Though talk as dialect or idiolect has a place in the critical history of realism, it has not been the defining marker of either the realist mode or the putative formal sophistication of the Victorian novel. Free indirect discourse has most often stood for the latter—about which more later. Yet both novelistic realism and the more minor of its textual forms seems of particular interest now. Recent calls for renewed attention to realism stress the importance of reconsidering a form that has often been accused of aesthetic naivety or bad political faith. My own work is indebted to those, like Jed Esty, Lauren Goodlad, and Harry Shaw, who have argued for the representational complexity and political flexibility of the realist mode.

But I am interested, too, in the ways this return to realism dovetails with a strain of thought that has recently emerged as a potential direction, or at least a useful provocation, for Victorian studies. The “descriptive turn,” comprises a range of critical models, e.g. surface reading, object-oriented ontology, and the literary applications of actor-network theory. I am more narrowly interested here in recent attention to description per se, as both a method of criticism and a textual object that merits further analysis (or, description). Talk, I argue, has both affinities with and stark differences from description as a mode within the novel, ones that might usefully illuminate the function of each in realist representation. And as an object of critical interest, a thing to be described, talk, in the form of direct discourse, can help us see why it is in fact so difficult to know when we are “only” describing, and to wonder if the ideal of description is simply the reproduction of the described object. Description and direct discourse share an affinity for the idea of “the thing itself;” an affinity which, when it animates works of criticism, often results in aspirations that would turn criticism into a sort of impassive mirror of the object, or into another version of the object per se: “Describing and descriptions can produce pleasure—granular, slow, compressed, attentive, appreciative—as when Roland Barthes reproduces, codes, and interprets every sentence of a Balzac novella in S/Z, then reproduces the text again in its entirety… Description can make us more attentive, as when we produce an audio description, copy a painting, analyze or perform a piece of music, and annotate or memorize a text.”

Though realism itself is often thought of as a “descriptive” mode, that is, though it is seen as

cleft are particularly manifest. This may be the case of a letter never returning to its sender. Both the addressee and the ‘author’ are unknown.” (Quotation Marks [New York: Routledge, 2003], 24.)


being invested in the reproduction or mimetic representation of extra-textual objects, considering the simultaneous reality and unreality of direct discourse, and the ways in which this minor form functions as a foil for more totalizing textual formations in the novel, makes clear that description is only one side of the coin.

II. Direct Discourse, Narration, and Theories of the Novel

In narratology-based accounts of the novel, direct discourse is often positioned as “basic”—something simultaneously necessary and to be gotten past or evolved beyond. It is, like so many things currently designated “basic,” a means of making complexity and aesthetic sophistication visible.\footnote{See: Maggie Lange, “The ‘Basic Bitch’: Who Is She?” The Cut, April 10, 2014, https://www.thecut.com/2014/04/basic-bitch-who-is-she.html} This is in part because of direct discourse’s formal kinship with drama, which, both as an avatar for the pre-novelistic in historical accounts of the novel’s rise, and as a popular but relatively non-prestigious cultural form in the Victorian era, often functions as the novel’s atavistic other.\footnote{For discussions of the Victorian novel’s relationship to drama see: Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971); David Kurnick, Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Sharon Marcus, “Victorian Theatrics: Response,” Victorian Studies 54, no. 3, Special Issue: Papers and Responses from the Ninth Annual Conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association (Spring 2012): 438-450.} But it is also because of direct discourse’s temporal and representational status, the promise it holds out of both relatively “pure” mimesis, and a proximity—in part a durational proximity—of story and discourse. Gerard Genette, though he concedes that scenes of dialogue have “only a kind of conventional equality between narrative time and story time,” nevertheless makes pure dialogue the exemplar of the isochronous narrative, the “hypothetical reference zero” of narrative duration more generally.\footnote{Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 88.} A totally isochronous narrative is, for Genette, impossible—“such a narrative cannot exist except as a laboratory experiment”—for, “at any level of aesthetic elaboration at all,” a narrative must move beyond isochrony, and vary the durations of its constituent parts.\footnote{Genette, Narrative Discourse 88.} It is this that produces narrative “rhythm,” the temporal movement of which Proust, in Genette’s account, is the master.\footnote{Genette, Narrative Discourse 88.} Isochrony, then, is not interesting per se, but only as an imaginary starting point from which narrative complexity evolves.

Direct discourse is, too, the bedrock of the traditional distinction between “showing” and “telling,” a place in which not only the duration, but also the identity of what represents and what is represented promise to converge. This, again, cuts two ways: If direct discourse promises the “real” of story/fabula, the most direct access to the fictional world—and characters—to which it refers, it is also only this, only the thing itself and not an elaboration thereon. Because it is a form in which the object of linguistic representation is itself linguistic, direct discourse temporarily converts the language of the novel from a mode of representation to an object of representation—or, it requires it to be both at once. It is on the proximity of object and representation that the fantasy of mimesis is built. This fantasy may be of either good or evil, of the ability of the text to bring otherwise inaccessible experience into the realm of the reader’s
perception, or of the artless, camera-like reproduction of sordid reality, but in either case it is born of the conviction that some relation of identity, or at least necessity, between signifier and signified, representation and object, is possible. Direct discourse, marked off as quotation, as language taken from “somewhere else” and preserved in the text, provides a locus for this fantasy. That it is in fact not from elsewhere—that its origins are as textual as those of narration, description, etc.—does not diminish its claim to referential primacy. It merely makes clear the way in which representation, in the Victorian realist novel, is centered around an absence.

The reporting of speech is of course central to the novel’s ascendance as a genre, and to claims for its literary merits. But it is free indirect discourse that generally grounds claims about the novel’s representational sophistication, ethical capacities, and aesthetic value. It is free indirect discourse that “externalizes a truth which language knows, but which it cannot speak,” that “offers a very subtle possibility of characterization,” and that constitutes, “the crucial technology of novelistic realism.” Free indirect discourse, in the simplest terms, offers more: More voices, more levels of discourse, more interpretive complexity. Shot through with narration, characters’ speech no longer “belongs” only to them, yet it cannot be read as emanating simply from the narrator. It holds out, accordingly, the promise of a transcendence of the particular; the liberation of utterance from a specific consciousness or moment. It is in this respect a synecdoche of not only the panoramic social realism and ethical, affective, and psychological complexity of the nineteenth-century novel, but also of the printed word more broadly. Or, rather, it illustrates the necessity of the one to the other. Transcendence of the particulars of time, the body, the individual mind, a transcendence which nevertheless remains fully private, contained within the individual experience of the reader or author—this is the promise that novel in print, and the “unspeakable sentences” of free indirect discourse, seems to fulfill.

It is this simultaneous transcendence and immersive, private experience that Ann Banfield describes when she defines free indirect discourse as expressive without being communicative, and as divorcing speaker from self, a definition whose competing imperatives Banfield figures in part via the imaginings of other critics:

> It is writing which frees language from that moment [in which, in the present tense, SPEAKER communicates with ADDRESSEE/HEARER] and that communicative relationship and which allows the creation of a fictional NOW completely separate from the real linguistic act which creates it and the creation of a fictional SELF separate from any writing I. This is because the present of the writer and the presence of his linguistic point of view may be silenced in writing. We recall Lorck’s hypothesis about the origin of represented speech and thought, where the first person of a dramatic monologue becomes the third person in a member of the audience’s private recollection of it. According to Pascal, Lorck agrees with Bally that represented speech and thought ‘cannot be found in common usage’ and ‘suggests that it can occur in literature only because an author, in the act of writing, can be alone with his imagined characters in the

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20 I take this phrase, of course, from Banfield’s *Unspeakable Sentences.*
seclusion of his study; and only in this privacy—which the presence of a second person shatters.\textsuperscript{21} The “freeing” of language from the moment of enunciation, and the person of the enunciator, is paradoxically imagined through a series of inward turns—the private recollection of the audience member, the author secluded in his study—which allow for the liberation in print of language otherwise constricted by limited mutual relations of speaking bodies. Banfield’s method of figuring this liberating inwardness is itself a kind of private outward turn, an argument constructed, as is of course the case with much literary theory and criticism, via the creation of an archive, both critical and figural: Lorck’s audience member, Pascal’s recounting of Lorck’s agreement with Bally’s image of the author alone with his characters. Perhaps free indirect discourse has come to be so thoroughly associated with the literariness of the novel in part because its blending of voices and capacity for subtle critical comment mirror the methodology of those who have theorized it.

Direct speech, by contrast, does not “blend” with narration. By some accounts it directly opposes it, as in Mark Lambert’s contention that the Dickensian narrator treats the quoted speech of characters as threats which must be brutally interrupted and dismembered.\textsuperscript{22} Direct discourse does not, in any case, constitute narration’s comment, sympathetic or critical, upon character, nor character’s incursion into narration. It creates, rather, a demarcation between the two, designating the origin of the words within the quotation marks as distinct from that of the words without. In the case of the omnisciently narrated Victorian novel, this demarcation serves to make clear the ontological status of narratorial language, in part by clearly distinguishing the rhetoric of narrator and character. Hetty Sorrel says things like, “There’s not many more currants to get… I shall soon ha’ done now.”\textsuperscript{23} The narrator of \textit{Adam Bede} does not. It is not merely the referential specificity—the state of the currant-gathering at the moment of speaking—or the dialect or idiolect with which Hetty speaks—“ha’ done now—that mark her speech as different from narratorial utterance. It is also their status as a textual object, something that \textit{is} in the text, rather than something that the text can describe. That is, it is the fact that these words are in quotation. In the case of characters like Dorothea Brooke, whose rhetoric and capacity for sympathy seem at times to converge with that of the narrator, direct discourse acts as a bulwark against such incursions into narratorial rhetoric, clearly setting off the speech of the character from that of the narrator.\textsuperscript{24} That this divide between direct discourse and narration is as imaginary, or fictional, as the interiority of free indirect discourse makes this division no less “real,” and no less necessary to the cosmology of the realist text. The insistence, typographical and ontological, on the distinction between direct speech and narration in fact illuminates both the things realism wants to say about the extra-textual world, and the formal schemas by which it is structured.

Whether direct discourse is elegant or disjointed, wise or foolish, like or unlike that of the narrator, it has of necessity a fundamentally different status than that of other language in the omnisciently narrated text. “Her dress was lovely” does not, cannot, mean the same thing when it is part of narration as it does when it is rendered as direct discourse. In the former case we take it

\textsuperscript{21} Banfield, \textit{Unspeakable Sentences} 242.
\textsuperscript{23} Eliot, \textit{Adam Bede} 220.
\textsuperscript{24} For two of the authors I discuss in this project, Harriet Martineau and Henry James, such convergences are in fact constitutive of style. This stylistic flatness is something I will take up at length later on.
as a statement of fact. In the latter, we take it as a statement of character, and consequently hold it up against other information (about “her,” “the dress,” the speaker of the sentence) in order to bring its inflections to light (this is sarcasm, this is ass-kissing, this is blind sisterly affection) and in turn discover things about the character who speaks these words (she is kind, he is besotted, she has good taste or a sharp tongue or a knack for seeing the best in people). In the first case the sentence is world-building. In the second it is character-building. Direct discourse is of course still “of” the novel, and its language subject to analysis as such. But it is language constrained by character, and because of its double origin—because it does and does not come from the text, because it speaks for both the language of the novel entire and the particulars of a single character—it stands just to the side of the novel’s other language.

This “to the side” quality, what I have elsewhere termed the “minor” or “mereness” of talk, is not simply a byproduct of this form’s ontological or typographical difference from narration. It is, rather, a necessity of that narration, an other on whose minorness narration depends. Audrey Jaffe argues that the “omniscience” or omniscient narration is not a form or position of knowledge, but a constant making and remaking of the boundaries of knowledge, a staking out of narratorial territory whose claims are, “not so much evidence for the possession of knowledge as an emphatic display of knowledge, a display, precisely, of what is not being taken for granted.” 25, 26 It is on the construction of a relatively limited “other” that such claims, Jaffe continues, depend:

The qualities… of omniscience depend, in order for us to perceive them at all, on their opposites. Knowledge appears to us only in opposition to its absence; an effect of unboundedness is created in contrast to one of limitation. Thus when omniscient narration demonstrates the ability to transcend the boundaries that confine characters, it must construct the very boundaries it displays itself transcending. 27

Jaffe is writing here about the relationship of more limited forms, like the point of view of character, to the expansive perspective and knowledge claims of an omniscience which is itself constituted by the tension between an all-encompassing rhetorical position and a more limited, character-esque “speaking from.” This dichotomy, between the wise but disembodied, and the limited but more human/accessible, can be applied not only to the relationship of narrator and character, but also to a more purely rhetorical understanding of the novel’s language. By marking off language that is other than or marginal to language that is designated the novel’s “own,” the text makes a claim not only about the knowledge of the narrator vis-à-vis the story-world, but also about the ability of the novel form to contain myriad kinds of language—including the one that would seem least containable in print: the oral. If the novel can include talk it can include anything—but in order for talk’s inclusion to make this implicit argument, it must be legible as other, as minor, as non-novelistic.

27 Jaffe, Vanishing Points 2.
III. Coleridge, Lyric, and the Victorian Talker

The particular significations of direct discourse and its place in the development of both the novel and novel theory evidently arise within a broader context of the relationship between orality and print in the nineteenth century. I will not attempt any comprehensive survey of this leviathan subject. To do so would be both impossible and misleading, in large part because talk as embodied human activity is not my subject here. Rather, I am interested in the ways that the novel—and adjacent print forms—takes up, defines, and contains the oral during the Victorian period, and how the history of such engagements has been conscripted into narratives about the “rise of the novel.” It is not only the nineteenth-century novel, or even nineteenth-century print, that tells a story of orality’s relative decline. It is also, I argue, necessary to novel criticism and theories of the novel to see the novel, for better or worse, as a sort of devouring form, one which takes in other kinds of language and, in doing so, simultaneously neutralizes them and makes them accessible in ways they otherwise would not be. The “difference,” then, of direct discourse is indicated both by its referential and punctuational distinction from narration, and by its association with language that is spoken, rather than printed. The latter at once curtails its potency, and gives it a frisson of reality; a suggestion of embodied utterance and all that comes with it. It is this dual status—more and less real, more and less powerful—that I have associated with “talk.” Talk as a referent for direct discourse not only indicates the latter’s function of representing oral activity, it also aligns this activity and its representation with a broader set of markers. The specific orality of “talk” connects verbal utterance with the capacious social life that the novel often takes as its subject, and with the quotidian, even boring or frivolous, nature of that subject.

The antithesis of talk not just to print, but to a certain literary seriousness, is evident in the Victorian reception of both the writing and the person—the relentlessly verbal person—of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge was a famously copious talker, enough so that he served as the model for Frank Saltram, the great but disorganized, dissolute talker of Henry James’s short story, “The Coxon Fund.” Coleridge’s verbal abundance was routinely described as a sort of tragic diverting of his energies: Because he talked, he could not write. William Hazlitt’s portrait of Coleridge in The Spirit of the Age treats speaking almost as a form of thievery, one that robs both Coleridge and his future readers of an externalization of his genius: “Those stores of thought and language that he pours out incessantly” in speech, “are lost like drops of water in the ground.” “If Mr. Coleridge had not been the most impressive talker of his age, he would probably have been the finest writer; but he lays down the pen to make sure of an auditor, and mortgages the admiration of posterity for the stare of an idler.”

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28 Not to mention, of course, the shift that came (again) at the end of the nineteenth century, when the newest media of/for linguistic representation were no longer necessarily visual and print-based. The realist novel’s encounter with this turn back to orality is something I take up more explicitly in my final chapter on Henry James.

29 In their preface to Coleridge the Talker, Richard W. Armour and Raymond F. Howes write that for “later critics” who could not hear Coleridge directly, his talking has become “one of the major tragedies of English literature.” (Coleridge the Talker [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1940], vii).


31 Hazlitt, The Spirit of the Age 214.
It is worth noting that Coleridge’s verbal utterance, whether it is depicted as genius or compulsion, is more often than not described, as in Hazlitt’s work, as “talk.” This is true of both nineteenth-century descriptions of Coleridge and of later critical discussions of his proximity. “Talk” becomes code for the formlessness and abundance of an utterance, a way of distinguishing it both from print and from something verbal, but more limited, e.g., “speech.” “Nothing could be more copious than [Coleridge’s] talk,” writes Thomas Carlyle in the famously catty depiction of Coleridge in Carlyle’s Life of John Sterling.\textsuperscript{32} “It was talk not flowing anywhither like a river, but spreading everywhither in inextricable currents and regurgitations like a lake or sea; terribly deficient in definite goal or aim, nay often in logical intelligibility… most times, you felt logically lost; swamped near to drowning in this tide of ingenious vocables, spreading out boundless as if to submerge the world.”\textsuperscript{33} “Talk” designates an orality that is messy, unfocused, too much, and whose formlessness and superabundance are mutually implicated. The liquidity of Coleridge’s talk is not even fluvial—a river, it seems, is too well-formed, too narrative, even. It goes somewhere, has a direction. But Coleridge’s talk overflows any such bounds and eschews any such directionality. If it contains brilliance, this brilliance is lost in the flood. It is an orality that, too, is unamenable to print. In his preface to Specimens of the Table Talk of the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a book whose titular purpose is to give form and permanence to Coleridge’s overflowing words, Henry Nelson Coleridge writes, “Such acts of spirit as these were too subtle to be fettered down on paper; they live—if they can live anywhere—in the memories alone of those who witnessed them.”\textsuperscript{34} If Coleridge’s talk kept him from producing more or better writing than he did (something that is evidently debatable) it is not simply because it diverted his energies, but because it constituted a fundamentally different activity than writing, one engaged in by a fundamentally different type of person. The conception of Coleridge as “a talker” is founded not just on a division between talking and writing, but also on a division between talkers and writers. And the formlessness of Coleridge’s talk is therefore evident not only in that talk’s length and unintelligibility, but also, in the reading of Carlyle among others, in Coleridge’s body:

The whole figure and air, good and amiable otherwise, might be called flabby and irresolute; expressive of weakness under possibility of strength. He hung loosely on his limbs, with knees bent, and stooping attitude; in walking, he rather shuffled than decisively stept; and a lady once remarked, he could never fix which side of the garden walk would suit him best, but continually shifted, in corkscrew fashion, and kept trying both.”\textsuperscript{35}

The orality of “talk,” then, is one in which the bodily nature of verbal utterance is a source of vitality and charisma and also a form of circumscription that limits such utterance to the particular body, and particular moment, of its uttering. It is at once too much—too long, too meandering, too capacious—and not enough: evanescent, unrecorded, “living in the memories alone of those who witnessed it.”

\textsuperscript{32} Thomas Carlyle, The Life of John Sterling (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897), 55.
\textsuperscript{33} Carlyle, The Life of John Sterling 55.
\textsuperscript{34} H.N. Coleridge, Preface to Specimens of the Table Talk of the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. H.N. Coleridge, v-xxi (London: John Murray: 1836), vi.
\textsuperscript{35} Carlyle, The Life of John Sterling 54.
To some extent the Victorian construction of Coleridge as talker can be seen as a synecdoche for the period’s relationship to the figure of the Romantic poet, and to the kinds of orality such a figure suggests. Much has been written, both in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and in the nineteenth, about the ways in which Victorian poetic forms evolved in response to the ascendance of the novel. Specifically, several critics have argued that the lyric’s status as the poetic form—the form that effectively stands in for poetry in general—arises in large part out of a Victorian literary marketplace and print culture in which the novel, and its association with print rather than orality, relegates the function of poetry to the subjective-expressive, a function that is understood as emanating from lyric’s connection to song and voice. In 1889 the critic John Addington Symonds wrote, “The public of the present time is a public of readers rather than hearers.” As a consequence of this shift from hearing to reading, Symonds writes, “No literature and no age has been more fertile of lyric poetry than English literature in the age of Victoria.” As Marion Thain points out, for Symonds, this fertility can only occur within the context of a culture that increasingly values the more capacious, more enduring novel in print: “Symonds’ essay suggests that the growing importance of the lyric genre within poetry is a result of the… erosion of the importance of poetry within the literary marketplace as a whole. The more poetry was defined in relation to and in opposition with the novel, the more it was equated with lyric as its quintessential form.” The novel has siphoned off the functions of both epic and drama, leaving to poetry the task of subjective expression, which is then coupled with the orality of lyric: “The genius of our century, debarred from epic, debarred from drama, falls back on idyllic and lyrical expression. In the idyll it satisfies its objective craving after art. In the lyric it pours forth personality.” This expressive orality comes to be understood as one that stands in contrast to the historical and historicizing work of the novel, and to the poetic modes that predate the predominance of lyric. Prose narrative speaks to and about its context, locating both its readers and its objects of representation in a particular historical situation. Lyric, on the other hand, especially as it comes to be understood by the literary criticism of the early twentieth century, has a simultaneously free-floating and direct quality. As Virginia Jackson writes in her discussion of the making-lyric of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, “Whereas other poetic genres… may remain embedded in specific historical occasions or narratives, and thus depend upon some description of those occasions or narratives for their interpretation… the poetry that comes to be understood as lyric after the eighteenth century is thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading.”

Symonds is not alone among the Victorians alone in associating Victorian lyric poetry with the oral and the subjective—we might think too of John Stuart Mill’s description of poetry as “overheard…feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude” Yet the expressive subjectivity of lyric is distinct from that of either individual oral expression or mimetic speech in narrative fiction. If “talk” as I have described it signifies both the fictive

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39 Symonds, “A Comparison” 244.
utterances of direct discourse, and the quotidian activity of human speech, lyric orality, on the other hand, implies an expressive orality that is at once more “real” and more purely formal, less connected to the particular speaking body. Jonathan Culler, drawing on Käte Hamburger’s reading of Hegel’s account of lyric writes, “Though the Hegelian framework requires that lyric be subjectivity encountering itself, subjectivity is not the expression of personal affect nor the articulation of individual experience, but above all a formal unifying function for lyric…” Mimesis of enunciation is distinguished from real enunciation, and lyric belongs to real enunciation of statement, nonmimetic and nonfictive.”

Coleridge’s “talk,” then, can be viewed as a fascinating yet frightening other not only for the language of the novel, but for that of lyric as well. While it shares lyric’s expressive orality, its subjectivity is all too subjective—too tied to Coleridge’s “weak,” “irresolute” body. Yet by associating this otherness with Coleridge Victorian writers posit this messy orality as the end of a spectrum of lyric utterance, the place that lyric’s subjective orality might go if left unfettered—or perhaps, if all too fettered by the speaking body of the poet. Such an association, such a potential denigration, of lyric utterance perversely furthers prose’s annexion of the oral, simultaneously disavowing and making use of orality’s potency. If lyric is what is “left to” poetry in the Victorian period, the novel, it seems, must find a way to leave it and to keep it at once. Talk, I believe, becomes that way.

IV. Talk Culture/Print Culture

This division between the writer and the talker is part of a more general narrative about the interaction between print and orality in the nineteenth century, the structuring dynamic of which is print’s ascendance and orality’s increasing marginality. There has been ongoing debate about precisely how, and if, print marginalizes the oral, but it seems clear that, at the very least, print worries or boasts that it has done so. This state of affairs is made more complicated by the fact that such debate—and such boasting or worrying—often takes place in print. That print more easily facilitates the examination of generically, geographically, and temporally disparate discourses—like, say, debates about print and orality that span many years and many miles—becomes implicit evidence for its dominance, an argument made by the mere presence of the debate. Print can see both itself, and its other. Ivan Kreilkamp traces this debate in Voice and the Victorian Storyteller, arguing that the figure of the storyteller, an avatar for a lost or diminished orality, emerges in Victorian print culture not because print truly excised the oral, even from the acts of reading and composition, but because print required such a figure both to position itself as a site for imaginative community-building, and to register despair over the “diminution of the authority of the individual cultural producer.” The narrative of orality’s banishment, Kreilkamp argues, even when it takes the form of nostalgia or longing, is more about the way that print—especially the Victorian novel—would like to describe itself than it is about registering the

43 Ivan Kreilkamp, Voice and the Victorian Storyteller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7. Quoting David Vincent, Kreilkamp argues that, “[a]t every level, the sound of the human voice was magnified rather than quelled by the mass production and distribution of prose and verse. The simple relationship between the faceless publisher and the soundless reader was disrupted my men and women reciting, singing, shouting, chanting, declaiming, and narrating” (3).
demise of a particular oral form. And theorists of the novel, in Kreilkamp’s reading, have from the Victorian period onward relied upon a narrative of the novel’s own making in order to explain, or argue for, its cultural dominance: “As analysts of Victorian fiction, we have become seduced by one of that fiction’s own inventions.” The Victorian novel, it seems, has been very good at telling us how to talk about it, and rather than take its imaginative tropes as such, critics have taken this troping as mimesis. Yet if, as Kreilkamp argues, orality does not disappear with the advent of print (what would such a world even look, or sound, like?), it seems impossible to deny that the meaning of oral activity, like the meaning of anything, is not static. If nineteenth-century readers were still “reciting, singing, shouting” etc., they were doing so with and to texts produced by people they would never know, read by others they would never see. Print may not actually have been a purely disembodied medium—it may have been delivered in books, read aloud by human beings—but the idea of Victorian print was of a space at once enduring and imaginary, in which orality could be preserved or contained.

The disassociation of bodily materiality and print also extends to ideas about the physicality of print per se, and the bodies of readers who encounter it. There is a rich critical literature devoted to the bodily intensities attributed to the act of reading in the nineteenth century. Thomas Laqueur, Garrett Stewart, and Nicholas Dames have all demonstrated the ways in which Victorians understood reading as a profoundly bodily process. Yet reading, in many of these accounts, is absorptive precisely insofar as it is transporting. That is, reading registers as overwhelming bodily sensation because it orients the reader either inward towards her own feeling and imagination, or towards an imaginary projection of mind and text, rather than the physical world at hand. And in this readerly absorption and concomitant physical intensity the other materiality of the novel—that is, the fact of the book itself—often falls away. Leah Price notes that this Victorian ideal of the immaterial text persists in, or is even magnified by, twenty-first-century descriptions of technologies like the e-reader. In Jeff Bezos’ assertion that the Kindle, “emulated the way in which ‘the physical book is so elegant that the artifact itself disappears into the background,’” Price finds an echo of George Eliot’s vanishing text, that, “as we read, seems to undergo a sort of transfiguration before us. We no longer hold heavily in our hands an octavo of some hundred pages, over which the eye laboriously travels, hardly able to drag along with it the restive mind; but we seem to be in companionship with a spirit, who is

44 The storyteller, in Kreilkamp’s reading, is essentially created in print in order to be murdered by the novel, an act which positions the novel as the new repository of verbal authenticity: “It becomes the novel’s task to present the death of the speaker as a resurrection in print. By reincarnating the charismatic speaker as the author, the novel promises to reconstitute a society of dispersed and isolated readers as a community on the order of an earlier organic speech community” (Kreilkamp Voice and the Victorian Storyteller 23-4).
46 Several critics have noted the Victorian tendency to imaginatively or descriptively dematerialize print as a way of taxonomizing different readers’ engagements with the book. Leah Price, in her discussion of the book as material object, writes that an alignment with the immateriality of “text” over the material book object become the mark of an intelligent and cultivated Victorian reader: “They cathected the text in proportion as they disowned the book.” (How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012], 4.)
48 Garrett Stewart, for instance, describes the reader as “a drastic abstraction of the self, spirited away from self-identity by text” (Dear Reader 10).
transfusing himself into our souls’”

The perfect book, it seems, is one that does not register as a one. Eliot’s description of the transfiguration of the book simultaneously liberates the reader from the book object and from the constraints of her own body. The hand no longer holds heavily; the eye no longer drags along laboriously. The only sensation is one which might not be a sensation at all: the transfusion of the author’s soul into the reader’s.

I am interested here not in whether the act of reading or the book itself are or not material (they are and they aren’t, of course—that is part of their pleasure), but rather in the paradoxical troping of the oppositions between print and orality, in which materiality is alternately figured as a source of endurance or vanishing, a site for continual reflection or the vagaries of bodily impulse. Such oppositions suggest that the material and the imaginative or abstract are not ground to be occupied, but concepts via which print and orality play out a dialectic of presence and absence, reality and unreality. That these oppositions are temporal in nature speaks to the ways in which this dialectic is catalyzed by two circumstances of the Victorian period: The development of print’s ability to circulate and store information—that is, its ability to make ideas move quickly, yet last for a long time—and the shift to what Benedict Anderson (borrowing in part from Walter Benjamin), calls “an idea of ‘homogenous, empty time,’ … measured by clock and calendar,” a shift of which the novel is both cause and effect.

Print, at least in the critical imaginary, has come to be associated simultaneously with a measurable, accretive, narrative time, and with a sort of non-time, a disembodied eternity, or, to put it another way: death. It is, in both cases, the medium’s ability to facilitate and contain complexity that distinguishes its temporality; its capacity to store information so that it can be returned to, built upon, analyzed. But this storage function is also what severs the ideas contained in print from embodied thought, from memory, from the human. The time of the book, the time of print itself, is a sort of imaginary forever, the time of knowledge that might always be accessed, but is no longer stored solely in human memory. The eternity of the book becomes almost a place to be visited, time something both to be given to and demanded of the reader: Time to read quickly or slowly, to return to difficult passages, to read again books that are treasured or initially misunderstood. Verbal utterance, on the other hand, demands more immediate reaction. Because of its evanescence, it must do its work right away, or not at all.

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50 Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 2006), 24. Here, Anderson also aligns his account of the novel’s temporality with Erich Auerbach’s distinction between medieval and modern conceptions of simultaneity: “What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of ‘homogenous, empty time,’ in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). The “old-fashioned novel” (of which his primary examples are the works of Balzac and “dollar-dreadful(s)”), Anderson writes, is “a device” for the presentation of such time; “a complex gloss on the word ‘meantime.’” (25). This temporal restructuring is, for Anderson, integral to the novel’s role as a part of the conceptual groundwork of nationalism.

51 Freidrich Kittler contends that: “Writing… stores the fact of its authorization. It celebrates the storing monopoly of the God who invented it. Since the realm of this God consists of signs that only nonreaders can’t make sense of, all books are books of the dead… The book itself coincides with the realm of the dead beyond all senses into which it lures us.” (Gramophone, Film Typewriter, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986], 8). Walter Ong, too, is explicit about the association of print with death: “One of the most startling paradoxes inherent in writing is its close association with death… The paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers.” (Orality and Literacy [New York: Routledge, 2002], 80).
Walter Ong writes, “All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of other fields that register in human sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent… If I stop the movement of sound I have nothing—only silence, no sound at all.”

The oral, then, is routinely used as a figure for a kind of literary reception that is fickle and unreflective; a symptom of the more general problem of “public opinion.” In The Principles of Success in Literature G.H Lewes turns repeatedly to the figure of the “orator” to either contrast or magnify the dangers of appealing only to public opinion—of appealing, in other words, only to the present: “An orator whose purpose is to persuade men must speak the things they wish to hear; an orator, who purpose is to move men, most also avoid disturbing the emotional effect by any obtrusion of intellectual antagonism; but an author whose purpose is to instruct men, who appeals to the intellect, must be careless of their opinions, and think only of truth.”

The orator’s problem is a positional one—he must appeal not to “intellect” but to “opinion.” He does not have time to “instruct.” Instead he must “move.” The trope of the charismatic but insincere speaker riling up a crowd, the demagogue who appeals to feeling rather than thought to achieve his own ends, is here converted into a problem of medium rather than morals. Both orator and listener are constrained by the limitations of speaking and hearing. They do not have the ability to reflect in or on print, and so the emotional work of oration proceeds in service to feeling, rather than truth. Lewes goes on:

Who does not know what it is to listen to public speakers pouring forth expressions of hollow belief and sham enthusiasm, snatching at commonplaces with a fervor as of faith, emphasizing insincerities as if to make up by emphasis what is wanting in feeling, all the while saying not only what they do not believe, but what the listeners know they do not believe, and what the listeners, though they roar assent, do not themselves believe—a turbulence of sham, the very noise of which stuns the conscience?

Oration here is a violent, “turbulent” feedback loop between speaker and listener, compelling agreement even in the entire absence of belief. The aggression and intensity of the event, the conscience-stunning noise and roared assent, are produced by the bodies of orator and crowd, yet float oddly free of them. The orator wants in both feeling and belief, the crowd in the latter—so by what are they compelled? They are compelled, it seems, by orality itself, which brings with it an immediacy that is both absorbing and dangerous, and that stands in contrast to a print in which truth, eventually, will out.

52 Ong, Orality and Literacy 32.
53 George Henry Lewes, The Principles of Success in Literature (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1894), 94.
55 Lewes, The Principles of Success in Literature 98.
56 The conception of print as allowing for the eventual revelation of truth, and the slower cultivation of ethical and aesthetic sensibility, was also crucial to the mid-century debates over the Copyright Act. Chris R. Vanden Bossche notes that:

While taking care not to blame the public, the proponents of the bill argued that readers could not be counted on to recognize the merits of imaginative literature… As Thomas Hood concluded, ‘works of permanent value… creep but slowly into circulation and repute, but then become classics for ever.’… Rather than a public that consumes texts, the proponents of copyright proposed that imaginative literature shapes readers into a ‘nation’; it ‘create[s] the taste’ by which
And yet orality, especially when it can be held at arm’s length by nostalgia, also offers a vitality, an embodied, human literature marked by the shared community of speaker and listener (even if this community is something as broad as “humanity,” or as fleeting as “the moment of telling”), a benevolent version of Lewes’s narrator and crowd. Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” is perhaps the most influential articulation of such an orality. Print, for Benjamin, is a kind of isolation, a falling away of “experience which is passed from mouth to mouth.”

The novel, he writes, is the archetypal form of this isolation, which is signaled and bred by print:

What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book… What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it… The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual.

But the essay, though it sees in the novel a sign of modernity’s disunity, the disjunction between experience and the language we have to communicate it, positions the novel as a sort of middle ground between storytelling and a form of communication which “confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that also brings about a crisis in the novel”: Information. Information, for Benjamin, is characterized in large part by its immediacy: It must be instantly assimilable, “shot through with explanation” and must “lay claim to prompt verifiability.” Unlike the story, which “does not expend itself,” but rather, “preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time,” information must “surrender completely” to the moment of its telling. Benjamin’s information sounds in many respects like the oration described by Lewes—demanding immediate reaction, withholding the possibility of reflection. In information, print would seem to have become its opposite.

This possibility, and its attendant anxieties, is not merely a product of viewing the nineteenth century from the vantage point of the twentieth. Richard Menke identifies distinctly Victorian concerns about the ways in which, “new modes of rapid communication and ramped-up data collection threatened to exceed any capacity for diffusion, assimilation, or use.” The realist novel, Menke writes, “offered a forum for exploring the possibilities of such losses and disjunctions… for imagining whether dislocated, dematerialized information about reality might be appreciated. Through this process, the work takes its place in the body of the national literature, a set of texts that embody the national ethos.


60 Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 89.
61 Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 90.
register as real knowledge.” Registering both the continuities and discontinuities, the pleasures and dangers, of the information network, the Victorian realist novel “play[s] out a set of antinomies.”

“The new media ecology of the nineteenth-century,” Menke writes, “tended to align storage with materiality, transmission with immateriality, so that writing—with its dual capacity for storage and transmission—occupied a shifting and ambiguous ground between the two. Along these lines, we should think of Victorian realism itself as an exploration of the power and the limits of written textuality in an age busy producing alternatives to it.”

Although the novel might seem at first glance to be part of the problem rather than a solution, Benjamin too registers it as a form that sits between the converging poles of orality and information. Like Georg Lukács, Benjamin sees the novel as the only form that wrestles, because it must wrestle, with the idea of totality; which attempts to piece together the life whose wholeness would previously have been taken for granted. Benjamin quotes Lukács to make this point: “Only in the novel are meaning and life, and thus the essential and the temporal, separated… The duality of inwardness and outside world can here be overcome for the subject ‘only’ when he sees the… unity of his entire life… The insight which grasps this unity… becomes the divinatory-intuitive grasping of the unattained and therefore inexpressible meaning of life.” Such a grasping, or a grasping at, constitutes the novel’s attempt to contain the potential formlessness of both orality and print, which are in turn registers of the potential formlessness of the world itself. Between speech and information, then, the novel would stand as a form that might instantiate both wholeness and its opposite.

V. Realism’s Minor Forms

That “The Storyteller” turns to a foundational text of novel theory in order to elucidate the broader relationship of print to the oral isn’t so surprising given the use the essay makes of the novel form. But this turn also indicates the ways in which the nineteenth-century novel mirrors or replicates the dualisms—material and not, present and not, real and not—of the period’s competing modes of verbal expression. And for Lukács, this project, of representing both totality and its splitting in two, must take the form of a specific novelistic mode: realism.

An interest in realism, like an interest in talk, seems in some ways simple, basic, kind of… cute. There’s a certain pliability or openness to these categories, an easy offering up of the object for examination. Yet both talk and realism share a sprawling, messy heterogeneity, a continual receding of an object that at times feels all-too approachable. If talk in the form of direct discourse allows us to approach a large unwieldy thing—that isn’t a thing—the realist novel—by way of the small, the minor, or the legible, this is in part because realism itself often...

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64 Menke, *Telegraphic Realism* 21.
65 Menke, *Telegraphic Realism* 11.
67 I am evidently thinking of Sianne Ngai’s discussion of “cuteness” here, which might seem odd given her assertion that, “Realist verisimilitude and precision are excluded in the making of cute objects” (“The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 [Summer 2005]: 815). Yet, if realism as a mode of representation is not especially “cute” the construction of realism in the critical imaginary has given the form a distinct “cuteness,” in much the terms Ngai lays out. Lacking “contours” and “detail,” the realism of novel theory seems constructed both as a placeholder for the aesthetically minor or approachable, and, as Ngai writes, “to excite… sadistic desires for mastery and control.” (816).
seems to instantiate a minorness of its own. Much of the renewed attention to realism that has lately emerged in Victorian studies has taken the form of a revision of both New Criticism and New Historicism’s often derogatory accounts of the Victorian realist text. As Lauren Goodlad writes in her call to re-examine criticism’s received accounts of the realist project, “In a way that has attracted surprisingly little discussion, the reputation for plodding artlessness that attached itself to mid-Victorian fiction at the end of the nineteenth century helped prepare the ground for the rather different claim at the end of the twentieth century that realist fiction inculcated bourgeois norms and authorized modern power.”

Goodlad, like Catherine Gallagher, Harry Shaw, and Jed Esty, grounds her reorientation towards realism in the assertion that realism, while ethically and aesthetically invested in representing the extra-textual world, never imagined it might do so by means of a pure mimesis. Realism’s representational project, Goodlad argues, involves a twofold relation to the idea of “world,” and such a relation produces not formal stagnation and convention, but a rich array of texts and aesthetic practices.

…there is, we contend, no reason to suppose that this representational affinity shuts down the creation of compellingly innovative forms, styles, or techniques. To the contrary, realism’s penchant for registering the unregistered has prompted centuries of aesthetic experimentation along two primary axes of world-making poiesis. Realist art… is both constitutively worlded (in taking the material world for its premise) and worlding (in making new ways of seeing, knowing, thinking, and being palpable to those worlds).

This dual relationship to “world”—both inward and outward facing—involves a relationship to the “real” that is far more complex than one of reference or mimesis. It is one, as several critics have noted, in which the real becomes not an object to be imported into the text, or a system to be described by it, but a source of desire, a thing made in and by the novel itself. Under such circumstances, the task of the critic becomes, as Grace Lavery writes, “that of finding a middle ground between truth claim…and disclaimer…to describe the movement between a fantasy of knowledge and the fantasy of its dissolution.”

Audrey Jaffe, who also describes realism’s relationship to the real as one of desire and “fantasy,” notes the way such a critical project takes on and up the desires of the texts it examines: “The continued attempt to define novelistic realism suggests an addition to realism’s numerous effects: the way in which realism’s very persuasiveness—its apparent purchase on the real—creates a critical version of realist desire, a desire to know how it works.”

This continual defining and redefining of the realist project, the critical desire to find the object or form or stylistic convention of realism is not the place this project intends to go. In arguing for the importance of talk and direct discourse in accounts of the realist novel, I do not mean to say that such talk is the essential realist form. On the contrary, as I hope I have suggested, it is the minor, dismissible quality of talk as both activity and textual form that gives it its paradoxical importance. In attending to such a minor form I am of course taking up a

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critical archive that centers realism around the small, or, as Roland Barthes writes in “The Reality Effect,” the “superfluous” or “insignificant.” This archive, however, reaches back to Victorian accounts of realism. In debating what forms were realist—or realistic—and why, realism attempted, always imperfectly, to define its own contours. In his 1883 essay “A Note on Realism” Robert Louis Stevenson writes:

In literature… the great change of the past century has been effected by the admission of detail… For some time [this style] signified and expressed a more ample contemplation of the conditions of man’s life; but it has recently (at least in France) fallen into a merely technical and decorative stage… All representative art, which can be said to live, is both realistic and ideal; and the realism about which we quarrel is a matter purely of externals. It is no especial cultus of nature and veracity, but a mere whim of veering fashion, that has made us turn our back upon the larger, more various, and more romantic art of yore… This question of realism, let it then be clearly understood, regards not in the least degree the fundamental truth, but only the technical method, of a work of art.

For Stevenson, the bare fact of the “admission of detail” into literature is neutral, or even salutary. But when the detail becomes visible as such, when it becomes visible as a “technical method” of representation, it ceases to represent. The detail then becomes opaque, rather than transparent, riveting attention to the “externals” of the text’s language per se, rather than allowing its reader to see through language into the “conditions of man’s life.” For Stevenson, the pitfalls of realism lie not in any particular failure of the detail as representational method, but in realism’s reduction of artistic production to mere method. The detail then becomes only technique, only fashion, only language.

Though Stevenson seizes on the detail as the representative formal feature of realist literature, I am less interested in his specific interest in this form, and more interested in what Stevenson says about realist forms in general. Stevenson’s detail, like the talk of direct discourse, is a form that disavows itself, one whose minorness is both a sign of its “reality” and a way for the text in which it appears to put distance between itself and an aestheticism that might threaten to altogether forsake the world. Realism, then, is characterized by a persistent shifting of forms which is itself in part the product of the desire to find a form that would not be legible as such. But if realism, this project argues, must disavow the visibly “formal” as a kind of “mere language,” it is nevertheless a genre deeply concerned with the ways in which linguistic forms can themselves be real. That is, the project argues, the realist text not only wants to describe or represent but also to in some instantiate a world. It wants to engage in a kind of world-making that seeks not to mirror a world more real than the one of the text, but to suggest that the text is itself another form of real world. Talk, with its minorness, its basic quality, allows or requires the novel to at once disavow it and build this world around it. And the realist novel, in centering itself around this vanishing, minor object, centers itself around an absence. It is this centering that in fact indicates the necessity of the absent object for realism’s representational project. It is

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not the presence of the world in the text that makes the realist novel possible, but rather the world’s absence that makes space for the novelistic real.
Chapter I: Harriet Martineau’s Feeble Realism

I. Illustrating the Real

To a twenty-first-century reader, the most striking aspect of Harriet Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* may be its popularity. The novellas evinced a double economic shrewdness, one both formal and practical: They told, or attempted to tell, their readers about a set of political-economic rules by which they were, wittingly or unwittingly, already living, but in so doing they also fed a set of readerly desires to the financial benefit of their author. The *Illustrations* worked so well, contemporary reviewers wrote, because they successfully blended their didactic function with, “a grace, an animation, and a powerful pathos, rare even in works of pure amusement.” And it is this hybridity, the illustration of the principle alongside, or via, the affectively engaging delineation of character and unfolding of narrative drama that has also established *Illustrations* as an important text of early Victorian realism; a text that helps make other texts possible. To read the *Illustrations* through this lens is inevitably a comparative project, one that asks them to disclose the realism of the 1850’s and beyond, linking it with forms from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that might be less immediately legible as novelistic. Such comparison often casts Martineau’s work as “proto,” exhibiting a kind of not-yet-ness: The characters lack the vivid specificity of those created by Dickens, and the narratorial asides don’t have the exquisitely bitchy insightfulness of Thackeray’s, or the godly/maternal empathy of Eliot’s. The *Illustrations*, in other words, seem to lose, or never to find, the pleasures of both style and representational specificity in the pursuit of their didactic goals. Nowhere is this more evident than in the texts’ dialogue, which comprises the bulk of the *Illustrations*. Direct discourse in *Illustrations of Political Economy* often feels wooden or merely expedient, stylistically homogenous enough to make it seem as if the words spoken by one character could have been spoken just as easily by another, and nakedly polemical enough to make these words seem to emanate not from a group of differing minds or bodies, but from a single officious school-teacher. Direct discourse feels, in other words, not quite “real.”

74 The initial monthly sales of *Illustrations of Political Economy* were around 10,000 copies, which Charles Fox, Martineau’s publisher, estimated meant they had about 144,000 readers. As Martineau’s biographer R.K. Webb succinctly puts it: “Her first important intuition of what the public wanted had been triumphantly accurate. She was famous.” (Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1960], 113-4). Yet to many later readers, the tale’s wild success seems hard to square with the experience of reading it. “It seems strange today,” Webb goes on to muse, “to read the praises which were bestowed on the Illustrations for their characterization, depiction and narration” (120).


77 The idea of realistic characters whose realism is evinced in large part by their speech is, of course, formally and historically specific. But if the mid-nineteenth century is where we find the explicit advocating of such a use of direct discourse, the form certainly served to specify character and suggest the proximity of story and discourse from the 18th century on (e.g. in Parson Adams’ speech in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*, or Mrs. Bennet’s in *Pride and...
It is precisely this not-quite-real quality that I read as essential not just to the literary-historical import of the *Illustrations*—that is, to their status as a link between the pamphlets and little books of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the novels of the 1850’s and beyond—but to their realism. That is, while the relative flatness of the texts’ direct discourse can be read as a kind of aesthetic failure, a place from which verisimilitude or stylistic complexity would evolve, I argue that it is via this flatness, the “feeble” (to use Martineau’s term) quality of the particulars of quoted speech, that Martineau makes a claim for the representational capabilities of narrative fiction, one that has surprising resonance well into the Victorian period. Such texts, Martineau contends, function not by elevating the mundane particulars of everyday life—that is, not by emphasizing what makes each person, object, or historical moment unique, but by dwelling with such particulars in order to ultimately dissolve or dismiss them; to demonstrate the way in which specificity resolves itself into the generalized abstraction of principle. If Martineau’s didacticism, along with her Comteian positivism, make her see such a project in the starkest of terms, she might nevertheless be viewed not as a counterpoint to but simply as limit-case of a will to totality that the realist novel, even at its most heterogeneous, never quite loses.

I take the term “feeble” from the description of the “organic state” that appears in Martineau’s *History of the Thirty Years’ Peace*:

> When war is over—(the critical period which admits the rule of the statesman’s will)—an organic state succeeds, wherein all individual will succumbs to the working of general laws. The statesman can then no longer be a political hero… He can only be a statesman in the new days who is the servant of principles—the agent of the great natural laws of society… Amidst the difficulty and perplexity of such changes, a whole nation may be heard… complaining that all its statesmen have grown small and feeble: but is not that the men have deteriorated, but that the polity is growing visibly organic.⁷⁸

In the organic state the statesman is indeed representative of the social whole, but no more so than any other member of the social body. The smallness or feebleness of a particular part expresses its integration into a heterogeneous yet cohesive totality, locatable not in a single principle, but in the relation of the part to the whole. For Martineau, narrative representation, like political representation, is both necessary and unnecessary; the former in that the representation, given the system which governs it, could not be other than it is, and the latter in that any particular representation might be exchanged or any other. If the theorization is striking, the

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*Prejudice*. The fact that by May of 1860 reviews of *The Mill on the Floss* could praise Eliot’s ability to, “make her characters speak for themselves,” or applaud the way that, “the dialogue is sustained with marvelous ability—the slightest shade of difference between the personages being rendered with great sublety,” only evidences the emergent visibility of what had already been an important aspect of the direct discourse’s function. (E.S. Dallas, “Review of The Mill on the Floss,” *The Times*, May 19, 1860, quoted in Raymond Chapman, *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction* [London: Longman, 1994], 234.)

⁷⁸ Harriet Martineau, *A History of the Thirty Years’ Peace vol. 1, A.D. 1816-1846* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1877), 433. War often plays the role of a salutary purgative event in Martineau’s work. The Crimean War, unfolding as “the Factory Controversy” was being written, appears only briefly in the text, but it does so as an agent of reformation: “One of the fair features of the just war in which we are engaged is, that it is sweeping away some of the corruptions, and rehabilitating some of the degeneracies bred by the long peace” (“The Factory Controversy: A Warning Against Meddling Legislation” [Manchester: The National Association of Factory Occupiers, 1855], 5.)
representation itself seems somewhat hobbled by this theorization; made superfluous to its own meaning. Yet, for Martineau, this concept of representation is not—or not only—a mark of the weakness of any given particular, but rather a sign of the vitality of the system that contains it.

The twenty-four stories that make up *Illustrations of Political Economy* all tend to follow a similar template: Though they are framed by omniscient third-person narration, lengthy passages of quoted dialogue comprise not just the bulk of the stories’ material, but also their evidence for the principles they seek to illustrate. Dialogues between characters who differ in their class-status, education, gender, or geographical origins, and (often consequently) in their opinions of trade unions, Corn Laws, and alcoholism among the working class, constitute the texts’ primary method of persuading their readers of the potency and pervasiveness of, “those natural laws by which and under which they subsist.”79 The texts’ form is in part a borrowing from the genres from which they evolved, e.g. the tract literature of authors like Hannah More. Linda Peterson has argued that Martineau shifts such generic forms in order to allot different characters’ competing points of view more equal space than they had in earlier didactic texts: “By allowing working-class characters to voice to their complaints without authorial critique and by investigating the motives for their actions, [Martineau] gives their radical politics more sympathetic treatment than More did, even as their economic and political judgments are exposed.”80 The shift in the *Illustrations*, then, is away from the interventionist narrators of the eighteenth-century tract in favor of the “pure” mimesis of dialogue. In place of the “things as they ought to be” of narration we are given the “things as they are” of story. Such a shift might be read, as it is by Peterson, as in keeping, albeit ambivalently, with the democratizing impulses of much early realism. Yet the resolvability of the differences expressed by characters’ speech would seem to model a democracy of form that is less about creating a capacious space for the expression of heterogeneous ideas, and more about demonstrating how such heterogeneity is, in the end, reducible to similarity. And this revelation, that difference is in the end either unreal or unimportant, is evident not just in the ideological evolutions various characters undergo, but in the speech with which they express such evolutions. It is evident, in other words, in the fact that Martineau’s characters tend to sound remarkably alike. The stylistic flatness and homogeneity of the *Illustrations’* direct discourse allows for a kind of clairvoyance, signaling that the differences expressed in speech will ultimately be resolved.

Although the text would seem to operate by first opposing and then resolving differing perspectives, *Illustrations of Political Economy* presents the opposed content of its characters’ utterances in language that immediately begins to efface the differences they express. In *A Manchester Strike* the speech of Allen, the subdued but heroic protagonist who is led almost against his will to head a doomed “turn-out,” provides a sort of fulcrum around which many of the narrative’s dialogues turn. His primary interlocutors make up two ends of the spectrums of both class and political-economic understanding: Clack, a fellow factory worker whose intractability in insisting upon a strike is matched by his prolixity in expressing his views, and whose name associates him with the professional applauders of nineteenth-century French theater, and Mr. Wentworth, a factory owner whose balanced, unemotional assessments of not just the strike depicted by the narrative, but also of the general structure of the relations between worker and employer, are evidently endorsed by the events of the text itself. Allen, in turn, holds

a middle ground between Clack and Wentworth, interrogating the assumptions of the one, and asking thoughtful questions of the other. Yet when speaking to these characters, who inhabit opposing ends of several spectrums, Allen’s voice tends to be synthesized with theirs, sharing, if not their points of view, their vocabulary and rhythms of speech. When Clack insists a strike is the only effective means of pressuring factory owners to raise workers’ wages, Allen provisionally takes up the position of doubter, wondering if the strike won’t do more harm than good:

“…what would you have us do?”  
“To root out Messrs. Mortimer and Rowe. Every man in our union must be sworn not to enter their gates; and if this does not frighten the masters and make them more reasonable, I don’t know what will.”

“And if, instead of being frightened, the masters unite to refuse us work till we give up our stand against Mortimer and Rowe, what are we to do then?”

“To measure our strength against theirs, to be sure. You know they can’t do without us.”

“Nor we without them; and where both parties are so necessary to each other, it is a pity they should fall out.”

“A pity! To be sure it is a pity…”  

This exchange is notable in part for the lack of proper names, or even pronouns, marking the two speakers’ utterances. Though names are attached to the first quotations in the dialogue, as the scene continues a reader might find herself looking back through the text in order to assign each utterance to its proper speaker, and without the occasional “Clack said” or “he remarked” to set them off from one another, the utterances have a tendency to flow into one another—the quotation mark begins to feel a somewhat weak barrier between words.

But more than this lack of character markers, it is the shared rhythm and vocabulary of the two speakers’ words that creates a sense of continuity between their speech. Allen and Clack, though they disagree about the potential effects of a strike—that is, although the content of their speech is at odds—both speak with a similar simplicity of style that is nonetheless lucid and grammatical. Both lack markers of class or region in their speech, and both speak in a way we might call “almost literary”: not unpleasing, not unclear, but unadorned; the sort of Paine-ian plain speech that would seem to argue for its truthfulness by saying nothing about itself. The language, that is of common sense. The dialogue, too, proceeds via the exchange of a set of shared terms put forth by one speaker and then taken up by the other: “Frighten” is first used by Clack, then employed by Allen. “Pity” is used by Allen and then Clack. Allen turns Clack’s statement that, “You know they can’t do without us,” into the first half of a longer utterance, finishing a sentence Clack does not realize is incomplete. Allen’s “nor we without them” turns the space after Clack’s words into a caesura, rather than an end. And finally, there are the rhythmic parallels between Clack’s speech and Allen’s: the sing-song-y, “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,” cadence of, “To measure our strength against theirs, to be sure,”

and its repetition in the rest of Clack’s words and then in Allen’s: ‘gainst theirs, to be sure
/can’t do without us/ nor we without them.

The opposition, then, of the views of the Illustrations’ speakers is almost always
accompanied by a stylistic similarity that knits together opposing viewpoints into the
language of a unified articulation. Individual utterance thereby simultaneously maintains
its evidentiary form as a kind of testimony, as particular language guaranteed by a
particular speaking body, and suggests, via the stylistic flatness and interchangeability of
the particular utterance, that any such particularity is always subservient to larger
systems. The importance of the Illustrations’ utterances resides not in their status as
individual assertions, but in their ability to create a kind of formal network, and a kind of
social interaction. And this is, of course, exactly the argument that the Illustrations wants
to make: The principle may be articulated by a single utterance, but it arises out of a
social and economic system in which relation produces reality. As Elaine Freedgood
argues, the economic principles the text espouses are ultimately rendered as structures of
characters’ social lives: “Profit is symbolically socialized in Martineau’s account of
laissez faire… [and] individuals… are transmogrified… into a collective body, each
member of which benefits all other members by full participation in the capitalist
enterprise” 82 The collectivizing of individuals is both necessary to and a product of the
economic system Martineau describes, and by producing such collective forms of social
life this economic system simultaneously produces the conditions under which it can be
understood. In this reading, the immanent sociality of free-market industrial capitalism is
not just revealed by the lessons learned at the end of each illustration. It is the very logic
by which the illustrations operate. Social cohesion would be the result, and not the
casualty, of free markets, competition, and minimal governmental regulation of industry.
The progress and growth of society requires an increase in capital, and the collective need
for an increase in capital creates a mutual interest which in turn brings together the social
body whose growth has made it necessary. Ella, the protagonist of Weal and Woe in
Garveloch, and her husband, Angus, understand their relation to their employers—who
might seem to be their economic antagonists—in precisely these terms: “Seeing so
clearly as they did the importance of an increase of capital in a society which was adding
to its numbers every day, they… saw that the interest of the Company, and of every
individual employed by it, was one and the same… Angus and Ella guarded the capital of
their employers as if it had been their own.” 83

And it is this logic, in which individual difference is effaced by the collectivizing social
forms of industrial capitalism, that allows for stylistic homogeneity not just between two
speakers in a dialogue, but among large groups of characters, who routinely utter relatively
complex statements in unison. The group, of factory workers, fishermen, or residents of a town,
is often figured in the Illustrations as a collectivized character, and as a site of both power and
danger. The direct speech of these groups tends to render them less as a collection of competing
personalities and opinions, and more as a sort of chorus spontaneously producing the same
thoughts in the same verbal forms. In A Manchester Strike, a union meeting is asked to consider

82 Elaine Freedgood, “Banishing Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy,” Victorian

83 Martineau, Weal and Woe in Garveloch 86-7.
whether a woman’s crime constitutes “lawful revenge” for a broken contract. The members respond with, “Groans, and shouts of, ‘No revenge!’”—a plausible form of simultaneous speech. But the group of union members, asked if the woman’s breach of contract might be “sanctioned by the Union,” shout, “‘No; we would have helped her to perform it!’” The utterances of the collective body of the union members become increasingly syntactically and semantically complex, culminating in a cry of, “Law and Concord forever!”—a sentiment that dovetails well with the form in which it is expressed. The scene begins to take on the qualities of a Broadway musical, the articulation of feeling sliding effortlessly into shared forms.

Direct discourse in the Illustrations, then, serves a very different purpose than the one with which it is conventionally associated. Quoted speech is the place in which story becomes identical with discourse, and in which the “actual” of the textual world becomes identical with its representation. It is also, therefore, the place in which a sort of realism of specificity emerges: The quoted word attests to the particulars of character, of the speaking body and the considering consciousness. It is where, in the realist text, narratorial voice, with all its style, its omniscience, and its relative uniformity, subsides, and the distinctive, sometimes ugly, and often partially enlightened voices of characters emerge. It is the place where the story speaks for itself. Yet in Martineau’s work this speech often takes the form of neither dialect nor idiolect. If it still serves to bring the discourse of the text closer to its referent, the referent can no longer be speech itself. Or, rather, speech no longer refers either to an individualized speaker, or to its own unreduced quality; its specificity. Instead, speech refers to the broader structures, both social and textual, that produce it. The realism becomes not one of specificity, but of systems.

This stylistic homogeneity is, of course, in part an inheritance from the didactic forms on which Martineau drew, or even a necessity of didacticism per se. The logic of the didactic, after all, is different from that of the realistic narrative—the real referred to by the text is less the endlessly varied, if ultimately cohesive, world of particular people, events, or objects, and more a set of rules toward which the world, ideally, tends. The didactic implicitly has a sort of aspirational realism, in which it describes not the functioning of the world as it is, but the laws that regulate the world as it should be. That is, even when didactic literature sees itself as descriptive rather than prescriptive it is nonetheless seeking, by describing, to bring about a right understanding in both character and reader, and to thereby align thought with law. But rather than looking to didacticism for a means of explaining away the disjunctions between Martineau’s realism and the realism of Eliot or Dickens, we might in fact find in it a kind of resonance, a formal and representational logic that persists, albeit in a mitigated way, throughout the Victorian realist novel. It would not only be in Martineau’s subjects, her representations of domesticity or the working class, that we find a source for future realism, but in her forms, and in the logic that governs her work. And it is through direct discourse, through the simultaneous representation and dissolution of the particulars of speech, that this continuity of formal logic is made most clear. If Martineau’s speakers are evidently distinguishable from those of Dickens or Eliot via their stylistic similarities, if that is indeed one of the primary ways in which

84 Martineau, A Manchester Strike 193.
85 Martineau, A Manchester Strike 193.
86 Martineau, A Manchester Strike 193.
87 See, for instance, Norman Page’s Speech in the English Novel: “If we assume for a moment a hypothetical notion of the ‘actual words spoken’ in the fictional world of [the novelist’s] creation, his choice will determine how close to, or how remote from, those ‘actual words spoken’ his presentation of speech will be. He may decide to adopt the role of dramatist and, by the use of direct speech, allow his characters to ‘speak for themselves’” (Speech in the English Novel [London: Macmillan, 1973], 25).
Martineau’s work differs from that of many of her successors, direct discourse in the novels of these later authors nevertheless retains this “minor” quality—indeed, the minorness of this form of represented speech is necessary to the development of the complex narrative forms of the mid-nineteenth century. The feeble particulars of direct discourse cannot be done away with, either by the Victorian novel itself, or by theorizations thereof. Rather, this feebleness must take different shapes as the novel is continually transformed.

II. A True Story, Fully Told

For Martineau, the minorness of such textual forms is not simply a quality of fictional, or even literary representation. It is, indeed, a kind of mimesis, a modeling of text on world that would extend to any work that aims for the “true.” In 1855, Harriet Martineau published, “The Factory Controversy: A Warning Against Meddling Legislation,” an essay decrying what she believed to be the over-zealous regulation of safety standards in English factories. The essay, written twenty years after the publication of Illustrations of Political Economy, and fifteen years after Martineau’s novel Deerbrook, which I will turn to at the end of this chapter, constitutes not just a discussion of the relationship between state power and individual liberty, but also a kind of synthesis of Martineau’s theories of representation, both political and literary. Though Martineau is not explicitly concerned in this essay with speech or direct discourse, “The Factory Controversy” is worth examining for its articulation of Martineau’s belief about the relationship of the particular to the general, and the ethical import of realist representation. Such an articulation can shed light on the function of the particular form of realist representation with which we have been concerned here—that is, on the talk of direct discourse. Though “The Factory Controversy” minutely describes the debate over workers’ injuries, the costs and benefits of the increasingly sophisticated machinery used in manufacturing, and, in occasionally excruciating detail, the fencing of the shafts of the machines, the essay, Martineau tells us, needn’t have been about factory safety at all. “There is nothing like a true story, fully told, for illustrating truths of a moral or political class,” she writes, “[but] it is nothing to us whether, in exhibiting the mischiefs of meddling legislation, we tell the story of the Maine Liquor Law in America, or the passport system in Austria, or sumptuary legislation in Sweden, or Sabbatarian enactments in England. Whatever illustrates our meaning is good for our purpose, and whatever best illustrates our meaning is best for our purpose.” This theory of representation is mirrored by the legal/political argument it makes: that the “evils” of factory controversy regulation lie not in the content of the specific terms, but in the very fact of their specificity. Common Law, Martineau argues, rather than a byzantine proliferation of particular statutes, should form the basis of factory regulation. All specific cases can be fitted into its broad structures. “The Common Law provides securities against injuries from neglect or mismanagement in the regular course of the employment of workpeople of all orders,” Martineau writes. “Are we [to leave] one particular interest under the incubus of a special law, while the Common Law suffices for all others? Or are we to go on in the course of special legislation; and if so, where are we to stop?”

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88 See: Introduction
90 Martineau, “The Factory Controversy” 46.
91 Martineau, “The Factory Controversy” 46.
This is, essentially, an argument about representation, one which asserts that it functions best not when it attempts to mirror the heterogenous multiplicity of the world, but when it sees through this heterogeneity to the principle underlying it. It is the exhibition of truth, and not the describing of any particular event, then, that constitutes a text’s “purpose.” “The justification of the narrative,” Martineau goes on, “lies in the one particular that an all-important principle is involved in it.”92 The essay’s “principle” is invoked in its subtitle: “A Warning Against Meddling Legislation.” Although “The Factory Controversy” is indeed substantially “about” the controversy surrounding the Factory Acts in the sense that it provides a description of them, its real topic, in its author’s view, is the sorts of limits that ought to be placed on government action more generally. And in turn, this subject is itself “really” about the importance of liberty per se.93

Martineau’s essay, then, is not so much “about” the object it describes as it is about the principles Martineau sees as governing the life of that object—principles which necessarily govern not only this particular object’s life, but also the lives of a whole range of objects (perhaps of any object), all potential topics for an essay. There would seem to be no meaningful difference, in this account of the text, not only between different objects of description, or between descriptions of different objects, but also between these descriptions and the meanings they instantiate. Illustration and principle are conceived of as not only necessary to one another, but as producing one another necessarily. The particulars of this story must indicate the generalities of this principle, and likewise the principle, if it is real and true, must produce these particulars.94 The mutual implication of particular and general is evident even in Martineau’s assertion that “the justification of the narrative lies in the one particular that an all-important principle is involved in it.” This declaration, with its odd reintroduction of specificity as a qualifier of generality, renders the evidencing of an “all important principle” one particular, presumably among many, about the essay. It is evident, too, in the leveling polysyndeton of, “The Maine Liquor Law… or the passport system… or sumptuary legislation…” Difference is effaced, and argument is flattened into statement. The proliferation of examples turns each into

93 In fact, the “underlying” subject of liberty discovers yet another underlying subject; an archive that is more purely textual, rather than legal/institutional/material. Martineau was inspired to write “The Factory Controversy” not by the events the essays details, but by another essay published one year earlier. In the first lines of her essay Martineau writes “In October, 1854, there appeared in the “Westminster Review” an article… on the Proper Sphere and Duties of Government. This essay, on the most important of all subjects of domestic politics, impressed me deeply, carrying out solidly, as it did, some ideas which had long been floating in my mind. I felt at once… that it would be a good public service to illustrate in all possible ways the truths of this essay” (Harriet Martineau, “The Factory Controversy” iii). The Westminster Review essay, written by John Chapman, was, as its title suggests, a review of—or, really, a panegyric on—Wilhelm von Humboldt’s The Sphere and Duties of Government. This John Chapman, in another, stranger, instance of duplication, was not the publisher of The Westminster Review, but his distant relative, “struck down by cholera” in the middle of composing the consequently unfinished Humboldt review (Editor’s note, on John Chapman, Review of “The Sphere and Duties of Government,” The Westminster Review no. 122 (October 1854): 251). The transferability of descriptions, then, is not only applicable to the events Martineau might have taken as her subject, but to the descriptions themselves—and, so it would seem, to their authors and publishers.
94 In an indication of the generic exchangeability of this theory of representation Catherine Gallagher describes the representational logic of Illustrations of Political Economy in essentially the same terms, writing that Martineau’s belief, “not only that values can be easily induced from facts but also that facts can even more easily be deduced from values,” which in turn made her feel, “justified in deriving a set of particular facts, not from observation of the world, but from general principles about how things should work.” These beliefs, Gallagher writes, make Martineau an “extreme realist,” one who can imagine the possibility of a perfect mirroring of world and text (Catherine Gallagher, The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative from 1832-1867 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985], 220).
an interchangeable epiphenomenon. “The Factory Controversy” purports to persuade not via the examination of an especially exemplary example, but by simply describing an occurrence so thoroughly mundane that it might be exchanged for countless others.

Although “The Factory Controversy” isn’t framed as an argument, it is also never called a description. Instead, the essay calls itself a narrative—a “true story fully told.” The claims it puts forward about itself are, consequently, as much about narrative representation as they are about either factory safety or liberty. I therefore read “The Factory Controversy” not only as a statement of Martineau’s politics, or even her philosophy, but as a work of literary theory in which Martineau works through the necessity and the limitations of telling stories that are true, and which therefore indicate something about the world. In other words, I take it as a statement about literary realism.

To read “The Factory Controversy” in this way seems authorized not only by the essay’s statements about its own form, or by the echoes between the form of Martineau’s fiction and the form of argument the essay describes, but also by the fact that the essay itself becomes a work of literary criticism when it turns to a discussion of Charles Dickens and a series of essays published in *Household Words*. “The Factory Controversy” is not only a representation of a particular event which is itself a sort of representation of a more general principle, but a discussion of the problems that its author believes can arise when such events are represented improperly. The exemplary improper representations are a series of essays published in *Household Words*—not written by Dickens, though Martineau argues Dickens, as editor, is nonetheless responsible for their content—which argue for the enforcement of the Factories Act of 1844, and detail the injuries caused by factory machinery. Martineau indict the essays not only for their perceived inaccuracies, but for their sentiment and their sensationalism, for the way in which, “descriptions of spilt brain, puddles of blood, crushed bones, and torn flesh, are exhibited as spectacles for which the masters are answerable.” Such descriptions, Martineau writes, are representational tactics “which a just-minded writer would scrupulously avoid.”

The “vividness” of the descriptions of these instances of injury improperly rivets the reader’s attention to the particulars of a given incident. When the manufacturers, “produce facts in answer to romance,” that is, when they cite statistics about the relative numbers of injuries caused by factory machinery, they are confronted not with other facts, but with, Martineau argues, further romance. It is not, then, simple *inaccuracy* against which Martineau argues here. It is, rather, a sort of representational hybridity, a blending of fact and too-rich, too-pathos-laden description, that concerns her. Such representations produce precisely the opposite of Martineau’s feeble particulars: memorable, dwelt-upon specificities whose potency renders the part of outsized importance in relation to the whole—figured here as the numerically represented sum of accidents. The hybridity of these descriptions produces, Martineau writes, a sort of monstrous heterogeneity of style, “a mingled levity and fustian [that would] neutralise [the

95 Martineau writes, “Who wrote the papers we do not know, and it is of no importance to inquire. Mr. Dickens is responsible for them, and, whoever may be his partner in the disgrace of them, he alone stands before the world as answerable for their contents” (“The Factory Controversy” 36). The “partner” was in fact regular *Household Words* contributor Henry Morley. For a detailed description of the composition and publication history of the essays, see K.J. Fielding and Anne Smith, “Hard Times and the Factory Controversy: Dickens vs. Harriet Martineau,” *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 24, no. 4 (March 1970): 404-427.
description’s] mischief to educated people.”

For a right-thinking reader, in other words, heterogeneity itself will indicate the unreality of its representations. But, Martineau continues, “the responsibility of presenting such pictures, and offering such sentiment, to a half-educated order of readers, is such as few writers would like to be burdened with.”

When the stylistic hybridity of the text is mirrored by a mental hybridity in the reader—half-educated, half-ignorant—the result is a potential further disarrangement of thought, a disruption of the process of alignment between text, world, and readerly perception that Martineau believes it is representation’s duty to produce.

Fiction, Martineau claims, is no less responsible for creating such an alignment. “If,” Martineau writes, “the office of casting new lights into philosophy, and adding new exemplifications and sanctions to morals, be not the ‘business’ of literary genius, we know not what is.”

But fiction, Martineau claims, contains its own corrective, one which is better than the infelicitous style of the essay form at signaling its failures to a range of readers: “It is not within our scope now to show how conspicuous has been Mr. Dickens’ proved failure in the department of instruction upon which he spontaneously entered.”

Martineau writes,

We need only refer to a single instance out of many,—as his Tale of ‘Hard Times.’ On this occasion, again, the plea of those who would plead for Charles Dickens to the last possible moment is that ‘Hard Times’ is fiction. A more effectual security against its doing mischief is that the Tale, in its characters, conversations, and incident, is so unlike life,—so unlike Lancashire or English life,—that it is deprived of its influence.

The last sentence is a sweet burn, but it is also a somewhat weird theory of both fiction and Hard Times, being, along with the dichotomy of “facts vs. romance,” nearly Gradgrindian in its insistence on the importance of realities. I am not prepared to argue that Hard Times is a perfect novel, or close to being one, but despite its condition-of-England subject-matter, to critique a novel whose closing lines project “beautify[ing]… lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up” as the horizon of a character’s development for a failure of mimesis might seem beside the point.

For Martineau, however, Hard Times’ failure of realism is as much about principle as it is about detail or description, and as much about what the novel does as about the novel’s form. But it is also, as in Martineau’s objection to the “mingled levity and fustian” of the Household Words essays, about style; about words that try to do or be more than one thing at once. Otherwise put, it is about irony. Here we can return again to direct discourse, to a form of language that, for Martineau, must always have a kind of transparency. While it is guaranteed by the speaking body of the character, it can also be seen through, revealing the structuring principle beneath. Such a conception of characterological speech cannot countenance utterance that is multi-valent or comic, and which relies upon differing ethical and aesthetic systems to produce the different speech of different characters. Later in “The Factory Controversy” Martineau reproduces in their

100 Martineau, “The Factory Controversy” 38.
103 Martineau, “The Factory Controversy” 36.
entirety a set of resolutions drawn up by the National Association of Factory Occupiers and a hyperbolic parody of those resolutions published in *Household Words*. Setting the two side by side, she writes, “will be the best rebuke to the false statement of [the parody].” But the falsity of the *Household Words* “burlesque” of the Factory Owners’ resolutions is, of course, a given—it is the stylistic conceit upon which it is built. By quoting the two texts, however, by turning them, essentially, into direct discourse, Martineau seeks to diffuse the parodic power of the *Household Words* essay. By bracketing them with quotation marks, “The Factory Controversy” turns, or attempts to turn, both original text and parody into speech-as-object rather than speech-as-interpretive act. To render them, that is, feeble particulars subject to the essay’s larger homogenizing structure.

This is, in its ideal form, the structure of quoted speech in Martineau’s fictional narratives. Yet “The Factory Controversy” is not, in fact, a fictional narrative. It is, in Martineau’s words, “a true story, fully told.” Such an examination or reproduction of the “true story” might seem preferable to even a realistic fiction if the text’s ends are the communication of truth rather than the production of aesthetic value. Why then, we might ask, write “illustrations” of political economy? Why not simply write… political economy? The novel, or any fictional representation, seems both less direct than the essay, and more prone to the kinds of dangerously proliferating signification Martineau finds in Dickens. Arguing, like Catherine Gallagher, Mary Poovey, and Tamara S. Wagner, that “realism emerges as a speculative genre, a form that rests upon and is driven by all of the open-endedness and riskiness engendered by speculative logic,” Annette Van finds in the *Illustrations* a tension between Martineau’s fear of “the dangers of uncontrolled and proliferating representation,” and a belief that the novel has a “unique status among forms of representation as the one best understood.” The novel serves, in Martineau’s words, as a kind of “national speech,” the lack of which implies that a nation is either “politically oppressed” or “young.” Fiction, then, would seem to be in a special position to communicate to the reader. But why? Because it is engaging? Life-like? As we have seen, *Illustrations of Political Economy* is certainly not always these. Rather, I believe, Martineau’s conception of fictional representation accords the novel this “unique status” because of the way in which it forces or allows the reader to dwell with the particulars, e.g. direct discourse, it will paradoxically efface. It is this ability to instantiate, and thereby render visible, a formal relation of part to whole, that makes Martineau’s novels, if not always realistic, then, at least by her lights, true. The “true story fully told” is true not because it describes what really happened but because its workings are in accordance with a set of structuring laws that dictate its form.

110 In this, I follow George Henry Lewes’s definition of realism: “Art always aims at the representation of reality, *i.e.* of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism.*” (G.H. Lewes, “Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction,” *Westminster Review* 70 [October 1858]: 493.)
And it is this orientation towards the fictional narrative that, I would argue, locates Martineau in the mode of realism.

Whether or how Martineau is a “realist” author is, in itself, perhaps not an especially interesting question—or, it may be interesting only in that it points to the ubiquity of definitional questions in considerations of realism more generally. Any discussion of the realist novel immediately confronts the slipperiness of both the term “realism,” and the boundary between what is realism and what is not. Given that “realism,” from the nineteenth century to the present, has served as often as a term of derision as it has a term of praise or even a neutral descriptor, it is perhaps unsurprising that the word has seemed flexible at best, and impossibly capacious, or impossibly narrow, at worst. Perhaps Elaine’s Freedgood’s description of Illustrations of Political Economy as “realist myth” might be the best way of thinking of Martineau’s work, concerned as it is with laws rather than “humanly-made and idiosyncratic solutions” to the problems its plots produce.111 And certainly, the term “realism” had not yet been applied to literary fiction at the time when Martineau was writing Illustrations of Political Economy.112 But it is not only the echoing of Martineau’s work in Dickens’ or Eliot’s, or vice versa, that makes the question of Martineau’s realism a useful one. Nor is it the fact that, in the extremity, or perhaps the totality, of her belief in the possibility of efficacious representation Martineau presents a sort of limit case of the realist project. Instead, it is the very difficulty of describing Martineau’s work—with its too-early-ness, its mechanistic plots, and the way in which, though it is clearly invested in its particular version of realism, it somehow doesn’t feel quite “realistic”—as realist that makes Martineau not just an interestingly idiosyncratic, but also a strangely emblematic realist author. If any given realist text is realist in a different way, this is so not only because of the particularities of a given author, character, sentence, etc., but also because realism as a mode is characterized a persistent shifting of forms, a shifting which is itself in part the product of the desire to find a form that would not be legible as such. As soon as realism, or any of its distinguishing “techniques” (e.g. the proliferation of detail113), becomes nameable as “realism” it thereby renders its representational methods suspect. It loses not just the claim to transparency but also the claim to organicism that would knit its language to the “real world” by describing the form of this language as a spontaneous, necessary product of that world, rather than an aesthetic product that responds to the dictates of a realm of art cut off from the realm of life. Martineau’s feeble particulars, then, would not only indicate the importance of the larger system of which they are a part, but also reflect the kind of representational shape-shifting necessitated by the realist project.

There is a weird disjunction between the idea of shape-shifting and the investment in unchanging laws evinced by Martineau’s work. And this disjunction mirrors a tension that is often both discussed and exemplified in theorizations of realism between flux and stasis, a realism that would capture the dynamism of lived experience and some transhistorical life-itself. If both of these are aspirations of many realist texts, the question then becomes: What is the relationship between the two, between shifting objects, events, and appearances, and the more stable, yet inaccessible or even imaginary, laws that organize them. Or, even, what is the

111 Freedgood, “Banishing Panic” 36.
113 See my introduction for a discussion of Robert Louis Stevenson’s “A Note on Realism” on the detail’s role in the realist text.
relationship of these shifting, heterogeneous particulars to one another? Erich Auerbach’s influential account of the development of Western literature is structured in large part by a temporal split in the possible answers to these questions. The literary history articulated by Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, and by his earlier essay, “Figura,” is built on a distinction between the “figural” realism of the Middle Ages, and the more modern realism of the nineteenth-century novel. The former refers seemingly disparate, historically disjointed events to a larger structure of divinely given meaning, thereby revealing their essential sameness: Auerbach, in his initial theorization of the figural, writes, “Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life.” 114 A modern view of history, on the other hand, finds meaning, where it does find meaning, in the temporal relation of events—that is, in the event’s inscription in a history whose meaning could only be revealed in some unforeseeable future: “In the modern view, the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process; in the figural system the interpretation is always sought from above.” 115 The modern event is itself “self-sufficient and secure,” but its meaning is not; its “interpretation is always incomplete.” 116 Figural interpretation, on the other hand, makes event subservient to meaning. Each event is “torn apart” from the other, and, “subordinated to an interpretation which is fully secured to begin with.” 117

If, for Auerbach, as for many other theorists of the Victorian novel, this subordination of the event is essentially impossible in the nineteenth century, it nevertheless persists as sort of formal-historical ideal, a totality towards which the realist novel may tend, or at least gesture, even as it elucidates all the disjunctions of event and meaning that make such a totalizing realism impossible. With its investment in a set of laws which are themselves unchanging, and which thereby figure historical change as a movement towards—that is, as a sort of fulfillment of pre-existing meaning—Martineau’s work seems closer, if anachronistically so, to the kind of figural realism that the very historical conditions it seeks to illustrate have rendered impossible. This paradoxical state of affairs makes visible the ways in which a relatively un-literary, proto-realistic style like Martineau’s can simultaneously stand as a not-quite-right limit case, and an ideal for the novel forms and literary history that follow it. How it can itself be, in other words, the “feeble particular” of literary realism.

Harry Shaw, in his reading of Auerbach, reminds us that, “Figural realism is not our realism”—by which Shaw means both the realism that would be conceivable to a twenty-first-century critic, and the realism of the nineteenth century authors (Austen, Scott and Eliot) with whom his work is concerned. 118 Yet, Shaw writes, “I believe that an adequate theory of realism must take the general form of Auerbach’s description of figural realism.” 119 The figural, Shaw contends, is in some sense the ideal of nineteenth century realism, and Auerbach’s nostalgic description may be as much a necessity of his definition of modern realism as it is a theory of the literary past: “Auerbach’s notion of the figural,” Shaw writes, “may be a projection into the past

115 Auerbach, “Figura” 59.
116 Auerbach, “Figura” 59.
117 Auerbach, “Figura” 59.
119 Shaw, *Narrating Reality* 93.
of what realism ought to be able to do but cannot in its more recent form.”¹²⁰ In this he helpfully reminds us that although authors like Martineau could not share in the historical (or ahistorical) vision of the poets of the Middle Ages (or, perhaps it would be even better to say that, convinced as we are of the essentially metonymical nature of historical meaning, it would be impossible for us to imagine that they might share such a vision), the idea that an event must be wrested from its place in the temporal unfolding of history and referred to an essentially static framework in order for its meaning to be revealed was not so impossible to entertain in the nineteenth century. Shaw, however, like many theorists of realism, locates the realist novel’s ideal of the real not in the unchanging, but in the dynamic. In much twentieth and twenty-first-century criticism it is some sense of movement or flow that comes to constitute the “real” of realism—and to mark the realist mode as essentially concerned with the relationship of the individual to the historical processes of which she is a part; that is, as taking as its raison d’être the reproduction in narrative fiction of a sense of the flux, the meaning of which is both immanent and almost impossible to perceive, and that it sees as characterizing the world that exists outside of the text. Shaw writes that, “What makes reality real is a process,”¹²¹ and that, “it’s difficult to capture a pattern that underlies historical existence and then depicts its fictional equivalent, in synecdochic form, because the patterns keep changing and are informed by historical particularities that are always different… [Modern realism] substitutes for the stasis provided by the divine incarnation a focus on movement and relationship as the ultimate realities.”¹²² Shaw emphasizes a sort of historical “flow” as modern realism’s ultimate referent. The difficulty of determining meaning becomes meaning itself; replacing figural realism’s static forms of meaning with an endless process of investigation.

This seems not not true. But it also seems like an essentially polemical stance, one which eschews the essence of the figural even as it insists upon its importance. The ideal of a totalizing meaning needn’t be transmuted into its opposite, into the “meaning” of the ceaseless and fruitless search for meaning, in order to have descriptive power for accounts of Victorian realism. Nor does this totality need to be cast simply as a kind of totalitarianism, a social dominance and closure that would constitute the darkest or most naïve impulses of the realist text. Rather, it might be understood as one side of a coin, or one end of a spectrum, a desire for the encounter with a novel to be an encounter with, if not totality, then wholeness.¹²³ This wholeness need not, in any given realist text, be reflective of a wholeness encounterable outside the literary. For Martineau, however, it is precisely that. And it is this extremity that makes her work a site of horror and longing for literary criticism. If Auerbach’s description of the figural can be understood in part as a nostalgic projection of the novel’s lost ideal—an ideal whose loss also constitutes literary evolution—then Martineau’s status as a proto-realist designates her work too as an ideal which must be gotten beyond in order for realism itself to emerge. It is the object of our interest, but it is also not that thing; not really, not yet.

Much of what I have described thus far could be summarized by applying one adjective to Martineau’s thought: deductive. As I have discussed, this stance is not confined to the literary

¹²⁰ Shaw, Narrating Reality 97.
¹²² Shaw, Narrating Reality 99-100.
¹²³ Or a dialectic. My thinking here obviously owes a debt to Frederic Jameson’s recent theorization of realism as a dialectic of narrative and affect, categories that might be mapped onto those of the totalizing, stable meaning of the figural and the flux and referential instability of modern realism (Frederic Jameson, The Antinomies of Realism [New York: Verso, 2013]). That is, Auerbach’s periodizing distinction between types of realism might in fact be understood as intrinsic to realism per se—or to nineteenth century versions of it at least.
for Martineau. It is pervasive in her thinking. If the minor quality of her characters’ speech, the feebleness of the particular, is especially evident in Martineau’s work, it is not only because of her ideas about fiction’s specific representational methods, but also because of her ideas about the perception of reality more generally. Such perception, for Martineau, must proceed from general principles to particular facts; that is, it must be essentially deductive. In her 1829 essay, “The Art of Thinking” Martineau writes that although “the mysteries of nature” must be “unraveled” by “bring[ing] together an accumulation of facts previous to the formulation of a theory,” the nineteenth century constitutes an historical moment in which it has become possible to appeal directly to general principles for the interpretation of facts; to be deductive rather than inductive. 124 It would, in fact, be impossible to perceive the potentially overwhelming abundance of facts if we proceeded otherwise:

If no general principles were known, the multiplicity of facts which we must register as the materials of knowledge would be too burdensome for any mind…
By reference of a number of facts to one principle, to which they bear a common relation, order is introduced into the midst of confusion, and the understanding is required to entertain a few well-arranged ideas only, instead of a confused multitude. 125,126

If the didactic text constitutes a collapse between the “is” and the “ought,” between the fact and the value, then for Martineau, there is essentially no meaningful difference between the realistic and the didactic. The didactic is simply a form of realism. Catherine Gallagher has noted as much, writing that “Martineau’s belief that universal laws were the primary reality and that daily experience was merely a manifestation of these laws led her to equate the ideas of didactic tale and realistic narrative.” 127 This deductive realism becomes, in Gallagher’s comparison of Martineau and George Eliot, a foil (if ambivalent one), for Eliot’s more inductively-oriented realism; a realism to which many mid-century Victorian novels at least partially aspire. “For Martineau,” Gallagher writes,

a morally neutral realism was a contradiction in terms; her own didactic fiction was simply the most efficient form of realism, deducing facts from principles she knew to be true. George Eliot's narrative method purports to be inductive rather than deductive like Martineau's. Unable to share the older woman's belief in a benign providential necessity, the younger adopts, as critics have shown, the

125 Martineau, “Art of Thinking” 106.
126 Although I will not specifically address its influence here, it should be noted that the deductive bent of Martineau’s thought owes much to her engagement with the writing of August Comte, whose work she translated—with her own condensations and alterations—into English. “If it is true,” reads Martineau’s translation, The Positive Philosophy of August Comte, “that every theory must be based upon observed facts, it is equally true that facts can not be observed without the guidance of some theories. Without such guidance, our facts would be desultory and fruitless; we could not retain them: for the most part we could not even perceive them” (August Comte, The Positive Philosophy of August Comte, freely translated and condensed by Harriet Martineau [New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1855], 27).
methodology and diction of those who scrutinize a more impersonal process of evolution.128

Ultimately, however, Gallagher is more interested in demonstrating the *impossibility* of disentangling the inductive and the deductive in the realist novel. “Most realistic novels,” she writes,

Ironically exploit the incongruity between appearances and essences; they are full of misunderstandings, isolation, the inadequacy of conventional signifiers. Realists thus are forced to supplement metonymic representation with other forms of signification. Indeed, if appearances were as self-sufficient as realists sometimes claim, there would probably be no need for novels, certainly no need for omniscient narrators with access to their characters' subjective inner lives, and surely no need for a body of critical explication. Realistic fiction, then, invariably undermines, in practice, the ideology it purports to exemplify.129

This reading is significant not only for the continuities it demonstrates between Martineau’s realism and that of a later, “greater” figure like Eliot, or for the disjunctions it finds between what realism is doing and what it often *thinks* it is doing, but also for the way in which Gallagher’s essay, published in 1980, serves as a rejoinder to so much work being done on the Victorian novel in the twenty-first century. Martineau’s deductive realism, and Gallagher’s reminder of its persistence over the course of the nineteenth century, stands in contrast to the many recent accounts of the Victorian novel that center their readings on the inductive methods of these works. The “descriptive turn” of twenty-first-century Victorian studies has often taken as the model for its critical praxis the kinds of accretive, slowed-down inductive methods that it in turn discovers in its textual objects, as in Jonathan Farina’s argument that Charles Lyell’s speculative “analogies” can also be traced in the novels of Dickens, and are useful to both because they are a “credible, value-neutral form of induction,” or in Amy M. King’s contention that, “Victorian natural history will encourage us to reorient our critical accounts of Victorian literary realism to their purely discursive aspects—to those moments of proliferating description made up of inductive details, rather than the architecture of plot or structure.”130 It is no accident that both of these essays are interested in another currently beloved subject of Victorian studies, natural history, and the nineteenth-century sciences in general. Both ways of approaching Victorian literature evince a kind of embarrassment at the grandiosity of the humanities, and the presumptuousness of more synthetic—one might also say deductive—critical methods or literary histories. As in Heather Love’s argument that “by refusing the role of privileged messenger prescribed by hermeneutics and emphasizing instead the minimalist but painstaking work of description, this approach [of surface or descriptive reading] undermines the ethical charisma of the critic,” there is a critical self-abnegation (at times at odds with the assertion that herein lies a radical new way of doing criticism) that tends to see the subservience of facts to theory as the

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129 Gallagher, “The Failure of Realism” 376.
cardinal sin of interpretation. Martineau, of course, operates with an entirely different model. And well she might—she is very different, temporally and otherwise, from Heather Love. But there may still be something to be gained from taking seriously the emphasis on deduction we find in Martineau’s work. I do not mean by this that we ought to be, ourselves, deductive. Exporting Victorian critical or compositional practices to our own work is, to my mind, neither a good nor an evil, it is just a very particular way of historicizing—equally so if we emphasize the inductive or the deductive. Rather, we might consider the forms, not just of argumentation, but also of narrative, that such approaches, or their mutual interdependence, produce. That is, we might—and I will try to—consider the way that a deductive realism like Martineau’s, with its insistence on both producing and undermining the particular, creates narratives in which a drive towards closure and totality both consumes and is troubled by the messy, heterogenous, and in Martineau’s words “circuits” events that constitute its interest, and its very content. How deductive realism, in other words, cannibalizes itself.

The distinction between an inductive and deductive realism is in some sense a distinction between an interest in causes and an interest in effects. The former is grounded in a belief about the good of verisimilitude (or perhaps better said, representation), the latter in a belief about the renovation of readerly thought via the illustration of a set of principles. One is rooted in phenomena, the other in the rules that order them. But the distinction is also grounded in a different orientation towards the literary object and its reader. For Martineau, the value of literature was to be judged primarily by its effects—specifically whether it was morally salutary or not. This moral improvement can indeed be seen as emanating from a kind of realism: It would be caused by the alignment of readerly thought and moral principle via the intermediary of literary form. But this is not a realism that believes in the pure good of representation. The object of description is not of primary importance, and the importance of verisimilitude necessarily wanes in the light of such a demotion of the object. The value of literary representation lies, instead, in its legibility, in the ways it can or cannot make vivid in the reader’s mind the structures under which she lives. The narrator of *Weal and Woe in Garveloch* informs us that, “In large societies, the mind of the observer is perplexed by the movements around him. The comings and goings, the births, deaths, and accidents, defy his calculations; and there are always persons at hand who help to delude him by talking in a strain which would have suited the olden time, but which is very inappropriate to the present state of things.” The scale of modernity, and the connectedness of the populace of not just a nation, but also of a continent or a globe, via the structures of capitalism and industrialization have made comprehensive understanding impossible. Narrative gains its new necessity by producing exemplary figures in realistic worlds: by making the total system legible in the particular instance.


132 Though why not? As Devin Griffiths point out in his response to the “V21 Manifesto,” “Comtean positivism, for all of its late zaniness, was also a profound, and profoundly influential attempt to think beyond history as a “mere accumulation of facts”; to elucidate the general patterns of history and think about their theoretical as well as historical implications for present society.” If V21 is in part a call to mine Victorian thought not just for objects of analysis, but for theoretical frameworks for such analysis—like for instance looking to scientific induction for formal frameworks for the novel—then deduction and positivism may be, at least experimentally, fruitful places to look for such frameworks. (Devin Griffiths, “V21 @ INC52015: The Chicago School of Victorian Studies,” *Devolution: Threading Literature, History, and Science* (blog), April 21, 2015, url: http://devingriffiths.com/v21-incs2015-the-chicago-school-of-victorian-studies/.)

133 Martineau, *Weal and Woe in Garveloch* 115.
This orientation, towards the effect of the literary object, rather than the cause of these effects, the subject or form of the text itself, is then in some sense an attitude towards narrative. It is an orientation that privileges ends over beginnings, a movement towards a particular form of pre-ordained closure. The end is always already there, contained in the beginning. Because Martineau’s concept of representation is one in which the specific and the abstract are in some sense exchangeable, narrative development comes to have a sort of stunted quality; rounding back on itself as it reveals only what must always have been the case. For Martineau, development—of the narrative, the individual, or even the State—is an oddly static, almost tautological affair: it is not a process of change, so much as a process of coming to a consciousness of what one already was. There is no revelation, only a continual orienting of attention towards that which has already been in plain sight. In “The Factory Controversy” Martineau writes, “The documents from which we derive our materials are all public, and if our reader should be surprised presently to find what a point the controversy has reached, it will not be because we have any revelations to make, but simply because we have been led to observe what has escaped their attention.”\[134\] Martineau has no revelations to make because by the logic of her work’s representational scheme mystery is impossible. The acquisition of new knowledge or the emergence of self-consciousness would of course constitute a kind of development, one in which the essay form often participates. But what I want to emphasize here is the way in which Martineau’s essay posits knowledge not as something new that would be acquired, and self-consciousness not as some new state that could be achieved, but rather casts both as a kind of re-inscription of what already is. That is, the essay’s narrative promise is one in which a gradual unfolding can only bring us back to the place from which we began. The Illustrations attempt to make evident their readers, as to their characters, the laws which already govern them, and which they cannot therefore help but obey. But they do so not by way of narrative suspense or bildung, but rather by employing narrative to gradually explicate a meaning which is given from the outset. There is a collapsibility to the narrative this attitude implies, a sense in which such narrative is unnecessary to its own goals—much in the way that the list of principles that ends every story in Illustrations of Political Economy makes the illustrations themselves almost superfluous. If we could arrive at those illustrations without the story that would be just as well. And yet, as Martineau clearly believes, we can’t. We have to dwell in the uncertainty and difficulty of a narrative unfolding in order to become right-thinking. Reading just the principles would be like reading only the last page of a novel. We would know the ending, but it would be without meaning, without value. Martineau’s narratives, then, must always dwell in this tension between their collapsibility and their narrative necessity. They must take up our time with particulars that disappear, that render up their own importance in service to their ends, both ethical and narrative. In the last portion of this chapter I consider the ways in which such a relationship to narrative manifests in Martineau’s 1839 novel Deerbrook, a text that both continues the representational project of the Illustrations, and also generates a new set of formal imperatives that restructure the possibilities for narrative representation.

III. Deerbrook’s Circuitous Methods

Every town-bred person who travels in a rich country region, knows what it is to see a neat white house planted in a pretty situation,—in a shrubbery, or commanding a sunny common, or nestling between two hills,—and to say to himself, as the carriage sweeps past its gate, ‘I should like to live there,’—‘I could be very happy in that pretty place.’ Transient visions pass before his mind’s-eye of dewy summer mornings, when the shadows are long on the grass, and of bright autumn afternoons, when it would be a luxury to saunter in the neighboring lanes; and of frosty winter days, when the sun shines in over the laurustinus at the window, while the fire burns with a different light from that which it gives in the full parlours of a city.

Mr. Grey’s house had probably been the object of this kind of speculation to one or more persons, three times a week, ever since the stage coach had taken to passing through Deerbrook.

Deerbrook’s first lines introduce a character whose presence in the novel is so fleeting that he perhaps does not even merit this title. The “town-bred person” does not begin his existence even as a figure. He is, rather, a mass: every town-bred person; a group of people, rather than a type who stands in for them. But with the paragraph’s introduction of direct discourse this mass becomes both more abstract and more specific—or, it becomes the one by becoming the other. The sentence’s utterances—“I should like to live there,” “I could be very happy in that pretty place”—generate pronouns, and “every town-bred person” becomes a “he” and an “I,” capable of both speech and imagination. A year in the town-bred person’s life goes by in the moment it takes for the carriage to sweep past the house’s gate. He doesn’t just think of his possible happiness, but also seems to watch it unfold as the seasons go by in succession. Deerbrook provides, in other words, as much information about the ephemeral and abstract figure of “every town-bred person” as it will in introducing characters in whose specificity and individuality it asks its readers to invest. But then, of course, the town-bred person, like most characters who are not really characters, disappears.

The opening paragraph of Deerbrook, then, insists both upon the importance of the detailed imaginings and specific utterances of the town-bred person, and upon the unnecessary quality of the same. Although the first paragraph of Deerbrook is essentially adjectival, it nevertheless cannot be reduced to an adjective. It requires the passing of seasons, the succession of scenes, and the uttering of words. This is the case both because the novel takes pleasure in this relatively lengthy, and relatively narrative, description of Mr. Grey’s house, and also because it is essential to Martineau’s literary project, in Deerbrook as well as elsewhere, to spend a lot of time on things that in and of themselves do not really matter.

It is not just the figure of the town-bred person that disappears, but his words: “I should like to live there,”—‘I could be very happy in that pretty place.’ And they vanish because, like the town-bred person himself, they both always and never happen. If fictional quoted speech is something which refers, yet has no material referent, then the town-bred person’s speech is both doubly fictional and doubly repetitious: no one “real” in the world of the novel ever speaks or thinks these words, yet something like them, it suggests, has been spoken or thought many times.

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by many people—at least three times a week ever since the stage coach had taken to passing through Deerbrook. It is not just the competing “reals” that this “always and never” condition of the town-bred person, or the dialogue in *A Manchester Strike*, instantiates that make possible the perception of form, but also the narrative and not, time-bound and not, quality that accompanies it. The moment of the town-bred person’s appearance is timeless, but in time, the part at once closing itself off from narrative, and incorporated into it—in fact, *made of it*. This simultaneous specificity and ephemerality of the town-bred person, and the vanishing narrativity of his imaginings, is itself an invitation, or perhaps a command, to hold two different forms of knowing in our minds at once. One advances plot; one makes nothing happen—and both are necessary to a novel that aspires not just to represent reality, but to be, in some sense, real.

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*Deerbrook* is often described as a novel that made other novels possible: “Without *Deerbrook* to combine the personal and professional dilemmas of the governess, the doctor, and the intelligent sisters in one novel of village life,” writes Valerie Sanders, “the Victorian novel might well have taken a markedly different course.”¹³⁶ Published in 1839, Martineau’s novel is, as Vineta Colby argues, one of the first realist novels of collective life; a part of the, “[evolution] from Miss Mitford’s little sketches and other prose idylls and pastorals into the realistic novel of social community.”¹³⁷ Like much of Martineau’s work, *Deerbrook* is often described as middling in many senses of the word: a transitional text standing between the sketches and silver forks of the preceding decades, and the achieved realism of the 1850’s and beyond. For Martineau, too, *Deerbrook* was a transitional text, offering a means of turning away from pure “fact.” In her autobiography Martineau writes: “Great were my expectations from my novel, for this reason chiefly;—that for many years now my writing had been almost entirely about fact: facts of society and of individuals: and the constraint of the effort to be always correct, and to bear without solicitude the questioning of my correctness, had become burdensome.”¹³⁸ But if Martineau found something liberating in giving up the “effort to be always correct,” she nevertheless continued to find the material for even her fictional work in the events of real life.¹³⁹ Her original source for a novel, eventually discarded in favor of *Deerbrook*, was an account in a newspaper:

> There was a police report, during that winter,—very brief,—only one short paragraph,—which moved me profoundly, and which I was sure I could work into a novel of the deepest interest. My fear was that that one paragraph would affect other readers as it did me, and be remembered, so that the catastrophe of my tale would be known from the beginning: so we deferred the plot, meaning that I

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¹³⁹ Discussing the origins of *Deerbrook*, Martineau writes, “My doctrine about plots in fiction has been given at sufficient length. It follows of course that I looked into real life for mine” (*Autobiography* 405). The novel’s plot, however, was drawn at least in part from Catherine Sedgwick’s story “Old Maids.” For an account of the inspiration from Sedgwick see: Valerie Kossew Pichanick, *Harriet Martineau: The Woman and Her Work, 1802-76* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 262.
should really work upon it one day. The reason why I never did is that, as I have grown older, I have seen more and more the importance of dwelling on things honest, lovely, hopeful and bright, rather than on the darker and fouler passions and most mournful weaknesses of human nature.\footnote{Martineau, \textit{Autobiography} 406.}

Martineau’s reasons for discarding her initial idea for a novel will be familiar to any reader of her theories about the duty of fiction. To be real is not enough—the novel must also be morally salutary, and the police report was evidently judged to be less than healthy for the reader’s higher nature. But the ethical function of literature is, according to this account, not the initial reason for discarding the police report as a subject. Rather, Martineau decides that the report is too memorable, too stirring, and that her readers will remember it as well as she did and, essentially, have read the spoiler before they start the book. If the retrospective explanation for ditching the police report is ethical, the initial justification for doing so is purely narrative.

In the end, though, the novel Martineau wrote is no less concerned with the tensions between the ethical and narrative imperatives of fiction than the one she didn’t. \textit{Deerbrook’s} plot (or plots) can be described in many ways—as a marriage plot, as a governance plot, as a plot about village life—but \textit{Deerbrook’s} primary subject, the thing that animates, troubles, and makes possible all the stories the novel tells, is gossip. Like Dickens’ and Morley’s ironic or sensational essays, \textit{Deerbrook’s} gossip presents the problem of proliferating systems of meaning—of, as Mr. Grey warns his wife, the “good many ideas [that] belong to [a] word or two.”\footnote{Martineau, \textit{Deerbrook} 19.} For \textit{Deerbrook}, gossip does not only present an ethical dilemma. It presents a dilemma about reference, about what to do with words that may or may not mean what they seem to mean, and that may or may not be true in either case. Yet gossip, for all that the novel criticizes its dubious reference and truth-value, is the thing that makes \textit{Deerbrook’s} narrative engine go. The novel, then, has an ambivalent relationship to its own structures, simultaneously reveling in and disavowing the misadventures of the information conveyed in its pages. The novel is evidently taking up the discourse of gossip as particularly feminine problem. And yet there, too, Martineau’s interest in the ways that women produce knowledge would seem to complicate the indictments of female imperfection that the novel so often produces. Kristen Pond reads \textit{Deerbrook’s} gossip as, “a source of knowledge rather than a female vice,” one which, “becomes the tool through which Martineau raises the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge that might counter, or at least complicate, assumptions about what constitutes certain truth and right knowledge.”\footnote{Kristen Pond, “Martineau’s Epistemology of Gossip,” \textit{Nineteenth-Century Literature} 69, no. 2 (September 2014): 178-9.} I am less sure that \textit{Deerbrook} is so ready to disavow the structures of knowledge that organize \textit{Illustrations of Political Economy}. But what I will suggest is that the oral nature of gossip, its status as both embodied human speech, and (often) direct discourse, makes it one of the feeble particulars with which Martineau’s work asks us to dwell. If the gossip of \textit{Deerbrook} isn’t necessarily true, it is nevertheless \textit{real}, and as such it is fodder for the formal system the novel seeks to create.

Both \textit{Illustrations of Political Economy} and \textit{Deerbrook} figure the circulation and comprehension of information as problems of scale. But whereas \textit{Illustrations of Political Economy} describes information in “large societies” as “defying calculation,” the information of
Deerbrook is all too easily circulated and consumed. Deerbrook’s village setting circumscribes the distances information must cover, the people among whom it would be exchanged, and the subjects it can take up. The claustrophobic information system of the village produces too-close observations that are too easily exchanged and circulated. Gossip, then, is a natural product of life in a rural village, the price one pays for pastoral beauty: “If,” Mr. Hope tells Margaret, “you leave behind the din of streets, for the sake of stepping forth from your work-table upon a soft lawn, or of looking out upon the old church-steeple among the trees, while you hear nothing but bleating and chirping, you must expect some set-off against such advantages: and that set-off is the being among a small number of people, who are always busy looking into one another’s small concerns.”

The gossip of the villagers becomes, like the “bleating and chirping” of animals, the white noise of village life, a sound without sense. Unlike the “bleating and chirping,” however, and more dangerously, gossip carries the illusion, or the form, of the meaningful.

It is easy, on the one hand, to see gossip as an evil that the novel attempts to exorcise. It has a kind of stupidity, but also a potency, sharing irony’s problem of a profusion of meaning coupled with sentiment’s problem of exciting unthinking feeling which in turn incites action. In this reading, gossip has a kind of bad omniscience, refusing to assign responsibility for itself to any one speaker, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere, and therefore unavilable for either challenge or investigation. If no one in particular claims that a statement is true, or is locatable as a statement’s originary source, then there is no one to hold accountable for its falsity. Gossip is speech unmoored; speculation that takes on the solidity of an assertion. Such speech would necessarily present a problem for a writer whose other work relies upon, and espouses the virtues of, an identity, or transparency, between word and meaning, between particular utterance and abstract idea. Literary criticism often casts gossip in a similarly seedy light, aligning it with the sadism and eros of the readerly hunger for information and revelation. Writing about the function of gossip in George Eliot’s novels, Maha Jafri argues that, “gossip seizes on the violent, libidinal charge that lies, as many scholars have noticed, at the heart of narrative desire… Middlemarch [emphasizes] the ease with which a narrative’s paradoxical drive to dilation and closure is itself an extended opportunity for aggressive gratification at another’s expense.”

Gossip is, in Deerbrook’s case, not only the vehicle of many of the novel’s misfortunes and animosities—the conflict between the Rowlands and the Greys, Hope’s dwindling practice—but also for the novel’s central drama: Hope’s decision to set aside his love for Margaret and marry Hester. The narrator is clear that Hope’s decision to marry Hester is not the right one: “He decided at length how to act; and he decided wrong;— not for want of waiting long enough, but because some considerations intruded themselves which warped his judgment, and sophisticated his feelings. He decided upon making the greatest mistake of his life.” Yet without that decision the novel ceases to exist. The mistake, like so many fictional mistakes, is narrative-making: “No man disliked more than he so circuitous a method of acting in the most important affair of life. He had always believed that, in the case of a genuine and virtuous attachment, there can or ought to be nothing but the most entire simplicity of conduct in the parties… but… here the circuitous method, which had always appeared disgusting to his imagination, was a matter of

143 Martineau, Deerbrook 39
145 Martineau, Deerbrook 139.
necessity to his conscience.”146 The “circuitous method” which Hope so dislikes is also, of course, the plot of Deerbrook itself. Hope’s distaste for the “circuitous method” is both aligned with the novel’s interest in simplicity and antithetical to its need for a plot. Without the misunderstandings and machinations that lead Hope into his mistaken marriage to Hester the novel would lose the engine of much of its narrative.

Yet Deerbrook’s casting of gossip as a byproduct of village life simultaneously aligns it with the idyllic, non-propulsive rhythms of the pastoral. It is a lot of noise without a lot of sense or meaning. It is mere talk, chatter, words that make nothing happen. As Patricia Meyer Spacks writes, gossip is,

> a version of the pastoral. Not just any gossip: the kind that involves two people, leisure, intimate revelation and commentary, ease and confidence. It may manifest malice, it may promulgate fiction in the guise of fact, but its participants do not value it for such reasons; they cherish, rather, the opportunity it affords for ‘emotional speculation.’ … Their ‘art’ like other oral forms, endures only briefly; its transience heightens its value.147

Deerbrook, then, requires gossip in order to give it structure and plot. But gossip isn’t therefore simply a necessary evil. It is also, as Spacks notes, the occasion for sociality, for the specifically oral exchange of information, and for the novel to produce the speech of its characters. In “Sophia in the Village,” the chapter that follows Hope’s engagement to Hester, Sophia Grey conveys the news of the engagement to various minor characters, including Mrs. James, who remains semi-convinced, even after Sophia has informed her otherwise, that Hope is marrying Deborah Giles rather than Hester. The exchange between Sophia and Mrs. James, conveyed in direct discourse, does not function to clarify or enlighten the way the dialogue of Illustrations of Political Economy does. It is, rather, an occasion for speech. The novel treats gossip not as true, but as real, as a sort of allegory for the information systems of both the village and the novel itself.

And this is precisely what Hope, though he and Margaret are in many ways the moral center of the novel, fails to understand about gossip in Deerbrook, and gossip in Deerbrook. Hope writes to his brother Edward, “I rather suspect that we have some wag among us who fabricates news, to see how much will be received and retailed: but perhaps these rumors, even the wildest of them ‘rise by natural exhalation’ from the nooks and crevices of village life.”148 Gossip, in Hope’s letter, can be imagined either as emanating from a single malicious consciousness or as a sort of secretion of the village itself, but not as a product of human speech and interaction. The letter is evidently facetious. But this is precisely the point: The letter is an extended form of first-person utterance; a sort of speaking for the sake of speaking, or for the sake of enforcing familial bonds. It is a way of producing, for a brother who has been exiled from it, the oral rhythms of village life. Yet Hope cannot understand the letter in these terms. After giving his brother a few longed-for details about the events of life in Deerbrook he breaks off:

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146 Martineau, Deerbrook 141.
148 Jafri, “Stories We Like to Tell” 191.
Here I must cease my gossip. I regularly begin my letters with the intention of telling you all that I hear and see out of my profession: but I invariably stop short, as I do now, from disgust at the nonsense I should have to write. It is endurable enough to witness; for one thing quickly dismisses another, and some relief occurs from the more amiable or intellectual qualities of the parties concerned: but I hate detail in writing; and I never do get through the whole list of particulars that I believe you would like to have.\footnote{Martineau, \textit{Deerbrook} 95.}

It is in these terms that the novel offers its solutions to the problems that gossip poses: What is required in order for gossip to function properly, that is, in order for it to be an object rather than a means of interpretation, is the vision afforded by the novel form. On the one hand, this vision is narratorial. \textit{Deerbrook}'s omniscient narrator organizes and explains the gossipy dialogue of its characters, sorting the true and the false, and directing gossip’s explanatory power towards an account of the community system rather than the explicit claims of the statements that constitute it. But \textit{Deerbrook} also gives this power of vision to one of its characters, the invalid school-teacher Maria Young. Maria, like Dorothea Brooke, or even Margaret Ibbotson, is narratorial by virtue of her sympathetic and ethical sense. But she is also, unlike these characters, \textit{outside} the action of the novel, a position the grants her a sort of omniscience. As Rachel Ablow writes, “Martineau’s sufferer [is placed] in a privileged position, able to free herself from the local attachments that stand in the way of the impersonality to which Martineau imagined all persons should aspire. The sufferer from pain thus emerges in her account as the ideal legislator, albeit one who is prohibited by her condition from acting in the world.”\footnote{Rachel Ablow, “Harriet Martineau and the Impersonality of Pain,” \textit{Victorian Studies} 56, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 677.} Martineau’s belief in the ability of illness and disability to bestow a special form of observational and sympathetic power on the sufferer is also articulated in \textit{Life in the Sickroom}, her account of her own prolonged illness: “Our happiest fellowship must be, I think, in seeing, with a clearness we could never otherwise have attained, the vastness and certainty of the progression with which we have so little to do.”\footnote{Harriet Martineau, “Dedication” in \textit{Life in the Sickroom: Essays by an Invalid} (London: Edward Moxon, 1844), xii.}

It is not only this outsider status, however, which allows the invalid observer to occupy a special position in the novel. Rather, it is her simultaneous attachment and detachment, her ability to both see clearly and sympathize with the novel’s other characters, that makes her the “ideal legislator.” Maria, speaking to herself, puts it in the following terms:

\begin{quote}
How I love to overlook people,—to watch them acting unconsciously, and speculate for them! It is the most tempting thing in the world to contrast the little affairs one sees them busy about, with the very serious ones which await them,—which await everyone…

I am quite out of the game, and why should I not look upon its chances… What is it to be alone, and to be let alone as I am? It is to be put into a post of observation on others: but the knowledge so gained is anything but a good if it stops at mere knowledge,—if it does not make me feel and act… I may find out that it is my proper business to keep an intent eye upon the possible events of
\end{quote}
other people’s lives, that I may use slight occasions of action which might otherwise pass me by.\textsuperscript{152}

It is through Maria, therefore, rather than through the voice of the narrator, that Deerbrook teaches its readers what to do with the problem of gossip, and consequently what to do with the novel form. At once able to appreciate and dismiss the vagaries of particular events and statements, the “little affairs” of everyday life, Maria understands, as does Deerbrook itself, the ways in which the collective life produced by the accumulation of little affairs is itself the good towards which the minor events tend. The cure for the problem of gossip, is gossip itself.

Deerbrook, then, becomes an allegory of its own narrative structures, and more generally of the kind of realism in which Martineau believes. Dwelling with the particulars of gossip—perhaps the most “feeble” particulars we find in Martineau, so relentlessly does the text in which they are embedded explicitly dismiss them—the reader is both enticed and admonished, made curious about the events to come, and chastised for her interest in the mere information of the text. And it is this productive pressure, the drive of Martineau’s narrative to somehow both perpetuate and destroy itself, that constitutes her fictions’ vision of the real.

\textsuperscript{152} Martineau, Deerbrook 46-7.
Chapter II: George Eliot’s Parables

“…none of our theories are quite large enough for all the disclosures of time.”
(George Eliot, *Felix Holt, The Radical*)

“It is not compact, doubtless; but when was a panorama compact?”
(Henry James, Review of *Middlemarch*)

I. Small True Thing

To write about *Middlemarch* is to encounter the problem of an object. The novel is very large, and it does many things, and many things are done in it. Writing about it, therefore, presents the question not only of which part, or parts, might stand in for a whole that is, in the words of Henry James, “diffuse,” but of what one could say about such a part—and, implicitly, such a whole—that would be true, or at least true enough. These questions are of course not specific to *Middlemarch*. They may not even be specific to the Novel, although the Novel, especially the voluminous productions of the nineteenth century, does seem to raise them with a special, often uncomfortable, clarity. But this question—how to make a true, small thing that bears some responsible relation to a thing that is large and difficult to describe—is precisely the question that animates not just *Middlemarch*, but Eliot’s work, and the realist novel, more broadly. Elsewhere in this dissertation I have suggested that talk, in the form of direct discourse, functions as the realist novel’s true, small thing. And this to some extent remains true in Eliot’s work, though differently: Idiolect and dialect come to the fore in a novel like *Middlemarch* in a way that they do not, cannot, in Harriet Martineau’s work. If, as Catherine Gallagher argues, it is impossible to call any realism purely “inductive,” in Eliot’s work we nevertheless find a form of fictional representation that is far more invested in the ways that characters’ speech can indicate both personal and class difference. Direct discourse becomes the novel’s real thing not because of what it cannot do, but because of what it can.

Yet to describe “talk” in George Eliot’s novels purely in terms of characters’ speech would be to fundamentally misrepresent those novels, and that talk. We do not end a George Eliot novel feeling like we have just “listened” to Adam Bede, Dorothea Brooke, or even Felix Holt. We end it feeling like we have listened to the novel’s narrator. While direct discourse is certainly an important form in Eliot’s work, it can only be understood in relation to the narratorial speech that interprets, interrupts, and often subsumes it. The two forms, direct

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153 “It sets a limit, we think, to the development of the old-fashioned English novel. Its diffuseness… makes it too copious a dose of pure fiction. If we write novels so, how shall we write History?” (Henry James, “Middlemarch” in The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and Practice of Fiction, ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986], 54)

discourse and narration, need one another. They demarcate each other’s limits. Characters’ speech, however, is not, in Middlemarch or any other Eliot novel, primarily conveyed via direct discourse. Eliot’s use of free indirect discourse is of course famous. But she tends equally—or even more often—to convey speech via passages of indirect discourse embedded in longer passages of narratorial interpretation. In his discussion of free indirect discourse in Eliot’s work Roy Pascal writes that given the “greater concern for the moral quality of the characters than for external event, we might expect a profusion of free indirect speech, and it can indeed be found in abundance.” Pascal notes, however, that, “It is almost always used to evoke the thought of characters, more rarely their actual speech.” Speech is often conveyed via direct discourse. But this direct discourse becomes an occasion for narratorial elaboration. J. Hillis Miller describes Middlemarch’s narration thus: “The basic mode of narration in Middlemarch is a form of indirect discourse in which the narrator first relives for the reader one moment of a character’s experience, then moves out to generalize about that character, and then goes to a still wider level of generalization, the universal experience of mankind.” This narratorial dilation will be familiar to any reader of Eliot. The speech of characters rarely simply stands alone. It is, rather, taken hold of and explicated by a narrator who, as Pascal writes, “never lets us or her characters quite out of her grasp.”

Perhaps, then, one true thing to say is this: Eliot’s novels abound in lines we might call aphorisms, and passages we might call parables. These are moments in which narrative per se pauses and the text offers a distillation of its contents, or an instruction for interpreting them, in the form of narratorial utterance. It offers, that is, some sort of truth. These sayings are true-sounding enough to have generated not only Alexander Main’s book of extracts, but countless reproductions in countless media. They are on t-shirts, stationary, refrigerator magnets, and a necklace made from a flask with “It’s never too late to be what you might have been” etched into its surface. They have generated, too, critical attention to the ways in which their excerptability both canonized and discomfited Eliot, and to their relationship to the inductive logic of Eliot’s work. These brief passages come to stand in not just for the novels as wholes, but also for Eliot herself. In their epistemological posture of inductive synthesis, their affective

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155 See my Introduction for a further discussion of the relationship between omniscient narration and direct discourse, and of Audrey Jaffe’s argument, applicable here, that “Knowledge appears to us only in opposition to its absence; an effect of unboundedness is created in contrast to one of limitation. Thus when omniscient narration demonstrates the ability to transcend the boundaries that confine characters, it must construct the very boundaries it displays itself transcending” (Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991], 3). While Jaffe is primarily interested in how narration requires direct discourse to give it shape and meaning, I would argue that, especially in Eliot’s work, direct discourse equally requires narration.


157 Pascal, The Dual Voice 78.


159 Pascal, The Dual Voice 78.


161 This quote, as Rebecca Mead somewhat happily discovers in My Life in Middlemarch, is not actually drawn from George Eliot’s work, though it is routinely attributed to her. But this may make it, for our purposes, the best George Eliot quote of them all (My Life in Middlemarch, [New York: Crown, 2014], 220).

pose of sympathy blended with critical wit, and their positioning of Eliot’s collective narratorial voice as, as D.A. Miller has suggested, a sort of universal mother, these passages seem to offer truths not only about their ostensible subjects, but also about the text and the author themselves. Yet the evident extractability of these lines—the premise of their inclusion both in anthologies and on greeting cards—also cuts them off from the texts of which they are a part. The truth, then, or we might say the real, that these forms offer about both world and text is one which does not derive simply from the broad applicability of the wisdom they offer, or the expansiveness of their referent. It does not derive, that is, simply from their universality. It derives, too, from their ability to be severed from the texts they would distill or summarize, and from the often closed and circular nature of their form—from their ability to designate themselves as form. What I hope to suggest here is that these passages are paradigmatic of Eliot’s realism not because they speak most clearly, eloquently, or truthfully about the world outside the text, but because they make visible the ways in which the realist novel, at the moments in which it would speak about the world, does so by articulating the reality of its own forms.

Direct discourse often marks the place in which the Eliotic project of sympathy reaches a limit. Eliot’s novels demonstrate over and over again the insufficiency of the act of speaking, and the necessity of the supplement of narratorial interpretation. Yet such a supplement requires the “real thing” of the to-be-interpreted object in order to proceed. And even as it does proceed, speech often remains opaque, closed off to understanding, simply the thing itself. In moments of direct discourse we get the object rather than its meaning. The expansive sympathy of narratorial talk then emerges around, but cannot entirely penetrate, the self-contained moment of direct speech. The mode of reference we find in these aphoristic narratorial passages is counterbalanced by, or in dialectal relationship to, the reference of the direct discourse that often precedes it. The one works by moving towards the vanishing point of an ever-expanding referential horizon, the other by turning reference inward, towards the fictional real of story. Both forms, however, end up in the same place: the “real” of the text itself.

II. On the Parable

There are many possible names for the extractable and relatively small generalizations that appear so frequently in Eliot’s novels. Aphorism, maxim, and epigram all suggest themselves. This chapter, though, will use the term “parable” to describe these forms. This may at first seem counter-intuitive. While “parable” suggests brevity, it is more often of a narrative kind: a short story, rather than a brief statement. I use the term, though, for several reasons, the first of which is its ability to encompass two related but different forms that these utterances take in Eliot’s work, and the hybridity which often characterizes them. The sense of parable as a brief story told to convey a moral lesson is now the predominant one, but in the nineteenth century and earlier the word could also indicate a proverb or maxim; a short phrase meant to instruct and persuade without reference to particular examples, and largely through the force of its own

163 “George Eliot... ventriloquizes the well-remembered voice of that all-knowing, all-understanding, and all-forgiving woman to whom—uniquely—everyone has been accustomed to submit: the mother.” D.A. Miller, Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 31-2.
Though the forms in which I am interested here are characterized by their relative smallness and extractability—these are the anthologizable extracts of Main’s *Wise, Witty and Tender Sayings*, and Leah Price’s “George Eliot and the Production of Consumers”—some extracts, one notices when looking through Main’s book, are smaller than others. The parables in Eliot’s work sometimes take the form of one or two epigrammatic sentences (e.g. “Among all the forms of mistake, prophecy is the most gratuitous”\(^\text{165}\)), and sometimes of a longer paragraph, often a brief narrative:

> …there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare. Even in that conservatory existence where the fair Camelia is sighed for by the noble young Pine-apple, neither of them needing to care about the frost or rain outside, there is a nether apparatus of hot-water pipes liable to cool down on a strike of the gardeners or a scarcity of coal.\(^\text{166}\)

What unites these two examples, however, is their simultaneous reflection on and detachability from the texts in which they are embedded. They are somehow both the *most* Middlemarch-y and Felix Holt-y of the lines in *Middlemarch* and *Felix Holt*, the lines which seem to hold out a promise of summing up the rest of the novel, and also the least necessary forms in the text—and themselves the least in need of the rest of the novel. That is, we could still read and understand (though not so thoroughly enjoy) *Middlemarch* without “Among all the forms of mistake, prophecy is the most gratuitous,” but we can likewise read and understand the sentence “Among all the forms of mistake, prophecy is the most gratuitous,” without having read another word of *Middlemarch*. The parable, then, is characterized not just by its syntactical or narrative form, or even by its length, but also by the paradoxical relations of necessity it has to the novel as a whole.

I use the term “parable,” too, because it is one that appears in both *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, though in a somewhat more circumscribed and ironized way. “Parable” in Eliot’s novels is used to suggest realistic but allegorical narrative, as in *Middlemarch*’s discussion of “the means of elevating a low subject”: The narrator tells us that a discussion of the “historical parallels” between her subject and another which is more dignified would serve to effect such an elevation, but they are too long, too tangential, and too hard to remember.\(^\text{167}\) We read that, “The chief objection to them is, that the diligent narrator may lack space, or (what is often the same thing) may not be able to think of them with any degree of particularity, though he may have a philosophical confidence that if known they would be illustrative.”\(^\text{168}\) Another form must be found:

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\(^{164}\) The OED includes, but designates as archaic, the definition “a proverb, a maxim; an enigmatic or mystical saying” within the broader definition of the parable as “an allegorical or metaphorical saying or narrative; an allegory, a fable, an apologue; a comparison, a similitude.” *parable, n.* *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed, March 17, 2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/137268?rskey=b1x59n&result=1&isAdvanced=false.


It seems an easier and shorter way to dignity, to observe that—since there never was a true story which could not be told in parables where you might put a monkey in for a margrave, and *vice versa*—whatever has been or is to be narrated by me about low people, may be ennobled by being considered a parable; so that if any bad habits and ugly consequences are brought into view, the reader may have the relief of regarding them as not more than figuratively ungenteel, and may feel himself virtually in company with persons of some style.\[169\]

In this passage, *parable* refers not to a particular form, but to a way of encountering a text. Anything might be a parable if we choose to read it as one. The archness of the passage, though, and its evident disdain for the reading practices it describes, suggest that there is in fact something about *Middlemarch* as a whole that prevents it from being read as a parable. Though the novel strives towards a form of universality, it is not of a kind that would allow for its particulars to simply be exchanged for any other. Its monkeys may not be made margraves. To the extent that these monkeys will have something to tell us about margraves, it will be in part because we understand exactly the ways in which they are monkeys. The novel does not permit a type of reading that would simply see through the text, using it as a means to encounter a real meaning lying beyond it. *Middlemarch*, that is, cannot be detached from itself. To suggest that it could be is not only to engage in a form of violent reading, but also to license a kind of lazy writing. The “diligent” narrator who cannot be bothered to remember, or even to know, the historical parallels which would dignify the novel’s subject is certainly not the narrator of this or any other Eliot novel. The parable here is the figure against which the novel defines itself, a way of short-circuiting the novel’s representational methods and flattening its discourse.

But although it is evidently intended ironically, we might take the narrator’s statement seriously in several ways. If it does not seem to provide us with a very good model for reading *Middlemarch*, or if it does so only in the negative, it does give us some useful ways of defining the parable. The first, as I have mentioned, is the simultaneous totality and detachability of the parable—that is, the way in which it seems at once to entirely encapsulate and be superfluous to the text as a whole. To re-think a novel as a parable, this passage suggests, is essentially to summarize it (which is precisely the problem with such a thought), and such a summary may be subsequently transported; its meaning, *the* meaning, made mobile and able to float free of the encumbrance of those hundreds of pages that make the book. The second is another paradoxical feature of the parable: its simultaneous opacity and transparency, or the way in which it predicates its efficacy both on its own internal logic and circular structures of cause and effect, and on its ability to refer broadly to the extra-textual, to point outside its own structures and at the world outside itself. The parable persuades not by marshaling particulars that prove the rule it articulates, but by articulating the rule in such a way that it might be said to refer to any particular at all. The parable refers to everything by referring to nothing. The Eliotic parable, then, is a form that knits together the narrative and the aphoristic, or that toggles between the two, in order to create something that is an archetype of, yet detachable from, the novel as a whole, and which punctures the narrative temporality of that novel even as it uses narrative to do so. It is also, I hope to demonstrate, a form that draws attention to form itself, and to the strange point of convergence between a form with a meaning that is universal, that is, which might refer to anything and everything, and a form that has no meaning at all.

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III. Failures of Speech

This passage on the parable follows, and refers to, a verbal performance that is extremely effective at causing a spectacular set of failures: The reading of Peter Featherstone’s will. The reading itself is rendered almost entirely in indirect discourse, its words made knowable only via their effects on their hearers: “…at the sound of the first ‘give and bequeath’ [Mary Garth] could see all complexions changing subtly, as if some faint vibration were passing through them… The small bequests came first, and even the recollection that there was another will and that poor Peter might have thought better of it, could not quell the rising disgust and indignation.”

What is rendered in direct discourse is the anticipation of and reactions to the will on the part of the listeners, none of whom lays an especially persuasive claim to the reader’s sympathy. The speech in this scene is essentially comic, reducing the speakers—even those, like Fred and Walter Vincy, for whom we elsewhere feel more fully—to types, or players in a scene that is itself a type: selfish and entitled family members gathered to hear the will of a rich relative whom they detested. The speaking bodies of the characters gathered to hear the will are reduced to eerily animated machines or animals—productive of noise but inhuman. Martha Crance’s hypocrisy (“I never was covetous, Jane,” she says to her sister, and we know untruer words were never spoken) is rendered grotesque by the descriptions of her speech: “Mrs Cranch was bulky, and, breathing asthmatically, had the additional motive for making her remarks unexceptionable and giving them a general bearing, that even her whispers were loud and liable to sudden bursts like those of a deranged barrel-organ.”

Least sympathetic, and least human, is the “stranger” who will later be revealed as Joshua Rigg (Featherstone), a “frog-faced” man, “perhaps about two or three and thirty, whose prominent eyes, thin-lipped, downward curved mouth, and hair sleekly brushed away from a forehead that sank suddenly above the ridge of his eyebrows, certainly gave his face a batrachian unchangeableness of expression.” We hear nothing at all from Rigg in this scene, but when, several chapters later, he speaks to John Raffles, his speech is the occasion for a further insistence on his frogginess, and narratorial musing on Rigg’s “lowness” and “social superfluity”: “Having made this rather lofty comparison I am less uneasy in calling attention to the existence of low people by whose interference, however little we may like it, the course of the world is very much determined. It would be well, certainly, if we could help to reduce their number, and something might perhaps be done by not lightly giving occasion to their existence. Socially speaking, Joshua Rigg would have been generally pronounced a superfluity. Rigg’s social superfluity is inversely proportional to his narrative influence. He “determines the course of the world”—and the plot of Middlemarch. Yet the speech of characters like Rigg and Mrs. Cranch are not the occasions for narratorial flights of sympathy. It is, rather, a place where sympathy reaches its limits, and where language no longer works to communicate hidden depths—or, really, to communicate anything at all. It becomes merely a confirmation of surface, another “superfluity” that tells us that here, at least, appearances are identical with interiors. This

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170 Eliot, Middlemarch 336.
171 Eliot, Middlemarch 333.
172 Eliot, Middlemarch 332. The description of Joshua Rigg’s “unchangeable” face can be contrasted with that of Will Ladislaw: “The first impression on seeing Will was one of sunny brightness, which added to the uncertainty of his changing expression. Surely, his very features changed their form” (209)
173 Eliot, Middlemarch 412
is why there can be no free indirect discourse for a character like Rigg or Mrs. Cranch. There are no interior depths to plumb.

Robert Kiely has noted that the exchange of language between characters in *Middlemarch* is often marked as a failure, a breakdown in communication: “As long and richly wordy as *Middlemarch* may be, it is not a display of unmixed confidence in the power of language and, especially, of dialogue. Despite its double plot and careful paring of characters, *Middlemarch* is not, like *Pride and Prejudice*, a masterpiece of dialogue; it is a masterpiece of interrupted dialects, of dialogues broken off… out of frustration and a sense of futility.” 174 Direct discourse in such cases becomes a mark of its own failure to function at the level of story, a way of showing that characters cannot speak for themselves. Yet at the level of discourse such direct speech works, in its failure, to create the necessity of narration. If Rigg and Mrs. Cranch mark the limit of sympathy for the specific character they nevertheless, or therefore, become occasions for the narration to turn towards a disquisition on the world, or people, more generally. They elicit, that is, parables. Eliot’s narration, then, requires characters whose speech—which can only take the form of direct or indirect, but never free indirect discourse—clearly demarcates the boundary between narratorial omniscience and the delimited consciousness of character. For Raymond Williams, such a delimitation constitutes the fundamental flaw in Eliot’s sympathy, a flaw which deforms the novel at the level of style:

> We have only to read a George Eliot novel to see the difficulty of the coexistence, within one form, of an analytically conscious observer of conduct with a developed analytic vocabulary, and of people represented as living and speaking in mainly customary ways; for it is not the precision of detailed observation but the inclusive, socially appealing, loose and repetitive manner that predominates. There is a new kind of break in the texture of the novel, an evident failure of continuity between the necessary language of the novelist and the recorded language of many of the characters. 175

For Williams, the division between narrator and character, and between narration and the “customary” and “loose and repetitive” style of the novel’s direct discourse, creates a “break” in the novel’s form, a rupture that indicates that however much it would aspire to do so, Eliot’s sympathy cannot hold up when confronted with the particulars of individual subjects. It can sympathize generally, but not in particular:

> the very recognition of conflict, of the existence of classes, of divisions and contrasts of feeling and speaking, makes a unity of idiom impossible. George Eliot gives her own consciousness, often disguised as personal dialect, to the characters with whom she does really feel; but the strain of the impersonation is usually evident—in Adam, Daniel, Maggie, or Felix Holt. For the rest she gives out a kind of generalising affection which can be extended to a generalising sharpness… but which cannot extend to a recognition of lives individually made from a common source… the people she respects in general (and for good

reasons) she cannot respect enough in particular unless she gives them, by surrogate, parts of her own consciousness.\textsuperscript{176}

If the narrator can sympathize with people like Mrs. Cranch—or even, to use a more loveable example, like Caleb Garth—she nevertheless cannot sympathize with Mrs. Cranch herself. In this reading the differences in the rhetoric of narrator and character indicate more than different forms or levels of knowledge, or even different textual formations. They indicate a fundamental disequilibrium or disunity in the text.

Yet this disequilibrium, I believe, is a problem the text knows that is has. It cannot incorporate the speech of someone like Mrs. Cranch into narration. It doesn’t want or need to. The point of such speech is not to be an incorporable element of the novel. It is to be a thing apart; an object, not a discourse. It is, in other words, to be particular. The narration that tends towards the parable is occasioned by such particularity, is a way of moving through and beyond it. In this moving through, however, in the turn to generality, the parable begins eventually to look inward again.

IV. Forms of the Particular

Eliot’s novels, like those of many realist authors, or even like novels in general, are in part an attempt to work through the relationship of the particular and the general. This is, of course, a truism of criticism about realism, but it is, perhaps for this reason, an idea that warrants further attention.\textsuperscript{177} The name that Eliot gives to relations between particular and general is, of course, “Form”:

Form, then, as distinguished from merely massive impression, must first depend on the discrimination of wholes and then on the discrimination of parts… And as knowledge continues to grow by its alternating processes of distinction and combination, seeing smaller and smaller unlikenesses and grouping or associating these under a common likeness, it arrives at the conception of wholes composed of parts more and more multiplied and highly differenced, yet more and more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common likeness or mutual

\textsuperscript{176} Williams, \textit{The Country and the City} 69-70.

\textsuperscript{177} The particular/general relationship in the realist text has been discussed by a range of critics, including Georg Lukács, Roland Barthes, Ian Watt, and Frederic Jameson, whose \textit{Antinomies of Realism} is a recent engagement with the subject. Some other formulations from the last few years include Elizabeth Deeds Ermath’s argument that in realism, “The details that formerly were understood as discrete cases now come to be understood as partial expressions of hidden wholes… The identity of anything… can only be discovered in relationship, and so, in realism, discrete forms are replaced by continuities” (Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, \textit{Realism and Consensus in the English Novel} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 16); or Harry Shaw’s assertion that, “Attempts to theorize different kinds of realism must specify the field of mundane phenomena that have the potentiality to be revealed as participating in or constituting ‘the real.’ They must also specify a larger structure that has the potentiality to confer reality on the phenomena. Finally, they must specify the nature of the link between the larger structure and the mundane phenomena” (Harry Shaw, \textit{Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot}. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 93). See also my discussion of this dynamic in Harriet Martineau’s work.
dependence. And the fullest example of such a whole is the fullest example of Form.  

Form is here a way of perceiving, one distinguished from “merely massive impression” by its simultaneous attention to both difference and likeness. Rather than being something an object, or even a system, possesses, form is a way of seeing that it would be possible to direct towards any object or system. It is a process, rather than a quality. And yet, for all the dynamism this conception implies, there is a still quality to Eliot’s form; a way in which its perception, though this perception is processual, reveals not timeless relations, but the timelessness of relation itself. Form for Eliot, as for many realists, inheres in this interweaving not only of the part and the whole, but also of the permanent and the changeable.

But what does it mean to say that a novel or a mode of writing negotiates the relationship between the particular and the general? How could any novel avoid doing so? Or, to put the question another way: What could be especially realist, or especially Eliotic, about a concern with the particular and the general? One frequently offered answer derives from the co-occurrence of high realism and sociology, statistics, and other discourses concerned with rendering large masses of individuals or events legible—that is with representation. All of these discourses would reduce the many to the one or the few, organizing the world according to categories arising from an inductive study of its particularities. Eliot’s novels, this line of thinking goes, attempt to describe an indescribably large and varied world outside the text by describing types, paradigmatic relationships, common experience, etc. They leaven this depiction of general categories with details (objects, character traits, random events) that are either idiosyncratic or contingent enough to register as realistic. This is not (or not only) a mere textual effect, but a sort of realist cosmology, shared by other nineteenth century discourses, in which the world might be represented by a textual negotiation between abstractions immanent in that world and particularities that are both sufficiently like and unlike the ones outside the text. Such a realism would formulate this type of representation not merely as an especially literary approximation of the real world, but as sharing with the real world a certain structure of relations. That is, Eliot negotiates between particular and general not because she believes this is what literature can do, but because she believes this is how the world works.

This is true, so far as it goes. Eliot evidently shares concerns about representation with sociology and statistics, and her novels evidently predicate much of their ethical, affective, and even aesthetic work on representing a world that exceeds the text. But what I would like to insist upon is the fact that representation is only one side of the coin. If representation is another name for, as George Levine writes, “an attempt to use language to get beyond language,” that is, if it constitutes the text’s turn towards a world that is exterior to it, then I want to argue that in the same moment that Eliot’s novels, and the realist text more generally, turn towards the world they must also turn away from it.

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Representation is not the only lens through which we might consider the relationship of the particular and the general. If my earlier question—how could any novel avoid negotiating between these poles?—is in part a response to the social conditions under which the nineteenth-century novel was produced, and which inform its conception of the structure of realities both literary and not, it is also generated by the fact that novels are big things made of little things. They are books made of chapters, made of paragraphs, made of sentences, made of words. Realist novels, then, negotiate between general and particular purely as a matter of form. And as long narrative forms, novels, realist or no, must navigate between a dual impulse towards narrative propulsiveness and descriptive dwelling. These two aspects of the general/particular crux can be, but are not necessarily, commensurate. That is, though we often think of “plot” as inhering in narrative totalities, of the largeness of temporal expansiveness finding its objective correlative in the 800-page book, we might think, too, of it residing in the flash of prolepsis or the condensations of anecdotes (or, for that matter, parables). So too, though we might associate the temporally particular with the “moment” of brief lyricism or the vivid noting of a minor detail, we might also find it in the way such noting can flower— or metastasize— into lengthy descriptions that go on for pages, making nothing happen. Finally, the relationship between particular and general is also a critical question, one which we ask each time we consider how to write about novels. What is our unit? In what does meaning inhere? We must read closely, but what is the thing we must read? In the attempt to appropriately select and accurately describe a textual unit, but also in the attempt to write a text that has its own, independent, reality, the critic of realism is more like her subject than not.

I note these sometimes overlapping formal elements of the general/particular relation not to suggest an overdetermined analogy or an identity between them, nor to suggest the primacy of one or another kind of relation. I hope, rather, to disambiguate these different relationships, and to show that by conflating them we often misunderstand the project of the realist text. If we understand realism as essentially external in its orientation, that is, if we understand representation to be the hallmark of the realist mode, then the formal elements of realism’s concern with the particular and the general may seem in some way secondary to those which either report upon or model themselves on “the world.” The novel’s own particularities and generalities come to seem descriptive or microcosmic, important in either case because they are like something, because they resemble that which they are not. Realism is realism insofar as it shows us something about the world. Again, this is true so far as it goes. But it only goes so far. For such a project is of course fated to fail, either because it is only partial, or because it is disturbingly totalizing. Critiques of realism more often than not predicate themselves on pointing out these failures of realist representation. But I would like to suggest that Eliot knows very well that this project is, or would be, a quixotic one. Realist novels, and Eliot’s novels in particular, do not “succeed” insofar as they mirror, describe or even represent the world. Rather, they instantiate a form that is itself real.

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181 As Gerard Genette writes of Proust’s “‘anachronic’ narrative”: “Ever since the day when the narrator in a trance perceived the unifying significance of his story, he never ceases to hold all of its threads simultaneously, to apprehend simultaneously all of its places and all of its moments, to be capable of establishing a multitude of ‘telescopic’ relationships amongst them: a ubiquity that is spatial but also temporal, an ‘omnitemporality…”’ (Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 78.)
V. Minim Mammals: Aphorism and Allegory in the Parable

Eliot’s parables are, on the one hand, the moment in which the text turns most decisively towards the world. If they are characterized in part by their generality, then they are by definition sites of enlargement; places where the text seeks to analogize its own contents to the contents external to it. “Doesn’t Middlemarch,” they ask, “remind you of your own life?” And conversely, “Isn’t it possible that your own life will remind you of Middlemarch?” These are moments in which third person narration often shifts to the third person plural, moving from the specificity of character to the ubiquity of an address that encompasses both those inside and those outside the text: “In our eagerness to explain impressions, we often lose our hold of the sympathy that comprehends them”182; “The right word is always a power, and communicates its definiteness to our action”183; “We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves.”184 These statements teach us how to read both the novel and the world, suggesting not just that they are similar in conforming to the descriptions offered by such statements, but also that they share an ability to so conform; to be condensed, at least partially, into an aphorism.

Catherine Gallagher has demonstrated the way in which such statements, when they are part of character descriptions, function as one pole towards which such description moves. It also, Gallagher argues, moves constantly in the other direction, towards uncategorizable specificity or exceptionality: “Eliot… carries the reader through the arc of induction and deduction, deduction and induction, that gives generalities weight and substance. The subtlety of such movements among referential levels, together with their frequency and seeming candor, the softening and hardening from instances to generalities and back again, reassures the reader that this fiction is always connected to the stuff of the real, that the type may be ideational but it has fed on life.”185

It is evidently the case that Eliot’s texts, in their ethical, affective, and aesthetic impulses, are built upon this dialectical movement between the general and the particular. But Eliot’s parables, unlike her descriptions of character, do not confine themselves to definitions of what we might call particular generalities—that is, to defining politicians in the 1830’s, or women who received a mediocre education. They are not descriptions of types of people, but of people, or experience, in general: “pain must enter into its glorified life of memory before it can turn into compassion”186; “…nature never makes men who are at once energetically sympathetic and minutely calculating.”187 The parable strives not towards typicality, but towards universality. And because it does so, because it tends toward saying something about everything, it is both more and less “testable” against readerly experience and knowledge than the generalizations of character description. For Gallagher, the alignment of a particular character with the type is a part of the referential function of the text, a broadening of description that predicates itself upon on a movement from text to world, or on the establishment of a relationship of identity between the two. But if the assertion that “pain must enter into its glorified life of memory before it can turn into compassion” resonates with a given reader, that is, if the statement seems to refer

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184 Eliot, *Middlemarch* 211.
effectively to the world, this is nevertheless insufficient “proof” of its broader referential
effectiveness. Such a statement refers not to someone or something, but, given the proper
circumstances, to everyone and everything. The “pain” of this sentence is not “my pain” or “her
pain,” but pain itself, everyone’s and no one’s. This way of thinking is, as Gallagher points out,
in many ways anathema to Eliot’s project. Specificity, after all, must be honored. Totalizing
impulses, whether political, ethical, or rhetorical, are always suspect. Yet the text evinces in
these moments a sort of yearning for totality. It briefly but intensely takes up the position of one
who sees, over and above difference, what in fact binds various experience together.

This happens more often than not in moments where particularity seems to fail; where
characters cannot understand or read one another, and narration becomes necessary as a
supplement to characterological understanding. Dorothea’s fight with Casaubon in Rome, which
constitutes for her one of those “epochs in our experience when some dear expectation dies, or
some new motive is born,” is in effect a product of the husband and wife’s respective inabilities
to properly read each other.188 Dorothea’s failure to understand Casaubon is probably the
Middlemarch’s most important misreading, but it is not the only one that occurs in this part of
the novel. Even when encounters between two characters are going well they often contain
moments of productive failure to understand: When Dorothea receives Will Ladislaw shortly
after her argument with Casaubon, we are meant to understand that the exchange between the
two is a welcome moment of mutual comprehension and connection. Yet the conversation is
laced with incomprehension: Dorothea “wondered” and then “[wonders] still more” at Will; Will
is “struck mute for a few moments” in response to Dorothea; There is a “new” but “mysterious”
light for Will in Dorothea’s words.189 And the first half of conversation centers around
Dorothea’s incomprehension of painting (“I always feel particularly ignorant about painting’’),
which has caused her to unknowingly criticize Will’s work.190 These are moments of
incomprehension, but they are pleasurable, erotic in their suggestion that the two can enjoy each
other without fully understanding, and will come to understand in time. It is an erotics not only
of character, but of narrative, the suggestion of an unfolding plot to come. The reader is invited
to perform a kind of imaginative supplementing, or, better yet, to anticipate the supplement of
the remainder of the novel. For the reader must not only pay attention to the particular facts and
moments that the novel will offer her, she must also be ready to receive instruction. Mere
observation—mere induction—is not enough. This, in fact, is the basis of Dorothea’s failure to
understand painting: “‘At first when I enter a room where all the walls are covered with frescoes,
or with rare pictures, I feel a kind of awe… But when I begin to examine the pictures one by one,
the life goes out of them, or else is something violent and strange to me.”191 Dorothea observes,
but simple observation is insufficient. As Will suggests, it must be accompanied by “knowing;”
by understanding that knits observation together into sense: “‘Oh, there is a great deal in the
feeling for art which must be acquired,’ said Will… ‘Art is an old language with a great many
artificial affected styles, and sometimes the chief pleasure one gets out of knowing them is the
mere sense of knowing.”192 The novel’s suggestion that exchanges between, or the individual
understanding of, characters is often lacking opens up Middlemarch’s rhetoric to the necessity of
the parable.

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188 Eliot, Middlemarch 211.
189 Eliot, Middlemarch 205, 206, 204, 209.
190 Eliot, Middlemarch 206.
191 Eliot, Middlemarch 206.
192 Eliot, Middlemarch 206.
It is often, then, precisely at the moments when the text instructs either its readers or its characters to bear in mind the specificity and essential difference of the other that it substantiates itself with the ballast of the universal. Dorothea’s dawning realization that she has been under a “wild illusion” in entering into her marriage with Casaubon is, as readers of *Middlemarch* will know, both a moment of pathos and the beginning of real of ethical maturity. It is her disillusionment, the startling knowledge that people are not only different from our ideas about them, but also different from ourselves, that will eventually produce the ability to sympathize with a human being rather than devoting herself to a concept. Dorothea must “conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling” that Casaubon possesses “an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.” She must realize that Casaubon is just like her, in that he is entirely specific. An oscillation, if ever there was one, between totality and particularity, sameness and difference. But the passage that so demonstrates the importance of considering the particulars of consciousness and experience is also a passage that itself begins with, and is premised upon, a totalizing statement: “We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet…” Dorothea’s bourgeoning emergence into moral maturity is predicated upon her beginning from an immature state, i.e. the moral stupidity into which she, like all of us, was born. But are we all born in moral stupidity? Would it be possible even to know such a thing about oneself, much less about all of humanity? And isn’t there at least the possibility of an equally persuasive counter-formulation, something like, “We are all of us born into moral perfection, taking the world as an udder to feed our baser selves”? This doesn’t apply very well to Dorothea, but it could well apply to other characters. But the point, of course, is not whether this statement is or isn’t true. It both feels entirely true, and cannot be true, not in any meaningful sense. And it cannot be true for precisely the reasons Eliot would give us—life casts its lights and shadows on everyone differently, and even when it doesn’t, we cannot possibly know. The only one who could possess such complete knowledge of the world would be God. Or, briefly, the narrator of a realist novel.

But we accept the statement nevertheless. It feels, as I said, true. We accept it as we accept most such statements on the part of the omniscient realist narrator, that is, provisionally, as true within the cosmology of *Middlemarch*. But we accept it, too, on its own merits, as a statement separable from the novel of which it is a part. It is this acceptance, and this separability, that make such a quote fodder for both refrigerator magnets and close readings. They seem like distillations rather than tenuously held positions. We accept that “the right word

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193 Eliot, *Middlemarch* 211.
194 Eliot, *Middlemarch* 211
195 Eliot, *Middlemarch* 211
196 K.M Newton, drawing from Roman Jakobson, points out that while, “the reader may want question [sic] [the] absoluteness” of such a statement, or may find it “both moralistic and artless” it would be a mistake to describe it as purely constative:

As Roman Jakobson essentially argued in his essay 'Linguistics and Poetics', the constative function of language in a literary context interacts with the poetic function and creates an interplay between the two which prevents the constative any longer having priority over the poetic… It would be wrong to say that the constative has no force but it can be argued that it is not legitimately read as if it were a normal piece of philosophical discourse. It can thus give pleasure to the reader of literature independently of the reader's particular beliefs and opinions (K.M Newton, “Narration in *Middlemarch* Revisited,” *The George Eliot Review* 42 [2011]: 22-3). At question, then, is not whether or not the statement is “really” true, but whether it feels, at the moment of reading, as if it is.
is always a power, and communicates its definiteness to our action,” difficult as it might seem to know if the word we have found is the right one, much less whether it has communicated definiteness to our actions.\textsuperscript{197} If elsewhere in the novel, as in Gallagher’s example of a description of Mr. Brooke, description oscillates between the categorical and the particular, in these moments it pushes this oscillation to its vanishing point. Eliot’s descriptions are often a complex web of generalized types punctured by idiosyncratic traits, events, etc., from which arise new inductively produced categories from which deductions can then be made about the bearers of those idiosyncrasies. But in Eliot’s parables the rhetoric of the text becomes increasingly expansive, and in exceeding the bounds of the verifiable, necessarily substitutes another real for the referential one towards which it strives. If these statements feel true, it is not because they seem to tell us something about real life, but because they seem themselves to be real. Their reality is not referential or representational, but formal, grammatical. As the parable pushes the universal past the referential it brings to the fore the linguistic structures that constitute it.

If the monkeys and margraves of \textit{Middlemarch} may not be responsibly understood as identical, it is not because the sentence in which they appear does any work to distinguish them. The parenthetical portion of this passage about parables might in fact be read as precisely the sort of aphoristic parable I have been discussing: “There never was a true story which could not be told in parables where you might put a monkey in for a margrave, and \textit{vice versa}.” The absolutism of the sentence’s first words is buoyed by the similarities in the terms to which these words will apply. The alliteration, and the syllabic and rhythmic parallels, of “monkey” and “margrave” render the opposition of their content secondary to the identity of their forms. They are, indeed, substitutable, exchangeable, reversible (“\textit{vice versa}”), etc.

But perhaps this seems like the tedious—and point-missing—explanation of that which should never be explained: a joke. This sentence, we might counter, is there to parody exactly the kind of absolutist thinking and ignorance of the particulars of everyday life that run counter to Eliot’s ethics. Monkey and margrave are therefore almost \textit{too} alike, their formal similarities the means by which we see how bad writing, bad reading, or bad language can flatten their subjects. But once again, the parabalistic mode that would seem to be ironized here is in fact one which has a serious application.\textsuperscript{198} \textit{Middlemarch}’s characters are always entirely, but never \textit{merely}, themselves. The very existence of the kinds of aphoristic sentences here under discussion, the assertion that we are “all of us born in moral stupidity” like Dorothea, makes plausible the substitution of margraves for monkeys. And while the inhumaness of the latter might seems to place it outside the representational scope of the novel, it is worth noting that a monkey, if it is not quite a margrave, is also not quite a mouse or a marmot—especially in England in the 1870’s.\textsuperscript{199} That is, if the allegorical/parabalistic reading both advocated and ironized by this passage would ultimately see all its subjects as reducible to something like the “primitive tissue” (as Lydgate might call it) of experience, making one of the parable’s terms a recently posited ancestor of the other can only reinforce this essential likeness. The real similarity between the content denoted by the words “monkey” and “margrave” turns the joke of their formal similarity

\textsuperscript{197} Eliot, \textit{Middlemarch}, 302.
\textsuperscript{198} The inclusion of these lines in Main’s book suggests their detachability from the context which ironizes them (Eliot, \textit{Wise, Witty and Tender Sayings} 297).
\textsuperscript{199} For more on Eliot’s responses to evolutionary theory and Darwin in particular see Gillian Beer’s \textit{Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
against itself. The two words are alike in reference after all. Yet the joke of the “merely” formal similarity—amplified by the passage’s later juxtaposition of “loobies” and “lords”—still stands. The silliness of the words produces a giddy impulse towards further silliness. A list begins to unfurl itself: monkeys for margraves for marmots (after all) for meadows for muskets. It may be objected that the last two items cannot so easily be made to stand in for the others, but if instructed to try, can we not see anything as a figure for anything else? It is this potentially endless unfurling of substitutable terms that is both the butt of this passage’s joke, and the promise of its form. J. Hillis Miller, in his discussion of this passage, writes that the mode of representation it describes is, “not that of one-to-one correspondence, but that of a figurative standing for, a sign-to-sign temporal relation like de Manian allegory.” In the parable, “the distinction between literal and figurative breaks down [and] is replaced by a mode of truth generated by the relation between two interchangeable signs… each of which is both literal and figurative, each of which can stand in for the other or be stood for by it.” Both in what it describes, then, and in what it does, this passage relies upon a logic of substitution. The parable as allegory is predicated upon its terms’ ability to always stand in and be stood for. The parable as aphorism makes a similar claim for universality, but the basis of its substitutions is as much formal as it is referential.

It is this logic of substitution that knits together the two definitions of the parable, each of which is at work in Eliot’s texts. If it is perhaps easy to see how the parable as aphorism might turn even Eliot’s work into a sort of circular Wildean epigram, the parable as allegory would seem to resist this kind of closure. It is, after all, a form in which language is always in search of something other than itself; in which the contours of writing can never be the point. The parable-as-allegory is a figure of the text as a means to an end, and if it is used to describe Eliot’s writing, it is used to put writing per se to the side of its subject. In his introduction to a collection of Eliot’s essays, published in 1883, Nathan Sheppard writes,

George Eliot belongs to and is the greatest of the school of artists in fiction who write fiction as a means to an end, instead of as an end. And, while she certainly is

200 “Thus while I tell the truth about loobies, my reader’s imagination need not be entirely excluded from an occupation with lords;” (Eliot, Middlemarch 341).
202 Miller, Reading for Our Time 109.
203 For Miller, clearly drawing from de Man, the contingency of the relation between signs is a necessary element of the parabalistic mode: “The relation between these signs is not that of objective similarity but a relation as arbitrary and conventional as the contingent fact that they start with the same letter” (Ibid., 109-110). It is this that separates the parable, where “equivalence is arbitrary and linguistic rather than objective or realistic” from a more stereotypically realist objective mode (one that would marshal “historical parallels”) which bases its analogies on analogies that are “really there” in history or the world (Ibid., 108). Although Miller is correct in identifying these modes as the two described by this passage, what he misses, I think, is the way these two modes converge. That is, when Middlemarch’s generalizations become general enough they render the terms of objective representation as infinitely exchangeable as those of the parabalistic.
204 This all depends, of course, on whom you ask. If Paul de Man’s theory of allegory would seem to lend itself easily to a detachable signification, a history of allegory that aligns it with the parable would insist more strongly upon the necessity of a given referent. My own analysis clearly tends towards de Man’s contention that, “the relationship between the allegorical sign and its meaning (signifié) is not decreed by dogma… We have, instead a relationship between signs in which the reference to their respective meanings has become of secondary importance.” (Paul de Man “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971], 207.)
not a story-teller of the first order, considered simply as a story-teller, her novels
are a striking illustration of the power of fiction as a means to an end. They
remind us, as few other stories do, of the fact that however inferior the story may
be considered simply as a story, it is indispensable to the delineation of character.
No other forms of composition, no discourse, or essay, or series of independent
sketches, however successful, could succeed in bringing out character equal to the
novel. Herein is at once the justification of the power of fiction. ‘He spake a
parable,’ with an ‘end’ in view which could not be so expeditiously attained by
any other form of address.205

Not only Eliot’s work, but the novel form itself, are here rendered subservient to their
representational function. Like the parable, the novel at its most “expeditious” is a mere vehicle
for “the delineation of character,” figured here not as the depiction of particular individuals, but
as a means of accessing a universal humanness. But, as in the previous passage, the tendency of
such allegorical modes to indiscriminately consume potential subjects, to become about
everything, is unavoidable. And so the formal substitutions of the aphorisms and the figural
substitutions of the allegory converge in the parable-as-both. The parable becomes a means to an
end, a means to all ends, and a means to itself.

“There never was a true story which could not be told in parables where you might put a
monkey in for a margrave, and vice versa.” What is left of this sentence if monkeys may be
margraves may be microscopes? What is left of this sentence if, as I have suggested, this
sentence is itself a parable? Or rather, since the answer to this question might itself be a
question—“what is not left?”—perhaps we might ask this in a different way: If monkeys may be
margraves (and vice versa) what is real in this sentence? The answer, I think, is that what is real
is the sentence itself. Though Eliot’s parables are certainly not reducible to some deep structure
in which they can all be re-written as mathematical equations, they do tend towards the
formulaic. They are definitions, or assertions of clear cause and effect. And if, in their
universality and in their fictionality, they cast off the question of which particular particulars
might fit (or not) within their parameters, the parameters themselves nevertheless remain intact.
We might perhaps insert anything at all into the blanks in, “There [frequency] [verb] a [noun]
that [possibility] [action performed],” and it would feel true—and we haven’t even reached the
monkeys and the margraves yet. The grammar of Eliot’s parables becomes the particular to
which their universals must always return.

This may seem almost perversely deconstructive, especially in its application to realism,
and to a realist as concerned with the relationship of text to world as Eliot. I do not mean to
suggest that realism is never referential, or that its reference is a failure for which language is
some therapeutic compensation. What I want, rather, is to reconsider those moments in Eliot’s
work that are both grandiose and tender—and often discomforting in their conjunction of the
two. The moments in which the Eliotic narrator seems either most wise or most tiresome are the
ones that offer themselves as moments, mobile and fleeting. These are sentences that often
remain with Eliot’s readers, but they are also sentences that remain with her non-readers. We do
not need the texts from which they are drawn in order to attach ourselves to these words, and this
fact renders them both powerful and scandalous—or, less grandiosely, embarrassing. Their

205 Nathan Sheppard, “George Eliot’s Analysis of Motives” in The Essays of George Eliot, Complete (New York:
Funk and Wagnalls, 1883), 7-8.
portability and their formulaic quality run the risk of making them feel empty rather than true. But this untethered expansiveness, and the sort of pure relationality that comes from the foregrounding of grammar, both serve to remind us that for Eliot, “Form,” that is, the perception of connectedness, is always more real than either the general category or the specific detail. In the parable, we find a form that gives us Eliotic form itself.

VI. The Divisions of Felix Holt

But what about the places where Eliotic form, and Eliotic realism, seems not quite to have achieved the perfection of Middlemarch? If Middlemarch’s parables are seen as able to stand in for all of Middlemarch, it would seem that Middlemarch itself is often asked to stand in for all of realism—or even the Novel itself.206 Not so Felix Holt. The novel, though better received than its immediate predecessor Romola, is and was often treated as a transitional text, a way for Eliot to move from the more limited scope of Adam Bede or The Mill on the Floss to the panoramic realism and formal ambitiousness of a novel like Middlemarch. Henry James, in an unsigned review, writes, “Better, perhaps, than any of George Eliot’s novels does Felix Holt illustrate her closely wedded talent and foibles.”207 The novel’s plot, James continues, “is essentially made up, and its development is forced.”208 James identified the novel’s narrative defects in essentially the same terms that critics would for the next 150 years: It was a text divided. “As a story,” James writes, “Felix Holt is singularly inartistic. The promise of the title is only half kept. The history of the hero’s opinions is made subordinate to so many other considerations, so many sketches of secondary figures, to so many discursive amplifications of incidental points, to so much that is clear and brilliant and entertaining, but that, compared with this central object, is not serious.”209 Subsequent critics have seen an even cleaner division, not a novel pulled in many directions, but a novel split in two. Sally Shuttleworth writes that, “Felix Holt explores the possibilities of organic reconciliation between the ideals of duty and fulfilment, continuity and change… Felix Holt is the one novel in which George Eliot makes the possible conservative political implications of organicism truly explicit. The celebration of organic

continuity is not mirrored, however, in the narrative form, for... *Felix Holt* is a divided novel."²¹⁰ Shuttleworth means this literally—that like *Daniel Deronda*, *Felix Holt* is divided between the more explicitly political drama of its titular character, and the “self-doubt and torture” of its other, female protagonist. But *Felix Holt* is divided too in another sense—or in several other senses. David Kurnick points out that while readers may be discomfited by the “baldly ideological way” in which the novel deals with Felix’s radicalism, this “political discomfort is augmented by the plot’s awkward embrace of the disparate domains of the erotic and the legalistic.”²¹¹ And Carolyn Lesjak argues that our perception of the novel as divided is conditioned by our understanding of its genre—the industrial novel. This understanding is shaped in large part by Raymond Williams’s description of the industrial novel as riven by its internal contradictions; by a simultaneous desire to depict and to turn away from the working class.²¹² This ambivalence, Williams argues, results in an escape into the domestic or sentimental, and a turning away from the political. Lesjak points out that the influence of Williams’s reading has put *Felix Holt*, like other industrial novels, in a “representational quandary”: “On the one hand, these novels cannot be ‘great’ literature if and when they stray from their mission of *authenticity*, which, needless to say, they always do. And, when they do stray into the realm of properly domestic fiction, they certainly cannot be considered great because sentimental fiction (obviously?) is of no ‘lasting interest.’”²¹³

Williams’s critique here, and Lesjak’s diagnosis of its enduring impact on readings of *Felix Holt*, echoes Williams’s argument that all of Eliot’s novels suffer from a “break in [their] texture,” and a “failure of continuity.” This problem, of trying to reconcile the competing requirements not just of different kinds of rhetoric, but of different levels of representation, is one I suggested *Middlemarch* attempts to solve via the parable, and its relationship to direct discourse. When the problem is made explicit in *Middlemarch*, it is described in terms of sympathy, as in Dorothea’s dark night of the soul after realizing she has been mistaken about Casaubon. In *Felix Holt*, however, the import of such imaginative unity, the recognition of difference in similarity and similarity in difference, is put in explicitly political terms. It is, in fact, the basis of the novel’s solution to the political turmoil it describes, and of the more explicit, polemical idealization of the organic state put forward in the “Address to Working Men.”²¹⁴ The latter’s description of society, which “stands before us like that wonderful piece of life, the human body, with all its various parts depending on one another, and with a terrible liability to get wrong because of that delicate dependence”²¹⁵ calls to mind Eliot’s description of form,

²¹² See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*: “These novels, when read together, seem to illustrate clearly enough not only the common critique of industrialism, which the tradition was establishing, but also the general structure of feeling which was equally determining. Recognition of evil was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal.” ([New York: Harper & Row, 1958], 109.)
which also uses the human body as a model for more generalized interdependent systems: “The human organism comprises things as diverse as the finger-nails and tooth-ache, as the nervous stimulus of muscle manifested in a shot, and the discernment of a red spot on a field of snow; but all its different elements or parts of experience are bound together in a… necessary wholeness or inseparable group of common conditions.” Felix Holt, then, is both a novel doubly invested in the unification of disparate parts in the total system, and a novel that seems constitutionally incapable of fulfilling such a desire. If the parable is Eliotic realism’s way of attempting to reconcile difference, what, we might ask, does it become under such circumstances?

The novel begins with a lengthy description of a mail coach journey, which is described in almost archetypal terms until the introduction of proper names via the stories the coachman (whose name is revealed to be Sampson) tells his passengers about various residents of Treby Magna, the town in which Felix Holt is set. These stories are also the means of introducing the Transomes, another narrowing of the rhetorical scope of the novel. But as Sampson’s stories, or possible stories, about the Transomes are enlarged to include all stories like them (“Sampson would shake his head and say there had been fine stories in his time… Sampson was right in saying there had been fine stories—meaning, ironically, stories not altogether creditable to the parties concerned… And such stories often come to be fine in a sense that is not ironical”) we gradually come to the transitional phrase, “For there is,” which signals a shift from particular to general, and lets us know that the narrator is going to tell us Something About Life—is going, that is, to give us a parable. The mail coach journey that is the subject and the narrative engine of the introduction here returns to the place from which it began: the generalizing statement. The scenes witnessed by the coach’s passenger begin as a series likelihoods and typical objects: “The passenger on the coach-box, bowled along above such a hamlet, saw chiefly the roofs of it: probably it turned its back on the road, and seemed to lie away from everything but its own patch of earth and sky, away from the parish church by the long fields and green lanes, away from all intercourse except that of tramps. If its face could be seen, it was most likely dirty; but the dirt was Protestant dirt…” [emphasis added].

The narrative passes into the concrete specificities of Felix Holt when “the coachman” becomes “our coachman,” “leaving the town of Treby Magna behind him.” This transition is followed by a succession of names: Transome, Durfey, Jermyn, and Sampson, which move the reader from “this kind of journey” to “this journey.” But the introduction seems to pass through these particulars only to pass back into even greater generalities, the story of the Transomes and the Durfeys an occasion for a statement about stories in general. Story, that is, leads to statement, to the extractable summing-up of the parable.

Many of the parables in Felix Holt, then, resemble the ones in other Eliot novels, including Middlemarch. They use the same narratorial rhetoric and tend towards the same vanishing horizon of reference. They also, often, follow scenes of failed dialogue or speech, supplementing the talk of characters with the explanatory speech of the narrator. But many of the parables in Felix Holt, more than in Middlemarch, contain instances of ontological metalepsis; that is, moments in which the narrator seems to change from an abstracted observing consciousness to a more character-like participant in the narrative:

If a cynical sprite were present, riding on one of the motes in that dusty room, he may have made himself merry at the illusions of the little minister who brought so

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216 Eliot, “Notes on Form in Art” 232.
217 Eliot, Felix Holt 5.
218 Eliot, Felix Holt 8.
much conscience to bear on the production of so slight an effect. I confess to
smiling myself, being sceptical as to the effect of ardent appeals and nice
distinctions on gentlemen who are got up, both inside and out, as candidates in the
style of the period; but I never smiled at Mr. Lyon’s trustful energy without
falling to penitence and veneration immediately after. For what we call illusions
are often, in truth, a wider vision of past and present realities—a willing
movement of man’s soul with the larger sweep of the world’s forces—a
movement towards a more assured end than the chances of a single life… At
present, looking back on that day at Treby, it seems to me that the sadder illusion
lay with Harold Transome, who was trusting in his own skill to shape the success
of his own morrows, ignorant of what many yesterdays had determined for him
beforehand. 219

To some extent this a stylistic hold-over from Eliot’s earlier work. Adam Bede contains
the famous “In Which the Story Pauses a Little” chapter, in which the narrator describes talking to
Adam “in his old age.” 220 The Mill on the Floss begins with a narratorial reminiscence about the
landscape around Dorlcote Mill. 221 And the narrator in this passage from Felix Holt is less
explicit about actually entering the world of the story—she does not speak to a character or recall
visiting a location in the novel, as in Eliot’s earlier works. 222 But the effect is largely the same: It
is a way, within the bounds of the parable, to simultaneously inhabit the position of the fallible,
embodied, speaking I, and the omniscient, narratorial “I;” to be at once circumscribed and
limitless. It is a way, essentially, of bringing the object of direct discourse into narration. The
narrator effectively undergoes the kind of educative process that the novel undertakes to create
for the reader: a process of observation, consideration, and self-correction that ends with a
gesture toward the wider world. It enacts, too, a kind of narrative compression, both in this
process, and in the prolepsis of the chapter’s last sentence. It is a figure for coming-to-know, for
narrative itself, one that tries, like so much of Felix Holt, to have it both ways.

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220 “I gathered from Adam Bede, to whom I talked of these matters in his old age, that few clergymen could be less
successful in winning the hearts of their parishioners than Mr. Ryde.” And then: “‘Well,’ I said, ‘that was an
excellent way of preaching in the weekdays, but I dare say, if your old friend Mr. Irwine were to come to life again,
and get into the pulpit next Sunday, you would be rather ashamed that he didn’t preach better after all your praise of
him.’ ‘Nay,’ said Adam…” (Eliot, Adam Bede 181-3.)
221 “It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice, as to the
voice of one who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dripping willows… I remember the stone bridge…”
222 As Monika Fludernik writes, this kind of ontological metalepsis can be thought of as largely rhetorical—the lines
between the two form are often blurry: “…many examples of metalepsis, especially the illusion-enhancing ones,
need to be treated as metaphoric transgressions of narrative boundaries; they are part of a narratorial metaphors of
immersion in the fictional world… [and] in many instances need not actually be literally treated as an ontological
contradiction (and therefore transgression), but could be regarded as an imaginative transfer into the impossible”
(“Scene Shift, Metalepsis and the Metaleptic Mode,” Style 37, no. 4 [Winter 2003]: 393).
VII. The Things That Are a Parable

Like *Middlemarch*, *Felix Holt* explicitly discusses the parable—the word in fact ends the novel’s introduction: “These things are a parable.” The introduction’s description of the mail coach passing through successive scenes, and stages, of rural development, however, suggests not just the movement from particular to general that we find in *Middlemarch*’s parables, but also the problems thereof. The passage is both geographically and temporally complex, moving through the time in which the novel is set, the time in which contemporary readers lived, and the time just previous to *Felix Holt*’s. It seems at first to emphasize the pleasures and uses of the mail coach journey in contradistinction to both the more common railway travel of the 1860’s, and possible future modes of locomotion:

Posterity may be shot, like a bullet through a tube, by atmospheric pressure from Winchester to Newcastle: that is a fine result to have among our hopes; but the slow old-fashioned way of getting from one end of our country to the other is the better thing to have in the memory. The tube-journey can never lend much to picture and narrative; it is as barren as an exclamatory O! Whereas the happy outside passenger seated on the box from the dawn to the gloaming gathered enough stories of English life, enough of English labours in town and country, enough aspects of earth and sky, to make episodes for a modern Odyssey.

One might observe that being shot through a tube like a bullet does not hold much appeal on an experiential level. The journey by mail coach, though, is valorized not for its experiential pleasures but for its narrative ones. It takes time, and time converts experience into meaning. It does this both because it turns events into sequences, revealing a sense-making story in the chaos of a series of moments, and also because it forces the traveler to dwell, enabling him to retain and retell his experience—to “have [it] in the memory” as a reproducible “picture or narrative.” Yet the novel, again, seems to want to have it both ways. Perhaps the tube-journey is almost devoid of story and experience, but the railway might offer precisely the kind of condensation and broader vision that is necessary for expansive political or ethical vision. As David Kurnick points out, this passage recalls the one that opens “The Natural History of German Life,” in which Eliot compares two figures’ mental associations with the word “railway.” The first, “a man who is not highly locomotive,” will be limited to, “the image either of a ‘Bradshaw,’ or of the station with which he is most familiar, or of an indefinite length of tram-road.” The second, a man who has had, “successively the experience of a ‘navvy,’ an engineer, a traveler, a railway director and shareholder, and a landed proprietor in treaty with a railway company,” would be able to bring to mind a, “range of images,” which would, “include all the essential facts in the existence and relations of the thing.” Even if the first man might “entertain very expanded views” about railways, it is the second, not the first, who better knows the railroad: “But it is evident that if we want a railway to be made, or its affairs to be managed, this man of

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226 Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life” 141
227 Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life” 141
wide views and narrow observation will not serve our purpose.”228 Kurnick argues that, read side by side, these passages illustrate the inherent difficulties and contradictions of Eliot’s vision for the novel, one in which we should really be both men, should really ride the mail coach and the railway:

The novelistic program that Eliot implicitly calls for here is, if not impossible, at least almost unthinkably challenging. The ideal novelistic vision will cultivate a dauntingly diverse set of relations to the object of representation—to “the thing” whose emblem here is the railway: get on the train—but get off the train and walk into the fields; build the railroad—but have the resources to ride it frequently; design it; manage it; own part of it, or own the land on which it has been built. Part of the interest of Felix Holt is the way its narrative awkwardness serves to render explicit the deeply ambivalent political and representational demands Eliot attempts to reconcile throughout her work.229

Such ambivalence, as I have been arguing, is latent in much of Eliot’s work, but seems perhaps the more apparent in Felix Holt because it is an explicit part of the political program the novel puts forth. On the one hand, we ought to have close, long-lived, personal experience of the issues about which we make decisions, either as voters or simply as people. On the other, we ought to take the long view, cultivating an expansive, disinterested vision that the “Address” associates with, “the common estate of society”—or, in other words, culture.230 The “Address,” like the “The Natural History of German Life,” figures such a problem in terms of infrastructure; here in the form of an irrigation system that, like the railway—or the roads on which a mail coach travels—traverse a region which must be carefully and closely studied, yet also seen in its entirety:

Suppose certain men, discontented with the irrigation of a country which depended for all its prosperity on the right direction being given to the waters of a great river, had got the management of the irrigation before they were quite sure how exactly it could be altered for the better, or whether they could command the necessary agency for such an alteration. Those men would have a difficult and dangerous business on their hands; and the more sense, feeling, and knowledge they had, the more they would be likely to tremble rather than to triumph. Our situation is not altogether unlike theirs.231

The “Address,” like the introduction, imagines in geographical terms what is in many was a temporal problem: Knowledge can be gained only by “a well-judged patient process,” not by “hurried snatching.”232 This is not so different from the process of coming to know that we find in the ethical directives of Middlemarch. But the valences of such a process, in a novel about the franchise, are necessarily different. The political imperative of Felix Holt, the action it advocates, is, in a word: Wait.

228 Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life” 142
231 Eliot, “Address to Working Men” 486.
The parable into which the mail coach journey of Felix Holt’s introduction transitions, and which ends the beginning of the novel, is another moment of echoing—or, in this case, prevision, since the passage that is here echoed appears in Middlemarch. The narrator turns from the vague “fine stories” about the Transomes relayed by Sampson to a more general consideration of how many stories we may never truly know, and of the simultaneous indelibility and illegibility of the marks made by vice and the suffering it entails:

For there is seldom any wrong-doing which does not carry along with it some downfall of blindly-climbing hopes, some hard entail of suffering, some quickly-satiated desire that survives, with the life in death of old paralytic vice, to see itself cursed by its woeful progeny—some tragic mark of kinship in the one brief life to the far-stretching life that went before, and to the life that is to come after, such has raised the pity and terror of men ever since they began to discern between will and destiny. But these things are often unknown to the world; for there is much pain that is quite noiseless; and vibrations that make human agonies are often a mere whisper in the roar of hurrying existence. There are glances of hatred that stab and raise no cry of murder; robberies that leave man or woman for ever beggared of peace and joy, yet kept secret by the sufferer—committed to no sound except that of low moans in the night, seen in no writing except that made on the face by the slow months of suppressed anguish and early morning tears.

Many an inherited sorrow that has marred a life has been breathed into no human ear.233

The passage, in its consideration of the impossibility of a truly comprehensive attention and sympathy, resembles Middlemarch’s eminently extractable parable on the “roar on the other side of silence.”234 But what the later novel will render as the overwhelming sonic data to which sympathy might subject us is here split in two: The mere noise of life (“the roar of hurrying existence”) opposes and overwhelms the “vibrations” that constitute the unknowable stories of the anguished sufferer. Placed side by side, these passages from Felix Holt and Middlemarch can tell us much about the work that each tries to do, for these passages don’t only tell us Something About Life, they also tell us Something About Novels. If, in Felix Holt, the novel is what provides us with information, that is, if it gives us access to the kinds of stories that are both too hidden, and, perhaps more importantly, too much surrounded by other information to be perceived in life outside the text, in Middlemarch the novel does not so much provide information as it does organize it. The passage poses a problem: We ought to sympathize broadly and deeply, but we are limited in our capacities to do so. The solution to this problems is, of course, Middlemarch itself, which organizes the superabundance of the roar into narrative, character, and parable. The function of the novel is both to provide an expansion of information and a distillation of it—precisely as the parable itself does. The parable, then, is not only a shortcut to or through sympathy (here is what you will understand when you learn to sympathize properly), or a guide for properly sympathizing (here is a statement which should condition your

234 “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.” (Eliot, Middlemarch 194).
understanding of other people). It is also an encapsulation of the simultaneous expanding and contracting performed by the novel more generally.

*Felix Holt*, however, presents the novel less as a solution and more as the further articulation of a problem. The stories of the parable, like much of the plot of *Felix Holt* itself, revolve around secrecy. The kind of sympathetic vision afforded by the novel becomes, in this analogy, a form of violent exposure. This way of figuring the uncovering of the “vibrations that make human agonies” is continued in the introduction’s final paragraph, in a passage that strangely doubles the one that precedes it: “The poets have told us of a dolorous enchanted forest in the under world. The thorn-bushes there, and the thick-barked stems, have human histories hidden in them; the power of unuttered cries dwells in the passionless-seeming branches, and the red warm blood is darkly feeding the quivering nerves of a sleepless memory that watches though all dreams. These things are a parable.”

The reference to Dante’s *Inferno* is not to an act of mere listening or benevolent uncovering, but to a violent breakage of the suffering body: “Then I put out my hand a little and plucked a twig from a great thorn, and its trunk cried: ‘Why dost thou tear me?’ And when it had turned dark with blood it began again: ‘Why manglest thou me?’” In order for us to know the stories of others, their stories must be ripped from them. Yet *Felix Holt*, like all Eliot novels, *wants* to know—and wants us to know. It wants to uncover, yet it wants to hold back.

This ambivalence might help answer a question raised by this paragraph, namely: why is it there at all? What does it “do” that that the one before it does not? Both the final and penultimate passages communicate essentially the same “point”: There are stories—tragic, painful, and very interesting stories—which mark their subjects indelibly but are nevertheless unknown to people in general. But the second paragraph, with its classical allusions, doubles not only this point, but the level of remove, the textual mass, through which we receive it. The stories of the novel, it suggests, are not only importantly like those in life, but also importantly like those in epic literature. The novel compounds its abstractions, moving towards a final sentence—“These things are a parable”—that can only be described as referentially weird. “These things” would seem at first to refer to the bleeding thorn bushes of the epic tales. But “things,” the objects or events depicted by Dante and Virgil (or George Eliot), are usually not a parable. A *story* about them is. The bleeding bush, however, is itself a narrative-containing object, a figure both of the compression performed by the Eliotic parable, and the concrete, speaking body from which we get direct discourse—a story about a thing, and a thing itself.

“These things,” though, still has a whiff of the strange about it. It refers, of course, to the bleeding thorn-bushes, but the vague deictic and the plurality of “things” (which things? How many things? All the things?) make its reference over-expansive, too loose. It seems to be potentially about all the words that have preceded it, and all the words to come; to devour the novel as a whole. But this, of course, is precisely the point. The sentence refers at once to everything and to nothing; it looks in by looking out. In so doing, it not only describes, but instantiates, the fraught, ambivalent ideal of Eliotic reference. This thing, too, is a parable.

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Chapter III: Henry James Makes an Impression

Dying of talk?—why, we were dying of the lack of it!
Henry James, “The Coxon Fund”

I. Talking like a Book

There is reason to feel that as we reach the end of the nineteenth century, and the work of Henry James, we should be leaving all this talking behind. In at least one narrative of novelistic development James marks a turning point from a realism of externals to one of internals, from a panoramic social realism to a realism of consciousness and point of view. Talk, as a marker of the particularities of character, and an index of social and geographical location, becomes in this reading less important than thought; individuality is marked by unspoken perception rather than speech. But whatever the status of talk within the novel, the media and communication technologies of the late nineteenth century give the oral and the aural a new prominence in the time during which James was writing. James’s fascination with telegraphy and his use of a typewriter (via the mediating person of a typist) to compose his late works both register the inevitability of the novel’s confrontation with new technologies of linguistic mediation.

Although I want to acknowledge the shifting media environment in which James was writing, this chapter is less concerned with charting the impact of specific technologies on James’s work, and more interested in thinking about the ways that the psychologization of the novel with which James is associated might be troubled or thickened by an account of Jamesian talk that does not see talking only as a social-technological activity, but also as a textual formation. Talk, I argue, both as direct discourse and as a more variously represented activity, is figured in James’s work as something both enlivening and strangely vanishing, an absent center around which representation is built. Sharon Cameron writes that in The Golden Bowl, as in much of James’s fiction, “words are made empty of significance.”

But, she goes on, “this...”

237 Jonathan Freedman argues that, “James’s art and example are best to be thought of in the context of his engagement with new media cultures, and... it is in this context that we might best reassess his contribution to the unfolding fate of the novel” Jonathan Freedman, “Henry James, the Novel, and the Mediascapes of Modernity,” in The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 6, The American Novel, edited by Priscilla Wald and Michael A. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 251.

238 Sharon Cameron, Thinking in Henry James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 106

239 Cameron is not alone in thinking that for James expression is a means of designating the impossibilities of expression. Arlene Young writes that The Golden Bowl’s “hypothetical discourse”—direct discourse that renders what the characters “may” or “would” have thought or said—works to,

[Suggest] the limitations of the narrator's perception... At the same time, hypothetical discourse suggests the limitations of the characters' perception... These inherent problems of interpretation for the reader are further complicated by the illusion of reality produced by the use of the form of direct quotation rather than that of free indirect discourse, thus giving a semblance of precision and authenticity to what is actually vague and indeterminate. This additional apparent barrier to an understanding of the narrative ultimately works to illuminate its major theme: the limitations of language and speech to express reality and the depths of human experience.

(Arlene Young, “Hypothetical Discourse as Ficelle in The Golden Bowl,” American Literature 61, no. 3 [October 1989]: 390.)
emptiness is not only in the service of denial or dismissal… It is also oppositely in service of the preservation of the thing unsaid. For in the Jamesian logic, designation (the ‘precisely nameable’) and dismissal are related to each other. If something can be put into words, it can simultaneously be put away.”

It is true, certainly, that James’s fiction—especially his late fiction—is invested in the preservation of both rhetorical and ontological ambiguities. It is equally true that these ambiguities are often preserved or created by a talking around, a failure or a refusal to name, or to create shareable reference. Yet, as I argue, two complications arise: The first is the sheer abundance of talk in the Jamesian text. This talk may not “do” what talk normally does—that is, name and communicate—but a purely negative account of Jamesian talks fails to articulate exactly what talk does do. When James addresses talk explicitly it becomes clear that such an activity, or such an object of representation, does not merely function to signal its own insufficiency. Rather, talk, for James becomes a way of thinking about, and figuring, style.

Then there is Henry James himself, who “talked as if he were reading proof” and “wrote to be read aloud”—whose writing and whose talking, that is, were and are defined by their mutual determination: James talked like he wrote and wrote like he talked. The circularity of these descriptions does not, at first glance, provide much of an entry point into their objects (what does it mean to talk the way you write when your writing is described as, and in fact came to be, a form of talk?). Yet it is precisely this circularity, this feeling of being sealed off from the concrete particularities of the object of description, that marks Jamesian talk as Jamesian. Talk, in James’s work and in his biography, is both an obscure object and an obscuring form—obscuring and obscure exactly insofar as it shines a light, allows for perception. Talk produces wonderment, that ur-Jamesian state of simultaneous knowing and unknowing.

We might proceed from the biographical, since James’s relation to talk is doubly so. James, as is well-documented, was a great, prolific talker, despite a tendency to stammer, and when he began dictating his work to a typist his talking became not just a social, but a compositional act. Rebecca West describes the latter as an outgrowth of the former, as if James’s decision to dictate were a product not of wrist pain, but of a late-flowering, and almost genetically determined, enthusiasm: “The James family had… a genius for conversation. For long years it had remained latent in Henry James… but latterly it had been liberated by the consciousness of maturity and fame. At last it became a passion with him, and he decided to converse, not only with his friends, but with his public.” West considered James’s propensity for talk to be the determining stylistic factor in his later work, though not necessarily for the better: “Decidedly,” she writes, “The Golden Bowl is not good as a novel; but what it is supremely good as one can be discovered when one learns how, in these later days, Mr. James used to compose his novels,”—that is, when one learns that he dictated them.

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240 Cameron, Thinking in Henry James 106.
242 Edith Wharton attributed James’s “involved phraseology” of James’s speech to his stutter: “His slow way of speech, sometimes mistaken for affectation—or, more quaintly, for an artless form of Anglomania!—was really the partial victory over a stammer which in his boyhood had been thought incurable. The elaborate politeness and the involved phraseology that made off-hand intercourse with him so difficult to casual acquaintances probably sprang from the same defect.” (Edith Wharton, quoted in The Legend of the Master, ed. Simon Nowell- Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 13.)
244 West, Henry James 113.
Bowl is, for West, bad when considered as a novel, but excellent when considered as “a flow of bright things said,” or as “good, rambling talk.”

James’s use of dictation is not a subject I explore in depth in this chapter, but it is important to note that whether or not speaking his texts aloud in fact substantially altered James’s style (and by all accounts it probably did), knowing that James dictated has made critics for the last 100 years read the patterns and vagaries of speech into his work, and has in turn made speech a sort of clarifying medium for James’s texts. William James said he could better understand Henry’s work when he read it aloud. Ford Madox Ford wrote that although the style of James’s later work starts to become “a little ‘high’” (“And so it goes on until, with the Prefaces and with A Small Boy, it just simply soars”) “If you will read [the sentences of James’s later works] aloud you will find them reasonably clear.” Talking, then, becomes not only something readers and critics find in James’s work, but something they do to James’s work in order to make it make sense. In James’s work, talk, as a practice of the author, becomes a figure for style. It is a way of thinking through the idiosyncrasies of the late Jamesian narratorial voice and attributing its difficulties to a compositional practice that is simultaneously mechanical and compulsive. And it is via the reproduction of this practice on the part of the reader, that is, through the act of reading aloud, that one can see—or hear—James’s texts clearly.

And yet, where it explicitly engages the subject of talk, James’s work rarely figures that activity as one that brings clarity. Or, rather, if talk is sometimes described as bringing insight, clarity, vision, it is nevertheless always evading clarity itself. If talk, in the form of dictation, reading aloud, or just the propensities of James himself, is framed as a heuristic for the elucidation of the Jamesian text, it is perhaps because the talk in James’s text is often maddeningly obscure—at least when confined to the page. If speaking aloud, or just imagining James speaking aloud, the lines of The Ambassadors can make these lines “infinitely clear,” this clarity can only be understood as the endpoint of a process that begins in relative obscurity; an obscurity that, perversely, is described as stemming from the very act that clears it all up: talking.

245 West, Henry James 115, 116.
247 Ford believed that the byzantine syntax and abstraction of James’s late work had been misunderstood as a matter of syntax and construction, when in fact it was a product of his new investment in the spoken: “For the latest James—the James of the latest stage is simply colloquial. Nothing more and nothing less. It is a matter of inflexions of the voice much more than of commas or even italics. And I have found repeatedly that when I read a passage aloud, whether from the Prefaces or The Golden Bowl, it became, to myself at least, infinitely clear. Though no less infinitely embroidered and decorative.” Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, A Critical Study (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1916), 173, 174.
248 The emphasis on reading aloud as a way to create proximity between reader and text is of course not confined to readings of James’s work. The emphasis on reading aloud, memorizing, reciting—essentially, bringing literature into contact with the speaking body of the reader has a history that coincides with the time of James’s writing. Catherine Robson has demonstrated the ways in which such practices, and the loss thereof, shape our relationship to literature: “For much of the nineteenth and some of the twentieth century, children in England were subjected, successfully or unsuccessfully, to an educational praxis that made a profound physical and emotional connection between the assigned literature and the bodies that read it. Freed from, or deprived of, such training, we will never feel the beat with the same urgency… when we do not learn by heart, the heart does not feel the rhythms of poetry as echoes or variations of its own insistent beat.” (Catherine Robson, “Standing on the Burning Deck: Poetry, Performance, History,” PMLA 120, no. 1 [January 2005]: 150.) I would suggest that the interest in reading aloud, for both James and his 20th century critics, is in some ways a confrontation with this legacy and its loss.
In the chapter that follows I tease out these clarities and obscurities of. First, I examine talk as a subject in James’s 1894 story, “The Coxon Fund,” a text that takes the incommensurability of talk and the marketplace as its subject. Talk in “The Coxon Fund” is figured as a magnificent, but finally ungraspable, object of representation, both fictional and economic. “The Coxon Fund” turns a meditation on the representability—and salability—of talk into a comment on the relationship of the artist to the world more generally, and registers James’s increasing ambivalence about the idea of a literary “public” and the competing need for privacy and engagement. These questions of privacy and publicity of course have a biographical and historical import. But they are also directly related to James’s style and theory of fictional representation. It is finally “The Coxon Fund”’s form—a short story narrated in the first person—that, I argue, opens onto considerations of ideas more broadly important to both James’s work (the impression, irony), and the (ostensible) Jamesian commitment to “point of view,” and its relationship to the specificities and difficulties of Jamesian style. To further consider these last points I turn to talk in the Prefaces and in The Ambassadors, and consider this talk’s relationship to the particularities of Jamesian style.

II. “The Coxon Fund” and the Absence of Talk

Perhaps James’s most explicit engagement with talk, the text in which talk is both represented and theorized, is his 1894 story “The Coxon Fund.” The story is the minor tragedy of the great talker Frank Saltram, whose talk, the story’s narrator reports, is “golden,” “dazzling,” “far and away the richest I ever listened to.” Yet Saltram, to the despair of his supporters, cannot display this dazzling richness in any form that can be publicly circulated: He cannot write, cannot lecture, cannot, in other words, enter into either the marketplace or literary posterity. Saltram’s great talk, precisely because it is great talk (abundant, capacious, peripatetic) cannot be made into a representing or represented object. When the story’s Saltram foil, the skeptical, ambitious, and aggressively practical George Gravener, asks the narrator to tell him what Saltram’s talk is in fact about, the narrator replies, “My dear fellow, don’t ask me! About everything!” The rest of the story offers nothing more specific than this—Saltram’s talk is never rendered in direct, or even indirect speech, nor are the words or ideas that constitute it given in any detail. Saltram’s talk is represented primarily in two modes: First, via abstractions that efface any particular qualities of this talk, ostensibly as the result of its greatness, and second, by describing the talk’s effects on other characters, rather than the talk itself. These two modes often overlap, and both have the effect of replacing talk itself with the meaning of this talk. It also gives “The Coxon Fund” a strangely absent center. We know how Saltram’s talk makes people feel, but not what it is that makes them feel this way. We know what this talk does, but we do not quite know what it is. The activity that allows the rest of “The Coxon Fund” to take place is itself withheld by and from the story. Frank Saltram’s talk is not only too wonderfully diffuse to offer particular descriptions, it is also too wonderfully diffuse to be described. And it is for these reasons that Saltram’s talk is impossible to incorporate not only

250 James, “The Coxon Fund” 169.
251 By “meaning” I do not intend the denotative aspects of the talk, but rather what it comes to mean when it is produced in a particular context.
into the literary marketplace, but into “The Coxon Fund” itself. Though it is the “kernel” around which the story is built, Saltram’s talk is un-representable within the story’s own pages, by its own words, becoming less an object and more the cause of affective and narrative effects. It is a way of severing language per se from what language does, and how language feels. This mediating object, both central to the story and always vanishing from it, becomes a figure for both the Jamesian impression and Jamesian style.

What is it that we mean when we talk about Frank Saltram’s “talk”? What is it like, this object of the story’s reverence? It is a question that “The Coxon Fund” itself poses repeatedly—“What would his talk just have been?” “And what is it all about?”—yet the short answer to these questions is that we never really know. We do not, in the simplest terms, “hear” Frank Saltram talking. The posing of questions about his talk becomes an opportunity for the story’s narrator to fail to answer them, and this failure becomes the index of the talk’s value. Saltram’s talk is like a private joke whose comedy is conveyed by the impossibility of its description—you just had to be there. Failure, the text seems to suggest, is the only possibility when one tries to describe such an object. On the one hand, this solves a formal problem confronted by anyone trying to write about genius, especially of the literary variety: You cannot write a writer (or a talker) better than yourself, and even The Master has his limits. But the withholding of Frank Saltram’s talk is more than a sleight of hand. It is also more than a meditation on the elusiveness of the “great talker,” and the ways in which that figure, often to his own detriment, evades literary history and the literary marketplace. Rather, the absence of Frank Saltram’s talk from a story that pays this talk so much attention is a way of privileging effects over causes, the impression the thing makes over the thing itself.

This organizing of a narrative around an absent center—one might even call it a mystery of a kind—is, of course, not unusual in James’s work. Like the “virtuous attachment” of The Ambassadors, Frank Saltram’s talk is simultaneously omnipresent within and missing from the text, its unknowability the catalyst for a state of both readerly and characterological wonder. But talk in “The Coxon Fund” functions somewhat differently, in ways both structural and material. For one, talk’s status as impossible to either depict or circulate is not simply a formal problem of representation. It is also an explicitly economic problem, the occasion for a meditation on the relationship of the artist to the marketplace that would both consume and sustain him. The story abounds in fantasies about the way talk might be circulated, and therefore made to produce material support for the person speaking. But they are flagged, always, as fantasy, as impossible aspirations to market the un-marketable. After the failure of a scheme to support Saltram via subscriptions to a series of essay he would (fail to) produce, the narrator muses on the paradoxical abundance of Saltram’s talk, and the dearth of saleable objects such an abundance produces: “The author’s real misfortune was that subscribers were so wretchedly literal. When they tastelessly inquired why publication had not ensued I was tempted to ask who in the world had ever been so published. Nature herself had brought him out in voluminous form, and the money was simply a deposit on borrowing the volume.” The un-marketable quality of talk is here made a problem of bad—“wretchedly literal”—readers, rather than an extension of orality itself. Yet such a figuring of talk’s economic troubles simply re-describes the bad fit between talk and the market, a market constituted by readers unable to receive the literary product they

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253 James, “The Coxon Fund” 175, 169.
254 James, “The Coxon Fund” 180.
might be sold. Saltram himself, the speaking body of the talker, is metaphorically transformed into his own speech—the voluminous form of nature’s authoring. Because talk cannot be held and made solid by text, its energy and charm redounds upon the talker, who then becomes the subject of reverence, study, and remembrance. But the talker, like his talk, is ephemeral. He will vanish too, albeit more slowly than his words. Yet because the talker produces no written text, his talk is reduced to his vanishing person. That the orality of talk renders it unfit for the literary marketplace is a product of its opposition to print—that is, to the medium of “The Coxon Fund” itself. The story, then, is a meditation on an object that it is constitutively unable to represent. Though Saltram’s talk can be experienced by the story’s characters, it cannot be experienced by its readers. It can exist on the level of story, but not on the level of discourse. “The Coxon Fund” is a story not about talk, but about what talk does. It is, in James’s words, an impression.

This is evident in the only scene the story contains in which Saltram actually gives one of his performances of talk. In it, Saltram is introduced only to be immediately placed in the background, his appearance the occasion for forgetting, rather than considering, him. Saltram’s talk is simultaneously the center around which the rest of the scene revolves, and entirely beside the point:

At ten o’clock he came into the drawing-room with his waistcoat much awry but his eyes sending out great signals. It was precisely with his entrance that I ceased to be vividly conscious of him. I saw that the crystal, as I had called it, had begun to swing, and I had need of my immediate attention for Miss Anvoy.

…I had of course a perfect general consciousness that something great was going on… I felt the strong pulse of thought, the sink and swell, the flight, the poise, the plunge; but I knew something about one of the listeners that nobody else knew, and Saltram’s monologue could only reach me through that medium… What I got out of it is the only morsel of the total experience that is quite my own. The others were shared, but this was incommunicable.255

There are of course practical reasons internal to the story that motivate this shift in attention—the narrator’s knowledge of Ruth Anvoy’s power over the speaker makes her perception of this speech the condition of its continued existence. Her esteem or dismissal may determine whether the body of Frank Saltram has the material resources to go on producing talk. The story reminds us, here as everywhere, that the effects of Saltram’s talk, and the ways in which it is received and interpreted, are not just the proof of its ethical or aesthetic effect, but the conditions under which it will or will not be remembered, may or may not be materially sustained, does or does not exist. The effect of Frank Saltram’s talk on Ruth Anvoy becomes, essentially, a cause of which Frank Saltram talking will be the effect. But the narrator’s interest in Ruth Anvoy’s perception of Frank Saltram does more than emphasize this feedback loop of effects. It also renders a shared, semi-public event, the “text” of Saltram’s words, the private possession of the narrator: “What I got out of it is the only morsel of the total experience that is quite my own. The others were shared, but this was incommunicable.” It is, paradoxically, because of talk’s mediation through the person of Ruth Anvoy that it is private, sealed off from description. The experience of Frank Saltram’s talk is simultaneously one of a shared intimacy between the narrator and Ruth, and an entirely individual event. It is, in either case, an experience in which the emphasis is shifted away from the creator of the object—Frank Saltram—and to the one who comes in contact with

255 James, “The Coxon Fund” 203.
such an object. This, again, is not an unusual state of affairs in the Jamesian text. But what I want to emphasize here is the way in which the specific orality of talk becomes an occasion for a fantasy about a literary object that is potent exactly insofar as it cannot enter the marketplace. Such a fantasy does not simply align with the Jamesian interest in the impression, but in fact illuminates some of the material and autobiographical bases for such an interest.

“The Coxon Fund” appeared during the mid-1890’s, a period during which James wrote a group of stories about thwarted producers of linguistic art. “The Coxon Fund” is anomalous for being the story of a thwarted talker, rather than a thwarted writer, but it is in many ways an intensification of the representations of authorship that appear in “The Lesson of the Master” or “The Death of the Lion”—stories with which James grouped “The Coxon Fund” in volume XII of the New York Edition. James had previously produced a number of stories about writers, but the stories composed in the 1890’s take a view of authorship that is both darker and more extratextual than that of their predecessors. For all their interest in people who write, these stories are equally, if not more, interested in all the ways they are not writing—by which I mean both that they are curious about the disidentification of author and text, and that they grimly revel in scenes of compositional difficulty. The press, literary fangirls (and boys), the infelicities of authorial character, life itself, really, all serve both to enable and disable writing, providing it with its subjects, but also distracting from or even destroying literary work. Anne Diebel argues that these stories are a meditation on the relationship—or not—of author to text in an age of publicity, one spurred both by James’s own fraught relationship to the reading public and the literary marketplace, and by his particular engagement with The Yellow Book, for which several of these stories were produced. These stories, Diebel suggests, pose a series of questions about publicity and authorship: “What was the effect of this dissociation of an author from that which made him an author—his work? And what became of a reading public when it started reading about authors, rather than reading their work?”256 “The Coxon Fund” then, can be read as both a meditation on the difficulties of the market and as a fantasy about escaping it. As much as Saltram’s supporters wish to provide him with support, support is, in the end, his undoing. The “magnificence” of the income he receives from the Coxon Fund “quite quenched him; it was the beginning of his decline.”257

Certainly, James had many personal reasons for his interest in questions of authorship, publicity, and persona during this period. The 1890’s saw James’s reputation, and the state of his finances, in decline. It was, too, the time of his famously unhappy foray into theater—“The Coxon Fund” was composed shortly before Guy Domville. James’s concerns about his finances and his reputation both mitigated and intensified his discomfort with, “The eternal dispute between the public and the private, between curiosity and delicacy,”258 and his wariness about

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256 Anne Diebel, “‘The Dreary Duty’: Henry James, The Yellow Book, and Literary Personality,” The Henry James Review 32, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 50. And, Diebel argues, it went both ways. Henry Harland, Aubrey Beardsley, and John Lane, the editors of The Yellow Book, were as interested in the idea of Henry James as they were in his writing: “Their request for James's contribution represents a peculiar relation between authors and readers: in the age of publicity an author's name could be separated from his work, and readers could thus feel a relation to an author independent of his work. The Yellow Book editors and publisher evacuated ‘Henry James’ of reference, turning his name into a signifier of indifference to popular taste and obsession with formal particularity” (46). James’s contributions to The Yellow Book (including “The Coxon Fund”) become, in this environment, a “meta-commentary on the very act of contributing to The Yellow Book” (46.)

257 James, “The Coxon Fund” 220.

258 James, “The Coxon Fund” 165.
feeding, “that apparently gorged but still gaping monster—the public.” Yet James cannot simply be seen as moving further towards privacy as his life progressed. As Richard Salmon writes,

…in James’s fiction, ‘publicity’ can no longer simply be opposed to ‘privacy’, as if this opposition represented the kind of stable ideological conflict which it did for much of the eighteenth century. Moreover, when James does invoke this opposition, the meanings attached to each term are characteristically inverted: publicity… is itself experienced as a form of occlusion (signified, for example, by the closed site of the Boston newspaper office) whereas privacy is transfigured into an impossible state of freedom.

Salmon argues that James’s own critical and compositional practice is often subject to the same critiques as that of “exponents of journalistic or biographical publicity”: “If the ‘power to guess the unseen from the seen’ was an important requirement for the artist, as James declared in the ‘The Art of Fiction’, a similar capacity for transgressing the boundaries of knowledge was exemplified by the apparently antithetical figure of the journalist.” And if James is often understood as valuing privacy, his own writing on the subject evinces an ambivalence about where and how knowledge becomes transgressive and invasive:

‘Say that we are to give up the attempt to understand: it might certainly be better so, and there would be a delightful side to the new arrangement. But in the name of common-sense don’t say that the continuity of life is not to have some equivalent in the continuity of pursuit, the renewal of phenomena in the renewal of notation… The only thing that makes the observer competent is that he is neither afraid nor ashamed; the only thing that makes him decent—just think!—is that he is not superficial.’ All this is very well, but somehow we all equally feel that there is clean linen and soiled and that life would be intolerable without some acknowledgement even by the pushing of such a thing as forbidden ground.

This passage, while it argues for the existence of a “forbidden ground” of knowledge, is entirely unclear about how the boundary between clean and soiled linen would be determined—and about why the “soiled” should not be part of an enquiry that is “not superficial.”

This passage, from James’s essay on George Sand, takes the form of a “discussion” that “takes place for each of us within as well as without.” The “genuine analyst” wonders why the “continuity of life is not to have some equivalent in the continuity of pursuit.” The “we” of the essays’ narrating voice responds with the clean and soiled linen. The response is, notably, one that does not take the argument up on its own terms. The “genuine analyst” makes, essentially, a formal argument: Where and how would it be appropriate to rupture the knowledge of a life that is itself continuous? Why break the form of life for the sake of privacy? The response is no

259 Henry James, “George Sand 1897,” in Notes on Novelists, With Some Other Notes (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1928), 166.
261 Salmon, Henry James and the Culture of Publicity 12.
262 James, “George Sand 1897” 166.
263 James, “George Sand 1897” 165.
argument at all—“All this is very well, but somehow…” Yet the containment of the argument against privacy within an imagined figure and the quoted speech thereof performs a sort of mitigation of the argument, emphasizing its specificity and interestedness. And yet again, the speaker, the “genuine analyst” is a figure who represents not an external interlocutor but something within, the aspect of the “we” that when it, “wish[es] to know at all… wish[es] to know everything.” The passage, then, via the sequestering function of direct discourse, performs a series of expulsions and incorporations, ones which enact the very sorts of openings and closings, the letting in and shutting out of the observer who wishes to know, that the passage considers.

These questions about privacy, then, are for James as much about form and composition as they are about ethics. If writing is an act of “going behind” or an “effort to get into the skin of the creature,” they are also invasions of a figurative other. That this other is fictional does not negate the importance of describing writing as a kind of violation. Rather, it demonstrates the way in which Jamesian form requires a sense of closure and inviolability which it nevertheless penetrates. It needs a notion of the private in order to perform a kind of exposure.

The talk of “The Coxon Fund,” then, is not just a way for James to imagine a literary object that cannot be incorporated into the marketplace. It is also a way for him to consider the inaccessible object of representation. The elusiveness, both economic and formal, of Frank Saltram’s talk, becomes an occasion for examining precisely how the speaking or writing self—that is, the author—is or isn’t related to the object he produces. For although Frank Saltram’s talk cannot be described, Frank Saltram himself can be. Like the author of “The Coxon Fund,” Saltram begins to seem oddly detachable from his work. And this detachability, or the lack of it, constitutes the central ethical question at the heart of “The Coxon Fund.” The question repeatedly posed about Saltram is: “Is he a gentleman?” To which the narrator can respond the second time, if not the first, “Emphatically not!” The problem, then, is not just what to do with the fact that Saltram cannot make any money, but what to do with the fact that this is in part because he is a bit of a lout.

This problem is connected to that of Saltram as talker via the inspiration for “The Coxon Fund,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In April 1894 Henry James wrote in his notebook, “In reading Dykes Campbell’s book on Coleridge… I was infinitely struck with the suggestiveness of S.T.C.’s figure—wonderful, admirable figure—for pictorial treatment.” The subject of this treatment would posses, James wrote, “the great Coleridge-quality—he is a splendid, an

264 James, “George Sand 1897” 165.
267 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes the queer erotics of James’s propensity to “[figure] authorial relations in terms of dermal habitation.”: “All the blushing/flushing that marks the skin as a primary organ for both the generation and contagion of affect seems linked to a fantasy of the skin’s being entered—entered specifically by a hand, a hand that touches.” The violations, if we want to call them that, that are figured in the prefaces are here understood as mutually penetrative, or at least as leaving a trace. To enter another’s skin, to turn the other inside out, is to subject one’s own body to that body, which will leave its traces. (Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity [Durham: Duke University Press, 2003], 59.)
268 James, “The Coxon Fund” 174.
incomparable, talker.” 270 “He has,” James continues, “the other qualities—I needn’t name them here, I see them admirably, all, with the high picturesqueness of their anomalous, their baffling, despairing, exasperating cluster round the fine central genius.” 271 The “other” qualities, unnamable or at least unnamed, are those which both pollute the “fine central genius” of Saltram and Coleridge, and cannot be extracted from it. What, the story asks, are we to do with such a situation? By what should we take someone’s measure, or rather, what is the object we refer to when we say “someone”?

“The only thing that really counts for one’s estimate of a person is his conduct,” George Gravener tells the narrator. And if neither the narrator nor the story precisely endorses this idea, they also do not seem able to tell us what, if not conduct, does in fact “count.” What is the object being judged in our estimation of a person? To what extent is anything separable from anything else, is aesthetic beauty separable from ethical ugliness? Saltram, like Coleridge, makes this problem especially clear. He isn’t malicious—not even that!—but he isn’t good, either. Ugly, lazy, drunk—not a gentleman. The text aggressively severs Saltram both from the talk he produces and from the means of its production. For if Saltram is described in terms that emphasize his physical and ethical ugliness, and his words are hardly described at all, there is nevertheless a mediating presence that receives lavish description. It is sometimes called his “gift” but is more often described as some form of mind. Frank Saltram the (unlovely) man is thereby divorced not only from his words, but also from that-which-produces-Frank-Saltram’s words, though this thing is in and of Frank Saltram.

Yet we are left, still, with the question of an object. What is the nature of Frank Saltram’s mind? In what does its greatness inhere? The descriptions of Frank Saltram’s intellect are perhaps less explanatory than obscuring:

“…if he had lectured, he would have lectured divinely. It would just have been his talk.’

‘And what would his talk just have been?”

… ‘The exhibition of a splendid intellect… The sight of a great, suspended, swinging crystal, huge, lucid, lustrous, a block of light, flashing back every impression of life and every possibility of talk!”’ 272

Saltram’s talk is reflective. It is not about Saltram itself, but about the listener and the world, or a meeting place between the two. It is also “lucid” and reflecting—“flashing back every impression of life.” That is, it is figured in the same terms as are James’s central consciousness, those “lucid reflectors” who give the text’s subject “dignity by extracting its finest importance, causing its parts to flower together into some splendid special sense.” 273 Frank Saltram’s mind, then, becomes a figure for the narrator’s own organizing consciousness, the two mirroring one another in a sort of pure perception. Talk, when it is as good as Frank Saltram’s, has the same organizing and elevating function as the Jamesian central consciousness—that is, as Jamesian form itself. In defending talk to George Gravener, who contends that, “We were drenched with talk—our wretched age was dying of it,” the narrator replies,

270 James, Notebooks 89.
271 James, Notebooks 90.
272 James, “The Coxon Fund” 175-6.
I differed from him here sincerely, only going so far as to concede, and gladly, that we were drenched with sound. It was not however the mere speakers who were killing us—it was the mere stammerers. Fine talk was as rare as it was refreshing—the gift of the gods themselves, the one starry spangle on the ragged cloak of humanity. How many men were there who rose to this privilege, of how many masters of conversation could he boast the acquaintance? Dying of talk?—why, we were dying of the lack of it!"  

While this speech is a defense of talk, it isn’t quite a defense of its necessity. Rather, talk both is and isn’t “merely” something. It is, in some sense, “extra”—a gift of the gods, a starry spangle. But it is this “extra” quality that makes talk elevating—life-giving, or death-averting. If Saltram’s talk is “about” everything, and therefore never really about anything, it is, in this way, like Jamesian language itself; what Leo Bersani calls a “richly superficial art,” in which, “language would no longer reveal character or refer to desires ‘behind’ words; it would be the unfolding of an improvised and never completed psychological design.”  

It is, then, like “The Coxon Fund” itself, “impressionizing,” a way of stripping away the content of the subject and dealing instead with the effect of the subject on the mind of the observer. As James worked on “The Coxon Fund” he wrote in his notebook:

The formula for the presentation of it in 20,000 words is to make it an Impression—as one of Sargent’s pictures is an impression. That is, I must do it from my own point of view—that of an imagined observer, participant, chronicler. I must picture it, summarize it, impressionize it, in a word—compress and confine it by making it the picture of what I see. That has the great advantage, which perhaps after all would have been an imperative necessity, of rendering the picture of Saltram an implied and suggested thing. I probably should have had, after all, to have come to this—should have found it impossible to content myself with any literal record—anything merely narrative, with the detail of narrative. But if the thing becomes what I see… A strong subject, a rich subject summarized—that is my indispensable formula and memento.

The impression—that is, “The Coxon Fund” itself—is here described as an act of condensation, a “picturing” (in one of James’s ubiquitous analogies of writing to painting) that replaces an experience of the thing itself with an experience of an experience of the thing. It is also, to some extent, a form that is especially available in the first person. In the first-person narrative we

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274 James, “The Coxon Fund” 169.
276 Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie” 139.
277 James, Notebooks 95.
278 As Kevin Ohi suggests in his discussion of “The Art of Fiction,” James’s assertion that the novel is a “direct representation of life” is misunderstood if we take it to be a statement about pure mimesis (“The Art of Fiction,” in The Future of the Novel [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956], 9). “‘Reference,’” Ohi writes, “as the immediate, direct representation of ‘life’—marks a relation to reality that can be grasped only through another form of representation.” (Kevin Ohi, Henry James and the Queerness of Style [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011], 5.)
are essentially “submerged” in a fantasy of extended utterance—we might even call it direct discourse. When the “central consciousness” is not, as in *The Ambassadors*, and in the majority of James’s fiction, especially his novels, the narrating voice of the text, then the impression necessarily becomes something different. But in James's work this feeling of being submerged is as present in third as in first-person narration. Both James’s style and his ethos of point of view produce exactly this. In the remaining portions of this chapter I examine the function of this submergence in two texts: The first is James’s preface to the volume of the New York Edition in which “The Coxon Fund” appears. The second is in a longer, third person narrative: *The Ambassadors*. In both, I argue, as well as in critical responses to James’s work, especially by Frederic Jameson, we find a working-through of the ways in which Jamesian form complicates relationships of inside and outside, text and life. And I consider the ways that the theorizations of talk we find in “The Coxon Fund,” as well as the talk of both the preface and *The Ambassadors*, allow for moments in which such borders can shift.

III. The Romance of the Real

In the prefacess to the New York Edition, “The Coxon Fund” is described—along with “The Lesson of the Master,” “The Death of the Lion,” and “The Next Time—as a story not about “life pure and simple,” but about “the literary life.”\(^279\) The stories, “[g]ather their motive, in each case, from some noted adventure, some felt embarrassment, some extreme predicament, of the artist enamoured of perfection, ridden by his idea or paying for his sincerity.”\(^280\) These descriptive downward spirals—from noted adventure to extreme embarrassment, and from the desire for perfection to the payment exacted by that desire—encapsulate neatly the dissolution of literary autonomy in the swirl of the economic and the social. But this description does something else, too, setting off, as it does, the stories of the life of the writer from stories of life itself. Unlike most of the stories included in the New York Edition, James writes, those in volume XII do not derive, “from some good jog of fond fancy’s elbow, some penciled note on somebody else’s case.”\(^281\) They do not, that is, come from observation or received anecdote, from an externally-oriented attention. Rather, James writes, “the material for any picture of personal states so specifically complicated as those of my hapless friends in the present volume will have been drawn preponderantly from the depths of the designer’s own mind.”\(^282\)

James does not stake his claim for the necessity of an inward turn in the creation of these stories on perhaps the most obvious ground: that of their biographical similarity to James himself. It is not the fact that these stories’ protagonists are, like their author, producers of language-based art that makes them compositionally different from stories of “life pure and simple.” It is instead their particularity and their complexity, the tangled but, in James’s word, “supersubtle” minds and “states” with which they must contend. This, one might say, is only another way of describing the biographical similarities between James and his protagonists. Yet if these stories are in some sense the most personal to James, if they come the most directly from him, they also seem to come from nowhere: “…if they enjoy in common their reference to the

\(^{279}\) Henry James, “Preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master,’” *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), 221, 220.

\(^{280}\) James, “Preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master’” 220-1.

\(^{281}\) James, “Preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master’” 221.

\(^{282}\) James, “Preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master’” 221.
troubled artistic consciousness, they make together, by the same stroke, this other rather blank profession, that few of them recall to me, however dimly, any scant pre-natal phase.”

To arise from the depths of James’s mind, it would seem, is to arise unbidden and suddenly, a process—if it can be called that—quite different from the slow growth from seed to plant, or gradual construction of architectural edifice that metaphorize artistic creation elsewhere in the prefaces. On the one hand this is a familiar trope for the origination of a work of art—the character or story that appears fully-formed in the writer’s mind, the flash of inspiration. But to call what James describes here “inspiration” would be to reorient the direction of the process. The nowhere, or the unknowable somewhere, from which these stories arise is not “out there.” Ideas do not flow into James’s consciousness, they arise from it. The mysterious origin of these texts is James’s own mind.

The origin—one might say the realism—of James’s subjects is a consistent preoccupation in the preface, and James routinely launches defenses of these stories whose subjects are “not real.” He is “rebuke[d],” he reports, with a question of the texts’ source; with, “where on earth, where roundabout us at this hour, I had ‘found’ my Neil Paradays, my Ralph Limberts, my Hugh Verekers and other such supersubtle fry.”

James’s reply is that, if he has not, in fact, “found” his subjects in the world, if he has found them essentially in his own mind, so much the better for them—and for the world, if it only it will pay the proper attention:

My postulates, my animating presences, were all, to their great enrichment, their intensification of value, ironic; the strength of applied irony being surely in the sincerities, the lucidities, the utilities that stand behind it. When it’s not a campaign, of a sort, on behalf of the something better (better than the obnoxious, the provoking object) that blessedly, as is assumed, might be, it’s not worth speaking of. But this is exactly what we mean by operative irony. It implies and projects the possible other case, the case rich and edifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain. So it plays its lamp; so, essentially, it carries that smokeless flame, which makes clear, with all the rest, the good cause that guides it.

In so describing these stories James associates them not with realism, but with romance. The romantic, for James, is produced not by the content of experiences, but by the way in which experience is perceived—the way it is, essentially, experienced: “The only general attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to

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283 James, “Preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master’” 221.
284 James, “Preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master’” 221.
285 James, “Preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master’” 222.
286 It should be noted that James was not consistently interested in making such discriminations. In “The Art of Fiction” he writes, “The novel and the romance, the novel of incident and that of character—these separations appear to me to have been made by critics and readers for their own convenience, and to help them out of some of their difficulties, but to have little reality or interest for the producer” (“The Art of Fiction” 16). But it seems to me that James is not responding here to a distinction between different relationships to experience, that is, to different modes of representation, but to generic distinctions drawn on the basis of subject-matter or tone, in which he is interested neither here nor in the Prefaces.
And: “The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another... The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we can never directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.” The romantic is figured as a turn away from the everyday not because it is a form of extraordinary experience, but because it is an alternative kind of knowledge, an experience that is referred not to habitual attachments and context, but to the “subterfuge” of the thinking, desiring self. Though they deal with essentially “realistic” subjects, the stories grouped together in volume XII are essentially self-referential, taking as both their origin-point and their organizing principle the internal workings of literary creation, rather than an extra-textual example of such a creator. The creators of “The Coxon Fund,” etc. are not “like” artists who James, or anyone, might have encountered in the world. They are like Art itself, ideal expressions of an abstraction.

The romantic, then, is a way of describing experience untethered—disconnected from the “balloon of experience.” Yet such language can distract us from the ways in which the romantic, for James, is also a form in which we are fundamentally submerged. If romance is about a move away from conventional knowing, it is such because it is a form that fully immerses the reader in another, more particular form of knowledge. This is why romance in the prefaces refers not only to a specific mode of knowing, but also to a specific form of narration: The first person. This attachment takes the form of a rejection. In the preface to *The Ambassadors* James acknowledges that in the service of giving Strether “all the subjective say, as it were, to himself,” he might have “made him at once hero and historian, endowed him with the romantic privilege of the ‘first person.’” But this form, James writes, “the darkest abyss of romance this, inveterately, when enjoyed on the grand scale,” is one “foredoomed to looseness.” A designation of “looseness” of course is a sure sign of James’s contempt. R.P. Blackmur writes that for James, “the double privilege (in the first person)... of being at once subject and object sweeps away difficulties at the expense of discrimination. It prevents the possibility of a center and prevents real directness of contact.” It is perhaps an odd gloss on the first-person form, the directness of which would seem to be its asset or its failing. Yet if, in the first person, we are directly submerged in the narrating consciousness, we are also, as Frederic Jameson writes, “confronted by a mask”:

...even a cursory reading of Huckleberry Finn reminds us how distant and mysterious the first-person narrator is from even the most mysterious third-person subject of narrative. In the former we do not confront the world side by side with the protagonist, looking along with him at the prospect, but are rather ourselves confronted by a mask that looks back at us and invites a trust that can never be verified.
This is perhaps why James was willing to use the first person in his shorter fictions, but not in his longer ones—it is a form that requires, from both reader and author, a kind of relinquishing, an acquiescing to the vertiginous experience of inhabiting the other. Yet this habitation, because it provides us with only an inside, with only that other experience, is also always opaque, obscure. Without the opportunity for examination afforded by distance, we can never see the object at all.

The “impressionizing” first-person narration of “The Coxon Fund,” then, is itself a figure for the talk—“flashing back every impression of life and every possibility of talk”—of Frank Saltram, and vice versa. If the story is a meditation on the necessity of good talk—or rather, on why the fact that it is not necessary gives it its beauty and value—it is also a meditation on its own form of narration, and thereby again on the form, or absence of form, of its subject. And this is why, in all of “The Coxon Fund,” we cannot “hear” Frank Saltram talk; we cannot have access to the object of direct speech that originates from him: because direct discourse, though it is formally adjacent to first-person narration, has exactly the opposite effect. It allows for distance, for an “outside,” for a space between the text and the speech it conveys.

If “The Coxon Fund” is “romantic” in the terms set by the prefaces, so are the prefaces themselves. Is there any James text that makes its readers feel more “submerged?” Yet in this moment, when he describes the self-reference quality of “The Coxon Fund,” etc., James breaks this enclosure. He creates an outside. In the lines that follow “So it plays its lamp…” James writes:

My application of which remarks is that the studies here collected have their justification in the ironic spirit, the spirit expressed by my being able to reply promptly enough to my friend: “If the life about us for the last thirty years refuses warrant for these examples, then so much the worse for that life. The constatation would be so deplorable that instead of making it we must dodge it: there are decencies that in the name of the general self-respect we must take for granted, there’s a kind of rudimentary intellectual honour to which we must, in the interest of civilization, at least pretend.” But I must really reproduce the whole passion of my retort.”

“The whole passion of the retort” then follows, in several pages of direct discourse. This passage has the affective thrust of staircase wit, a fantasy fueled by James’s indignation. But it also serves as an odd moment of unreal realism, one that simultaneously explicates and instantiates a relationship between text and reality. Not the “retort” but its “passion” are reproduced, and while the presence of quotation marks signals the “real thing” of speech, the passage otherwise flags itself as a condensation of or elaboration on what was said—an impression. And this, of course, is precisely the relationship between textual and extra-textual that the text advocates: an “applied” or “operative” irony in which the text supplies the image of what could, what should, exist beyond its borders. “Operative irony” has sometimes been understood as operating within the bounds of the text. The “possible other case” that such irony “implies and projects” is that of the other imaginable fates of characters, what they might have done or known had they seen more clearly, acted with greater sensitivity or integrity, etc. But what is in fact ironized in

294 Jameson, Antinomies 222.
James’s account is not the text, but the world itself. As Michael Roemer writes, “Classical irony reveals the ‘real’ under the apparent, and derives from the discrepancy between what we know and what the figures believe... In traditional fiction what is ironizes what is not. But in the novels of James’s ‘major phase’ what is not ironizes what is.” 296 Direct discourse, like the ironizing text, offers an object that is at once real and not.

IV. Jamesian Ironies

Irony, in a different sense, has long been seen as a foundational to James’s methods of narration and representation. Jameson marks its centrality in James’s work in order to cast James as the destroying angel of realism:

On [sic] [Wayne Booth’s] interesting narrative of the destinies of this literary phenomenon [irony], what began life as a linguistic trope—stable irony as an effect—is with Flaubert transformed into something like as ideology and a nihilistic worldview; nor do I wish to tell this story very differently, except for historicizing the change and replacing the moral judgement with a structural description, in the process assigning Henry James a rather different historical role.

For if Flaubert is to be considered the inventor of unstable irony, as much on the strength of his ‘invention’ of free indirect discourse as of anything else, then Henry James must be considered its ideologist, and its spokesperson throughout the literary landscape.” 297

Booth’s account of the evolution of irony argues that from the eighteenth to the twentieth century literature shifts from a “stable irony” which “does not mock our efforts by making general claims about the ironic universe, or the universe of human discourse,” to an “unstable irony” which, “refuses to keep in place, when it becomes increasingly like an end in itself.” 298, 299 In such a situation, Booth writes,

paradox is unescapable. And the paradox is not just of that happy rich kind which the ironist originally seeks—the perception of wheels within wheels, the vertiginous but finally delightful discovery of depths below depths; it is a paradox that can weaken and finally destroy all artistic effect. Including the perception of paradox itself. Since irony is essentially ‘subtractive,’ it always discounts something, and once it is turned into a spirit or concept and released upon the world, it becomes a total irony that must discount itself, leaving... Nothing. 300

297 Jameson, Antinomies 181.
298 Stable irony, Booth writes, “does not say, ‘There is no truth,’ or ‘all human statements can be undermined by the true ironic vision,’ or (in the words of Edward Albee in Tiny Alice) ‘We do not know anything.’ On the contrary, it delimits a world of discourse in which we can say with great security that certain things are violated by the overt words of discourse.” (A Rhetoric of Irony [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 6.)
299 Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony 77.
300 Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony 177.
For Jameson, the Jamesian ethos of point of view marks the enshrinement of bourgeois individuality on the level of form.\textsuperscript{301} He has indicted James for as much since \textit{The Political Unconscious}.\textsuperscript{302} But in \textit{The Antinomies of Realism} he is interested in taking James to task not only for this ideological work, but also for an act of formal destruction, a kind of realist bloat in which the third person becomes “swollen” and “subjective,” and the narration of classical realism “dissolves into a facile practice of narrative mind-reading.”\textsuperscript{303,304} There is no space, no distance: “We are so fully sealed into the protagonist’s consciousness that we can scarcely see them from the outside.”\textsuperscript{305} So, again: submerged.

Well. That all depends. There is no shortage of arguments against this way of reading James—that is, as a propagandist, witting or unwitting, for the centrality of individual consciousness. Ross Posnock argues (addressing Jameson’s earlier work) that Jameson’s reading of James comes from a failure to distinguish between “central” and “centered” consciousness. James, Posnock writes, used centered consciousness, less to legitimate and authorize centered subjectivity than to reveal its compromised status and obliviousness to its own solipsism. By neglecting this distinction Frederic Jameson is able to relegate ‘Jamesian point of view’ to a bourgeois ‘containment strategy’ that functions as a ‘powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world’ (Political 221). The distinction between central and centered is the source of an ineradicable gap in James’s work between form and subject, intention and achievement. He finds this disjunction fertile and returns to it often in his prefaces.\textsuperscript{306}

Sheila Teahan argues that, although we read a figure like Lambert Strether as the organizing center of the novel, he is just that—a figure. There is no there there: “The center of consciousness effects a figurative displacement, into third-person discourse, of the putative literal contents of an originary first-person consciousness. But there is no accessible prior place from which this figurative mediation departs, no available literal term from which the narrator’s metaphors are derived. The central consciousness in this sense corresponds to the trope of catachresis, a figure for which there is no literal term.”\textsuperscript{307}

But Jameson is, of course, identifying something very real about Jamesian third-person narration: the intermingling of the narratorial and the characterological. If the critical conversation about this aspect of James’s work seems often to devolve into the uncanniness of semantic squabbling—debates about the varying realities of two forms of consciousness that are,

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\textsuperscript{301} Jameson writes: “Free indirect discourse will mark the thoughts and perceptions of the subject in question on the level of the sentence; point of view will identify their mutual interrelationship on that of narrative as such. Both of these techniques, therefore, reflect that more general emergence of the subject of consciousness which we call individualism on the social level, as well as on the ideological one; and their codification as literary norms is then equally ideological.” (Jameson, \textit{Antinomies} 181).
\textsuperscript{303} Jameson, \textit{Antinomies} 174.
\textsuperscript{304} Jameson, \textit{Antinomies} 177.
\textsuperscript{305} Jameson, \textit{Antinomies} 183.
\end{flushright}
of course, not forms of consciousness at all—the mingling of narrator and focalizing character is undeniable on the level of style. Lambert Strether sounds like the narrator of *The Ambassadors*, and the narrator of *The Ambassadors* sounds like Strether. This is in part an effect of James’s affection for indirect speech and non-transitive verbs. As Ian Watt points out, the first sentence of *The Ambassadors* (“Strether’s first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend…”308), because it converts Strether’s speech into narratorial utterance, and grammatically privileges the question over the questioner, “has the effect of subordinating the particular actor, and therefore the particular act, to a much more general perspective… ‘question’ is a word which involves analysis of a physical event into terms of meaning and intention: it involves, in fact, both Strether’s mind and the narrator’s. The narrator’s, because he interprets Strether’s act.”309 But this stylistic similarity is not only the effect of a style of narration. It is, seemingly, the effect of Strether being a character in a Henry James novel. When Strether gives his famous “live all you can” speech in Gloriani’s garden, his language is strikingly like that of the narrator:

What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn’t no doubt, have been different for me; for it’s at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one’s consciousness is poured—so that one “takes” the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less complacently held by it: one lives in fine as one can. Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don’t be, like me, without the memory of that illusion.310

The vocabulary of their metaphors is alike—Chad is earlier described as a “copious but shapeless” substance that is “put into a firm mould.”311 But the syntax is similar too, all dependent clauses and pauses for emphasis or definition. But this isn’t so strange, maybe. The whole idea, after all, is that narration is conditioned, “swollen,” by character. Though some critics insist on the narrator of *The Ambassadors* as an independent, discriminating presence, he breaks a fundamental rule of omniscient narration—he is wrong alongside his character.312 Upon meeting Jeanne de Vionnet Strether formulates an idea—Chad is attached to her. Waiting to confide his idea to Little Bilham he is instead met with Maria Gostrey: “He had dropped back on his bench, alone again for a time, and the more conscious for little Bilham’s defection of his unexpressed thought in respect to which however this next converser was a still more capacious vessel. ‘It’s the child!’ he had exclaimed to her almost as soon as she appeared; and though her direct response was for some time delayed he could feel in her the meanwhile the working of this truth.”313 But of course this statement is not “a truth.” It is not to Jeanne but to her mother that

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310 James, *The Ambassadors* 215.
311 James, *The Ambassadors* 167.
312 See Watt’s assertion that the style of *The Ambassadors* is characterized by, “the dual presence of Strether’s consciousness and that of the narrator,” making the “narrative point of view both intensely individual and yet ultimately social” (Watt, “The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*” 260); or Daniel Gunn’s argument that “the constructed figure of the authorial narrator plays a more prominent role in *The Ambassadors* than has previously been recognized” (“Reading Strether: Authorial Narration and Free Indirect Discourse in *The Ambassadors*,” *Narrative* 25, no. 1 (January 2017): 30).
313 James, *The Ambassadors* 220.
Chad is attached. Again, maybe this shouldn’t be entirely surprising given the organizing principle of Jamesian narration. Yet in each case what makes the convergence jarring is the fact that it follows—or is evidenced within—direct discourse. If the rest of the time we are, as Jameson puts it, “sealed in” to the point of view of a character, direct discourse is a place in which point of view becomes unsealed. We are not getting a perception of a thing, but a thing itself. Or rather, the perception becomes the thing.

Read across texts, however, the consistency and peculiarity of Jamesian style produces an odd side-lining of any given central consciousness. As David Kurnick points out, James’s characters often, “address one another in almost indistinguishable patterns, and they laud one another with adjectives that seem interchangeable.”314 “This uniformity,” Kurnick writes, “will hardly be news to any reader of late James. But it has largely escaped critical commentary, perhaps because it sits athwart the supposedly paramount Jamesian dictum of the central consciousness, with its emphasis on perspectival distinctions… James’s style interrupts the operation of this formal principle, inundating the drama of moral and perspectival difference in a bath of stylistic indistinction.”315 The third-person Jamesian narrator is often understood as submerging himself in the character who constitutes the focal point of the text, and yet Jamesian language is so peculiarly Jamesian that it is almost impossible to read a James novel as a prolonged surrender to the specificities of the individual character’s psyche. This is a constitutive paradox of the Jamesian text: It is a psychological novel in which the central consciousness is rendered in language that effaces its psychological particularity. Thus, when Dorrit Cohn uses What Maisie Knew as an example of “psycho-narration” which can “effectively articulate a psychic life that remains unverbalized, penumbral, or obscure” she perhaps understates the case.316 As Cohn writes of one passage317 from the novel “the point of view of this passage is clearly Maisie’s, but the language is elaborately Jamesian.”318 Cohn attributes this discrepancy (as, it should be noted, does James) to the fact that Maisie is a child, and thus has “many more perceptions than [she has] terms to translate them.”319 But this formulation—a character’s thoughts rendered in “Jamesian language”—is certainly not unique to Maisie. Virtually any character in James’s oeuvre can be described by, “the point of view of this passage is clearly X’s, but the language is elaborately Jamesian.”

If, then, James’s project can be seen in part as a critique of the officious narrators of the mid-nineteenth century, this critique can only be understood as a shifting rather than an elimination of narratorial control. Narratorial style, rather than extra-diegetic intervention, comes to be the sense-making apparatus via which characters’ actions, thoughts, and speech are given meaning. This method might, in fact, might be understood as more officious than the interventions of Thackeray, Eliot, or Balzac, as it leaves nothing “outside” of the narratorial. This, again, is in part a result of the Jamesian narrator’s tendency to render thought and speech in

315 Kurnick, Empty Houses 146.
317 “She had conceived her first passion, and the object of it was her governess. It hadn’t been put to her, and she couldn’t or at any rate didn’t, put it to herself that she liked Miss Overmore better than she liked papa; but it would have sustained her under such an imputation to feel herself able to reply that papa too liked Miss Overmore exactly as much. He had particularly told her so. Besides she could easily see it” (quoted in Cohn, Transparent Minds 47).
318 Cohn, Transparent Minds 47.
319 Quoted in Cohn, Transparent Minds 47.
indirect discourse: Not, “‘She has a rare unlikeness to the other women I have known,’ he thought,” but, “At the bottom of it all for him was the sense of her rare unlikeness to the women he had known.”320 Not, “‘This sense has grown since yesterday, the more I recall her, and was fed by my talk with Chad in the morning,’ he thought,” but, “This sense had grown, since the day before, the more he recalled her, and had been above all singularly fed by his talk with Chad in the morning.”321 The weirdness of the sentences translated into direct discourse—would Strether have put it to himself that way? Did he put it to himself that way? Who knows?—attests to the totality of the subsuming of character into narrator. The narrator of The Ambassadors tells us not just what Strether thinks, but what he cannot think, despite it being a part of his consciousness. This is why everyone in a James novel always seems at once supremely clever and knowing, and also a little bit dumb: Their knowledge always resides a bit to the side of their articulation. The characters’ thoughts are not objects on which the narrator comments, but objects that, in their stylistic proximity to narratorial utterances, can only seem like projections of these utterances. That is, when a character “sounds like a narrator” that narrator does not “intervene” in the narrative because he does not have to. His presence is already the pervasive sense-making force in the text.

And yet. In this analysis the narrator comes to seem too author-like, too person-like, even. Käte Hamburger argues that the “narrator” in the third person can be meaningfully spoken of only as a sort of shorthand for a textual function, not as a sort of consciousness or character.322 And if, in James’s work, character is subsumed by the specificities of Jamesian prose, then so, perhaps is the narrator. The blurring of the line between narrator and character can be seen as making character subservient to narration. But it can also be seen as effacing the distinctions of either figure, either form. Jamesian style is not a product of narratorial consciousness. It is a product of Jamesian prose. Thus, if James’s style is always supremely Jamesian, it is also, paradoxically, dissociated from the figure of the particular author—or from any “particular” figure at all. James’s stylistic homogeneity can be thought of in terms of “ravishment”—what Sharon Cameron identifies as the characteristic state of the Emersonian voice, the “proprioceptive sense of what occurs at the moment when the personal is annihilated by the influx of the impersonal.”323 It is, Cameron writes, a state that “reveals a weird absence, the opposite of which is stylistic mimesis, since nothing counts or registers as ‘personal’ even prior to the epiphanic moment of its proclaimed disappearance.”324 The voice becomes anonymous speech produced by the abandonment of self; “a rhetorical construction, the most enduring feature of which impedes or staves off any apparent individuality.”325

Certainly, James’s style cannot be thought of as impersonal in the ways, or for the reasons, that Emerson’s can. It doesn’t evince the Emersonian affection for platitudes, or indulge in the wandering, witchy tangents that Emerson’s style does. Nor can it be described as lacking stylistic particularity, that thing that makes a Jamesian text identifiable as such. James’s style is nothing if not eminently “Jamesian.” But James’s style has, nevertheless, a twofold impersonality. For one, the stylistic homogeneity of James’s work, the similarity not just of the recorded thoughts, but also of the speech of characters and narrators, all signal from within the

320 James, The Ambassadors 237.
321 James, The Ambassadors 237.
323 Sharon Cameron, Impersonality (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 92-3.
324 Cameron, Impersonality 93.
325 Cameron, Impersonality 94.
text the submission of the self to the larger reality of the “impersonal”—in this case, of style. Dialect, but also idiolect, is given over to the Jamesian way of rendering language, speech, and thought. And in identifying this style as “Jamesian” we perhaps obscure the extent to which this style itself, and James’s entire representational project, can be understood as a form of dis-identification of author and style. This is the relationship, or the effacement of a relationship, that James investigates in the stories of the 1890’s: that of author to text. Though the stories can, of course, be read as a series of mournful complaints about the impossibility of producing art while attending to the demands of life—that is, as tender examinations of the embodied, working, person of the writer—they can also be read as gleeful, brutal destructions of these writerly bodies. Dead and desolate writers litter the pages of James’s stories in this period, and one can only think that while the stories render these manifold annihilations as tragedies, it is the stories that bring about the tragic ends. But this murderous strain in James’s work might best be understood not (or not only) as self-abnegation or sadism on the part of their author, but rather as an attempt to disentangle the writer from that which is writing. The hyper-abstraction, the byzantine grammar, all the things that have served to make James’s style seem difficult or unapproachable—all of these tend to elicit the question, “Who would ever say something like this?!?” The answer to which question is of course not, “Henry James,” but, “No one.” “Saying” seems some sort of test for the written word, for its relationship to the world it would both represent and speak to. The chattiness of so many novels gives us that pleasurable sense of being spoken to, of having direct access to a particular speaking other, and thereby to the particular world they describe. No so, James’s world. It is a familiar thing—just people, talking, so often—made alien.

This is true even though speech was so often cast as a clarifying medium for James’s work, and his writing was so often described as a kind of talking. Understanding James’s work as itself a kind of talk means understanding talk in a very particular way, a way that “The Coxon Fund” teaches us to understand it. This talk would be less a form of explanation and clarification, and more a kind of experience, one that perhaps communicates little and about which little can be communicated. Hazel Hutchinson writes that:

The celebrated ambiguity of James's late style, therefore, can perhaps best be understood as a problem of sound. The puzzle for the reader of working out what the text "means" cannot be separated from the question of how one should "hear" what the text says. Like the noise of the Remington itself, the late style is experienced as "an embroidered veil of sound"—a highly decorated, yet translucent fabric, which reveals and protects, even as it distracts and obscures. Double meanings, homophones, and the performative possibilities of words and phrases (to which James's theatrical experiments in the early 1890s had made him highly attuned) are deliberately exploited to create a densely textured, linguistic experience, in which the reader must relax his or her grip on certainty in order to navigate the text. Read like this, James's language starts working more like poetry than prose, with the alternative versions and meanings of his words continually available to the reader, sounding in the inner ear and jostling for attention.326

This description of Jamesian prose makes it seem almost like language poetry; an opaque surface that, because it produces manifold associations, ends up requiring us to turn away from

326 Hutchinson, “‘An Embroidered Veil of Sound’” 159.
stable meaning. The sound of Jamesian prose, of Jamesian talk, may be the sound of clarity or of obscurity. But in either case it is productive of the thing that, more than the strangest or most obscure kind of sex or the strangest of most obscure kind of language, has always seemed to me to be the queer thing about Henry James: The dream-like sense of being simultaneously enclosed in oneself and dissolved in a crowd, not because of something everyone in the crowd is, or does, but because of something that, without articulating it, everyone knows about the experience. Any confusion is simply part of this knowing, a way of making knowledge something that cannot, that need not, be precisely put into words, no matter how many words are spoken. And it is this speaking without saying that is the sense of Jamesian talk.
Coda: Grace Paley and the Life of Talk

When considering lines of inheritance, influence, or some more amorphous moving-through-time of the forms and modes—realism, direct discourse, the minor—with which this project has been concerned, there might be many places to look. Particularly if we were to disentangle these forms and modes from one another, they would be nearly ubiquitous in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. To try to keep them at least provisionally together, as I have throughout this project, I’ll turn to the short (short) stories of Grace Paley, a writer whose brevity is linked, both in her work and in assessments thereof, to a sort of vitality: an orientation towards life. It has been linked, that is, to a kind of realism, one imagined both as an explicitly political investment in the everyday lives and speech of women, of the poor, of all sorts of people on the receiving end of racist and colonial governmental violence, and as a kind of energetic force-field that surrounds Paley and her sentences. “She is read as a master storyteller in the great tradition: people love life more because of her writing,” writes Vivian Gornick. It is as if Paley’s project of realizing, at once in granular detail and in broad strokes, the experience of living in turn infuses her readers with this life-lovingness. This is not a thing I have described in the nineteenth-century novels I have examined in this project—which is not to say that life-loving plays no part in them, or in the experience of reading them. But the way in which their minor forms, especially their direct discourse, is encountered as “real” has, I have argued, been less about a turning towards the “largeness of the world,” and its, “involuntary, palpitating life,” than about a turn inward, towards the detail of text itself. The “life” of talk in these Victorian texts is simultaneously about the world, and not about it at all.

Paley’s work both does and doesn’t feel like this. It is as odd and prickly in its way as James’s. It never seems interested in helping the reader forget that she is encountering something made of words. It is, if anything, obsessive about mulling over its own language. The title of a Paley story, e.g. “Love,” is often the occasion for a set of overlapping reflections on the title’s meaning, or its evocations: “I told my husband, I’ve just written a poem about love.” “I used to be in love with a guy who was a shrub buyer.” “In a hazy litter of love and leafy green vegetables I saw Margaret’s good face…” “Walking along the street, encountering no neighbor, I hummed a little up-and-down tune and continued jostling time with the help of my nice reconnoitering brain. Here I was, experiencing the old earth of Vesey Street, breathing in and out with more attention to the process than is usual in the late morning—all because of love, probably.” This story, while it always remains a meditation on the words it is using, makes this meditating feel like a way of experiencing the world, or of moving through it. It feels, too, in Paley’s polyphonic rendering of the particular and heterogeneous voices that make up her urban environment, less like an immersive experience of one writerly or narratorial voice, and more like an exploration of the language of others. If this language often feels odd or jarring—that is, if it often orients our attention towards the fact that it is indeed language—this seems like

330 Terry Gross opened a 1985 interview with Paley by remarking, “The voices that you write with for the narrator and for the characters I think are really vernacular voices, and they’re always so perfect. Everybody doesn’t speak the same; everybody has their own really distinctive way of speaking…” (Terry Gross, interview with Grace Paley, Fresh Air, WHYY Public Media, July 2, 1985.)
a way of reminding us that everyday speech is just this: often odd, often jarring, often an encounter with something other or unfamiliar.331

Paley’s own understanding of the ethical and political dimensions of her work had everything to do with putting the reader, and herself, in contact with the simultaneous strangeness and familiarity of the everyday. If her descriptions of her work call to mind a Victorian—especially an Eliotic—kind of imaginative sympathy, it is with this difference: that the imagination must now be called into service not just to imagine the other, but also to imagine the self. In a talk she gave in 1996, Paley considers the uses and the necessity of the imagination. “First of all,” she says, “we need our imaginations to understand what is happening to other people around us, to try to understand the lives of others.”332 But imagination is not only a way of accessing what is alien or distant. It is a way of accessing what is happening near at hand. What is real in the sense of being present to the self, yet impossible to comprehend or transmit without the supplement of imagination:

I read somewhere that Isaac Babel said that his main problem was that he had no imagination. And I thought about that a lot, because if you read him, you know that what he’s trying to say... is very close to his life, the terrifying life that he led in the Cossack Red Army during, I guess, 1920, ’21, ’22. And so I tried to figure out exactly what he meant. I guess what he really didn’t understand was the amount of imagination it had taken for him to understand what had happened, what was real. There were people in his unit who, if they had tried to tell him what was going on in this particular hut or pogrom-suffering village, couldn’t have. Yet he was able to use what he did know about life and poverty and war to stretch toward what he didn’t know about the Cossack Red Army. So I think about that as the fact of the imagination.333

Paley sees Babel’s imagination of the real as necessary specifically to comprehend and describe the mass violence of the twentieth century. This diagnosis of the problem facing representation, of the difficulties of understanding, much less rendering in transmissible forms, the sheer scale and terror of such violence, gives Paley’s discussion of Babel a resonance with Walter Benjamin’s description of the decline of exchangeable experience in “The Storyteller”:

It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness... With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since...

331 In this way Paley might be said to enact a version of Viktor Shklovsky’s ostraniene (translated variously as defamiliarization/estrangement/enstrangement): “In order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of thing instead of the organ of sight instead of recognition. By ‘enstranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and ‘laborious.’” (Viktor Shklovsky, Theory of Prose, trans. Benjamin Sher [Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990], 6.) For a discussion of the difficulty of rendering this Shklovsky’s Russian neologism, see Benjamin Sher, “Translator’s Introduction: Shklovsky and Revolution,” in Theory of Prose, xviii-xix.


333 Paley, “Imagining the Present” 201.
then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?... For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.334

Benjamin takes a different, perhaps a grimmer, view than Paley does of the possibility finding new forms to communicate such experiences. But both Benjamin and Paley see the difficulty of such communication in terms of the alienation of the individual from his or her own experience. For both, experience contradicts itself. Or, individual experience is contradicted by inflation, warfare, and power. If, for Benjamin, this state of affairs is concurrent with, or the cause of, a decline in oral forms of storytelling, for Paley too the problem is centered around the human voice. In Paley’s work, however, the difficulties of communication become the occasion for a productive estrangement; a call to action for an imagination that must confront the difficulties of not only the speech of the other, but also the speech of the self.

None of this is to say that Paley is somehow better at knitting together text and world than the writers whose work I have examined elsewhere in this project. Nor is it to suggest that the twentieth century held the solutions for the representational troubles of the nineteenth. Far from it. Rather, I want to suggest that talk, both of the narrator and of the characters, is for Paley about a blurring, rather than an establishing, of boundaries. This applies not just to boundaries between world and text, but to those between the voices themselves.

This blurring is also a function of Paley herself—or the perception of Paley. She was as much an activist as a writer, an activist who also wrote, a mother whose motherhood constituted for her a way of thinking about love, poverty, language, servitude—everything. As Alexandra Schwartz writes, “There’s a case to be made that Grace Paley was first and foremost an antinuclear, antiwar, antiracist feminist activist who managed, in her spare time, to become one of the truly original voices of American fiction in the later twentieth century.”335 This sense that Paley was embedded in life, not just her own, but the lives of those around her, that she was infused with it, and that her politics was identical with this embedding—all this in turn infuses the reception of her work, which is seen as a source of vitality. Gornick, in giving a personal account of the way that Paley’s writing makes people, “love life more,” writes, “I remember the first time I laid eyes on a Paley sentence. The year was 1960, the place a Berkeley bookstore, and I a depressed graduate student, leafing restlessly. I picked up a book of stories by a writer I’d never heard of... The next time I looked up it was dark outside, the store was closing, and I had completed four stories... I saw that the restlessness in me had abated. I felt warm and solid. More than warm: safe. I was feeling safe. Glad to be alive again.”336 Paley’s death in 2007 became the occasion for further describing her, and her work, as a vital, alive, death-rejecting thing. Gordon

Lish wrote, or transmitted, the following in a special issue of *The Massachusetts Review* devoted to memorializing Paley:

*Found Scribbled on a Napkin at Luzzo’s*

Grace Paley? Nothing ever even a little dead about her.³³⁷

If Paley’s work, or even Paley herself, comes to stand in for a sort of “about life-ness,” this is both because of the formal and political contours of that work, and because of its place within an archive of fiction written by women in the mid-late twentieth century that tends towards the brief, the gestural, and the everyday. Paley’s transformations of the kind of talk found in the sprawling Victorian novel are not just evident in her narratorial voice, or in her use of dialect and idiolect. They are also evident in the larger-scale form of her stories—that is, the fact that they are very short. Like the stories of Lydia Davis, Amy Hempel, and Diane Williams—all authors whose work Paley influenced—Paley’s fiction tends to be concise, often only a few pages long. Though the rise of short short stories and flash fiction is frequently linked to the spread of the internet,³³⁸ the brevity of Paley’s work is generated by something other than an alignment of fictional forms and shrinking attention spans, or the immediacy and superabundance of virtual talk available at the end of the twentieth century. Paley was writing during a time—the 1950’s into the 1980’s—that is almost the present, but not quite; a time that has only recently come to seem like the past. Of course, novels were still being written during this time. And of course short short stories are still being written now. But there is a way in which this form feels particular to a moment, a late twentieth-century period in which fiction aspired to condensation. If, as I have argued, talk in the Victorian novel has a punctuating effect, instantiating a moment both minor and vital within the larger forms of the text, talk in Paley’s work subsumes the story entirely. The story becomes a kind of talk. The minor, in this case, is not a moment, object, or mode within the text. It is a way of describing the text itself.

The formal minorness of Paley’s stories inheres both in their length and in their attendant centering on that smallest of textual units, the sentence. Great sentences are not necessarily a marker of the “small” in a text—Proust and James wrote great sentences which were neither especially short, nor especially indicative of a general minor quality in the novels of which they were a part. But Paley’s sentences have a more disjunctive, pugilistic quality. They butt up against one another, often interrupting one voice with another, as in the early lines of “At That Time, or the History of a Joke”:


³³⁸ Sean Hooks writes that, “The history of flash fiction is convoluted and meandering prior to the 1980s, but it came into its own in the 1990s and early 2000s, due to two factors: the increased availability of the internet and the proliferation of MFA programs. The eye gets stressed scanning a screen and the attention span is tested by the web’s farrago of distractions, while the academic workshop model is easier to apply to poetry and short fiction than to novels or book-length nonfiction.” (“Protean Miniatures: The Adaptability and Sustainability of Flash Fiction,” *Los Angeles Review of Books Online*, June 12, 2017. url: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/protean-miniatures-adaptability-sustainability-flash-fiction/#!)}
The young woman said, “It wasn’t the pain or the embarrassment but I think any court would certainly award me the earliest uterine transplant that Dr. Heiliger can obtain.”

We are not a heartless people and this was done at the lowest judicial level, no need to appeal to state or federal power.

According to the *Times*, one of the young woman’s ovaries rejected the new uterus. The other was perfectly satisfied and did not.

“I feel fine,” she said, but almost immediately began to swell, for in the soft red warm interior of her womb, there was already a darling rolled-up fetus. It was unfurled in due time, and lo! It was as black as the night which rests our day-worn eyes.\(^{339}\)

The narrating voice’s tactile and biblical descriptions arrest the narrating voice that speaks in staccato, newspaper-quoting sentences, which have in turn interrupted the voice of the speaking woman. Each sentence asks to be taken on its own terms, in its own moment, giving sense not just to the lines around it but to itself. This quality of Paley’s work, its orientation towards the sentence, has been commented on often by critics. Ron Carlson writes that,

Grace Paley was a writer of sentences as much as anyone we’ve had in that her sentences all had personalities of their own and they resisted serving other sentences around them except by stubborn contrast. They are individuals and proud of it and skeptical in their affection for other sentences. She, of course, in the best ways was a radical, and her sentences were little radicals reduced to elemental tissues and unadorned except as adornment might be caught out.\(^{340}\)

The sentences, like the stories of which they are a part, and like Paley herself, are described as having a kind of resistance to the pull of a grand narrative. Their strangeness and irreducibility give them a “radical” quality. In “stubbornly” insisting on remaining their separate, small selves they paradoxically allow the minorness of talk to become larger, more capacious.

There is something inherently funny about the rhythms of a text so attuned to the sentence, a jokey cadence to the rejoinders it issues to itself. Many of Paley’s formal descendants take this kind of rhythm, and its consequent comedy, to its farthest possible ends, generating stories that are only a sentence long. The story becomes the response to the call of the title, a two-liner joke, as in Lydia Davis’s “Tropical Storm”:

*Tropical Storm*

Like a tropical storm,
I, too, may one day become “better organized.”\(^{341}\)

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Or, her “Information from the North Concerning the Ice”:

*Information from the North Concerning the Ice:*

Each seal uses many blowholes and each blowhole is used by many seals.\(^{342}\)

Paley’s sentences, though they don’t constitute the entirety of any of her stories, often feel similar to Davis’s: Although the transition from one sentence to another can be abrupt, and the puns and odd adoptions of academic, legal, hyper-literary, or newspaper-y vernaculars can give the language a tinge of the absurd, there is nevertheless a self-contained simplicity to both the individual line and the totality of the story. Like the form of a joke, the smallness and austerity of the stories makes their weird moments and rough edges cohere into something that feels almost crystalline.

This feeling comes in part from Paley’s play with the kind of narratorial omniscience that structures much of Victorian realism. If the nineteenth-century novel requires direct discourse and character as a foil for omniscience—that is, if it requires them as a form of difference—Paley’s work routinely interrupts these distinctions. Paley’s alter-ego, Faith Darwin, the subject and narrator of many of Paley’s stories, is often endowed with omniscience. She is not only occasionally able to see into the minds of other characters, but makes the kinds of pronouncements, summations, and addresses to the reader that often characterize the Victorian third person. This is, in part, a way of elevating the knowledge of the mother, or of reminding the reader that an idealized maternal knowledge is often the model of narratorial omniscience. As Schwartz writes, “Faith claims the sort of objective authority you’d expect to find in third-person narration… This is the omniscience not only of a writer but of a wife.”\(^{343}\) But it is also a way of challenging this omniscience, or of making it into something that can go both ways. If Faith can interrupt the thoughts of others, her thoughts can be interrupted in turn, as in “Faith in a Tree”:

“Who needs it?” he says, just to tease me. “All those guys got knives anyway. But you don’t care if I get killed much, do you?”

How can you answer that boy?

“You don’t,” says Mrs. Junius Finn, glad to say a few words. “You don’t have to answer them. God didn’t give out tongues for that. You answer too much, Faith Asbury, and it shows. Nobody fresher than Richard.”

“Mrs. Finn,” I scream in order to be heard, for she’s some distance away and doesn’t pay attention that way I do, “what’s so terrible about fresh. EVIL is bad. WICKED is bad. ROBBING, MURDER, and PUTTING HEROIN IN YOUR BLOOD is bad.”

“Blah blah,” she says, deaf to passion. “Blah to you.”\(^{344}\)

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\(^{342}\) Lydia Davis, “Information from the North Concerning the Ice” in *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (New York: Picador, 2002), 92.

\(^{343}\) Schwartz, “The Art and Activism of Grace Paley.”

The seeming interiority of “How can you answer that boy?” is punctured by Mrs. Junius Finn’s, “You don’t,” but the speech that elicits Faith’s seemingly rhetorical question—her son Richard’s teasing question to her—is itself a response to what had seemed to be Faith’s interior monologue. Richard routinely interrupts Faith’s thoughts, incarnating the tiny, time-thieving demon of self-doubt that sits on the maternal shoulder. Faith’s position—literally in a tree—in the story gives her the ability to observe and comment on the other mothers at the park. But, as Judie Newman points out, “Faith’s empire of the eye is violated by the unpredictable ability of sound, words, to cross long distances.” Her thoughts are interrupted, but she must then shout to respond to the interruption. Newman writes that these, “manipulations of distance are what make the story politically effective.” And it’s true: the manipulations of voice have a kind of egalitarian levelling effect on the characters, including Faith. But they are also a way of effacing the formal distinctions between different kinds of fictional language, and of making the story in its entirety into a “real fictional” object, the whole thing into a form of talk.

This, finally, may be what Paley allows us to see about the moment in which she was writing: The way in which a certain kind of fiction aspired to instantiate, in its entirety, what had previously been a moment, or an object, in a different kind of rhetoric. The way, that is, such fiction aspired to be talk. That this moment seems to have passed is evidenced as much by talk’s inescapability in the media landscape of the early 21st century as it is by the returned maximalism of the novel. We have all pivoted to video now—why write stories that would be just another kind of talk? But Paley’s fiction offers a way of experiencing everyday speech that is just alienating enough to make us pay attention. It makes talk feel strange. In “Wants,” the narrator runs into her ex-husband outside the library, and the two begin, companionably enough, dissecting their relationship:

> I wanted a sailboat, he said. But you didn’t want anything.
> Don’t be bitter, I said. It’s never too late.
> No, he said with a great deal of bitterness. I may get a sailboat. As a matter of fact I have money down on an eighteen-foot two-rigger. I’m doing well this year and can look forward to better. But as for you, it’s too late. You’ll always want nothing.
> He had a habit throughout the twenty-seven years of making a narrow remark which, like a plumber’s snake could work its way through the ear down the throat, halfway to my heart. He would then disappear, leaving me choking with equipment. What I mean is, I sat down on the library steps and he went away.347

This passage lacks what I have described as the crucial barrier between direct discourse and other forms of fictional language: the quotation mark. This again has the effect of breaking down barriers not only between the speech of the two characters, but between the characters’ talk and the kinds of narration that usually tend towards invisibility, and therefore remain uninterrogated: “he said,” “I said.” It is not, then, just the speech of everyday people that Paley makes at once familiar and weird. It is the language in which it is embedded; which tells us, without our quite

knowing it, what that speech should mean, and how we should receive it. The long narratorial metaphorph—the remark like a plumber’s snake—that colors the exchange and constitutes its last word is violent, unsettling, and beautiful. But it is also cut down to size, made just another way of describing something, just another thing someone has said: “What I mean is, I sat down on the library steps and he went away.” The passage’s last line does not replace the ones that came before, but it grounds them. What the longer passage “means” is just two actions, bluntly described. And yet that “I mean,” (favorite form of the feminized, hedging verbal pause, along with “I just,” “I only”—a way of reminding the listener that these words are merely mine) is not “this means” or “it meant.” It is another way of reminding the reader that pithiest and most aphoristic sentences, the pithiest and most aphoristic stories, are still just ways of seeing, or saying. That they are ways among many makes them no less important—no less real. By being small, Paley’s stories remind us that everything, beautifully, is. It’s all just talk.
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