Telegraphic Realism: Henry James's *In the Cage*

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Looking back at *In the Cage*, his 1898 tale of a young female telegraphist who becomes obsessed with the coded messages exchanged between two trysting customers, Henry James speculates that its principal "idea" is so evident that it "must again and again have flowered (granted the grain of observation) in generous minds": to wit, "the question of what it might 'mean' [. . .] for confined and cramped and yet considerably tutored young officials of either sex to be made so free, intellectually, of a range of experience otherwise quite closed to them" (Preface xviii, xix). For the observing author, the question becomes "an amusement, or an obsession" (xix), the spectator echoing the sentiments that the story ascribes to the telegraphist. James concedes that the watcher may be too hasty to attribute such a "critical impulse" to his subject; the tale's "central spirit," the telegraphist, "is, for verisimilitude, I grant, too ardent a focus of divination[,] but without this excess, the phenomena detailed would have lacked their principle of cohesion" (xix, xxi). Piecing together the story of her customers' affair, the telegraphist applies her insight to bits of information sent by people who might seem to have little connection to one another; her authorlike critical faculty, her excessive divination, holds the tale together. In fact, "[t]he action of the drama is simply the girl's 'subjective' adventure—that of her quite definitely winged intelligence" (xxi).

The lovers use the telegraph for secret, virtually instantaneous communication. Yet by reading and interpreting the messages of Captain Ev and Lady Bradeen, the unnamed telegraphist interposes a level of mediation, a layer that intermingles the materiality of communication, the content of her subjectivity, and the social structures of bureaucracy, class, and gender. James points out that the telegraphist of *In the Cage* has been endowed with the attributes of the "artist" (the quotation marks

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are his)—and of the novelist (xix). But she also represents telegraphy not just as a mode of communication but also as a social practice, a medium of discourse come to life, an information exchange rendered no longer transparent.

The interplay James establishes between the trade of telegraphy and the art of fiction might seem haphazard. Why should the tale assign its telegraphist the characteristics of a novelist, even at the price of “verisimilitude”? In fact, in seating the tale’s central consciousness within the “cage” of the postal telegraph counter, James literalizes and estranges a metaphor that had occasionally provided Victorian writers with a powerful technological analogue, and even a kind of working model, for Victorian realism—a nonce metaphor, perhaps, but one that had flowered repeatedly in authorial minds. As invoked by novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens, the image of the telegraph suggests some of the formal and ideological properties of mid-Victorian realism, even the episteme supporting the developments of telegraphy and classic realism at mid-century. Recasting the meaning of telegraphy, James discloses some of his divergences from such forebears by the century’s end. The version of telegraphic realism in In the Cage has much to do with James’s notion of realism but also important connections to developments in telegraphy between the 1850s and the 1890s—developments first treated in a short story by Anthony Trollope.

Unlike James or even Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell left few pronouncements on the art of the novel, fictional realism, the writer’s obligation. One of her rare statements comes in an 1859 letter to a young writer who had asked her opinion of his manuscript:

I believe in spite of yr objection to the term “novel” you do wish to “narrate,”—and I believe you can do it if you try,—but I think you must observe what is out of you, instead of examining what is in you. It is always an unhealthy sign when we are too conscious of any of the physical processes that go on within us; & I believe in like manner that we ought not to be too cognizant of our mental proceedings, only taking note of the results. But certainly—whether introspection be morbid or not,—it is not a safe training for a novelist. It is a weakening of the art which has crept in of late years. Just read a few pages of Defoe &c—and you will see the healthy way in which he sets objects not feelings before you. I am sure the right way is this. You are an Electric telegraph something or other,—

Gaskell’s words are sometimes cited as evidence of her no-nonsense approach to novel writing, but critics have largely failed to note the peculiar terms in which she couches her advice. Narration, claims Gaskell, should grow from looking outward and not inward, for being too conscious of our minds’ inner workings is as “unhealthy” as being too aware of our bodies’; “introspection” resembles indigestion—or worse. As a curative measure and a salutary example of fiction that eschews emotion in favor of “objects,” she prescribes Defoe.

“You are an Electric telegraph something or other,—” Gaskell pronounces with a combination of the oblique and the oracular reminiscent of the characters in her comic Cranford: that is, a device that relays information from point to point. But, like many Cranfordian declarations, Gaskell’s metaphor is shrewder than it might appear. Since telegraphs both send and receive messages, they offer an apposite figure for the claims of realism and imagination in Victorian fiction; the electric telegraph is the passive transmission of the message and its active production—simultaneously the mirror and the lamp. The ambiguous “you” adds to the equivocation. Is the electric telegraph an image of the novelist, who “sets objects” out with a crisp, dot-dash clarity? Is it the reader, who receives the images? A telegraph something or other, “not an X-ray thingamajig.” Gaskell would have added had she been living forty years later; for her, the metaphor of telegraphy provides a safeguard against the morbid possibilities of a psychologized fiction.
Writing in his private memorandum book a few years later, Dickens offers another vision of narration as telegraphy: “Open the story by bringing two strongly contrasted places and strongly contrasted sets of people, into the connexion necessary for the story, by means of an electric message. Describe the message—be the message—flashing along through space—over the earth, and under the sea” (Charles Dickens’ Book 19). The medium of electric telegraphy is the metaphor, and the story’s narrative voice is “the message—flashing along through space.” Pulsing between disparate characters and settings, the telegraphic narrator becomes the thing that connects them. Dickens’s scheme for this unwritten story consolidates in the image of the “electric message,” what his fiction elsewhere delineates by other means. The memorandum’s principle and even its language recall a famous pause in Bleak House (1852–53):

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom [ . . . ]? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! (272)

Like the shift from the question mark of the first sentence to the exclamation point of the second, the telegraphic message confirms that unseen connections are already in place. Running overhead and underwater, the telegraph wire actualizes the links that Dickens highlights in his novels.

In Realism and Consensus in the English Novel, Elizabeth Ermath argues that from quattrocento painting to nineteenth-century fiction, “realism” in its multifarious forms depends on a notion of collective, coordinated space that grows from an idea of time as continuous and uniform. Citing a version of Dickens’s telegraphic memorandum, Ermath notes the ways in which the figure of the telegraph message describes Dickens’s creation of narrative perspective (194). According to Ermath, his novels ultimately reveal a “commanding structure [that] comes into view slowly, emerging from all parts of the world and grounded in them. Each point is a relay for the electric messages that connect them” (196–97). This fundamental “structure of significance, uniting various worlds of experience,” underlies—and is tested by—the caricature, stylization, and animism of Dickens’s fiction; for Ermath, this unifying system finally constitutes his realism (196).

But Ermath does not note the ways in which Dickens’s telegraphic memo and his emphasis on a system of “connexion” resonate with accounts of the telegraphic network that was beginning to interconnect the world with an expanding web of copper wire. Probably written in 1862, Dickens’s notebook entry alludes to contemporary efforts to lay telegraphic cables across empires and oceans (“over the earth, and under the sea”)—especially the attempt to create a transatlantic connection between Britain and North America. (After a short-lived realization in 1858, the effort resulted in a permanent link seven years later.) As international telegraphy became a possibility and then a profitable reality, the power of the electric telegraph to unite a world of varied experience and conflicting interests became a commonplace in Whiggish assessments of human progress. For Charles Briggs and Augustus Maverick, writing in the wake of the laying of the first transatlantic cable (“the greatest event in the present century”), it was now “impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought” (11, 22). They predict that “the whole earth will be belted with the electric current, palpitating with human thoughts and emotions” (12). The telegraph’s “electric fluid” was like “a spiritual […] force” (14, 13); it would “forestall the flight of Time, and inaugurate new realizations of human powers and possibilities” (14). Harnessing a “spirit like Ariel,” the electric telegraph was
widely acclaimed as a “step towards realizing the dream of the poet, to ‘Put a girdle round about the earth/In forty minutes’” (Morus 341).

Like mid-Victorian realism in Ernath’s account, then, mid-Victorian telegraphy promised to unite disparate viewpoints by means of an encompassing framework of discourse, a “vast interconnected system” of communication (Briggs and Maverick 12). An 1881 article in *Scientific American* on the telegraph’s “moral influence” claimed that “the touch of the telegraph key [. . .] welded human sympathy and made possible its manifestation in a common, universal, simultaneous heart throb,” a burst passing “over the continents and under the seas.” Indeed, the outpouring of telegraphic sympathy after President Garfield’s assassination presaged “a day when science shall have so blended, interwoven, and unified human thoughts and interests that the feeling of universal kinship shall be, not a spasmodic outburst of occasional emotion, but constant and controlling” (qtd. in Marvin 199–200). Flashing through space, realism and telegraphy alike would affirm the ties between each node of their networks.

Gaskell’s and Dickens’s comments suggest the similar cultural logic sustaining understandings of realist fiction and the electric telegraph during the initial decades of Victorian realism and commercial telegraphy—phenomena one might understand as chronologically twinned technologies that grow in tandem from experimentation in the 1830s and early 1840s to standardization in the late 1840s and to a certain triumphant audacity by the late 1850s and 1860s. In the novelists’ formulations, the figure of electric telegraphy helps crystallize the assumptions and evasions of Victorian realism, its claims to transmit a domain of shared meaning neutrally, its evocations of a many-sided but coherent world palpitating with thought, its claims to be a “message” that invisibly connects a reality marked by contrasts. To borrow a term from Bakhtin, we might think of the telegraph as a *chronotope* for realist fiction in this period, a narrative figure that unites representations of space and of time (Bakhtin 84); the telegraph, after all, would bring the world closer by instantaneous communication, would materialize the connections of *Bleak House* and the web of *Middlemarch*. To this end, Dickens and Gaskell assume the transparency of the electric telegraph as a medium. Such transparency allows Gaskell to exalt the ideal of communication yet minimize the importance of human interiority in the process.

But when it came to the telegraph, such transparency was a fantasy. To be transmitted, information had to be transcoded into electrical impulses, and telegraphy soon developed norms based on the pricing of language by the word or letter (Morus 372–73). As telegraphic messages underwent encoding and commodification, they had to pass through another level of mediation: the telegraphists. “Despite the widely expressed optimism that the telegraphs would unite humanity,” notes Tom Standage, “it was in fact only the telegraph operators who were able to communicate with each other directly” (145). And the telegraph’s history reveals that the persons on either end of the wire could play a conspicuous, and sometimes obstructive, role (Morus 368–71).

It might have been especially tempting to hail the transparency and the community-building possibilities of telegraphy in the 1850s, when telegrams were a new medium and too expensive for frequent use by most people, technologically dazzling but with social implications that were still unclear. But by the 1870s the British government had nationalized the telegraph companies, folded their operations into the post office, and significantly reduced the cost of sending telegrams (Moody 55). Dispatching telegrams soon became “one of the commonest and most taken-for-granted of London impressions,” as James calls it in his preface to *In the Cage* (xviii); in this tale, the telegraph office occupies “the dustiest corner” of a grocery shop (*In the Cage* 835). Hailed as an epoch-making invention at mid-century, the telegraph had by the 1890s become mundane, the oldest of what one might call the nineteenth century’s new media.
The final decades of the century introduced an array of newer technologies of transmission and inscription: the telephone, the gramophone, the X-ray photograph, the motion picture (in 1898 James reported having “quite revelled” in a “cinematograph—or whatever they call it” of a prize-fight [Edel 4: 175]). Most crucial for James’s practice of writing was of course the typewriter; suffering from chronic wrist pain, James bought “an admirable and expensive machine” in 1897 and soon ended up “writing” by dictating to a private typist (Edel 4: 176).1

By the time of The Wings of the Dove (1902), James claimed that dictating to a typist was for him “intellectually, absolutely identical with the act of writing” (Edel 5: 127). But as Mark Seltzer notes (Bodies 195–97n57), the concurrent developments in inscriptive technologies and in James’s writerly habits could foreground the properties of communication media, even as James disavowed their effects as “only material and illusory” (Edel 5: 127). And James was not the only novelist to respond to the new configurations of technology and writing at the turn of the century (Seltzer, “Graphic” 25–27). Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) invokes an array of old and new recording technologies (letters, shorthand journals, telegrams, a “phonograph diary”) as simultaneously modes of documentation and figures for the novel’s thematics of textuality, secrecy, and knowledge. As Ivan Kreilijkamp has recently shown, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899) responds to the possibilities of “disembodied phonographic language,” possibilities that might have been suggested in part by Con- rad’s encounter with a technophile and his phonograph (237). Only four years later, Rudyard Kipling’s story “Wireless” would explore the literary and intellectual implications of an even newer technology (Beer 155–57).

In contrast to these writers, James with In the Cage does not investigate the thematic and formal questions raised by a new medium; rather, he approaches an established one in the light of turn-of-the-century attention to the properties of recording and transmitting technology.2 Carolyn Marvin observes in her study of late-nineteenth-century technologies that “the introduction of new media is a special his- torical occasion when patterns anchored in older media [...] are reexamined, challenged, and defended” (4). Although the patterns Marvin discusses are those of social life, the same argument might apply to the entanglement of media technology and literature. In In the Cage, James’s new attention to the mechanics of telegraphy and to the psychosocial content of the telegraphic exchange indicates how the imaginative possibilities of a medium may change as newer technologies emerge and suggests the significance of media transitions for literary history.

Telegrams, those tangible products of telegraphic interconnection, are a familiar feature of late-nineteenth-century fiction, including James’s; for instance, as plot points and as technology for intercontinental communication, they feature in his transatlantic novels from The American (1876–77) to The Ambassadors (1903). In the first chapter of The Portrait of a Lady (1881), telegraphy figures as a technology of inscription and encryption, perfectly suited to the peremptory but mystifying messages Mrs. Touchett sends to announce her return with Isabel Archer in tow. As Ralph tells Lord Warburton:

[M]y mother has not gone into details. She chiefly communicates with us by means of telegrams, and her telegrams are rather inscrutable. They say women don’t know how to write them, but my mother has thoroughly mastered the art of condensation. “Tired America, hot weather awful, return England with niece, first steamer decent cabin.” That’s the sort of message we get from her—that was the last that came. But there had been another before, which I think contained the first mention of the niece. “Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister’s girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent.” Over that my father and I have scarcely stopped puzzling; it seems to admit of so many interpretations.
Stunningly, in the thirty-four words of Lydia Touchett’s artfully compressed telegrams, James manages to convey not only the character’s style but also many of the novel’s crucial issues. “Taken sister’s girl”—“go to Europe”—“quite independent”: here is the international theme reiterated with the “condensation” of a transatlantic cable. In view of his mother’s acutely interpretable telegrams, Ralph adumbrates the questions of Isabel’s character and fate that the rest of the novel will investigate: “who’s ‘quite independent,’ and in what sense is the term used? […] is it used in a moral or a financial sense? Does it mean that [she’s] been left well off, or that [she] wish[es] to be under no obligations? or does it simply mean that [she’s] fond of [her] own way?” (67). With a character’s jocular sallies at an “in"scutable” telegram, The Portrait of a Lady has introduced several of its principal topics and their complexities—beginning with James’s international theme and Isabel Archer’s independences but extending even to concerns such as social snobbery (“insolent clerk”) and the aesthetics of interior spaces (“first steamer decent cabin”).

In the Cage too treats telegrams as texts demanding intricate interpretation, but it does far more with telegraphy than draw on its compressive effects on language. The central consciousness of the novella belongs to the telegraphist who begins to take an interest in the affairs of her wealthy customers. Her attention blends obsession, conscientiousness, and rage—an ambiguous state resembling that of the governess in The Turn of the Screw (1898), a tale with which In the Cage has sometimes been compared. The story’s opening sentences incisively confute her employment, her social status, and her spatial immurement in the post office of Cocker’s grocery, coordinating these data as the “position” that gives her a unilateral knowledge of the persons around her:

It had occurred to her early that in her position—that of a young person spending, in framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie—she should know a great many persons without their recognising the acquaintance. That made it an emotion the more lively […] to see any one come in whom she knew, as she called it, outside, and who could add something to the poor identity of her function.

“[F]ramed and wired” in place at the counter, the telegraphist is enclosed by a wood and wire “lattice” reminiscent of the telegraphic network, of which her post forms the most prosaic node, as if—through a spectacular metonymic logic—the miles of cable spanning the globe were her “cage” (835).

The situation becomes clearer when the next sentence specifies the workaday “function” that establishes her “poor identity”:

Her function was to sit there with two young men—the other telegraphist and the counter-clerk; to mind the “sounder,” which was always going, to dole out stamps and postal-orders, weigh letters, answer stupid questions, give difficult change and, more than anything else, count words as numberless as the sands of the sea, the words of the telegrams thrust, from morning to night, through the gap left in the high lattice, across the encumbered shelf that her forearm ached with rubbing. (835)

“[T]hrough the bars of the cage” float money and messages, “numberless” words that must be reckoned before they can enter the system (841). As Jennifer Wicke notes, the cage is “a nexus” where acts of “communication” enter a new “grid of social relation” (146–47). Far from being transparent and idealized, telegraphic dialogism here is mediated by the postal staff and defined as economic exchange. Were Dickens to “be” one of these messages, he would find that his flight across space began in a decidedly earthbound place, a “smelly shop” where the aromas of “hams, cheese, dried fish, soap, varnish, paraffin” mingle with other, less identifiable odors (James, In the Cage 895, 835).

Separated from her customers by a “transparent screen,” the telegraphist conducts her pro-
fessional and her imaginative commerce with humanity across the “gap” (835). When her friend Mrs. Jordan accuses her of lacking “imagination,” the telegraphist concludes with rueful satisfaction that “people didn’t understand her.” In fact, contra Mrs. Jordan, “her imaginative life was the life in which she spent most of her time”; despite Gaskell’s assurances, the telegraph office offers little protection against morbid interiority. Just as Mrs. Jordan, an impoverished widow with a genteel past, arranges flowers in the houses of wealthy Londoners, so the telegraphist mentally arranges customers: “What she could handle freely, she said to herself, was combinations of men and women.” With “a certain expansion of her consciousness,” the telegraphist experiences “flashes” of “inspiration, divination and interest” about others who scarcely notice her (838). Mrs. Jordan may enter her customers’ houses, but the telegraphist believes that she penetrates into their stories.

What shapes the telegraphist’s flashes of insight into her well-to-do customers is her avid reading of “novels, very greasy, in fine print and all about fine folks,” borrowed “at a ha’penny a day” (837)—texts that offer entry into a range of experience to a broad array of the cramped and confined. The telegraphist will regularly review the situation of Captain Everard and Lady Braden, and eventually her own intrusive part in their drama, in “ha’penny novel” terms. The repeated adjective fine suggests the quality of her aesthetic and moral sensibilities (Aswell 376), but it also indicates the disparity between her reading material and its materiality—the sumptuous subjects of cheap one-volume novels printed in close type. For the telegraphist, the lovers’ telegrams present a coherent, novel-like “reality” that transcends the fragments encountered in her ordinary life; “more than ever before it floated to her through the bars of the cage that this at last was the high reality, the bristling truth that she had hiterto only patched up and eked out” (841). In fact, as Nicola Nixon observes, the telegraphist “watches for each new telegraphic hint to their story as if it were the next installment of a serialized novel” (190). As the telegraphist becomes involved in this story, she finds that her interest in it “literally [. . .] makes up” for the tedious of Cocker’s and tempts her to delay her marriage to the dull grocer Mr. Mudge (James, In the Cage 838). Thinking about “what [. . .] a bad girl would do” with such scandalous knowledge of the couple’s affair, she conjures up “a scene better than many in her ha’penny novel” (866).

Caged at the interchange between the public and the telegraph network and inspired by her novels, the telegraphist begins by making electrical connections but soon finds herself making intellectual ones:

There were times when all the wires in the country seemed to start from the little hole-and-corner where she plied for a livelihood, and where [. . .] the people she had fallen into the habit of remembering and fitting together with others, and of having her theories and interpretations of, kept up before her their long procession and rotation. (847)

At the center of the system, the telegraphist works to fit together the endless queue of her clientele and does so in ways suggested by fiction. It is as if, to escape her monotonous captivity in the telegraph office, she were attempting to become a version of the realist telegraph, the instrument of connection celebrated in Victorian invocations of the telegraphic imaginary. As James’s preface indicates, the telegraphist is a “central spirit” who provides “cohesion”; what he calls her “winged intelligence” is also an ironic, subjective version of the electric Ariel’s ability to saturate the world with human thought.

In Thinking in Henry James, Sharon Cameron demonstrates the opposition in James’s work between the idea of consciousness as a product of individual, interior psychology (typically articulated in the New York Edition prefaces) and the more radical possibility that consciousness might be intersubjective or transcendent (usually raised in the fiction). This is exactly the incompatibility
over which James frets in his preface to the tale, the problem that “the author” has attributed “subtlesties” to a specific “soul” unlikely to possess them—a problem that arises from “the author’s irrepresible and insatiable, his extravagant and immoral, interest in personal character and in the ‘nature’ of a mind” (xx). The author has shared too much of his own capacity for scrutinizing consciousness with the character whose consciousness he scrutinizes. The result of this putative misapportionment is precisely the “winged intelligence,” the sovereign consciousness, that seeks an intellectual liberation from the cage of Cocker’s. For Cameron, “the novels and Prefaces [. . .] raise the question of what thinking is, of how it can be made to register, and albeit disconcertingly, of where it might do so” (42). In the Cage, a tale Cameron does not discuss, provokes similar questions. Yet it does so not simply by formulating complex, intersubjective relations between characters (as in the fiction Cameron examines) but by aligning such interrogations with telegraphy, a technology that promised to register thought across vast distances, to relocate consciousness in the electric pulses of the network.

As both the telegraphist fantasies of Victorian fiction and the telegraphist’s reading of her story as a novel imply, this alignment between telegraphy and questions of consciousness has much to do with the technology of nineteenth-century fiction. In part, the problem of consciousness that Cameron notes in James simply recasts the novelistic convention of a mobile narrator with selective access to characters’ minds (a mode characteristic of Gaskell, George Eliot, and much of Dickens) as no longer a habit but now an open question of representing thought. By the late 1890s, this question was on James’s mind; in an 1899 letter to Mary Augusta Ward, that late Victorian heir to the tradition of Gaskell and Eliot, James argues that the problem is not how many minds a novel seems to penetrate but the coherence of its narrative scheme:

[T]here are as many magnificent and imperative cases as you like of presenting a thing by “go-

ing behind” as many forms of consciousness as you like—all Dickens, Balzac, Thackeray, Tolstoy (save when they use the autobiographic dodge) are huge illustrations of it. [. . .] For that matter, [. . .] I “go behind” right and left in “The Princess Casamassima,” “The Bostonians,” “The Tragic Muse” [. . .].

And yet I must still add one or two things more. [. . .] I hold the artist must (infinitely!) know how he is doing it, or he is not doing it at all. [. . .] He must there choose and stick and be consistent [. . .]. (Letters 110, 111)

Raising this question of consciousness and narrative form to the level of theme, In the Cage renders it doubly pressing.

The telegraphist fantasizes that she can see into others but that no one really knows her, a situation that echoes the structure of knowledge in third-person narrative, especially the supervision exercised by the narrators of mid-century realist novels. But by embodying such fantasies of mobile knowledge in the figure of the telegraphist and making her consciousness the center of the tale’s character-focalized narration, James places narrative knowledge in the cage: readers are largely confined to the telegraphist’s thoughts and perceptions, while the third-person narrative voice adds ironic distance. Through the transparent screen of his narrative, James can indicate the “triumphant, vicious feeling of mastery and power” that inheres in the one-sided knowledge of a shared reality (In the Cage 847). Emphasizing her gender, sexuality, and class position as elements of the telegraphist’s psychology and will to knowledge, James suggests some of the real data that the realist narrator function must neutralize.

The story cages the soul of an authorial narrator (who “maintains his own vantage point on the fictional world and its inhabitants” [Cohn 14]) in the focalized and ironized figure of the telegraphist.

Crucial to this troubling of narrative convention is not only the social situation of the telegraphist as woman and worker but also her particular “position” at the telegraph counter. Recent critics
have read James’s tale of coded interchange and sexual secrecy in a telegraph office in relation to the 1889 Cleveland Street Scandal, which revealed that a male brothel in London was supplying its upper-class customers with young telegraph workers (Savoy 290–92; Stevens 128–31). The telegraphist’s sense of her dual existence as knowing subject and subservient clerk, “the queer extension of her experience” into a “double life” based on her knowledge of upper-class sexual scandal, would seem to bear out such a field of reference (James, In the Cage 846). Yet the tale goes far beyond merely using the telegraph worker as a figure of scandal or recognizing her location at the interstice between public transactions and private communications.

Indeed, In the Cage is permeated not simply by a general sense of the telegraphist as a worker in the nineteenth century’s emergent information economy (“endless right change to make and information to produce”) but also by attention to the specific components, mechanics, and language of telegraphy (844). The telegraphist is “wired” at the counter or makes a “ridiculous circuit” to pass Everard’s house on her nightly way home (835, 874); again and again, characters “flash” (the verb Dickens uses for his flight as a telegram) or “dash” (a word that recalls the pulses of Morse code). In particular, James manages subtly but thoroughly to identify the telegraphist with the device from which she takes her “poor identity” and her designation in the story (835). At work at the counter, she registers the presence of her customers like a sort of hyper-responsive emotional seismograph:

There were those she would have liked to betray, to trip up, to bring down with words altered and fatal; and all through a personal hostility provoked by the lightest signs, by their accidents of tone and manner, by the particular kind of relation she always happened instantly to feel.

There were impulses of various kinds, alternately soft and severe, to which she was constitutionally accessible and which were determined by the smallest accidents. (847) Not only does this description treat the telegraphist as a kind of superfine registering mechanism, “instantly” sensitive to the “lightest signs,” it defines her as “constitutionally accessible” to an alternating series of binary (“soft and severe”) “impulses.” And thus she manages in a flash to read the coded relationship between Captain Erard and Lady Bradeen: “The fine, soundless pulse of this game was in the air for our young woman while they remained in the shop” (843).

The “soundless” quality of their romance conveys its furtiveness and marks it as a sort of silent telegraphy. For perhaps the most sustained appropriation of a telegraphic term in the tale surrounds the “sounder,” that device that is “always going” in Cocker’s store. Although Samuel Morse had designed his telegraph with a register that recorded its pulses on paper for later translation, telegraphers discovered that they could save time by “sound reading”—by listening to the register’s long and short ticks as it received a message (Coe 66). After some initial resistance, officials in the telegraph companies came to endorse sound reading, and manufacturers adapted their equipment by replacing the paper register with a sounder, a simple noisemaking device consisting of an electromagnet, an armature, and a lever. A sort of reverberator for telegraphic pulses, to borrow a Jamesian term, the clicking sounder eventually became “the universal receiving instrument” of the telegraph (Coe 71).

Playing a set of variations on the sounder, In the Cage builds an entire tropology on sound in various senses: aurality, articulation, investigation—especially the measurement of “depths.” (As Kipling’s paean “The Deep-Sea Cables” suggests, even this final meaning does not necessarily take us far from telegraphy.) Although the postal branch in Cocker’s only sends telegrams and does not receive them, the sounder dominates the scene of telegraphy. For reasons that I propose in my conclusion, James identifies the telegraph completely with the sounder. In the story, the sounder comes synecdochically to stand for the whole apparatus and metonymically
to represent the encaged telegraphist who operates it; it occupies “the innermost cell of captivity, a cage within the cage, fenced off from the rest by a frame of ground glass” (840).

The sounder figures its operator’s receptivity to alternating pulses of soundless signification. And the telegraphist turns out to be as sensitive an instrument as Maisie Farange, the young female center of consciousness in a work James had published a year previously. In fact, a telegraphic trope describes Maisie’s desire for shared, silent contact as well. Disconnected from her beloved Mrs. Wix by the presence of her stepmother, Maisie misses a mode of communication deeper than words, for “[t]hey had [. . .] never been so long together without communion or telegraphy” (What Maisie Knew 226–27). Even when foreclosed, the possibilities of psychic “communion or telegraphy” may more generally underwrite the pauses, gaps, interruptions, and intakes of breath that make late Jamesian dialogue—in contrast to the amleness of James’s descriptive prose—seem telegraphic.

After perceiving the illicit affair between Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard, the telegraphist begins to intrude in it. She offers Lady Bradeen a correction of her coded telegram (realizing that the telegraphist has been not merely sending her messages but also interpreting them, her ladyship leaves in shock) and begins walking past the captain’s lodgings on her way home. One night he notices her and “send[s]” her a laugh “across the way” (875)—a telegraphed greeting that introduces a fantasy of communication deeper than speech. During their ensuing colloquy, the telegraphist imagines an unspoken connection between the two of them, a soundless mode of transmission, a telegraphy that is also a communion: nothing “vulgarly articulate” leads them to stroll together (876); she has “an intense desire he should know the type she really was without her doing anything so low as tell him”; the usual relations that an upper-class man might have with a young working woman “were on the mere surface, and their relation was behind and below” (877); the telegraphist feels, she tells him, “as if there were something—I don’t know what to call it!—between us”—“something unusual and good” (881). Soon she breaks out to him: “I know, I know, I know!” “Yes,” Everard concludes, “that’s what has been between us”: “everything they had so definitely not named [. . .] settled solidly between them. It was as if then, for a minute, they sat and saw it all in each other’s eyes, saw so much that there was no need of a transition for sounding it at last” (885). The solid, soundless connection between them is the telegraphist’s divination and knowledge of the affair. What makes her fantasies of interpersonal telegraphy so ironic is the suggestion that while she conceives of their tie as a high-flown romance, Everard probably believes she is threatening blackmail (Nixon 192).

At the seaside with Mr. Mudge for a cheap holiday, the telegraphist experiences a sort of Victorian-realist reverie, “seeing many things, the things of the past year, fall together and connect themselves, undergo the happy relegation that transforms melancholy and misery, passion and effort, into experience and knowledge.” The vision would almost be worthy of Middlemarch, were it not for the ironic spin James applies locally by word choice (the blithe and insipid “happy relegation”) and more broadly by deflecting the observation into the register of his character’s thoughts. In the midst of such meditations, the telegraphist’s life in London becomes for her “a far-away story, a picture of another life”—just the relation she once had to her novels and to the lives of Everard and Lady Bradeen (888).

But as the telegraphist invades the story she has discovered, misprision fills the space of human interconnection. At Cocker’s, her encounters with Everard become a comedy of ambiguous signs and overreading. As another clerk waits on him, “nothing pass[s] between” Everard and the telegraphist “but the fullness of their silence,” yet she manages to read an elaborate message telegraphed by the series of looks in his eyes: “The look she took from him was his greeting,
and the other one a simple sign of the eyes sent her before going out. The only token they exchanged, therefore, was his tacit assent to her wish that, since they couldn’t attempt a certain frankness, they should attempt nothing at all.” The telegraphist prefers this code to “their former little postal make-believes”; she feels she has “established on the part of each a consciousness that could end only with death” (894). When he departs, she can “almost hear him, through the tick of the sounder, scatter with his stick [...] the fallen leaves of October” — as if the sounder’s clicking were simultaneously the noise his vibrations must overcome and the medium by which they come over (895).

During Everard’s subsequent visits, the telegraphist notices that he seems to be trying to give her money, perhaps as blackmail payments. Pursuing a profounder explanation, she again attempts to read his eyes:

What was most extraordinary in this impression was the amount of excuse that, with some incoherence, she found for him. He wanted to pay her because there was nothing to pay her for. He wanted to offer her things that he knew she wouldn’t take. He wanted to show her how much he respected her by giving her the supreme chance to show him she was respectable. Over the driest transactions, at any rate, their eyes had out these questions. (899)

What is most extraordinary about this passage itself is its trio of middle sentences, the parallel “excuses” that the telegraphist makes for Everard’s conduct. Their anaphora and repeated structure draw attention to the veiled virtuosity here: just as the narrative uses free indirect discourse and psychological narration to present the telegraphist’s fictional thoughts from a third-person point of view, this passage uses the same approach recursively, to present Everard’s fictitious thoughts from her point of view — even as the story narrates her consciousness.

Taken out of context, the three sentences could be a trustworthy account of a male character’s thoughts; in the story, however, they are an “extraordinary” misreckoning. And yet, on a narratological level, this is the point at which the telegraphist’s thoughts would appear to coincide formally with his. It is as if the narrative were feigning to grant the telegraphist her dream of mental communion with Captain Everard — only to reveal it as a chimera. Yet this remarkable misrecognition is technically congruent with the character-focalized narrative mode of the tale. As if beset by such confusions, even as she works so sedulously to manufacture an explanation of Everard’s motives, the telegraphist seeks “the refuge of the sounder”; “to be in the cage had suddenly become her safety, and she was literally afraid of the alternate self who might be waiting outside” (897, 898).

The tale’s climax both grants the telegraphist her disillusioned desire to return dealings with her customers to their “proper impersonal basis” and allows her to display her mental acumen one last time (901). After first answering with officious detachment the lovers’ urgent request for the text of an earlier telegram, she manages to recollect the coded message from memory and thus — in a plot point about which James is deliberately unspecific — to save them from exposure. In the tale’s denouement, the telegraphist and her friend Mrs. Jordan reconvene for a final meeting. The text presents their conversation as a drama whose evolving suppressions and misunderstandings translate an alternating stream of hauteur and humiliation; as John Carlos Rowe notes in passing, this is a particularly “telegraphic” exchange (159), elliptical in its verbal compressions and its circling indirections. Mrs. Jordan had hinted that her employment in upper-class London houses might lead to a match with one of their denizens, and indeed it has, to betrothal to a Mr. Drake — who, Mrs. Jordan haltingly admits, is a butler. This shock awakens the telegraphist from her vision of access to the “high reality” that Lady Bradden’s telegrams once suggested: “what our heroine saw and felt for in the whole business was the vivid reflection of her own dreams and...
delusions and her own return to reality. Reality, for the poor things they both were, could only be ugliness and obscenity, could never be the escape, the rise” (917–18).

To complete the telegraphist’s Jamesian disillusionment, Mrs. Jordan also reveals the true state of relations between Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen, Mr. Drake’s future employer. And this reality too turns out to be shabbier than the telegraphist had imagined: after the sudden death of her husband, Lady Bradeen has used the recovered telegram to coerce Everard into marrying her, even though he would have preferred to end their relationship. The telegraphist “had, in the cage, sounded depths, but there was a suggestion here somehow of an abyss quite measureless” (920). And this abyss only recapitulates the chasm that traps “poor things” in “ugliness and obscenity” and even the “social gulf” (918) that now yawns between the telegraphist (affianced to Mr. Mudge, the industrious grocer) and the soon-to-be Mrs. Drake (a servant’s wife). Now it is the telegraphist’s soundless visions that fall away; after months of delaying marriage to Mudge, she plans to move up the date.

As James often does, here he stages a character’s loss of illusion as an encounter between the seductions of romance and the grounded truths of the real. “The only general attribute” of romance, he would argue in the New York preface to *The American*, is “the kind of experience with which it deals—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembodied, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it” (Critical Muse 474). This well-known definition of romance as disconnected experience, as imagination liberated from life’s constraints, is again the telegraphist’s winged intelligence, the purely intellectual freedom of this confined young official, her imaginary access to a world of experience otherwise denied her. In Ermah’s terms, gender, sexuality, and the social gulf of class may disturb the “consensus” necessary to realism in *In the Cage*. In a larger sense, James hints that the seamless telegraphic interconnection promised by Victorian realism, like the “fine” society novels that echo it in a vulgarized form, depends on a fantasy of disengaged knowledge recognizable as a covert form of romance.

With an intentionally fanciful figure, James goes on to encapsulate the tethered nature of the realist imagination: “The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination”; “from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated.” In contrast to the realist’s task, “[t]he art of the romancer is [ . . .] insidiously to cut the cable” (475). Perhaps in the cable that keeps things grounded we can perceive an alternative to the telegraph wire that, to Gaskell as much as to James’s telegraphist, seemed to promise disencumbered discourse. The organization of James’s figure (a cable fixing a car in space) may even suggest a topological transformation of some familiar terms; in his image it is not the hot-air balloon that represents the “imagination” but the “car” underneath—which we might also call a cage.

A late short story by Anthony Trollope offers an important counterpart and possibly a source for the treatment of a young woman as telegraph worker in *In the Cage*—and a signal moment in the history of the phenomena this essay has explored in tandem, fictional realism and electric telegraphy. Trollope combined the careers of postal administrator and novelist for many years, but he retired from the post office shortly before Parliament nationalized the British telegraph system and merged it into the postal bureaucracy. For his 1877 story “The Telegraph Girl,” however, Trollope carefully researched one consequence of this consolidation, the employment of female workers in large centers for processing telegrams.

Like Trollope himself, Lucy Graham—the telegraph girl of the title—is a realist. She rejects her friend Sophy’s romantic fantasy that the printing engineer Mr. Hall might be “some gen-
tleman in disguise,” perhaps hiding from “paternal tyranny,” in favor of the theory that he is simply kind and good-natured (362, 363). Having worked in her brother’s bookshop, Lucy is also unusually literate, bookish (she even compares herself to a book with a “good strong binding” [356]), and skilled at reading the “little dots and pricks” punched into her telegraph’s recording tape; “[n]o one could read and use her telegraphic literature more rapidly or correctly” (365). But she is being edged out by technological change, for the postal “pundits” have introduced a new “system of communicating messages by ear instead of by eye” (365): the very sounder that will feature prominently in James’s tale. Sophy easily masters the technique and is promoted to “the musical box” (367). But lacking “musical aptitudes,” Lucy cannot accomplish the shift to aurality from literacy (366); it is just as well that she ends up marrying the printer Mr. Hall and leaving the telegraph office. A version of the original telegraphs of the mid-nineteenth century, the machines preferred by Lucy Graham produce “telegraphic literature.” For the realist postmaster Trollope, the post office’s adoption of the more modern sounder signals the technological replacement of “literature” with something else, something that one does not read but simply “catch[es]” and whose “little tinkling sounds” he can only describe as a sort of music (365–66).

The realist telegraph of Gaskell and Dickens was Lucy Graham’s machine. But the sounding telegraph conveys words into consciousness with neither speech nor writing. Indeed, it approaches what Friedrich Kittler has identified as a project of the new-media technologies of the late nineteenth century: recording or transmitting “sense data” without recourse to the written word (229). A year before Trollope published “The Telegraph Girl,” Alexander Graham Bell tested a device that moved telegraphy even closer toward this incipient but unspoken ideal; he originally conceived of his telephone as an improvement to the electric telegraph. As an author who had recently abandoned longhand for dictation to a typist, James might have been especially struck by the use of the sounder in telegraphic transmission—and by the position of the educated young worker who attends it.

To James, telegraphy is an everyday experience of the modern. It is also an evolving technology whose fictional representation marks the differences between his realism and that of mid-Victorian writers who found in telegraphy a figure for their own practice. Perhaps telegraphy, like photography, seemed initially to offer nineteenth-century writers a total analogy for the ambitions of realism; however, by the end of the century both technologies had proved not to reproduce a world of consensus, consistency, and neutral truth but to highlight problems of subjectivism, discontinuity, and mediation. Even a text as apparently straightforward as Thomas Hardy’s A Laodicean (1881) may hint at such an emerging awareness. In Hardy’s novel, the installation of a telegraph line at Stancy Castle represents the encounter of the modern with the medieval, the stated theme of this “story of to-day.” But when a forged telegram and an altered photograph condemn the novel’s blameless hero, it becomes clear that however modern these technologies are, they may be as likely to mislead as to extend our “direct vision” and our understanding (320).

In the end, James’s telegraphic realism with its epistemological concerns may raise the possibility of a telegraphic modernism. Redistributing space into a network of connections, permitting virtually instantaneous communication across continents and empires, the telegraph “would literally make the world a smaller [. . .] place” (the adverb is worthy of James [‘Morus 341]), but it would do so in a peculiar way: by collapsing distance into a proximity that was discursive, technologically mediated, and strangely invisible in daily life. For Fredric Jameson, a keynote of modernist writing is its simultaneous feeling of global connection and of “spatial disjunction,” its sense that the center lies elsewhere; Jameson traces this trait to the fact that high modernism arises amid the vast system of imperialism before
the Great War, a system whose logic appears everywhere but that is virtually impossible to grasp as a whole (51). Systematically expanded to link continents and empires, the telegraph could by the turn of the century suggest the radically de-centered possibilities attending the notion that “[r]eally [. . .] relations stop nowhere,” as James puts it in a famous phrase from the New York preface to Roderick Hudson (Critical Muse 452). Stretched to the breaking point, the realist telegraph may hint at fictional modernism.

The affiliation between telegraphy and the evolving logic of realism suggests that fiction, having long since absorbed the epistle that gave it its Richardsonian form, is by the later nineteenth century taking up a newer technology of transmission: as narrative model, chronotope, and figure for realism’s epistemological armature. But James’s cagey version of telegraphy may also carry a timelier message. Early in the history of the telegraph, its promoters hailed its ability to bind the world together with instant communication, a vision congruent with the promises of realism at mid-century. Forty years later, Henry James scrutinized the telegraphic muse with a keener sense of telegraphy as social and material practice and with a more skeptical eye for the claims of a fictional realism that had once found a counterpart in the telegraph’s idealized image. The era of electric data networks may look primitive in our age of electronic interconnection, but as Standage notes, the rhapsodies of its advocates sound familiar (207–11). Like James’s telegraphist, we may find that our wired position renders us peculiarly susceptible to certain fantasies: not merely that knowledge might be transparent but that technology will automatically permit us to transcend our social and economic rifts. As present-day developments in electronic communication create new fantasies of participation and portend new social gulfs, we too might benefit from a margin of the chastened telegraphic realism sounded by In the Cage.

NOTES

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1 On the psychodynamics of dictation—in In the Cage, for James and his typists, and beyond the grave—see Thurshwell.

2 Seltzer suggests that James “powerfully registers the radical recompositions of writing and information-technologies at the turn of the century” in the form of Jamesian “psychology,” a psychology inseparable from the writing of writing.” Specifically, Seltzer cites James’s explorations of “the materiality of information-processing and technologies of communication (In the Cage, for example), the corporeality of thinking and speaking (What Maisie Knew, for example), the psychophysics, and pathologization, of reading and writing (The Turn of the Screw, for example)” (Bodies 197n57).

3 Moon compares the “romantic Toryism” of the telegraphist and of the governess (31); Gabler-Hover reads In the Cage as a ghost story (265–68). Most recently, Rowe has used the two enigmatically similar tales to set each other off, contrasting the antiquarian trappings of The Turn of the Screw with the modern scene of In the Cage (155–56, 162).

4 On the importance of the telegraphist’s marginal sex and class status and of her desire for a “margin” of freedom or control, see Wicker, Bauer, and Lakritz.

5 Savoy also considers the tale in the light of Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trials, a consideration that Nixon extends into a reading of In the Cage as a response to Wilde’s “Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1897).

6 As Savoy and Nixon note, the unspoken topos of the telegraphist’s sexualized negotiation of privacy, publicity, and money is prostitution—that infamous second job of telegraph boys.

7 Norman delineates the situation’s deep irony: Everard and Lady Bradeen are “saved” by the fact that the telegram’s code contains a mistake—the mistake that the telegraphist originally thought she was correcting.

8 Recognizing the telegraphist’s dreams of “romantic disengagement,” Nixon aptly applies this passage both to the telegraphist and to Wilde’s fantasies of transcendence in “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (196).

9 In his Autobiography, Trollope compares the author at work to a telegraphist at the sounder: “His language must come from him [. . .] as the syllables tinkled out by little bells form themselves to the ear of the telegraphist” (177). An updated version of Gaskell’s metaphor, Trollope’s comparison similarly sidesteps questions about the provenance of the message.

10 Clayton considers In the Cage in relation to the specifically acoustic nature of telegraphy and argues that the aurality of the sounding telegraph makes it anomalous (“odd” or “queer”) in the light of the “disembodiment” usually associated with modern technologies (226–29). Clayton raises fascinating points, but it seems to me that James’s tale provokes
more extended questions about the relation between disembodied knowledge and the form and ideology of fiction.

For a different reading of telegraphy in *A Laodicean*, see Clayton 218–22.

**WORKS CITED**


