

From
Speaking into the air:
a History of the Idea of
Cinema.
John Durham Peters
Chicago 1999



FOUR

Phantasms of the Living, Dialogues with the Dead

If the dull substance of my flesh were thought,
Injurious distance should not stop my way;
For then, despite of space, I would be brought,
From limits far remote, where thou dost stay.
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, SONNET 44

Recording and Transmission

Distance and death have always been the two great obstacles to love and the two great stimulants of desire. Great obstacles excite great passions: since eros, as Socrates argues in the *Symposium*, consists not in possession but in wanting, what could stimulate eros more than distance and especially death, itself the ultimate distance? Eros seeks to span the miles, reach into the grave, and bridge all the chasms. It is the principle that seeks to transcend the limitations of our normal modes of contact with each other in word and in the flesh. New media, by smashing old barriers to intercourse, often enlarge eros's empire and distort its traditional shape, and hence they are often understood as sexy or perverse or both. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates saw written texts as an intellectual sperm bank that allowed conceptions to take place apart from paternity or person-to-person relationships. The Greeks took as natural

1. See Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, rev. ed., trans. Mont- gomery Belgion (New York: Pantheon, 1956).

facts the limited range of the human voice and the weakness of memory. Memory and writing were the only record. Writing, by making possible remote control over other bodies and voices (of readers) and the preservation of thoughts (of the writer), made possible a new order of polygamous coupling among souls. The far could now speak to the near, and the dead could now speak to the living.

Something similar happened in the nineteenth century. Putting it too starkly, in the 1830s and 1840s the photograph overcame time and the telegraph overcame space. The formulation is too stark because the dream of recording experience in something more substantial than human memory and of sending messages through the expanses are at least as old as writing and the angels; likewise, photography and telegraphy have their own long cultural and intellectual prehistories.² Still, the nineteenth century saw unprecedented transformations in the conditions of human contact, along two axes in particular: transmission and recording. The key changes are registered in the terms *tele-* and *-graphy*, so ubiquitous in subsequent media nomenclature. *Tele-* suggests a new scale of distances—telegraphy (word), telephony (sound), television (image), and telepathy (spirit); *-graphy* suggests new forms of inscription—telegraph (word), photograph (image), phonograph (sound), and electroencephalograph (brain waves). The nineteenth century saw a revolution in both space binding and time binding.³ Space-binding media, such as paper or electricity, are portable and knit distinct points in space together over great distances. Time-binding media, such as statuary or architecture, are durable and “bind” distinct moments across great spans of time. Writing inscribed on stone is time binding; we can still read the Rosetta stone today. The telegraph, because its cargo is weightless and swift, is space binding.

The revolution in time binding meant that writing lost its monopoly as the chief record of human events and intelligence. Memory achieved a sort of joltbreak from the body and the (suddenly) sensorily challenged medium of writing. Mnemotechnics was an art no longer tied to the mortal individual; lost time could become captive; something besides writing could contribute to the historical record. Writing’s handicaps—its blindness and deafness—were suddenly revealed. Scenes and, more

important, events could now be caught without the intervention of word, pencil, or paintbrush, thanks to the camera. More strikingly yet, the epitome of transience—the flow of time itself—could now be transcribed in images and sounds by film or phonograph. By preserving people’s apparitions in sight and sound, media of recording helped repopulate the spirit world. Every new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts. (Kafka knew this.) As Friedrich Kittler argues, “The spirit-world is as large as the storage and transmission possibilities of a civilization.” The oldest available print of a printing press is a 1499 image showing skeletons cavorting about a press, pages in hand, doing a dance of the dead.⁴ Spiritualists, as we have seen, did the *dance macabre* of the telegraph, celebrating the spirits conjured by electricity, the first of many in the nineteenth century to recognize that the realm of the immortals had expanded from the remembered dead to the recorded and transmitted dead.

The nineteenth-century revolution in space binding was marked by techniques of telecommunication. Simultaneity across distances—first in writing, then in speech, sound, and image—was made possible by the telegraph, telephone, radio, and facsimile. For the first time in human history, acuity of vision and hearing were no longer the limit to instantaneous remote contact; the only limits were the extent of the telegraph lines (and hence of capital). In principle the coefficient of friction for signals—but not bodies—was reduced to zero, even though access and cost kept the telegraph from being the utopia of universal contact that some early enthusiasts, excited about “the annihilation of time and space” dreamed of. As James W. Carey argues, the telegraph wrought the fateful separation of transportation and communication. Except for messages sent by line of sight or range of hearing, all sending had historically required some form of carriage by courier, boat, pigeon, or some other means.⁵ The telegraph, in contrast, fits precisely into the lineage of Augustine, the angels, and Mesmer: communication without embodiment, contact achieved by the sharing of spiritual (electrical) fluids. The spookier consequence was, I will argue, that the human body retained its weight even amid new norms of spiritual communication inspired by the swiftness of electricity.

Contact between people at a distance has, to be sure, taken a variety of forms in the social history of our species, from diaspora and pilgrim-

2. Peter Galassi, *Before Photography* (New York: Museum of Fine Art, 1981); Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); Nicholas J. Wade, ed., *Brewster and Wheatstone on Vision* (London: Academic Press, 1983); and Geoffrey Wilson, *The Old Telegraphs* (London: Phillimore, 1976).

3. Harold Adams Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).

4. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin: Birkmann und Bose, 1986), 24, 12.

5. James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), chap. 8.

age to correspondence and statury. The distatiation of sociability is by no means unique to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What is new is a rash of incursions on the human incognito. The capturing and dispersion of signals meant that the visual and auditory signs of human personality were no longer tightly tied to the presence of the person's body. To be sure, two and a half millennia of writing and four centuries of printing had made it possible for personal utterances—the seeds of thoughts, as Socrates would put it—to scatter abroad in space and time. Writing had been an expression of the unique "character" of each person, a term that shows the union of writing discipline and notions of personality. But the camera and cinema, telephone and phonograph, allowed for entirely new kinds of raids on and representations of the human form. The nuances of facial, vocal, and gestural expressions could be immortalized in sound and image. A new realm of personal quirks and significances became available for storage and transmission, underscoring the truth of Kierkegaard's point that the accidental is as necessary as the necessary.⁶

Put slightly differently, the separation of communication from transportation meant the conjuring of a parallel universe in which personal replicas dwelled and abided by laws other than those that apply to us mortals. "Media always already yield ghost phenomena."⁷ Though steam power made the transportation of people and cargo by rail and water much swifter, the body still could not keep up with its acoustic, graphic, and visual representations. Our bodies know fatigue and fitude, but our effigies, once recorded, can circulate through media systems indefinitely, across the wastes of space and time. Kafka saw that the effort to restore the peace of souls by bringing people together by train, car, and air was always outflanked by media that were more nutritious for the ghosts—the telegraph, telephone, and wireless—that all had as modus operandi the creation of doubles that sometimes work against us.

The humanoid replicas that served as proxies in distance communication were named well by Frederic Myers, a classicist polymath, coinventor of the term "telepathy," and leader in the British Society for Psychological Research from its founding in 1882 till his death in 1903. He used the

6. The key works are Harold Adams Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), and Innis, *Empire and Communications*.

7. Walter Benjamin, "The Parts of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 48.

8. Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, trans. John and Jane C. Tedeschi (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), 96–125, 200–214.

9. Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter*, 22.

phrase "phantasms of the living" in 1886 for the apparitions proliferating in the spiritualist culture of his day. Writing within a decade of the introduction of the phonograph and the telephone, Myers wanted a term that would not imply an exclusively visual sense (as in "apparition"), whence his choice of "phantasm" over "phantom."¹⁰ Phantasms of the living, he explained, could be voices, faces, or entire materializations of spectral bodies. What men and women in the late nineteenth century faced with alarm is something we have had over a century to get used to: a superabundance of phantasms of the living appearing in various media. The concern in psychical research—contact with spectral emanations of distant bodies, whether via writing, images, sounds, or even touch—is part of a larger effort in modernity to reorganize representations of the human body.¹¹ The joining of the phantasmatic body and voice of the actor was a long trend in the normalization of cinema.¹² Media both define and enlarge the spirit world, being populated by spectral beings who look or sound human but offer no personal presence and possess no flesh. Electronic media both supplement and transform the nineteenth-century culture of doppelgängers by duplicating and distributing indicia of human presence.¹³ Fifty years after Myers, the psychologist Gordon Allport stated the phantasmatic fact of media well: the idea of "appearing in person," he wrote in 1937, "once seemed redundant, but it is less so now in the days of cinema and radio when partial appearance or appearance *not* in person is possible."¹⁴

The ability of persons to "appear" apart from the flesh was perhaps the most unnerving thing about the new audiovisual media. This created a dialectical crisis of representation. On the one hand, telephone managers, phonograph marketers, and radio spokespeople, among other

10. Frederic W. H. Myers, "Introduction," in *Phantasms of the Living*, by Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, ed. Eleanor Mildred Balfour Sidgwick (1924; New York: Arno Press, 1975), ix. This is the book that Richard Burton has to shelve when he is working undercover at the library of the Society for Psychical Research in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1965).

11. Mark Bennion Sandberg, "Missing Persons: Spectacle and Narrative in Late Nineteenth-Century Scandinavia" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1991).

12. See Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 335–48. But the problem of corporeal integration is general to a media culture life with phantasms of the living.

13. Friedrich A. Kittler, "Romanik—Psychanalyse—Film: Eine Doppelgängergeschichte," in *Darstellungsmittel: Technische Schriften* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993), 81–104; Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," in *Figurative Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patricia Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 42–71.

14. Gordon W. Allport, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1937), 37.

ers, sought to reassure their customers by reconnecting the mechanically reproduced representations to an originating body (via testimony and authentication). The effort to manifest the body within the mediating apparatus led to practices of sincerity in radio (chapter 5), and at their most extreme, the ectoplasms of materializing mediums. On the other hand, the sites where acoustic, optical, and verbal traces of the human could be registered started to multiply rapidly. Humans have long interacted symbiotically with their personal effects, but traces of subjectivity get even more scattered by these new media of dispersion and recording. As William James, much in tune with the new audiovisual order argued, tracts within the material universe can serve as repositories of human personality, whether dead or alive. Media able to capture the flow of time, such as the phonograph and cinema, seemed to vaporize personages into sounds and images. To interact with another person could now mean to read media traces.

The phantasms of the living were always either disembodied or embodied in abnormal ways. (Communication theory from Augustine to Locke had taken the body as a given and called for a more spiritual, less hindered means of connecting souls. The ability to engage in out-of-body communication is likewise the central theme of the intellectual reception of the telegraph, telephone, and radio—and of spiritualism, chief vehicle for the formation of ideas about communication in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The word, voice, or image of a person dead or distant channeling through a delicate medium: this is the project common to electronic media and spiritualist communication. Indeed, all mediated communication is in a sense communication with the dead, insofar as media can store “phantasms of the living” for playback after bodily death.)

In sum, the new media of the nineteenth century gave new life to the older dream of angelic contact by claiming to burst the bonds of distance and death. As one 1896 phonograph enthusiast announced a trifle prematurely, “Death has lost some of its sting since we are able to forever retain the voices of the dead.”¹⁵ Such retention apparently allowed for revivification (resurrection?) at will.¹⁶ But the price of such conjuring soon became evident: a world of doppelgängers that had no flesh. As soon as spirit-to-spirit contact became realized in new technologies,

mutual presence “in person” took on a new premium and a new definition.

As we live through something of a digital revolution in our own time, revisiting old shocks can be highly illuminating. The urgent questions about communications today—the telescoping of space-time (e.g., the Internet) and the replication of human experience and identity (e.g., virtual reality)—were explored in analogous forms in the eras of the telegraph and photograph, the phonograph and telephone, the cinema and radio. At what follows I pursue the ways these media, in claiming to bring us closer, only made communication seem that much more impossible. Chapter 5 is devoted to the pathos of looking for signs of sure contact in transmission across media (and mediums). This chapter concerns dialogue with the dead, specifically the futility of the effort to commune spiritually with beings who can only be read hermeneutically. The next chapter concerns novel powers of transmission: this one, novel powers of recording. The distinction between transmission and recording, or the overcoming of distance and the overcoming of death, is largely a convenience of organization. To send a signal at a distance, it must be kept from dying along the way. Indeed, one motive for Edison's work on the phonograph was to make a better telegraph “repeater.”¹⁷ Once recorded, anything can be transmitted to new eyes and ears.¹⁸ Societies' concern about writing was precisely this: the inevitable promiscuity of any intelligence committed to permanence.

The experience of flight was central to the nineteenth-century conquest of distance. Both new means of transportation such as the railroad and new technologies of sensory amplification such as the camera, telegraph, and telephone were described as flying machines.¹⁹ In 1859 Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. famously characterized the sensation of the steroscope as “a dream-like exaltation of the faculties, in which we seem to leave the body behind us and sail away into one strange scene after another, like disembodied spirits.”²⁰ Just as a telegraph dispatch

15. Walter L. Welch and Leah Brodbeck Stempel Burt, *From Tinfol to Stereo: The Acoustic Years of the Recording Industry, 1877-1929* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), chap. 1.

16. In “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Sherlock Holmes helps the king of Bohemia cope with potential blackmail concerning a photograph of an early romance. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Doubleday, 1930), 1:161-75. See also Tom Gunning, “Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charnay and Vanessa K. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 15-45.

17. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Space and Time in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), chap. 3.

20. Quoted in Sandberg, “Missing Persons,” 15.

15. “Voices of the Dead,” *Phonograph*, 1 (1896): 1. Thanks to Mark Sandberg for providing a copy.

16. See W. H. Lammiman (Walter Rathenau), “The Resurrection (ca. 11998),” trans. Louis Kaplan, *New German Critique* 62 (Spring-Summer 1994): 63-69.

could leap from Washington to Baltimore in the twinkling of an eye, the stereoscope could crosscut from the immediate environment to far-off lands and ancient ruins (a favorite subject for stereoscopic images).

Time travel was an equally remarkable achievement of nineteenth-century media. The stream of time could be bottled and stored for later use. The culture of historicism and lifelike representation (as found in the practice of taxidermy, for instance) all argued the possibility of transport across time (in the sense of either travel or rapture).²¹ The light that shone on Niecphore Niepce's courtyard in 1826, making the first photographic image, seems preserved in some sense for us to see today as well. Caruso's voice not only has dissipated into minute echoes traveling into deep space, it is available on record, tape, and compact disc. Phonography and film served not only as hearing and seeing aids, neurophysiological assist devices for the voice, ears, and eyes, but as new archives of consciousness. The sensuous, temporal impressions of events could be preserved in light and sound. Media of transmission allow time to be preserved in light and sound. Media of transmission allow time to be preserved in light and sound. Media of transmission allow time. The sentence of death for sound, image, and experience had been commuted. Speech and action could live beyond their human origins. In short, recording media made the afterlife of the dead possible in a new way. As *Scientific American* put it of the phonograph in 1877: "Speech has become, as it were, immortal."²² That "as it were" is the dwelling place of the ghosts.

HAWTHORNE'S HAUNTED HOUSE Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* (1851) is a wonderful example of the metaphysical mischief unleashed by both photography and telegraphy.²³ Hawthorne wrote amid massive transformations in the capacities of data storage and transmission. The spirit world had opened a new frontier: communication at a distance and from the grave. The book is all about haunting. Hawthorne called it a "romance"; it is clearly a variant of the gothic genre, with its run-down mansion, ancestral guilt, and spookily paranormal powers. The Pyncheon family has dwelled in the house of the seven gables for over two centuries, and only four Pyncheons remain, haunted by the curse imposed by a seventeenth-century wizard, Matthew Maule, who had originally owned the property on which the

house was built. Colonel Thomas Pyncheon, the clan's founder, had loudly encouraged Maule's prosecution for witchcraft, since he had designs on Maule's property. Right before being hanged, Maule had cursed the Pyncheons. Subsequently the Pyncheons became masters of property, but the Maules had been rumored to possess quasi-magical powers, including influence on other people's dreams. The one family owned real estate, the other the unreal estate of image and memory. Hawthorne describes a mirror in the mansion that, thanks to "a sort of mesmeric process," was fabled to contain every image it had ever reflected. Thanks to their command over "the topsy-turvy commonwealth of sleep" and access to hidden interiors, the Maules inherit the key to this camerallike record of things past.²⁴ Like Hawthorne, they dwell in the ambiguous world of art.

All these themes appear in the character of Holgrave, a drifter, revolutionary, mesmerist, and daguerreotypist who comes to the mansion as a tenant and is climactically revealed to be the descendant of Matthew Maule. Holgrave, an aptly assumed name, is a dabbler in the spirit world who uses the truth of the sunlight to record the hidden truths of the visible world on his camera. "There is a wonderful insight," he says, "in heaven's broad and simple sunshine. While we give it credit for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it."²⁵ His daguerreotype portraits reveal the true character of the face, showing that Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, the smiling public man, has in fact the inherited scowl of his Puritan ancestor and that Clifford, the private recluse, has a beautiful smile. Despite his gift for revealing inner and outer surfaces, he does not dwell on the past or on property. He would agree with Marx's remark in the preface to *Capital*, volume 1 (1867): "We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead. *Le mort saisit le vif!*"²⁶

Holgrave is also, as it happens, a writer and the appropriately numbered chapter 13 of the book offers one of his tales, intended for one of the magazines of the day, fictionalizing the sadistic mesmeric probing done by Matthew Maule of one Alice Pyncheon, a virginal young woman, in order to tap into the family secret. Holgrave's account unites optical technology, animal magnetism, and communication with the dead: "It appears to have been his object to convert the mind of Alice into a kind of telescopic medium through which Mr. Pyncheon and

21. Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Time: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

22. Welch and Burt, *From Tintype to Stereo*, 6.

23. See Cathy N. Davidson, "Photographs of the Dead: Sherman, Daguerre, Hawthorne," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 89 (1990), 667-701.

24. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851; New York: Bantam, 1986), 13, 17.

25. Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables*, 68.

himself might obtain a glimpse into the spiritual world. He succeeded, accordingly, in holding an imperfect sort of intercourse, at one remove, with the departed personages in whose custody the so much valued secret had been carried beyond the precincts of earth."²⁶ Here mesmerism (binding another's mind) leads to spiritualism (contact with the dead). On tapping the secret, Maule refuses to share it and leaves the Pyncheons with the house, since it is too cursed to take. But Alice remains forever after under his spell, a degraded plaything of his whims. Wherever she happens to be, Maule can misogynistically command her emotions with a small gesture of his hand, making her laugh at funerals, weep at parties, and dance at inopportune moments. Here we see the dark side of soul binding, as we did in mesmerism before. In the story Alice eventually dies, much to Maule's chagrin, a victim in his class warfare on the Pyncheons.

As he reads this tale within a tale aloud to Phoebe Pyncheon, Holgrave mesmerizes her, thanks to his enthusiastic miming of the gestures used by the fictional/ancestral Maule. But despite the temptation and the evident enjoyment he derives from knowledge of his powers, Holgrave renounces the chance to dominate her, having "the high and rare quality of reverence for another's individuality."²⁷ Unlike Roger Chillingworth of *The Scarlet Letter*, who also toys with another's interiority, Holgrave here refuses to penetrate another's heart. Phoebe is clearly cast, like Alice, as particularly sensitive to magnetic and electrical sympathy. In this account of the scene of reading, Holgrave here chooses not to repeat the past but to turn it into literature—again, like Hawthorne. Like Emerson and Melville, Hawthorne takes soul-to-soul communication as a narrative we tell or a story we write, not as bodiless thoughts we send, though it clearly has dangerous powers of mind binding.

The book's vision of the telegraph has been relatively neglected compared with its treatment of photography. Clifford Pyncheon, a wordless aesthete wasting away under the pressure of accumulated ancestral guilt, finally escapes the house and flees by train. He rides in rapture and gushes to his rather more sober seatmate about the world's growing spirituality. Touching in quick succession such associated spiritual wonders of the age as mesmerism, rapping spirits, and electricity, Clifford turns to the telegraph lines that run parallel to the railway and declares: "An almost spiritual medium, like the electric telegraph, should be consecrated to high, deep, joyful, and holy missions. Lovers, day by day—

hour by hour, if so often moved to do it—might send their heart-throbs from Maine to Florida." Like Socrates telling of Diotima in the *Symposium*, Clifford imagines the telegraph as a means of a erotic junction between lovers. (His seatmate much more accurately notes that the telegraph's fate lies in the hands of politics and commerce.)

The "almost spiritual medium" enlarges not only the realm of amateur contact, but that of contact with the dead and the distant. Says Clifford, "When a good man has departed, his distant friend should be conscious of an electric thrill, as from the world of happy spirits, telling him—'Your dear friend is in bliss!' Or, to an absent husband, should come the tidings thus, 'An immortal being, of whom you are the father, has this moment come from God!'"²⁸ Clifford's "electric thrill" is found more in the line of telepathy than telegraphy; he sees none of the obstacles—the expense, need for coding, or enforced brevity—of telegraphic communication that would soon become clear to its more practiced users, such as newspaper correspondents and businessmen. Clifford states the enduring dream of communication at a distance as a bridge between distant lovers and a bringer of tidings of birth and death, the key portal between this world and the other side. The telegraph, like all other means of linking bodies at a distance, offered new potentials for making links between bodies and bodies (as in the case of lovers) or spirits and spirits (as in the case of the dead). Media—as things that come in between—are liminal objects par excellence, and they deal not only with information but with birth, sex, love, and death.

Hermeneutics as Communication with the Dead

The concept of communication was developed in a culture that routinely sought communication with the distant and the dead. What sex was to the Victorians, death is to us: the ultimate but inescapable taboo. We avert our eyes, fear dwelling on the corpse, sequester death in hospitals, and are easily persuaded by the hygienic rhetoric of cremation. We are miles apart from the nineteenth century's gloomy romanticism about death. We chuckle at Victorian primness, congratulating ourselves on our liberalism on topics sexual, but nothing is so veiled to us as death, so cloaked in euphemisms—or as pervasive in popular culture. Whatever the excesses of lamentation among the Victorians, nothing is so telling of our own times as our inability to mourn. We lack the cultural and religious practices that would protect us from being lonely

²⁶ Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables*, 135.

²⁷ Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables*, 162.

²⁸ Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables*, 203.

psychological agents. Our perfunctory grief bespeaks a disturbance in that most crucial of all relationships, our relation to the dead. Perhaps in a time of video- and tape recording, photo albums and home movies, death seems less final.

The sensibility was different in Victoria's age. So were the conditions. Lewis Mumford suggests that the pervasive black clothing in the nineteenth century was an unwitting expression of a civilization in mourning.³⁰ The facts are well known: the population exploded, children died young, the laboring classes (which included children) toiled in squalid misery, and the middle classes lived in upholstered insecurity.³¹ It was a rare house at any rung on the class ladder in which someone had not died. Corpses were relatively familiar if uncanny presences, not ghoulish objects to be hidden in hospitals. Mourning was central to culture and commerce. The paraphernalia of grief were aggressively marketed, especially to women, including such artifacts as mourning cards, *immortelles*, earthenware chimneypiece ornaments of famous criminals or murderers, sable furs, handkerchiefs embroidered with tears, "mutes" (professional mourners), curtains, jewelry, and lockets (with a daguerreotype or photograph or a lock of hair). Elaborate wreaths woven from the locks of the dead were a favorite parlor decoration. The color of one's clothing announced degrees of mourning: black, white, gray, and finally mauve. Queen Victoria, of course, led the way spectacularly, daily laying out Prince Albert's shaving kit for him until she died, decades after he did. The high point of Victorian poetry was characteristically a long lament for a lost comrade, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. A. H. H. Tennyson's soul-mate died in 1833, but the poem was not completed until 1849. Tennyson spent sixteen years writing the elegy; no psychologically certified "stages of grief" for him! Victorian literature was filled with spirits returning from the dead; Dickens's Scrooge first thought Marley's ghost was "an ill-digested piece of cheese," but his materialistic suspicion of humbuggery would eventually bow to the incontrovertible proofs of the ghost's reality. Edgar Allan Poe is the archetypal romancer of the dead. Cemeteries were places of contemplation, pilgrimage, and picnics. "No-where is the strangeness of the period, with its obsessions about death,

its high moral tone, and its sentimentality, better expressed than in the cemeteries."³²

The two key existential facts about modern media are these: the ease with which the living may mingle with the communicable traces of the dead, and the difficulty of distinguishing communication at a distance from communication with the dead. The same phantasms of the living that are "communicated" to far-off destinations in telecommunications can be captured for playback in recording media. The key difference is that a dialogue can be conducted over distance, but a dialogue with the dead is quite another matter. As communicators the dead are a particularly enigmatic bunch. They tend not to respond to our entreaties. Their words are fixed and invariant. Like Socrates' description of writing, the dead repeat themselves, always signifying the same thing.³³ Certainly we can read the traces of the dead, but we cannot interact directly with them. Even in spiritualism, problems of linkage are enormous. As Eleanor Ballour Sidgwick noted in a 1924 retrospective of thirty-five years of psychical research on telepathy, "'Why,' say the critics, 'cannot the dead, if they communicate at all, say what they mean?'"³⁴ Our communication with the dead consists of dead letters, correspondence never delivered. The communicative stance to the dead can only be one of dissemination. The dead are tutors in the art of reading traces where dialogue is impossible. Communication with the dead is the paradigm case of hermeneutics: the art of interpretation where no return message can be received.³⁵

Hermeneutics, the reading of texts that have drifted out of their original historical setting, is an old practice. It starts from a shattered communication situation in which writer and reader are in some way estranged from each other, by distance in time or culture. It begins precisely where the *Phaedrus* breaks off: with the weird couplings of mediated communication. One stream of hermeneutics, from Schleiermacher through Dilthey up to Gadamer, wants interpretation more or less to open up something more than texts, so that contact or at least conversation between the living and the dead can be attained. I follow

29. Lewis Mumford, *Techonics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1934), 162.

30. James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (London: David and Charles, 1972). See also John Morley, *Death, Heaven, and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), and Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

31. Curl, *Victorian Celebration of Death*, 179. On the American scene, see Gary Willis, *Limbo in Gethsemane: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

32. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d.

33. Eleanor Mildred Ballour Sidgwick, "On Hurdances and Complications in Telepathic Communication," in *Phantasms of the Living*, by Edmund Curry, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, ed. Eleanor Mildred Ballour Sidgwick (1924; New York: Arno Press, 1975), 432.

34. I thank Catlin Marnall for this insight.

a more heretical tradition here, not in the mainstream of specifically hermeneutic thinking, that is more aware of the impossibilities than the bridges. Hegel, Marx, and Kierkegaard, despite their massive disagreements, all see relations with even the living as in some way hermeneutic, that is, as the interpretation of traces. No subject expresses itself except via the object.

Paul Ricoeur's argument that hermeneutics is about the distortion of dialogue also suggests a counter-claim quite immune to the pathos of communicative breakdown. In fact, Ricoeur argues, almost all dialogue is always already broken down in the sense of being textual. Disturbance is what makes it dialogue in the first place. The need for talk arises from something problematic. Hence the features of textuality are not deviant but illustrate what is usually hidden in face-to-face communication. "The text is much more than a particular case of intersubjective communication: it is the paradigm of distanciation in communication. As such it displays a fundamental characteristic of the very historicity of human experience, namely that it is communication in and through distance." Once "inscribed," an utterance transcends its author's intent, original audience, and situation of enunciation. Such removal is not just an alienation; it is a just alienation. Inscription liberates meaning from the parochial and evanescent status of face-to-face speech: "*Verfremdung* [estrangement] is not only what understanding must overcome, but also what conditions it." In writing, the "narrowness of the dialogical relation explodes. Instead of being addressed just to you, the second person, discourse is revealed as discourse in the universality of its address. . . . It no longer has a visible auditor. An unknown, invisible reader has become the unprivileged addressee of the discourse."³⁵ Hermeneutics, once again, is the art of literary correspondence where no reply is possible. Since the text's intended audience is gone, it can be read only in conditions of eavesdropping. Hermeneutics involves the interpretation of stray texts. Though theorists of hermeneutics are rarely as explicit about the strangeness of the operation as we will find Kafka or even Emerson to be, the challenge is to stand in the place of those "invisible auditors"—in short, to "mate with the dead," as Nietzsche put it.

Thanks to mediation, we are surrounded with communication situations that are fundamentally interpretive rather than dialogic. Only the Lonelyhearts of the world expect a personal reply from the movie,

phonograph record, or radio program. Or to be more precise, we are all Lonelyhearts inasmuch we "interact" with books, pets, infants, or distant correspondents. In each case, control over turn taking is restricted to one end of the transaction. A radio show broadcast at 2:00 A.M., an SOS in a bottle cast into the sea, a personal ad in the "agony columns" of the newspaper, or an inscription in an undeciphered script all speak, as it were, into the void, or at least to those who have ears to hear. They await completion of the loop. Herbert Menzel speaks of an "address gap" in such situations, a concept suggestively resonant with Ricoeur's notion of distanciation.³⁶ Hermeneutics and media face a common problem: the production and reception of texts within unforeseen horizons. The studio designing a television pilot, the merchant who has no way to know precisely who will hear the radio ad, the theologian reading the same interpretive dilemma: a gap between sending and receiving. The first two fret about how to get their "message" across the gap (theoretic), and the latter two about how to read texts not addressed to them (hermeneutic), but all find themselves in a situation in which message making and message receiving have become distinct activities. As Stuart Hall puts it of television, though it is equally true of all hermeneutic situations, "There is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding."³⁷

Hall's "no necessary correspondence" reveals a poststructuralist sensibility about the contingency of articulations, but it is also a useful reminder of a more literal sort of correspondence: letter writing. When we are dealing with distanciated communication, there is no necessary correspondence—letters may cross in the mail, never arrive, or never be sent. Communication may be infinitely deferred. Pauses in conversation, often kept from growing too long in a face-to-face setting, can be dilated in correspondence; delays can stretch out indefinitely. With the dead, we may wait forever for a reply. But this does not stop our overtures. An unknown man leaves a bottle of cognac at Edgar Allan Poe's grave every year on the anniversary of his death; many leave flowers on the graves of their loved ones; a vault full of abandoned sundries has been collected from the United States Vietnam Veterans Memorial; and direct apostrophe of the deceased is a common practice in funeral ora-

35. Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 131, 140, 202-3.

36. Herbert Menzel, "Quasi-Mass Communication: A Neglected Area," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35 (1971): 406-9.

37. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 135.

tory.³⁸ As Samuel Johnson observed, "We profess to reverence the dead not for their sake, but for our own."³⁹ Communicating with the dead, along with sacrificing to the gods, may be the oldest sort of one-way offering. It occurs in situations in which dialogue is not possible or desirable. Gifts to the dead are the purest kind of dissemination; they involve some of the most splendid acts we can know and do.

In dialogue with the dead, infants, pets, or the distant, the speaker must hold up both ends of the conversation. The call must contain or anticipate the response. Our communication with the dead may never reach them, but such elliptical sending is as important as circular reciprocity. It would be foolish to disparage communications that never leave our own circle as only failures. Perhaps all dialogue involves each partner's enacting the response of the other. Dialogic ideology keeps us from seeing that expressive acts occurring over distances and without immediate assurance of reply can be desperate and daring acts of dignity. That I cannot engage in dialogue with Plato or the Beatles does not demean the contact I have with them. Such contact may be hermeneutic and aesthetic rather than personal or mutual. I may have to supply all the replies they might make to my queries—rather like the contact I have with the universe. Or with myself. In this respect Charles Horton Cooley was right to claim that our concourse with ghosts may be the most important kind we have (chapter 5).

EMERSON: THE PORCUPINE IMPOSSIBILITY OF CONTACT

In strict science, all persons underlie the same condition of an infinite remoteness.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "FRIENDSHIP"

Perhaps even as much as money, the archmedium may be the cemetery, the place where the bodies of the dead are held in suspended animation, as the term itself suggests: "cemetery" comes from the Greek *koinōtērion*, meaning a sleeping place, quite literally a dormitory. Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1855 address at the dedication of Sleepy Hollow cemetery in Con-

38. A recent book on the Memorial notes on its dirt jacket: "Now as much as shine as a monument, the Vietnam Wall has become a national pilgrimage site, a place where certain people are invited to leave votive offerings in a variety so wide they are impossible to categorize. These offerings represent, for the most part, private messages to the Vietnam dead, their meaning known only to their senders." Thomas B. Allen, *Offerings at the Wall: Artifacts from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection* (Atlanta: Turner, 1995). Offerings have included a rusty harmonica, crucifixes, pillows, black lace panties, and a photo of a Viet Cong soldier and his daughter removed from his dead body by the man who killed him, together with a note of apology.

39. Samuel Johnson, "An Essay on Epitaphs," in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), 98.

cord, Massachusetts, captures much of the nineteenth-century vision of the cemetery as a spot for the communion of the living and the dead.⁴⁰ It also introduces us to his vision of communication, in any setting, as essentially communication with the dead: never as the touching of consciousness, only as the interpretation of traces. Sleepy Hollow, he argues, will be a sort of historical archive for the dead to which the living can repair for edification and enjoyment. Emerson had his own reasons to be interested in cemeteries. He had opened the coffin to view the remains of his first wife Ellen Tucker after she had been dead over a year. He also inspected the remains of his beloved son Waldo when they were transferred to Sleepy Hollow in 1857. Waldo had been dead fifteen years.

The lessons Emerson learned from seeing the decomposed remains of the two creatures he loved most are unrecorded.⁴¹ One clue is found in the key essay called "Experience": "The only thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers. Was it Boscovich who found that bodies never come into contact? Well, souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes between us and the things we aim at and converse with. Experience drips off our being like the summer showers of a raincoat. Nothing is left us now but death. We look to that with a grim satisfaction, saying, 'There at least is a reality that will not dodge us.'⁴² Death is a rather desperate escape hatch from the labyrinth of solipsism, and perhaps what he saw in the decayed remains of Waldo and Ellen was precisely the costly price of sons and lovers.

In his dedicatory address, Emerson celebrates the round of life and death, the recycling of organic substance: "The irresistible democracy—shall I call it?—of chemistry, of vegetation, which recomposes for new life every decomposing article,—the race never dying, the individual never spared,—have impressed upon the mind the futility of these old arts of preserving. We give our earth to earth. We will not jealously guard a few atoms under immense marbles, selfishly and impossibly sequestering it from the vast circulations of Nature." Emerson gives a characteristic critique of possessive individualism, here in terms of the

40. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Consecration of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery" (1855), in *Miscellaneous* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 427–36.

41. John I. McAbee, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 109.

42. Emerson, "Experience" (1844), in *Selected Writings of Emerson*, ed. Donald McQuade (New York: Modern Library, 1981), 344. The physicist Ruggiero Giuseppe Boscovich (1711–87) influenced both Faraday and Maxwell.

grandiose funerary monuments that proliferated with the embourgeoisement of cemeteries in the nineteenth century. In criticizing "old arts of preserving" Emerson also anticipates some new ones: photography and phonography. Garry Willis suggests that Emerson's address becomes almost a séance.⁴³ But not quite: a séance suggests a live interchange between the living and the dead, whereas Emerson has something more hermeneutical in mind. He expects no direct reply from the dead; those who visit Sleepy Hollow will be engaged in a form of loosely coupled interpretation. "We shall bring hither the body of the dead, but how shall we catch the escaped soul?" The cemetery will become a "spot tender to our children, who shall come hither in the next century to read the dates of these lives." The next generation will come not for communion but for memory. Emerson renounces the possibility of any soul-to-soul junction between the living and the dead; what is possible is the anamnestic reading of the traces of the dead by the living. To visit the cemetery is to interpret a historical text, not to receive a spirit visitation. Some day "in a remote century, this mute green bank will be full of history: the good, the wise and great will have left their names and virtues on the trees; heroes, poets, beauties, sanctities, benefactors, will have made the air timeable and articulate."⁴⁴ *Geist* will be there, if not the souls of the departed. As in the parable of the sower, only one end of the communication circuit will be active.

Emerson does not believe in communication between the living and the dead; he may not believe in communication among the living and the dead either. Theodor W. Adorno describes Kierkegaard's doctrine of love as the call to love everyone as if they were dead. Adorno finds this doctrine both noble and wretched—noble because love would then have to be constant and unaffected by rejections or hurt, wretched because love would cease to be a joint journey in which the lover is open to being radically transformed by the beloved.⁴⁵ In the same way, Emerson takes communication with the dead as the paradigm for all communication. He never grants any immediate contact: "It is the same among the men and women as among the silent trees; always a referred existence, an absence, never a presence and satisfaction."⁴⁶ Emerson does not believe in one-to-one personal sharing either among the living or the dead be-

cause he does not quite believe in either presence or personality. "If I am not at the meeting, my presence where I am should be as useful to the commonwealth of friendship and wisdom, as would be my presence in that place. I exert the same quality of power in all places."⁴⁷ To be within touching distance is not to get any closer to another. In a letter to Margaret Fuller, who desired more closeness with Emerson than he felt prepared to give, Emerson wrote of "this porcupine impossibility of contact with men."⁴⁸

For Emerson, the impossibility of dialogue gives us reason to celebrate the universe as a constant transmission to those who have ears to hear. In "Demonology," an 1839 lecture on the variety of spirits then abroad in the land, Emerson criticizes the quest for personal signs in the universe (he is aiming partly at mesmerists, though the point holds for later spiritualists as well). "The whole world," he insists, "is an omen and a sign. Why look so wistfully in a corner?"⁴⁹ He enjoins a hermeneutic stance to the cosmos, reading everything as if intended for you. He renounces the search for personal signs, whether of God's benediction or of the survival of loved ones beyond the grave, bravely claiming that it does not matter if the message is even intended as a message, as long as we receive it. The universe, in short, engages only in broadcasting. Whatever meaning we find is left to our power of "creative reading."⁵⁰

For Emerson, communication never involves contact with another, and joyously so. We are released from the obligation to expend our strength on other minds and can bask in the cumulative intelligence of the universe. We find fellowship everywhere and are not so rude as to require any response from those we encounter. In all our conversation we write, and receive, only unanswered letters. In walking through the fields and woods, "I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown." To commune with nature is not to enter a terrifying epistemological limbo in which one never knows if one's missives are received, but to feel the presence of a strange and familiar intelligence. Nature, said Schelling, is visible intelligence. For Emerson, it is the hieroglyphic writing of an intelli-

43. Willis, *Touch at Sleepy Hollow*, 75.

44. Emerson, "Consecration of Sleepy Hollow," 430, 436, 430, 435.

45. Theodor W. Adorno, "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8 (1939): 41-5, 29.

46. Emerson, "Nature" (1844), in *Selected Writings of Emerson*, ed. Donald McQuade (New York: Modern Library, 1981), 403.

47. Emerson, "Experience," 342.

48. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 7:301. Quoted in MacLester, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 114. (Had Emerson read Schopenhauer?)

49. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Demonology" (1839), in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 3:151-71.

50. Emerson, "The American Scholar" (1837), in *Selected Writings of Emerson*, 51.

gence radically unlike one's own. Yet the experience of fields and woods is a genuine encounter, not a projection: "The power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both."⁵¹ This harmony is governed not by motion but by affection and affinity.

Clearly, this is a good recipe for those strong enough to live without need for recognition from an authentically other consciousness, perhaps one of the things Nietzsche found to admire in Emerson. Yet it also invites questions about proof and the avoidance of deception. How can we avoid the flattering deceptions of the self and of others? In short, where do we find the proof of reality outside our own private theater of projections? In death, at least, Emerson found one thing that would not dodge him, and his response to skepticism foreshadows later debates about communicative authenticity. In nineteenth-century usage, "mesmerism" often meant the five senses, and philosophical skepticism about sensation is a clear forerunner of later skepticism about the reality of the images and reports of the media.⁵² Emerson describes "my utter impotence to test the authenticity of the report of my senses." From this, the traditional starting point of philosophical skepticism, he does not conclude that the world is either unstable or unknowable. Instead he draws the protopragmatist conclusion that we are always practically required to act, whatever our epistemological scruples. "Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me."⁵³ The choice between the world as authentic otherness and as self-projection makes no difference to action. Whether the wall is a figment or not, it still hurts when I run into it. Though we should act as if our choices shape the universe, we must also stand ready to be rudely and gratefully awakened by what Emerson calls "commodity" (the same principle as Peirce's "secondness" or Kenneth Burke's "recalcitrance").

These interruptions by matter can be redemptive. To deny matter would lose the saving touch of otherness. "It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end. Then the heart resists it, because it balks the affections in denying substantive being to men and women."⁵⁴ Emerson lists three defin-

51. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836), in *Selected Writings of Emerson*, ed. Donald McCQuade (New York: Modern Library, 1981), 7.

52. John Durham Peters and Eric W. Rothemburgher, "The Heality of Construction," in *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences*, ed. Herbert A. Simons (London: Sage, 1989), 11–27. Cf. Emerson, "Experiment," 343.

53. Emerson, *Nature*, 26.

54. Emerson, *Nature*, 35.

ing horrors the nineteenth century bequeathed to the twentieth: a God-forsaken universe, a self lost in its own labyrinth, and other people depleted of substantive being. Against idealism and materialism, which in their extremes deny the "consanguinity" between nature and humanity, Emerson wants a vision sensitive to the impress of culture on the universe and of the universe on culture. Matter is not only mud; it is the stuff that gives us inklings of God and of others and saves the self from interminable wandering. His idealism wants not to deny matter but to save it in its multiform appearances. Emerson appreciates the testimonial value of contingencies breaking through the solitary labyrinth of perceptions. In sum, he sees communication as a matter of giving and receiving without any coordination of the two. Whatever linkage occurs is a gift of grace. He allows for the otherness of the world yet refuses to make it account for itself to him.

"BARTLEBY": SCRIVENING AS DISSEMINATION Emerson thought sincerity was overrated as a virtue if it distracted from honest self-assertion. "In this our talking America we are ruined by our good nature and listening on all sides."⁵⁵ Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) is a test of Emerson's faith that one need never receive personal responses from others or the universe.⁵⁶ Bartleby is the ultimate impersonality in communication. As a scrivener or copyist, Bartleby inhabits the no-man's-land of writing—and the parallel universe of copies at that. At first he is hired to do a prodigious amount of work for the narrator, an older Wall Street lawyer whose self-righteousness gives an ironic cast to the story, but when asked to read his own work to check its accuracy, he answers, "I prefer not to." The response drives the narrator to distraction, but "I prefer not to" remains Bartleby's reply to all subsequent requests for compliance (32). "You will not?" asks the narrator; "I prefer not," replies Bartleby (36; emphasis in the original). Bartleby will not say *will*. He can be read as a holy fool who actually practices the injunction to act invariantly regardless of circumstances. As Louis Schwartz has argued, Bartleby may represent the passive resistance of writing itself, a theme the tale shares with the *Phaedrus*.⁵⁷ Writing, like Bartleby, gives no answer; cannot be engaged in dialogue; is not "particular," as Bartleby says, of how it is used (58, 59); and is "cadaverous" and

55. Emerson, "Experience," 346.

56. Herman Melville, "Bartleby" (1853), in *Puzzaz Tales* (New York: Eif, 1929), 21–65. Page references hereafter are given parenthetically in the text.

57. Louis G. Schwartz, "Seminar Paper" (paper prepared for seminar on philosophy of communication, summer 1991, University of Iowa).

"ghostly," two terms the narrator repeatedly uses for the scrivener. Bartleby's is a stance of pure dissemination, of letters from the dead. As Socrates complained of writing, it always communicates the same things (*semnaiet isai*) and never acknowledges a query.

The narrator, noting that "nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance" (34), puts Bartleby under a prudent sort of surveillance: "Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually become a sweet morsel for my conscience" (35; cf. 52). The narrator's rage at the remoteness of Bartleby's soul escalates: he first tries to fire Bartleby, gives him an oral eviction notice when he refuses to leave the office, and bribes him to divulge his life story, but nothing can get him to enter into the lawyer-narrator's repressive economics of communication. A nonreactive *doppelgänger*, Bartleby is quite literally a dead letter: an uncanny shadow of the narrator's moral rigor mortis.⁵⁸ Finally the narrator moves to another building, leaving Bartleby alone in the unoccupied chambers: "I tore myself away from him whom I had so longed to be rid of" (56), a line that captures an intertwining of attachment and rejection characteristic of modern dramas like this one. Alfred Kazin called "Bartleby" a "very Existentialist little story."⁵⁹ It could be a Sartre or Bergman film, with its close quarters, agonistic struggle between two people, ambiguity about who is master and who slave, impossible dialogue and inscrutable motives. It is a small step from the agonies of communication explored in the mid-nineteenth century by Melville, Kierkegaard, and Marx to the solipsism of fin-de-siècle idealism and then to twentieth-century existentialism. They all examine media that put us in circuits of communication with the absent.

This singularly resonant tale has sparked a conflict of interpretations. At first the inscrutable Bartleby compels one's attention, but most late twentieth-century readings have focused on the ironies of the narrator's stance, which mingles charity and persecution. Bartleby fits a longer American tradition of literary selves that evade the command to be centered or even human.⁶⁰ He refuses to refuse and will not will: he simply prefers not. He is beyond communication. Bartleby would understand Kierkegaard's point that, rather than being misunderstood, "An author

58. As Freud has famously shown, part of the uncanniness of the double is the foreshadowing of one's own death: "Das Unheimliche," 1919, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1947).

59. Alfred Kazin, "Ishmael in His Academic Heaven," *New Yorker* 24 (1949): 84-89.

60. Richard Poirier, "Writing off the Self," *Kritikon*, no. 1 (summer 1981): 106-33.

who understands himself is better served by not being read at all." Bartleby's selfhood has autonomy but no interiority that can be made into an object of power. His otherness drives the narrator to despair and domination, making him an epitome of the chief villains in recent poststructuralist criticism: an agent of pastoral power, who surveys the other's soul in such a way that philanthropy is inextricable from cruelty (Foucault), or a critic who rifles the text, probing its interior, wanting it to give a proper account of itself (Derrida). To recent sensibilities, Bartleby is less a pathological extremity than a rebellious integrity. There can be no communication with such a self: preferring not is a heroic escape from the officious paper power of the lawyer's world.

Bartleby is a martyr to the cold righteousness of dialogism. For a Bruce Ackerman, the refusal to engage in dialogue can only be an act of violence, not a principled moral decision. Consider the power play implicit in his words: "I can use neither force nor reason to impose dialogue on you. All I can do is ask my question and await your reply. If you try to stare me down and impose brute force upon me, I will act in self-defense. If, instead, you answer my questions, I will answer yours, and we will see what we will see. The choice is yours."⁶¹ The choice is ours, in this apparently "free and open encounter," but the choice to opt out of the game will be greeted as a prelude to hostilities. Ackerman's persuasive invitation to chat, despite its protestations otherwise, is backed by a repressive apparatus: "Dialogue's supposed moral nobility can suffocate those who prefer not to play along. At their worst, dialogues deploy the inspectionism of the lawyer-narrator in Melville's "Bartleby" under the hegemonic cloak of goodwill."

Am I being too subtle in detecting the workings of power? Is there really something suspicious in an invitation to dialogue? Fair enough, as long as the world is full of rampant poverty and inequality, perhaps the coarser sorts of power, rather than dialogue traps, ought to preoccupy us. Still, the moral tyranny of dialogue blinds us to the nobility of Bartleby, the wisdom of Kierkegaard's Abraham, or the blitheness of Professor Avenarius in Milan Kundera's *Immortality*, all of whom circumvent the demand to account for themselves. In the same way Jesus did not "dialogue" about the Father's will and, when questioned, would pose counterquestions. He came into the world not to converse, but to testify of the truth to whoever would hear. Though the cosmos does not

61. Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, 371, quoted in Mark Kingwell, *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 61-62.

give answers to our queries, no matter how hard we press, we would be fools to criticize its bad manners. Dialogue can be a wonderful method for enforcing imagination of the other's position and is obviously a far superior mode of handling differences than fisticuffs or nerve gas, but it is not in itself an adequate communicative vehicle for bearing the full varieties of moral experience.

THE PHONOGRAPH AND DISTORTED DIALOGUE The phonograph, like writing, daguerreotypy, and money, is a medium that preserves ghosts that would otherwise be evanescent. Like Bartleby, the phonograph is a copyist; it evoked many of the same anxieties as its predecessors in the art of scribbling. The phonograph, as its name suggests, is a means of writing.⁶² Its rearrangements of culture were as imaginatively decisive as writings' effects on the oral world, and its intellectual reception runs along *Phaedrus*-like tracks. Inscription, as Ricoeur notes, spells the removal of utterance from the original situation, the death of the author, and an open-ended audience. The phonograph disembodied and even immortalized sound; exerted a kind of erotic control at a distance; and was as promiscuous in its distribution as it was faithful in its invariant narrative. In a classic 1878 article, Thomas Edison boasted of the phonograph's ability to reproduce sound waves "with all their original characteristics at will, without the presence or consent of the original source, and after the lapse of any period of time."⁶³ It would be hard to find a clearer statement of the founding dreams of phonography or, for that matter, of any other time-binding medium: fidelity, manipulability, liberation from origin, and the overcoming of time and death. This is Sociates' lament of writing with a positive valence.

In many ways the phonograph is a more shocking emblem of modernity than the photograph. From time immemorial people have been able to preserve images by drawing or painting, but to fix sound events requires an altogether different sort of inscription, namely, the ability to capture the serial flow of time itself. Such inscription occurred first, to date it with exaggerated precision, in 1877 in Menlo Park, New Jersey, in Thomas Edison's laboratories. The succession from the "singing wire" (telegraph), through the microphone, telephone, and phonograph to radio and allied technologies of sound marks perhaps the most radical

62. "Phonograph" was originally Edison's trade name for his device. Bell's model was a "graphophone," and Emile Berliner's model, employing a flat disk, was called the "gramophone," the name that stuck in Europe. Throughout, I use "phonograph" as the generic term.

63. Thomas A. Edison, "The Phonograph and Its Future," *North American Review* 126 (May-June 1878): 527-36, 530.

of all sensory reorganizations in modernity. Except for echoes, hearing disembodied voices has, for most of the history of our species, been the preserve of poets and the mad. The phonograph was one of several sound technologies to democratize this experience, and as with most things democratic, the oracular edge has worn off with use. The phonograph presented a human voice without a human body. The human soul, the breath, had taken up residence in a machine.

This is not to burden a small instrument with too large a historical weight, as media scholars are sometimes wont to do: the aspiration to capture live events and life itself was pervasive in nineteenth-century culture, in panoramas, dioramas, wax museums, anatomical shows, photography, taxidermy and natural history exhibits, pleasure palaces, historicism, magic, and spiritualist acts, culminating in the cinema.⁶⁴ Still, the phonograph helped change the meaning of sound, music, and the voice. Music no longer required a live performer; sound could be produced without bodily labor.⁶⁵ Music as such could take on a life of its own, independent of composers, musicians, or audiences. The phonograph record, as Adorno put it, "is the first means of musical presentation that can be possessed as a thing."⁶⁶ Adorno did not say musical notation, but *presentation*: the unique thing was the possession of the performance in a form that enabled the eternal recurrence of the same. Jacques Perriault (overlooking the camera) calls the phonograph "the first technology which actively attempts to conjure up death."⁶⁷ Two ruling ambitions in modern technology appear in the phonograph: the creation of artificial life and the conjuring of the dead.⁶⁸

Little wonder the phonograph seemed like a door to the spirit world. Nipper, obedient to "his master's voice" in the famous Victor advertisement, was painted in the Victorian iconography of the loyal dog mourning his departed master.⁶⁹ The phonograph had the power to suppress absence: "Writing," said Freud, with equal relevance to the

64. See Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Bann, *Clothing of Cloth*; Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations" and "Teaching the Individual Body"; and Sandberg, "Missing Persons."

65. The aeolian harp, beloved of the romantics, is an obvious exception, as are music boxes, clocks and barrel organs. James F. Lastra, "Inscriptions and Simulations: Representing Sound, 1780-1900" (paper given at Sound Research Seminar, Department of Communication Studies, University of Iowa, 21 April 1995), discusses "autographic" sound before phonography.

66. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Form of the Phonograph Record," trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October*, no. 55 (winter 1990): 56-61, at 58.

67. Jacques Perriault, *Mémoires de l'ombre et du son: Une archéologie de l'audio-visuel* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), 202, 224.

68. For evidence of this iconography, see Morley, *Death, Heaven, and the Victorians*, 201, plate 1.

69. Perriault, *Mémoires de l'ombre et du son*, 177.

Phaedrus and the phonograph, "was in its origin the voice of an absent person."⁷⁰ Count Théodore Du Moncel, the nineteenth-century French expert on all things electric, wrote on hearing an early phonograph: "It is startling to hear this voice—somewhat shrill, it may be admitted—which seems to utter its sentences from beyond the grave. If this invention had taken place in the Middle Ages, it certainly would have been applied to ghostly apparitions, and it would have been invaluable to miracle-mongers."⁷¹ A similar reaction was had to a 1922 radio broadcast of a Caruso recording: "Caruso dead and buried these many months, yet singing to us and perhaps twenty thousand others, down out of the ether on this cold winter's night, all by way of a phonograph and a few feet of wire in Newark, a few feet of wire and a telephone in New York."⁷² Charles Sanders Peirce had, characteristically, the most visionary notion of an acoustic archaeology of time: "Give science only a hundred more centuries of increase in geometrical progression, and she may be expected to find that the sound waves of Aristotle's voice have somehow recorded themselves."⁷³

All these witnesses suggest that something about the phonograph was unsettling and exciting to early audiences, especially its ability to detach voices and sounds from the organic cycle of birth and death. Once, all sounds had been mortal and particular. With recording, one can build a mausoleum of sound, fixed in a state of suspended animation. As Edison declared, "The speeches of orators, the discourses of clergymen, can be had 'on tap,' in every house that owns a phonograph."⁷⁴ Not only could voices speak from the other side, they could also take possession of one's soul and body. A 1896 piece called "Voices of the Dead," in complaining that historical writings about great men are spectral and sterile, provides a great example of how the phonograph could arouse what Walter Benjamin called "the sex-appeal of the inorganic."⁷⁵ "Like preserved fruit, however delicious, [the transcripts of the speeches of great men] lack the bloom of life: they are dry and difficult of digestion." The phonograph, however, restores the full juices of the original: "I did not know their spirit until I heard their voice on the cylinder of

a phonograph. The body, the strength, the soft modulation, the emphasis, so faithfully reproduced by this delicate mechanism, the life thus imparted to the words, made them sink indelibly into my soul, showing to me in the fullness of their power, the men whom till then I had known only vaguely. I felt their presence; their spirit pervaded me."⁷⁶ This remarkable rhetoric reproduces the queer scenario of *Phaedrus* reading Lysias's speech: the erotic possession of one body by a remote one. What is preserved is not the soul but the body, in all its strength, soft modulation, and emphasis.⁷⁷

The phonograph's simultaneous promiscuity and invariance—its open address and its inability to tailor its discourse to its audience—came in for praise and blame, quite as Socrates had lamented the publicity of all writing. An 1878 comment about the phonograph complained: "This little instrument records the utterance of the human voice, and like a faithless confidante repeats every secret confided to it whenever requested to do so." The same article captures the positive valence of this invariance, praising the phonograph's "charming impartiality" in its equal readiness to record a diva or a street urchin. The phonograph "never speaks until it has first been spoken to."⁷⁸ It prefers not. Beings that abstain from interaction are subjects of laughter, awe, or consternation: Harpo Marx, Poe's Raven, oracles, or Bartleby.⁷⁹ In its inability to give appropriate conversational responses, the phonograph spoke like the ominous dead. It achieved the great distortion of dialogue, making the gulf between speech and hearing irreparable, offering the single turn of speech in all its alarming solitude.

Again, the wonder of the phonograph, like its Edison sibling, motion pictures, lay in its ability to capture temporal sequence. Sound, whose being Hegel and many others linked uniquely with temporality, no longer vanished into thin air.⁸⁰ The phonograph inscribes the music's longer vanished into time, recording not the score but the performance, not the libretto but the voice. Phonography and film attack the monopoly on the storage of intelligence once held by writing.⁸¹ Thanks to what

70. Siegmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," trans. Joan Riviere (1930; New York: Norton, 1961), 43.

71. Théodore Du Moncel, *The Telephone, the Microphone, and the Phonograph* (New York: Harper, 1879), 243.

72. Bruce Bivven, "The Ethel Will Now Oblige," *New Republic*, 15 February 1922, 329.

73. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 5:542. Thanks to Michael Raine for this passage.

74. Thomas A. Edison, "The Perfected Phonograph," *North American Review* 146 (1888): 647.

75. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1978).

76. "Voices of the Dead," 1.

77. Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1993), explores the unatural couplings of ear, voice, and machine, the sensual pull of unapproved apertures, in vinyl records and record players.

78. "The Phonograph," *Harpers's Weekly*, 30 March 1878, 249–50. Many thanks to Mark Sandberg.

79. The invariance of the phonograph fits Bergson's comic formula, "le mécanique plaque sur du vivant." See *Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique*, 1899. Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1972), 29.

80. On Hegel and sound, see Joseph Simon, *Das Problem der Sprache bei Hegel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966), see 73ff. on the voice as the cry of finitude.

81. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks: 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 245.

Adorno called (referring to the long-playing record) a "concentric hieroglyph," sound was no longer fated to die.⁸² Sound is fundamentally an event; it was, at least until the phonograph, always historically embodied, particular, and performative. According to Perrault, "The phonograph was, from its beginning, a means to preserve the voice of missing persons." Edison was almost totally deaf to high-frequency sounds, and he initially wanted to develop the phonograph as a hearing aid, inadvertently inventing "the storage and reproduction of the human voice" in the process. Charles Cros, Edison's major French competitor for the title of inventor of the phonograph, called his version a *paleophone*, a term suggesting a kind of telephone that calls out of the past.⁸³ Indeed, the phonograph was largely considered first as an improved way to preserve and transmit telephone messages. Telephone or paleophone, sound from far away or the past: the nomenclature reveals the alliance between transmission and recording.

The closest analogue to the strange ontological status of a phonograph is the realm of spirits, who possess continuing intelligence without corporeality. The voices of the dead can be revived from their phonographic limbo without their presence or permission. Oliver Lodge praised the phonograph as an analogy in psychical research. "In the early Edison phonographs, the same machine had to be used for both reception and reproduction; but now a record can be readily transferred from one instrument to another. This may be regarded as a rough mechanical analogy to the telepathic or telegraphic process whereby a psychic reservoir of memory can be partially tapped through another organism."⁸⁴ Lodge conceives memory as a phonograph record cut elsewhere that can be played on one's own player. An effect of modern media, again, is the externalization of the fragile and flickering stuff of subjectivity and memory into a permanent form that can be played back at will. The supposed ease of transfer was paid for with ghostliness.

Dead Letters

Naught joints are depressing, like all places for deposit, banks, mail boxes, tombs, vending machines.

NATHANIEL WEST, *THE DAY OF THE LOCUST*

Recorded sound suspends dialogue, as Bartleby is an allegory of the difficulty of arriving at a destination in writing. Strangely enough, little research in media history has been done on the original context of communication that is most explicitly hermeneutic: correspondence by letter. Media historians are beginning to take the post office seriously as a key site for understanding the development of communications.⁸⁵ The cultural history of the mails is a remarkably rich source for philosophical visions of the varieties of communicative experience.

The notion that the mails involve delivery of a private, specifically addressed message was late in evolving. The current division of genres between personal and public correspondence did not exactly exist in the eighteenth-century newsletter in England and the colonies. The "military" letter was distinct from the newsletter, the forerunner of the modern newspaper, but both could be edited for and by the public. Newsletters had very high pass-along rates; they were meant quite literally to circulate among readers who would handwrite additional notices in blank spaces left for that purpose. In a similar way, personal letters in the United States at least could be raided for publication in the newspaper or at least for postmaster-led discussion. Some postmasters in the colonial period apparently freely quoted in their newspapers from love letters and personal correspondence.⁸⁶ Not only was content open to stray eyes, but the receipt of mail was itself public because local post offices in the United States routinely kept logbooks on who purchased postage for what mail, since payment was typically made by the recipient rather than the sender before the 1850s. Hence not only were local postmasters well informed on local reading habits, they were privy to much of the news locally in circulation and often monitors, even cen-

82. Thomas Y. Levin, "For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," *October*, no. 55 (winter 1990): 23-47.

83. Perrault, *Mémoires de l'ombre et du son*, 122, 153, 154.

84. Oliver Lodge, *Raymond, or Life and Death, with Examples of the Evidence of Survival of Memory and Affection after Death* (New York: Doran, 1916), 328.

85. Richard B. Kriebowicz, *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information, 1700-1860* (New York: Greenwood, 1989); Menahem Blondheim, *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming of Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Dan Schiller, *Theorizing Communication: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 1; and Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

86. John Hothersy, *Make Way for the Mail* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1939), 38.

sors, of what newspapers local postal patrons would read and what mail they would receive.⁸⁷ The post was not a secure channel. Letters then were more like postcards today—both privately addressed and publicly accessible.

Jacques Derrida has famously argued that all mailed correspondence has the implicit structure of a postcard, that the attempt to restrict the reception of a message to one recipient is always undermined by the scatter of all textuality.⁸⁸ His argument is historically possible, and striking, however, only under a certain postal system: the historically recent convention of mail as a secure private channel. Since the mid-nineteenth century, postal practices in North America and Western Europe quite explicitly sought to contain the potential for straying missives by giving senders private control over their letters and making the address circuitry much more focused. The key innovations that took place in the two middle decades of the century made the modern private letter possible. The first postage stamp appeared in 1840 in Great Britain, bearing a portrait of Queen Victoria. No longer did one need to see a postmaster to pay for carriage, marking a key step toward impersonality in access. In the 1840s adhesive postage stamps appeared in the United States, first as local, private issues, and in 1847 the first national stamp was authorized by the United States Congress. The first United States patent for envelopes was issued in 1849. By sealing off contents against inspection, envelopes gave letters an entirely new aura of privacy. In 1851 Congress, perhaps motivated to secure linkage with the Pacific Coast in the wake of the 1849 gold rush, passed a flat rate for all letters, not graded for distance as some early rates were. In 1856 all mail in the United States had to be prepaid (as opposed to C.O.D., or cash on delivery), and a registered mail service was founded to help prevent the loss of valuables (perhaps in response to the dangers of the Pony Express), though it was rarely used. In 1858 street drop boxes, introduced in London in 1855, were first used in the United States.

By the late 1850s, then, it was possible to mail a letter sealed in an envelope, paid for with a pre-purchased stamp, and dropped into a public box. "No longer did the sender have to come under the scrutiny of the receiving postal employees."⁸⁹ No sentinels guarded the gates to the system. Confidentiality was now possible—a necessary precondition

87. Leonard, *News for All*, 13–14.

88. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Freud to Structuralism*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

89. Matthew J. Rumer, *They Carried the Mail: A Story of Postal History and Heroics* (Washington, D.C.: Lane, 1972), 24.

both for the censorious work of Anthony Comstock and for the long history of American mail bombing from late nineteenth-century anarchism through the so-called Unabomber. Here, then, we have a system of public communication, connected to every address in the nation, that allows for the conveyance of private messages in sealed packages. Mail, the circulation system of writing and other lightweight cargo, and no longer locally inspected to the same degree. Stamps, envelopes, and drop boxes made the individual sender in principle sovereign over the letter. The post office had thus achieved something quite like what Augustine or Locke wanted for language: to make an inherently public and plural signifying system into one governed by the private will of the sender. The post office, by accommodating sender-imposed restrictions on receivers, had transformed letters from creatures of dissemination (polygamous address) into creatures of apparent dialogue (tight coupling).

As in Augustine and Locke, the ideal of two distant selves brought into contact via some medium also opened up new dangers and problems of miscommunication, specifically of lost letters. Walt Whitman was one of the few not to be alarmed at the specter of missent missives and the unattainability of a secure channel for communication:

I see something of God in each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then, in the face of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass, I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name, And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go Others will punctually come for ever and ever.⁹⁰

Whitman expresses the older wisdom of dissemination: a letter written to one is written to all. Why search so wistfully, he might ask with Emerson, when the whole universe is a letter? The moral lesson of the friends of dissemination, from Emerson through Derrida, seems to be to live ethically and joyously without any assurance of secure channels. All our communications, like everything else, are subject to the interruptions of contingency.

The pathologies unique to the person-to-person ideal are illustrated wonderfully by "dead letters." In 1825 the United States Postal Service started a Dead Letter Office for sorting and collecting mail with address problems, though the practice of opening undelivered letters had been authorized by Congress during the Revolutionary War.⁹¹ A recent esti-

90. Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, stanza 48.

91. John, *Spreading the News*, 77–78.

mate has fifty-seven million items annually ending up in this office.⁹² The question why undeliverable letters should be "dead" leads to the heart of my argument. With the poststructuralists and pragmatists, I find the vision of communication as private correspondence proposed by Augustine, Locke, and Mesmer ill conceived. Signs are always open to eavesdropping and what Socrates in the *Phaedrus* called *kulindesthai*, tumbling abroad. Signs are fundamentally public, that is, capable of multiple junctions of meaning. But not all meaning is by the same to-ken equally public. The source of the privacy of meaning lies not in the interior sovereignty of the mind to arrange meanings at will, but in the mortality of the sender. The paths of dead letters is not that minds fail to share the meaning of signs but that mortal beings miss getting in touch. The problem of communication is not rupture between spirits but letters that never arrive. It is not a noetic problem (relations between minds); it is an erotic one (relations between bodies).

The ghoulish metaphors start with the term "dead letters" itself. The Dead Letter Office is often called "the morgue of the mails" and "the limbo of undeliverable mail."⁹³ Limbo is the place of oblivion where the souls remain who cannot enter heaven owing to incorrect addressing (such as lack of baptism). With lost letters, the disposal of the dead becomes critical. An 1852 article on the Dead Letter Office in Washington, D.C., describes a room in the General Post Office where "a body of grave, calm men . . . deal with these mortuary remains" (92). They sort the letters and consign most to the flames after removing money, jewelry, or other items of value. Apparently their charge was not to read the letters for "information" of value, but only to search for enclosures. Only in the case of obviously valuable enclosures were efforts made to return to sender, a policy in contrast to those of the United Kingdom and France.⁹⁴ Hence, the article continues, a letter "contains a lock of hair—nothing more; valueless in the hard, unromantic judgment of the law" (93). A lock of hair, of course, was a standard Victorian memento of the dead. In Poe's "The Premature Burial," a bereaved lover goes to his beloved's grave "with the romantic purpose of disinterring the corpse, and possessing himself of its luxurious tresses," only to find that she is still alive.⁹⁵ That this purpose should be "romantic" tells us

much about the way the age was half in love with easeful death and gives added pathos to the way the Dead Letter Office serves as a vast crematorium of the dead and their personal effects.

Enclosures of value are sorted into two categories, "money and mi-nor," the latter including articles "that may be either intrinsically of worth, or presumed to be so, to their owners" (96). Every three months the accumulated letters are "solemnly burned" at a place outside of the city, like the biblical Gehenna, "no human being but their writers knowing how much of labor and pain has been expended upon them, thus to perish by fire and be exhaled in smoke" (94). Dead letters stand in for the oblivion of the dead. The symbolic association of the letter and the body is as least as old as the Torah. Dead letters are, in an Augustinian mode, emblematic of our mortal state, prone to become lost in transit. The trope of dead letters clearly plays on the Christian idea that the letter without the spirit, like the body without the spirit, is only a corpse.⁹⁶

The Dead Letter Office deals with the materiality of communication, not its supposed spirituality. It is the dump for everything that misfires. The need for it to exist at all is an everlasting monument to the fact that communication cannot escape embodiment and there is no such thing as a pure sign on the model of angels. Further, the contrast between items that are "intrinsically of worth" and ones of worth only to the owners reveals the ways that shared histories can in fact fill in the meaning of signs. The sense of familiar letters is often peculiar to the parties and not generalizable to those not privy to the code and history. Like the body, dead letters underscore the inalienability of certain sorts of meaning. A human finger to a torturer is just a piece of meat; but to its possessor it is a potential poem, violin song, or caress. In this way private letters are like bodies, objects of immense value that, when detached from their proper setting, are almost utterly useless: my glasses and my eyes, my shoes and my feet, my notebooks and my brain. To me these things are almost infinitely precious; to almost everyone else they are almost infinitely worthless. The disproportionate value of the body to its owner and to anyone else is the firmest proof that not all meanings are public and general.

92. Charrs Conn and Deena Silverman, eds., *What Counts: The Complete "Harper's" Index* (New York: Holt, 1991), 106.

93. Elinor, *Make War for the Mail*, 167, 171.

94. Piny Miles, *Postal Reform: Its Urgent Necessity and Practicality* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1855), 65-74. Thanks to Dean Colby for providing a copy of this fascinating reformist tract. Miles had done a stint in the Dead Letter Office.

95. Edgar Allan Poe, *Poems and Tales* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 608.

96. A *Life* magazine "Picture of the Week" from January 1945 features a pile of undeliverable Christmas packages. The caption: "In 1944, when U.S. casualties were highest, the relics of destroyed lives turned up in many places. In U.S. post offices were packages which had come back from men who could not receive them. Stamped on the packages were the 'cold official legends: return to sender—killed in action. Return to sender—missing in action.' Note the curious location: The packages 'come back' from those who could not receive them, as if the dead could send."

Recognizing that they might possess invisible treasures, the Dead Letter Office advertised items and held periodic auctions. In surveying the lists one faces a spectacle of what Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, briefly transcribed before the window of a pawnshop, calls the "paraphernalia of suffering."⁹⁷ At an 1859 auction, for instance, a main item was jewelry, including no fewer than 504 rings, "many of them plain gold wedding rings."⁹⁸ All the packages were sealed, however, so that participants had to wager blind. An 1875 auction boasted a sixty-page catalog of items that had accumulated since 1869. It advertised "8,600 different articles sent through the mails, but unredeemed," including jewelry, books, engravings, charms, corn-crushers and corn-huskers, glasses, needlework, asthmatic fumigators, toothpicks, baby clothes, rosaries, poker chips, crutchxes, and the wings of a hat.⁹⁹

Here the private system of the mail spills its guts. No longer understood as a system of moving items that might be used by any number of recipients in addition to the intended, the postal service's new confidentiality of address allows the trappings of private meaning to pile up. Dead letters reveal the indecipherability of private history. The items accumulated at the Dead Letter Office are hieroglyphics, a lost language both sacred and ghastly, that surely would speak to someone somewhere but is a sealed book to us. They are bodies without spirits to breathe life into them. In a similar way, the morgue itself is filled with personal effects—human bodies—precious only to loved ones. The contents of the Dead Letter Office are melancholy props of an enormous dereliction, that of the unclaimed dead, the unredeemed. As the narrator in "Bartleby" appends in epilogue:

Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity—the whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death. (64–65)

The narrator wants this reverie to stand as an explanation of Bartleby's malady and, by extension, the fate of all of us who wait for the visitor who never comes, concluding: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

The letter that never arrives: What could better suggest the pathos of communication gone awry? The tunes my wife hums inside her head; the dreams I forget on waking; the conversations children have with their "air friends" when they are alone; the sound of the heartbeat in my ears as I lie upon the pillow; the smell of mammoth meat frozen a mile deep within the glacier; the letters in the pockets of the kamikaze pilot; what the sirens sang to the rowers in the belly of Odysseus's ship; what the colors look like beyond violet and below red; what the jawbone felt under the dentist's drill while the nerve was numbed with Novocain; what great works died in the trenches of World War I; what the color, humidity, and temperature are within the thing-in-itself. It is easy to mock such questions as repetitions of the old conundrum whether there is a sound when a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, but what is the meaning of the letter burned in the Dead Letter Office whose writer does not know it is lost and whose recipient does not know it was ever sent?

COMSTOCK AND THE DANGERS OF POSTAL DISSEMINATION A later and different response to the disseminatory talents of the mails was the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, founded in 1872 by Anthony Comstock, which fought for the purity of America's youth against the explosive new dissemination of things erotic. Its president for two decades was, "with exquisite appropriateness," a manufacturer of soap, Samuel Colgate.¹⁰⁰ Already widely scorned in his lifetime for his stern holiness, the source of the term "Comstockery," Comstock makes an even easier target today. Walter Kendrick calls him "the archetype of the Victorian prurient prude," and David S. Reynolds finds in him the epitome of "lascivious repressiveness."¹⁰¹ A man who boasted of the number of suicides he induced and entrapped people without the least regard for due process cannot elicit much sympathy. Yet his rhetoric (a horror at dissemination) and his position (a special agent at the United States Postal Service from 1873 to his death in 1915) offer a key excavation

97. Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts" (1933), in *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957), 63–140, at 104.

98. *New York Times*, 9 December 1859, 3.

99. *New York Times*, 26 December 1875, 22 December 1875.

100. Heywood Brown and Margaret Leach, *Anthony Comstock: Roundsmann of the Lord* (New York: Bant, 1927), 154.

101. Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 136; David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 541.

site in the history of anxious reflection about the disseminatory power of communications.

In Comstock's mind the new anonymity of the post made for all kinds of iniquitous doings. In 1865 a ban was passed against sending obscene materials through the mails, but with the Comstock Act in 1873 the post office acquired expanded powers of search and seizure. The ascendance of Comstock in the 1870s exemplified a more generally narrowing space for sexual and other kinds of reformers in that decade. Whatever his crimes, Comstock recognizes with special acuteness the ways that sex, of all domains of human life, is the most susceptible to alteration by the simple fact of circulation. Comstock's anxieties about published sexuality teach the larger lesson that when mediation touches the body, it not only magnifies its objects but changes their nature. Like Socrates against Lysias, he was concerned about the souls of young men erotically manipulated at a distance.¹⁰²

A particular object of Comstock's wrath was the privacy of letters. Children could order and receive immoral materials without their parents' knowledge. "Secrecy marks these operations. In the darkness of the attic-room, of basement or cellar, is the favorite salesroom."¹⁰³ He welcomed the return of the regime of supervised mails: "We are almost ready to adopt the practice of the Roman Catholics, who in their schools and colleges require all letters to be opened in the presence of a priest or teacher."¹⁰⁴ Long before radio and television, Comstock was alarmed at the permeability of domestic space: "The good men of this country . . . will act with determined energy to protect what they hold most precious in life—the holiness and purity of their firesides."¹⁰⁵

In 1873 Comstock's desire to weaken the sacrosanct character of the sealed envelope met with resistance from the postmaster, a certain T. L. James, who called the seal of a letter inviolate but did agree that undeliverable items or fictitious addresses would end up in the Dead Letter Office at the end of each month.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, it was precisely the flossam of dead letters that seems to have convinced Comstock and his cronies of the iniquity of postal circulation. He already had a propensity for a certain aesthetics of bulk. The revelation of obscenity en masse was one of Comstock's chief tactics—he had been a drygoods clerk before his call

in 1873 and retained what Kendrick calls "the clerical habit of keeping running totals."¹⁰⁷ When he seized smut, he would typically publish reports of it in tonnage, in a forerunner of today's police genre the drug bust, with its scrupulously weighed contraband. His fetish for accumulation expressed itself in inventories of seized paraphernalia that are a veritable warehouse of late nineteenth-century mechanical reproduction: photographs, stereoscopic and other pictures, catalogs, handbills, watch charms and rings, negative plates, lithographic stones, steel and copper plates, woodcuts, stereotype plates, and "lead moulds for manufacturing rubber goods," among other things.¹⁰⁸

Comstock had a horror of scattered seed. Half-time novels, "like the fishes of the sea, spawn millions of seed, and each year these seeds germinate and spring up to a harvest of death."¹⁰⁹ He wrote a marvelously characteristic letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in 1873 complaining about the posting of bills: "There is no place that is free from such posting—every tree, tree-box, lamp-post, awning-post, hydrants, or telegraph poles. The sheds upon the docks, the docks themselves, and every rock and stone on shore, or above low tide, is covered with some filthy advertisement, contrary to law."¹¹⁰ The target of his fire here was in part the fact of dissemination itself: the "filthy" content of such posters was magnified by their promiscuously public ubiquity. The focus on the conveyance itself also gave Comstock his *modus operandi*—he was able to control only "smut" in the mails. The channel gave him his leverage. The Latin word *publicare* meant to publish—and also to confiscate and to prostitute. Comstock's activity represents this primal unity.

From antiquity, sex has been seen as a way to spend male substance, but the postal system defined the fear of wild-oat sowing in a novel way: "Comstock found in the postal system a perfect metaphor for this ancient terror: spread throughout the country, indiscriminately accessible, public and private at once, the postal system had (odd as it may sound) something sexy about it."¹¹¹ Given this book's argument, it ought not to sound odd at all. Any means of linking distant bodies will be erotic to some degree, and the rhizomatic network of the mails bog-gles the mind for erotic possibilities, with an inlet and outlet at every address in the nation. Any mailbox was an orifice of the body politic

102. As Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, notes, Comstock focuses on the souls of boys, quite in contrast to contemporaneous purity campaigns in Europe, which featured the vulnerable souls of girls.

103. Anthony Comstock, *Traps for the Young* (New York: Funk and Wagnall, 1883), 131.

104. Comstock, *Traps for the Young*, 146.

105. *New York Times*, 15 March 1873, 1.

106. *New York Times*, 3 July 1873, 8.

107. Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, 136.

108. *New York Times*, 15 March 1873, 1; cf. Comstock, *Traps for the Young*, 137.

109. Comstock, *Traps for the Young*, 41.

110. *New York Times*, 17 November 1873, 2.

111. Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, 145.

capable of coming into figurative contact with any other. For Comstock, the fecundity of industrial culture was an abominable substitute for the natural fecundity manipulated by birth control and other "obscene" items. Walter Benjamin chose well when he coined the term "the age of mechanical reproduction."¹¹² Though his "reproduction" referred largely to photography and cinema, it fits reproduction proper just as well. "Copulation and mirrors are abominable," wrote Borges, "because they multiply the numbers of men." To reproduce likenesses: this is what both birth and modern media do. Comstock's horror was not only sex per se but the female capacity to reproduce new bodies. After all, the language of mailing is all about carriage and delivery; dead letters were routinely called "miscarriages."¹¹³

THE INVASION OF PRIVACY AS DISSEMINATION A concern for the reproduction of likenesses was central to the famous 1890 *Harvard Law Review* piece "The Right to Privacy" by Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis, which I will treat as a final example of the effort to contain dissemination by the principle of privacy. Comstock was worried about what invaded the home via the mails. Warren and Brandeis about what was extracted from it via the press. "Instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise," they write, "have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that 'what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops.'¹¹⁴ High-speed photography, they argued, eliminated the implicit contract that had implied consent to the reproduction of one's likeness when one had to sit for minutes before a camera. Now not only the home but private thoughts could be captured in a photo of an inadvertent facial expression. Warren and Brandeis faced what Paul Valéry called "the conquest of ubiquity" and what Benjamin called "the dynamic of the tenth of a second."¹¹⁵ They were very aware of the historically recent character of their argument: privacy, quite explicitly, emerges as a concern once it is threatened by new media

112. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217-51. The German essay refers to the age of "reproduzierbarkeit" or technical reproducibility, but the English title of his essay derives from the first published version, in French, in *Zedoktrin für Sozialhygiene* 5 (1916): 48-63, which refers to "l'époque de sa reproduction mécanique."

113. Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," *Harvard Law Review* 4 (1890): 193-220, at 195. On the photographic context of this essay, see the very interesting article by Robert E. Menzel, "Kidnakers Living in Wart: Amateur Photography and the Right to Privacy in New York, 1885-1915," *American Quarterly* 43, 1 (1991): 24-45.

114. Benjamin, "Work of Art," 236.

of image and sound recording. For Warren and Brandeis, privacy is a distinctly modern notion resting on new individualizations of the self.

Like Comstock, Warren and Brandeis recognized that sex serves as the central fuel for the new media of mechanical reproduction. Their prose is full of new communications overrunning old cultural borders. "The press is overstepping in every direction the obvious bounds of propriety and of decency. Gossip is no longer the resource of the idle and of the vicious, but has become a trade, which is pursued with industry as well as effrontery. To satisfy a purient taste the details of sexual relations are spread broadcast in the columns of the daily papers." Warren and Brandeis are not the only late Victorian cultural critics to face what Horkeimer and Adorno half a century later would call a "culture industry."¹¹⁶ Like Comstock, they are concerned both about the lack of discretion in things "spread broadcast" and the centrality of the home in the production cycle. Raw material for the gossip trade "can only be procured by intrusion upon the domestic circle." And once more like Comstock, they worry about seedy appetites' being stimulated by spiraling feedback loops: "In this, as in other branches of commerce, the supply creates the demand. Each crop of unseemly gossip, thus harvested, becomes the seed of more, and, in direct proportion to its circulation, results in a lowering of standards and of morality."¹¹⁷ The same has been said about movies, comics, radio, television, video games, and the Internet during this century.

Socrates wanted to find a secure channel through which philosophical lovers could come together in soul if not in body. Promiscuous couplings, scattered harvests, and deathly speeches into the void were the dangers of communication styles and systems, whether they be Lyssa's rational choice theory or writing that suspended connection with a distinctly addressed other. With the post and the press in the nineteenth century, similar worries arose about address defects. The postal service was perhaps the first long-distance person-to-person communication

115. Kenneth Camlet, "Highrow/Lowrow" (paper presented at Organization of American Historians, Chicago, April 1991), and Rochelle Gurstein, *The Ripoff of Richness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), chaps. 1-2. Ironically enough, the Warren family itself was involved in culture industries. Members' manufactured newsprint and led the way in the technical improvements that made cheap and prying dailies possible. They were substantial investors in what one press historian has found to be "the most audacious" of the major Boston papers, the only one with a gossip column." Leonard, *News for All*, 96.

116. Warren and Brandeis, "Right to Privacy," 196.

medium. Dead letters represent the *pathos* of the letter that never arrives; Comstock, of the letter that arrives under cover; and Warren and Brandeis, of the private missive that is intercepted and broadcast to the public. All three manifest the ways that person-to-person communication, once recorded and transmitted, can break free of its senders and receivers. By the hyperpublic forums of advertising, catalogs, and auctions, the Dead Letter Office sought to reconnect lost letters and their owners. Comstock sought a return to the—for him—good old days when the mails were open to public inspection. What Warren and Brandeis saw as the solution to the wanton dispersion of personal materials—a legal right to privacy based on the notion of inviolate privacy—is, very generally, the age-old solution proposed by those alarmed by dissemination. Socrates' call for face-to-face dialectic is, after all, a way to guarantee the privacy of the teaching. Eavesdropping is always a potential in any communications system in which strangers must handle personal cargo: Warren and Brandeis gave the interception of such cargo a name—the invasion of privacy. Mediation increases the specters haunting transmission and reception, the potential touch of alien hands or inspection by alien eyes. Like Augustine and Locke, they assert a principle of privacy in order to secure the public space against the all too noisy and even silly antics of media and signs, those fallen angels.

In sum, the nineteenth century is a long preparation for the echoes and overlaps of dialogue in the twentieth century. Photos of departed loved ones, letters that may never arrive, disembodied voices that cannot reply—these and many other facts of everyday life add to the haunting of communication. The people who so blithely dream of dialogue as a robust encounter between two sovereign souls forget the harsher, more uncanny fact that all communication via media of transmission or recording (which have come to include our bodies and souls) is ultimately indistinguishable from communication with the dead.



FIVE

The Quest for Authentic Connection, or Bridging the Chasm

If I chance to look out a window on to men passing in the street, I do not fail to say, on seeing them, that I see men . . . and yet, what do I see from this window, other than hats and cloaks, which can cover ghosts or dummies who move only by means of springs? RENE DESCARTES, MEDITATIONS

Wir wissen wenig von einander. Wir sind Dickhäuter, wir strecken die Hände nach einander aus; aber es ist vergebliche Mühe, wir reiben nur das grobe Leder an einander ab.—wir sind sehr einsam.

[We know little of each other. We are pachyderms; we stretch our hands out to each other, but it is wasted effort: we only rub the coarse leather off of each other. We are very lonely.] GEORGE BUCHNER, DAWTONS TOB

Chapter 4 provided examples, especially from American literature and cultural history, of how greatly enhanced modes of recording could multiply the opportunities for mishaps and breakdowns. The same is true for transmission. Here again developments in physics provide the right metaphors. In a public lecture, probably given in 1873, James Clerk Maxwell described two schools of thought on action at a distance. One held that action at a distance, strictly speaking, could never occur. In this view it was a mistake to think of distance as empty space, for there was always some “line of communication” (physical chain) such as the ether, however imperceptible, linking the two interacting bodies. The notion of action at a distance was thus simply