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Networked Solitude:
American Literature in the Age of Modern Communications, 1831-1898

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American Literature in the Age of Modern Communications, 1831-1898

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Yoshiaki Furui

Networked Solitude examines the concept of solitude in nineteenth-century American literature by attending to the developing media environment of the period. Historians have highlighted how developments in communications media radically reshaped concepts of spatiality and temporality in mid-nineteenth century America: they concur that antebellum America witnessed a "communications revolution," which fortified the unity of the nation and served to connect individuals psychologically. In situating solitude in this historical context, I have chosen to examine Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Emily Dickinson's poetry and letters, telegraphic literature in the 1870s and 1880s, and Henry James's "In the Cage." These works explore the experience of solitude within the newly emergent communications environment in different but mutually illuminating ways. My contention is that, paradoxically speaking, the novel sense of connectedness engendered by the revolution created an equally new sense of disconnectedness. In other words, this dissertation looks at the other side of the communications revolution. While offering a utopian vision of unity both on national and personal levels, the new possibilities of communication also invoked anxiety, ambivalence, and skepticism with regard to connectivity in the literary imagination of the American authors.

Thinking about solitude in the nineteenth century helps us reconsider the values of solitude that seem to be eclipsed today by our cultural urge to connect. The authors in this study came to find virtues, not vices, of solitude in their own unique ways. Thoreau viewed solitude as a means of deeply engaging with imaginary others in a higher form of communication; Jacobs shrewdly turned her solitary imprisonment in the garret into empowerment to fight against slavery; Bartleby's solitude signifies his resistance against the economy of circulation and exchange to protect his individual self; and Dickinson maintained her solitary life to extricate herself from the age's cult of speed, embracing what I call "slow solitude." If our culture today regards solitude increasingly as a negative state of being, each of these authors encourages us to reclaim the virtues of solitude.

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Acknowledgements

Although this dissertation is about solitude, it was not written alone.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the concept of solitude in nineteenth-century American literature by attending to the developing media environment of the period. The past decade has witnessed a surge of important historical studies on the communication system in nineteenth-century America. Among others, the works by Paul Starr, David M. Henkin, Daniel Walker Howe, and Richard R. John have highlighted how the Postal Acts of the 1840s and 1850s, the invention of the telegraph in the 1840s, and, beginning in the 1830s, the development of the railroad, the Fourdrinier printing process, cheap paper making, and other technological innovations radically reshaped concepts of spatiality and temporality in mid-nineteenth century America: they concur that antebellum America witnessed a "communications revolution," which fortified the unity of the nation and served to connect individuals psychologically. In short, this revolution, to borrow a popular phrase of the era, "annihilated time and space."[1]

Despite the rapid connectedness brought on by this transformation, nineteenth-century American literature is contrarily full of solitary figures. In "Self-Reliance" (1841), Ralph Waldo Emerson eulogizes solitude: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (272). In several of his other writings such as "Nature," Emerson casts solitude in relation to the idea of individualism, one of the key concepts of the Transcendentalist movement that he spearheaded in the 1830s and 1840s. Henry David Thoreau followed in his mentor's wake in writing the "Solitude" chapter of his *Walden* (1854). The concept of solitude

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[1] For the phrase's origin, see Marx 194 and John 11.

extends beyond the Transcendentalist writings. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" portray characters who experience solitude within cities. Many of Poe's tales, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Black Cat," and "William Wilson" explore the association between solitude and madness. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* stages a tragedy in which the mad Captain Ahab experiences the "desolation of solitude" (405) within the vast ocean. Each of these authors thus explores multifaceted aspects of solitude, presenting the concept not as monolithic but as amenable to various interpretations.

In situating solitude in the historical context of the communications revolution, I have chosen to examine the works of authors such as Henry David Thoreau, who describes his two years in a solitary cabin in *Walden* (1854); Linda Brent, who suffers seven years of confinement in a small garret in Harriet Jacobs's *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861); the titular character of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), who resists any form of communication by repeating "I would prefer not to"; Emily Dickinson, who led a solitary life through most of her adult life and published few poems; popular stories by and about female telegraph operators, who relied on online communication to deal with their senses of confinement and loneliness; and yet another female operator in Henry James's "In the Cage," who seeks to overcome a class barrier through the telegraph. These figures voice their experience of solitude within the newly emergent communications environment in different ways. My contention is that, paradoxically speaking, the novel sense of connectedness engendered by the revolution created an equally new sense of disconnectedness. In other words, this dissertation looks at the other side of the communications revolution. While offering a utopian vision of

unity both on national and personal levels, the new possibilities of communication also invoked anxiety, ambivalence, and skepticism with regard to connectivity in the literary imagination of the American authors. While historians and literary critics have studied the new sense of connectedness during the communications revolution, *Networked Solitude* instead speaks to the inverse side of this situation: a sense of disconnectedness and solitude that this era of connectivity brought to American (sub)consciousness. The present study probes this seeming paradox.

This dissertation seeks to answer the question of *what kind* of solitude authors of the period experienced. This query is crucial for my study because the concept of solitude can take on various meanings depending on the context in which it is put. In terms of Transcendentalism, for example, solitude cannot be separated from the idea of individualism. In Poe's texts, solitude can be understood in relation to madness. It is difficult to grasp the idea of solitude holistically as expressed in nineteenth-century writings due to its amorphousness and multi-dimensionality of solitude. Solitude is vexingly difficult to pin down due to its interchangeability for adjacent concepts such as loneliness and isolation. In this respect, Robert A. Ferguson is right in noting: "When we say, 'I am alone,' we mean different things. The phrase is descriptive: we are by ourselves, and yet the words when used have an emotional trajectory. They imply loneliness (a negative state), vulnerability (a limitation), or solitude (a sought condition). The three possibilities are even interchangeable, but each suggests a different understanding of the self and its use of time and space" (Ferguson 1).[2] Ferguson's brief mention of the difference between solitude and loneliness is important because one of my

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[2] Barbara Taylor also notes: "[S]olitude is not a unitary experience but a fantasy scenario, an imaginary staging of self that is far too complex, too physically dense, to be captured by any simple opposition between absence and presence" (644).

contentions throughout this study is that solitude as expressed in nineteenth-century American literature presents a positive, desired state of being as opposed to a negative sense of loneliness.

In his philosophical meditation on solitude, Philip Koch makes an important distinction between solitude and loneliness by noting that "Loneliness, in the first and clearest sense, is an emotion. . . . Loneliness is the unpleasant feeling of longing for some kind of human interaction" (31). On the other hand, solitude, Koch opines, is not an emotion: "[S]olitude does not entail any specific desires, feelings, or attentional sets: it is an open state receptive to every variety of feeling and reflection" (33). My study shares with Koch this distinction between solitude as the state of *being* and loneliness as the negative state of *feeling*. Furthermore, I also argue that solitude for the authors in this study meant a desired state of being, something that was sought after. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt offers another important differentiation between solitude and loneliness in political terms, specifically by stressing the positive nature of solitude:

> Loneliness is not solitude. Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others. . . . The lonely man finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed. The solitary man, on the contrary, is alone and therefore can be together with himself since men have the capacity of talking with themselves. In solitude, in other words, I am "by myself," together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others. (476)

Echoing Koch's differentiation between solitude as being and loneliness as emotion, Arendt makes a case for solitude as a state that is sought to achieve, not something to be avoided. Building on these distinctions between solitude and loneliness, this study aims to illuminate virtues, not vices, of solitude that American authors came to find over the long nineteenth century. It should also be noted that, since the terms "solitude" and "loneliness" are thus value-laden, I employ the word "aloneness" throughout this study to refer to a value-free state of being alone.

Literature and literary authors are sensitive registers of solitude in the context of the communication revolution of the era. First of all, literary writing is composed in the solitude of the author's private room. Emily Dickinson's life, for example, showcases how the solitude in which she wrote many poems in her chamber is reflected in the solitude expressed in her poetry: the solitary poet inscribed her solitude in poetry. Thoreau also wrote the bulk of his notes for *Walden* in his solitary cabin at Walden Pond. Jacobs also wrote her *Incidents* in solitary, silent nights after her day's work was done. Second, literature itself is a communicative product that circulates in the marketplace and is generally written in the hope that it will be successfully communicated to a reader. With this comes the author's anxiety of the very possibility of communication, or in the context of my argument in the chapter on Melville's "Bartleby," the fear that a text may end up a "dead letter." *Networked Solitude* will thus trace the inscriptions of solitude both in authors' lives and their works.

Historicizing Solitude

Networked Solitude seeks to historicize solitude by attending to the dialectics of an oppositional binary of connectedness and disconnectedness, a conflicting, paradoxical binary created in this era. In considering the relationship between literature and communications, mid-nineteenth-century America is a unique and fertile period to study in American history. Richard R. John's recent study *Network Nation* (2010) charts a dynamic communications history in the US from the antebellum era up to the early twentieth century. In the wake of the Civil War, John argues, the United States became a "network nation" due to the increasing availability of the telegraph which was prohibitively expensive in the antebellum era as well as the telephone, the quintessential communication technology of postbellum America. America in the mid-century marks a transitional period during which a novel sense of connectivity emerged, yet one not wholly blessed with the fruits of the communications revolution, such as the telegraph enjoyed by later generations. *Networked Solitude* sheds light on this transitional period in which the United States was rapidly connected, but not wholly modernized unlike the late century. My study illuminates the concept of solitude by anchoring literary works in this revolutionary yet interim period of American communications history to consider how the newly developing media environment shaped experiences of solitude. This dissertation thus examines the emergence of new solitude in response to the rapid modernization of the era, probing the relationship between solitude and modernity. Despite my focus on the mid-nineteenth century, however, the final chapter of this dissertation also gives attention to telegraphic literature produced between the 1870s and 1890s so as to trace the trajectory of solitude's transition into being understood as

loneliness, the period in which the positive state of solitude, I argue, began to assume a negative connotation.

One of the claims I make throughout this study is that solitude in the nineteenth century was distinctly modern. Solitude in this century, I argue, was conditioned by the development of modern communications such as the postal system, the telegraph, and expanding means of transportation. Through the works examined in this dissertation, we witness the birth of modern solitude, a kind significantly different from that of the eighteenth century, the age in which the media environment was in a pre-modern state before the communications revolution. This nineteenth-century sense of solitude runs on a continuum to the solitude of the twenty-first century, yet another era of the communications revolution thanks to the invention of the Internet. Understanding solitude in the nineteenth century helps us not only to understand an aspect of days long since passed, but also helps to better understand *our* sense of solitude in our current age of overconnectivity.

The term "modernity" has long been understood from various perspectives, yielding equally myriad definitions in religious, political, cultural, social, and economic terms. Among many studies on modernity, the most pertaining to this dissertation is Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. In this study, Berman divides the development of modernity into three phases. In the first phase, that runs from the start of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, "people are just beginning to experience modern life" (16). In the second phase, which begins with the revolutionary wave of the 1790s and ends with the end of the nineteenth century, people share "the feeling of living in a revolutionary age, an age that generates explosive

upheavals in every dimension of personal, social, and political life" (17). I earlier referred to the mid-nineteenth century as a "revolutionary yet interim period," and Berman makes my point clear by noting that "the nineteenth-century modern public can remember what it is like to live, materially and spiritually, in worlds that are not modern at all," experiencing the "inner dichotomy," the "sense of living two worlds simultaneously" (17). Berman also characterizes this second phase of modernity as the age of modern communications. Referring to railroads, daily newspapers, telegraphs, telephones, and other mass media, Berman observes that the nineteenth century witnessed "the highly developed, differentiated and dynamic new landscape in which modern experience takes place" (18). By situating solitude in this second phase of modernity, this study aims to understand the concept as a historical development, which I see as concomitant with the development of communications media.

Historicizing the idea of solitude is necessary for my study because, as stated earlier, it is such a nebulous concept which easily eludes a rigid definition. In *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*, Philip Koch attempts to offer a comprehensive definition of solitude from a philosophical perspective. Despite my great indebtedness to his theoretical framework throughout this study, however, his attempt is only partly successful. For example, after discerning the distinction between "engagement" and "disengagement," Koch offers a tentative definition of solitude: "Solitude is, most ultimately, simply an experiential world in which other people are absent: that is enough for solitude, that is constant through all solitudes. Other people may be physically present, provided that our minds are disengaged from them; and the full range of disengaged activities, from reflective withdrawal to complete emersion in the tumbling rush of

sensations, find their places along the spectrum of solitudes" (15). While the book begins

with this nuanced understanding of solitude, as Koch's analysis proceeds, the definition

of solitude gradually grows more ambiguous: "But it is important to remember how rare

and difficult of achievement such pure states are, and how briefly they endure. . . .

[V]irtually every solitude has its impurities, even the great solitudes of the greatest

solitary spirits" (78-79). This idea of impurity serves to mask Koch's inability to capture

and fixate the elusive concept of solitude. His failure to do so derives, I believe, from his

lack of historicizing his theory and the absence of geographical context. His study covers

a broad range of world literature spanning centuries, discussing Kafka, Montaigne, and

others together without providing a common ground by which to juxtapose them.

Intriguingly, the more Koch widens his range of study, the more elusive the concept of

solitude becomes. To sidestep such pitfalls, my interrogation focuses on a specific time,

place, and context: nineteenth-century America in the age of modern communications.

Nevertheless, some aspects of Koch's theorization on solitude remain extremely useful,

especially his distinction between solitude and loneliness, which this study will utilize.

Rather than negating Koch's contribution, my study instead builds on his conceptual

framework to complement what he leaves out in his otherwise splendid work.

In historicizing the concept of solitude, this study also suggests that the solitude

experienced in the late eighteenth century is fundamentally different from that in the

nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, the era before the communications

revolution, the American people had less access to mass communications media than they

would several decades later. While the postal service was expensive to everyday

Americans of the era—a problem that would be corrected by the Postal Acts of 1845 and

1851—people with concerns in business, intellectual life, and politics depended on letters as a primary mode of personal communication. A great amount of literature in the period speaks to this dependency. Many of the major fictional works in the late eighteenth century are epistolary novels such as William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797). Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), another sentimental fiction of the period, actively utilizes letters as a narrative device. Furthermore, John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) takes the form of a letter addressed to a British friend. The mode of telecommunication in these works is predominantly epistolary, unlike the works studied in this dissertation, which address a variety of media such as letters, the telegraph, and print media.

Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), written in post-revolutionary America and set in the pre-revolutionary era, illustrates a difference between the solitudes in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[3] The novel explores a dangerous corollary to the state of solitude within the nascent democracy of the new Republic. More specifically, Brown's novel examines the issue of (mis)interpretation resulting from solitude. The tragedies that occur within *Wieland* invariably stem from characters' misinterpretations in their solitary state, in which they must test the veracity of Frank Carwin's ventriloquized voice without the guidance of any external authority. The characters of Brown's novel are frequently presented as judges: Theodore and Pleyel both stand as "judge[s]" (88) of Clara's innocence; and Clara judges Carwin's vindication of his malevolence through his use of ventriloquism (148-65). Unassisted by external authorities in mediating their judgment, the characters' individual understandings of Carwin's voices lead to disastrous

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[3] My argument on *Wieland* originally appeared as part of my published article. See Furui 1-2,4-5.

consequences, most notably Theodore's murdering his entire family. This novel addresses less the characters' engagements with communications media during the era's flourishing print culture, such as newspapers and pamphlets, than the very *absence* of such engagements.

The isolation the characters experience in Brown's novel has a lot to do with the geographical distance that separates the Wielands from the public realm: "For a while he [Clara's father] relinquished his purpose, and purchasing a farm on Schuylkill, within a few miles of the city, set himself down to the cultivation of it. . . . The character of my mother was no less devout; but her education had habituated her to a different mode of worship. The loneliness of their dwelling prevented her from joining any established congregation" (11, 13). Set "a few miles" from the city, the Wielands' domicile is separated from their surrounding society. In effect, both Clara and Theodore have been insulated from the outside world since infancy. Orphaned at an early stage of life, their learning was conducted independently from external authorities: "Our education had been modelled by no religious standard. We were left to the guidance of our own understanding, and the casual impressions which society might make upon us" (22). Noteworthy here is the fact that Clara uses the word "society" as the antithesis of "solitude." Despite Clara's recurrent use of the word "society," however, her understanding of the concept is very limited: "It was not till the addition of Henry Pleyel, my friend's only brother, to our society, that his [Theodore's] passion for Roman eloquence was countenanced and fostered by a sympathy of tastes. . . . We were frequently reminded how much happiness depends upon society" (24-25). Clara's use of "society" thus refers to a small group of intimates. Throughout the novel, it seems as if

her version of society is synonymous with social isolation as she remains at a distance from the world beyond Mettingen, the Wielands' estate.

Physical distance from society equals an imagined distance from it. Clara emphasizes her psychological distance from the contemporary socio-cultural tribulations, especially the French and Indian War, which occurs during the timeframe of the novel. In other words, the Wielands are insulated from the present temporality. Clara states: "The sound of war had been heard, but it was at such a distance as to enhance our enjoyment by affording objects of comparison. . . . Revolutions and battles, however calamitous to those who occupied the scene, contributed in some sort to our happiness, by agitating our minds with curiosity" (26). This passage reflects the Wielands' psychological distance not only from the present temporality but also from the public realm in its expression of their indifference to the political affairs preoccupying the public of colonial America. Their "curiosity" about the war notwithstanding, their minds are directed more at their own private "enjoyment" than at serious engagement with public affairs. Noteworthy in relation to this is that, despite the emerging print culture of the revolutionary era described by Larzer Ziff, Michael Warner, and Cathy N. Davidson in their influential studies on the subject, no mention is made at Mettingen of public communications media, such as newspapers or political pamphlets, staple platforms for disseminating political news and views in the era.[4] Without any access to public media outlets, Mettingen thus constitutes an insulated topos in *Wieland*, both geographic and imaginary.

One of the fundamental differences between the solitudes in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries concerns the value of solitude. While authors in this study such

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[4] See Ziff's *Writing in the New Nation*, Warner's *The Letters of the Republic*, and Davidson's *Revolution and the Word*.

as Thoreau, Jacobs, Melville, and Dickinson viewed solitude as a desired state conducive to each of their purposes, much of the fiction in the late eighteenth century presents a negative understanding of solitude. We have just seen how solitude stemming from the lack of access to media leads to a tragedy in Brown's *Wieland*. Many of sentimental novels in this era also speak to this association between negative solitude and communication. For instance, Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* represents a similar case in which a deprivation of communications media leads to a character's tragic end. At the beginning of the novel, its titular character is seduced by Montraville, a dashing British soldier. The means of seduction Montraville employs is a letter: "He . . . slipped a letter he had purposely written, into Charlotte's hand" (9). Moved by the seductive content of the letter, Charlotte decides, although tentatively, to go with Montraville from Britain to America. If Montraville's letter holds great power over Charlotte, her own letters are constantly rendered powerless. When they are about to board a ship to America, Charlotte writes a letter to her parents, entreating their pardon and blessing. But this letter is intercepted by Montraville and ends up a dead letter: "Montraville knew too well the consequences that must unavoidably ensue, should this letter reach Mr. Temple: he therefore wisely resolved to walk on the deck, tear it in pieces, and commit fragments to the care of Neptune" (42). The letter's destruction cuts the communication line between Charlotte and her family, leaving the latter uninformed of the reason for her sudden disappearance.

The interception of Charlotte's letters continues through the rest of the novel. Belcour, another British soldier interested in having Charlotte as his mistress, seeks to sever the ties between Charlotte and Montraville by obstructing their correspondence.

Belcour resolves "to prevent any letters ever reaching him [Montraville]: he therefore called the servant, and, by the powerful persuasion of a bribe, prevailed with her to promise whatever letters her mistress might write should be sent to him" (65). Living alone in the house bought for her by Montraville, Charlotte is thus forced into a solitary state because of her failure to reach him. Toward the end of the novel, now remorseful of his seduction, Montraville writes a letter to Charlotte, telling her to go back to her native country. He hands Belcour the letter along with money necessary for Charlotte's travel back to Britain. But of course, the letter and money never reach Charlotte because of Belcour's interception, leaving her in total solitude: "Charlotte had now been left almost three months a prey to her own melancholy reflections—sad companions indeed; nor did anyone break in upon her solitude but Belcour" (71). Belcour, however, eventually abandons Charlotte as he sees her fall into sickness resulting from her melancholy: "The fits she had been seized with had greatly horrified him; and confined as she now was to a bed of sickness, she was no longer an object of desire" (74). Abandoned by her seducers and cut off from her family, Charlotte is now "an outcast of society" (72) and eventually suffers a tragic death because of her sickness. Through a portrayal of Charlotte's solitude stemming from her deprivation of postal communication, the novel thus foregrounds the association between letters and solitude, showing the latter to be a dangerous state.

The negative solitude as described in Brown's and Rowson's novels of the late eighteenth century would have been nearly impossible in the mid-nineteenth century, an era of the communications revolution. Historian William Gilmore argues that by 1830, railroad development significantly altered rural remote communities in the United States by integrating those communities into a national and even international market with the

dissemination of print media via the railroads (Gilmore 355). With the integration of rural communities into the connected whole came the dissolution of localism (18). If the Wielands and Charlotte had lived in this age of connectivity, the tragedies stemming from their solitude might have been avoided because, in these novels, the disconnect from media and solitude are closely tied together. Both novels speak to the fact that, when one is disconnected from the outside world due to the absence of communications media, one easily falls into solitude. Conversely, however, mid-nineteenth-century literature expresses a different kind of solitude, one experienced in the highly networked communication environment. Solitude amidst connectivity—*Networked Solitude* probes this paradox.

To understand this paradoxical nature of solitude, this dissertation proposes the concept of "networked solitude" that emerged in response to the communications revolution. The new media environment in the mid-nineteenth century significantly changed the idea of being physically alone. In the works studied in this dissertation, physical aloneness does not equal a psychological separation from the exterior world, as Brown's and Rowson's novels demonstrate. The authors in this study experienced, each in their own way, a certain kind of connectedness in their physical aloneness thanks to various communications media. In their solitary spaces, they worked to create what Benedict Anderson terms "imagined community," complicating the idea of pure solitude, if there is any. In the age of modern communications, the state of pure, absolute solitude was increasingly difficult because one was able to form an imaginative connection with the outside world by reading letters or hearing the sound of railroad cars. These media

made encroachments on Americans' private and solitary spaces to create a novel sense of connectivity in the midst of physical aloneness.

My historical approach, which attributes the conceptual change of solitude to the communications revolution, might be termed, in the language of media and communication studies, "technological-determinism." The term means "[t]he stance that new technologies are the primary cause of major social and historical changes at the macrosocial level of social structure and processes and/or subtle but profound social and psychological influences at the microsocial level of the regular use of particular kinds of tools" (Chandler and Munday 422). Famous proponents of this stance are Friedrich Kittler and Marshall McLuhan. Kittler begins his preface to his *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* in noting that "Media determine our situation" (xxxix). In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan remarks on the impact of the printing-press technology: "Socially, the typographic extension of man brought in nationalism, industrialism, mass markets, and universal literacy and education" (172). While the positions of both in terms of technological impact on society are known as "hard determinism," the position of this dissertation is one of "soft determinism," which refers to a more moderate version of technological determinism. In this study, I do not wish to assert that the communications revolution was the sole factor that determined the conceptual contours of solitude in nineteenth-century America, but rather to discuss a single facet of solitude by contextualizing it in the historical development of a media environment. As stated before, solitude can denote various things depending on the perspective one takes toward it. For some, solitude can be understood best in relation to the philosophical development of individualism and self. For others, solitude is better understood in relation to madness, a

subject prominent in Brown and Poe. The concept of solitude is so multifaceted that it is malleable to various approaches, and my study presents one approach to understand the concept.

Another caveat of my historical approach concerns the idea of historical development. A hard technological determinist, Kittler has been criticized for "his descriptive and nonevolutionary model favoring sudden ruptures and transformations at the expense of genetic causalities" (Winthrop-Young and Wutz xxxiv). Kittler's determinist perspective shares with that of Michel Foucault a faith that history undergoes sudden discontinuities with previous eras and experiences epistemological breaks. In Kittler's case, such epistemological ruptures are tied to technological changes. This study, however, does not mean to claim that a sudden epistemological break occurred due to the communications revolution. Modern solitude was not born overnight but gradually took shape over the long century in a process that was intertwined with the ongoing development of a media environment. The revolution itself was a gradual process that originated in the 1830s with the transportation revolution and its impact continued to be felt long after Samuel Morse's invention of the telegraph in 1844. Richard R. John observes that it was "a long revolution: it occurred in an extended territory over an extended period of time" (John 3), leaving the periodization of the revolution undefined and open-ended. Therefore, its impact on solitude was gradual and subtly felt. In this regard, Paul Starr clarifies my avoidance of asserting hard technological determinism: "In the usual understanding of the term, a 'communications revolution,' is a radical change in both communications and society resulting from the introduction of a new medium. The putative social changes stemming from a new technology, however, may be slow in

coming, hard to isolate from other contemporary developments" (Starr 4). With this

opposition to hard determinism, rather than *determine* the solitude after the revolution, I

attempt to identify a seismic shift in terms of the concept of solitude that occurred over

the long nineteenth century.

The Intersection of History and Theory

While grounding its argument in concrete historical contexts, this dissertation also

incorporates theoretical insights into its literary analysis. Although I do not explicitly

utilize theoretical rhetoric or mention specific thinkers in my study, theory offers an

invisible yet important scaffolding of my argument. Among others, Jacques Derrida and

other deconstructive thinkers provide a basic theoretical framework within which to

navigate my literary analysis. Deconstruction is a methodology that works to destabilize

the seemingly rigid lines between two entities to show the interrelations between two

apparently discrete concepts. Drawing on deconstruction's theoretical framework,

Networked Solitude seeks to unpack the binary opposition between connectedness and

disconnectedness to better understand the dynamic interactions between the two.

Deconstruction theories also pertain to my literary analyses, which put a premium on a

close reading of each text. As Derrida's reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* in "Plato's

Pharmacy" and Barbara Johnson's analyses of *Walden* and *Billy Budd* demonstrate,

deconstructive reading is an attempt to dismantle rigid conceptual binaries through the

close reading of a given text.[5]

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[5] More specifically, Derrida's *The Post Card: From Socrates and Beyond* is a main reference
point for theorizing communications technologies in general, and more particularly, Herman

Gurkin Janet Altman's *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, a study heavily

influenced by Derrida's deconstruction theory, examines and categorizes diverse

functions of letters in fiction, thus providing a theoretical vocabulary for my analysis of

letters as a narrative device. Altman's study, now regarded a groundbreaking work in

letter studies, includes a focus on "distance" engendered by epistolary communication:

"Epistolary discourse is a discourse marked by hiatuses of all sorts: time lags between

event and recording, between message transmission and reception; spatial separation

between writer and addressee; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript." Letters

foreground temporal and spatial distances between addresser and addressee. "Yet,"

Altman adds, "it is also a language of gap closing, of writing to the moment, of speaking

to the addressee as if he were present. Epistolary discourses is the language of the 'as if'

present" (140). Thus letters are involved in a double contradiction, both opening and

closing of gaps. Altman's discussion of distance is useful in thinking about dead letters in

terms of foregrounding the distance between the addresser and the addressee of a letter.

In addition to classical deconstructive works, I also refer to more recent

theoretical studies by communication scholars, such as, among others, Briankle G.

Chnag's *Deconstructing Communication* and John Durham Peters's *Speaking into the Air*.

Chang's thoughts on dead letters reverberate with those of this dissertation:

"Communication occurs only insofar as the delivery of the message may fail; that is,

communication takes place only to the extent that here is a separation between the sender

Melville's "dead letters" in Chapter 3. In *The Post Card*, Derrida discusses the possible mis-delivery of letters (*The Post Card* 124), which he bases on the presupposition that the postal system is essentially fallible. Due to the system's fallibility, Derrida argues, letters can go astray from the postal route and become dead letters. Drawing on this basic understanding of dead letters, I will demonstrate in Chapter 3 the ways in which Melville's notion of dead letters both resembles and differs from Derrida's understanding.

and receiver, and this separation, this distance, this spacing, creates the possibility for the message not to arrive" (Chang 216). Peters's text also focuses on the potential incommunicability of communication: "In renouncing the dream of 'communication,' I am not saying that the urge to connect is bad; rather, I mean that the dream itself inhibits the hard work of connection" (Peters 30). Along with his skepticism of the "dream of mental conjunction via semantic agreement" (20), Peters's work is significant in terms of defining and theorizing the term "communication," tracing the term's conceptualization by myriad philosophical thinkers, such as Socrates, Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Jürgen Habermas, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida.

In viewing nineteenth-century American literature both from a historical and theoretical perspective, this dissertation adopts a cross-disciplinary approach. In literary studies, there seems to be an entrenched divide between historical and theoretical approaches to the topic of communication. Recent studies on this subject by literary critics possess a strong leaning toward historical interpretation to the absence of rich theoretical insights. Literary studies has long since taken a so-called historical turn, increasingly devoting its analytical energies to situating literary works in the historical and cultural contexts in which they were produced. Given that New Historicism came in the wake of deconstruction in American scholarship in the early 1980s, there is little wonder that historically-oriented scholars tend to distance themselves from a deconstructive readings, as they are often labeled "ahistorical" in focusing on the workings of language and textuality. Most symptomatic of this tendency is Meredith L. McGill's dismissal of deconstruction in her study on antebellum print culture: "In framing their object of study as the entanglement of literary texts with a thematics of

writing, deconstructive critics have tended to take the category of literature for granted, relegating publishing history to at best a supporting role" (6).[6]

There is a modicum of truth in McGill's statement, but it would be equally true to say that placing too much focus on history runs the risk of relegating the study of literature to unearthing historical facts. In today's scholarly climate, historicism and theory seem to stand in a mutually exclusive—at times antagonistic—relationship, especially in American literary studies. Critics with a new historical orientation often neglect to incorporate the fruits of deconstruction into their argument: deconstruction seems to be the legacy of the past. Barbara Johnson's classic deconstructive reading of *Billy Budd*, for example, is now rarely mentioned in today's scholarly climate of New Historicism.[7] But it is worth questioning whether, as McGill vociferously claims, New Historicism and deconstruction must cancel out each other. This dissertation proposes that both approaches can converge to enrich our understanding of literary texts.[8] This schematic understanding of New Historicism versus deconstruction, however, should be qualified by noting that New Historicism, one could argue, absorbed some of the essence of deconstruction in collapsing the binary between text and context, or between what Louis A. Montrose has called "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Montrose 23). Indeed, Montrose mentions Derrida in his meditation on the interplay

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[6] As one of such examples, literary historian Cathy N. Davidson remarks on early American literature in a similar vein: "To subject an eighteenth-century American novel to a Derridean deconstruction that does not take into account the codes whereby it was originally constructed demonstrates, again, mostly the transubstantiations of the critic" (Davidson 61).

[7] Barbara Johnson, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*," in *The Critical Difference*.

[8] As Peter Barry notes, New Historicism is indebted to deconstruction for its "preference for the textual record of the past": "New Historicism accepts Derrida's view that there is nothing outside the text, in the special sense that everything about the past is only available to us in textualized form: it is thrice-processed, first through the ideology, or outlook, or discursive practices of its own time, then through those of ours, and finally through the distorting web of language itself" (Barry 169).

between deconstruction and New Historicism. However, at least in American literary studies, the schism appears to be growing between the two critical approaches. Through the synthesis of historicism and deconstructive theory, the present study explores literary writings in an interdisciplinary field from both macroscopic and microscopic perspective. More specifically, by grafting New Historicism with deconstruction in what might be termed "deconstructive historicism," this dissertation attends to both the textual complexity of literary texts and their historical contexts, thereby opening a new means of approaching literature.

Previous Studies on Solitude

A plethora of important scholarly works on the concept of solitude constitutes the basis of this dissertation. John D. Barbour's *The Value of Solitude* and Peter France's *Hermits: The Insights of Solitude* together trace the history of solitude in Western thought dating back to the age of the Desert Fathers, exploring the value of solitude as expressed by writers such as Petrarch, Michel de Montagne, Thoreau, among others. As mentioned earlier, Philip Koch's *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* attempts to offer a theoretical definition of solitude by examining works of Western literature. From social and cultural perspective, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, and Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* offer significant contributions to the field by focusing on the negative implications of disconnection and alienation. With regard to psychology, there is *The Handbook of Solitude* (2014), a voluminous collection of essays

by eminent psychologists, an indication of the increasing interest in solitude as a subject for critical analysis.[9]

Despite a great amount of scholarly attention given to solitude, however, virtually none exists in relation to American literature. While many studies on solitude touch upon Thoreau's *Walden*, their treatment is often tangential and sporadic, offering a very limited understanding of solitude in an American setting. Given the attention that solitude attracts in other disciplines, it is rather surprising that there are so few studies of solitude in American literature. In the British context, there is Edward Engelberg's *Solitude and Its Ambiguities in Modernist Fiction*, which examines works such as *Robinson Crusoe* and Samuel Becket's prose. This book yields a very sustained and contextualized analysis of solitude in British fiction that is currently lacking in American literary studies. In the American context, to my knowledge, the only publications available are Linda Costanzo Cahir's *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* and Robert A. Ferguson's *Alone in America*. However, it is hard to say that these books make a significant contribution to the understanding of solitude in the American context. Cahir's study, as the title suggests, is interested more in the interrelations between Melville and Wharton than in solitude itself. Ferguson's book, despite its title, fails to address solitude directly. The broad range of works Ferguson covers, from Washington Irving to Don DeLillo, indicates a lack of specificity which I try to avoid in my study.[10]

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[9] Other noteworthy studies or meditations on solitude are: Sayre's *Solitude in Society*, Dumm's *Loneliness as a Way of Life*, Halpern's *Migrations to Solitude*, Lewis's *Lonesome*, Weiss's *Loneliness*, Berdyaev's *Solitude and Society*, Rouner's *Loneliness*, and Munz's *Relationship and Solitude*.

[10] The only substantive dissertation available is Joseph Francis Doherty Jr.'s "The 'Desolation of Solitude': Studies in American Solipsistic Loneliness during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," which was submitted to the University of Minnesota in 1969. Although this study was

Networked Solitude, therefore, aims to explore a subject that warrants greater attention in today's American literary studies. The richness of this subject requires systematic and focused attention, which this dissertation aims to provide. My hope is that with this work, other scholars will take up this subject from different perspectives, perhaps pursuing the subject in its relation to madness or to individualism in nineteenth-century American literature. They might even want to examine solitude in twentieth-century American literature, for instance, in works such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and Raymond Carver's stories.[11] Overall, I hope to demonstrate that solitude represents a fertile ground for critical examination that awaits further scholarly attention.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation covers the period from 1831, the year William Lloyd Garrison founded the *Liberator*, to 1898, when Henry James published "In the Cage," the novella examined in the last chapter. This periodization begins during the nation's formative years of modern communications, from the broad dissemination of print media on the eve

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written almost half a century ago, it has gone unnoted in scholarly writings, with no sign of impact on the development of the subject.

[11] Solitude continued to be a conspicuous idea in American literature in the twentieth century. William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* (1931) portrays Thomas Sutpen, an Ahab-like character that embodies the nexus of solitude and individualism. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) begins with a scene in which the protagonist muses on the social injustice of racism in the solitary basement, which he calls the "hole in the ground" (6). Many of Raymond Carver's short stories in the seventies and eighties depict solitary figures who have difficulty with having adequate communication and connection with others. Carver's stories well pertain to my study's topic because he employs communications media such as the telephone, radio, and television to accentuate the characters' failure of communication and loneliness. Although my study does not have space to explore these writings, they await a critical analysis in the future to trace the trajectory of solitude from the kind described in my study to a new one in response to the new media environment in the twentieth-century.

of the communications revolution to the completion of this technological revolution when the concept of solitude began to take on a different meaning. Chapter One examines Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) with the aim of advancing a discussion of recent critics on Thoreau's relationship with modernity. Shannon L. Mariotti, Benjamin Reiss, and others have probed Thoreau's engagement with the various processes of modernization underway in the mid-nineteenth century. In Mariotti's words, Thoreau "was in a perfect position to observe the birth of a nascent form of modernity" (Mariotti 87). Drawing on recent scholarship on communications history in antebellum America, this chapter attempts to locate Thoreau's kinship with modernity by focusing on his self-professed solitude amidst modern communications. I argue that Thoreau's solitude was in fact a networked solitude, a distinctly modern version of solitude that resonates with our experience today.

Chapter Two examines a solitary Linda Brent, an enslaved woman in an attic for seven years in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). This confining space has now become famous: "The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor" (92). American slave narratives invariably foreground solitary figures: Solomon Northup, Henry Box Brown, Henry Bibb, and Frederick Douglass all escaped slavery by fighting almost entirely alone, save for occasional help from others along the way. The hallmarks of Jacobs's narrative, however, are a long solitary imprisonment in the garret close to her master, along with her marked use of communications media, especially letters and newspapers, to secure her freedom from enslavement. This chapter investigates the relationship between Linda's solitude and her literacy, arguing that, while physically

disempowered in the solitary garret, Linda is nonetheless empowered through her use of letters, which enable her to transcend physical distances. Linda's solitude was empowering solitude.

Chapter Three reads Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) in terms of the story's representation of dead letters. Here, I aim to make a connection between the Dead Letter Office and the solitude that Bartleby represents. Bartleby is solitude embodied, a character who does not engage in any substantive communication with other characters in the story. In a world set in flux by the communications revolution, and against the market imperative to move in antebellum America, Bartleby alone prefers to be "stationary" (30). Bartleby is quite solitary in that he steps away from the rapid flow of exchange and circulation in which his contemporaries eagerly participate. In this regard, it is vital that the story is set in New York's Wall Street, a commercial hub in the United States where commodities are exchanged and commercial activities vigorously transacted, and a rapid flow of information keeps all of this economic activity afloat. The question to be explored in this chapter is to what extent Bartleby can maintain his solitude in this highly networked environment. Melville's story, I argue, presents Bartleby's solitude as a form of resistance against its own time, against the communications revolution. When the narrator states, "What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" (17), he is obviously conflating "solitude" and "loneliness," unable to appreciate potentially positive meanings of solitude. This chapter, however, seeks to reclaim the value of Bartleby's solitude as a means of resistance.

Chapter Four seeks to understand Emily Dickinson's life, letters, and poetry, paying particular attention to her engagement with letters. Her notorious antisocial behaviors notwithstanding, Dickinson was a very communicative person: she wrote an innumerable number of letters that both generate and record extraordinary intimacy. However indirectly, Dickinson cultivated human relationships alone in her chamber by means of a pen, thus actively placing herself in a communications circuit. Letters provided Dickinson with an intimate space in which to articulate her private sentiments. Rather than fully isolating her, Dickinson's desired state of solitude actually facilitated a sense of intimacy with her loved ones. Solitude was a means of and precondition for constructing her version of networked society, making her solitude another instance of networked solitude. This chapter also looks at Dickinson's so-called "envelope-poems" to demonstrate that her solitude also represented a means of stepping away from the jarring rapidity of her surrounding world: in that sense, her solitude was "slow solitude." Defying the publication of her poems and instead leaving them to posterity, she allowed her writings to escape being consumed at any specific moment in time. Going against the cult of speed was Dickinson's unique way of protecting her solitude.

Chapter Five probes the impact of the telegraph on the popular imagination in popular accounts of the late nineteenth century. With the invention of the telegraph by Samuel Morse in 1844, the 1870s and 1880s witnessed an emergence of so-called "telegraphic literature," a constellation of popular fiction written by telegraph operators about their work and lives. Telegraphic literature offers us a direct glimpse into the lives of telegraphers of the time, many of whom are female operators. In telegraphic literature, they often feel lonely, bored, discontent, and caged in small work environments. These

stories speak to a sense of loneliness shared between distant operators over the wire. Despite the promise of unity that the telegraph offered, the technology did not fully live up to its ideal in the real lives of telegraph operators. Creating a discrepancy between reality and imagination, the telegraph served ultimately to isolate telegraphers from reality. While online communication offered temporary respite from a mundane life, one ultimately had to return from the fantasy of such communication into the real world. As the telegraph fueled a tantalizing desire for physical contact, it gave its users extra desire for unity in reality. In certain cases, the telegraph served to augment a sense of isolation from real life. Telegraphic literature showcases the emergence of a novel form of personal disconnection facilitated by a perceived split between reality and imagination. This disconnect is distinctly modern and resonates with our own time, in which we live double lives in both real and online worlds.

Why Solitude Now?

Solitude is an interesting topic to study not only because it is now a vibrant scholarly topic in various disciplines, but also because it is a basic human experience that has long been the preoccupation of Western thought. As Barbara Taylor puts it, "Solitude has been a key feature of human experience in all times and places" (641). In his historical study of solitude, Peter France also observes that "The Greeks, who first taught the Western world what could be achieved by living together, were also the first people in that world to work out a philosophical justification for living alone" (France 1). France's history chronicles the trajectory of human obsession with solitude from Socrates and the

Desert Fathers in the ancient times to Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century American writer. In addition, Sherry Turkle's 2011 book, *Alone Together*, examines today's cultural obsession with technology such as smartphones to note that "We are lonely but fearful of intimacy" (Turkle 1). To navigate both our fears of loneliness and intimacy at once, Turkle tells us, we become addicted to online communication. Although the goal of this dissertation is to unravel the experience of solitude in the nineteenth century, my additional goal lies in shedding light on our solitude in the twenty-first century. Modern solitude that was born in the nineteenth century forms a continuum with our sense of solitude in the highly networked media environment.

To say that the solitude of the nineteenth century continues to this day is not in any way to say that they are the same. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Five, with the invention of the instantaneous communications media such as the telegraph, solitude, which I will discuss as expressive of a desired state of being through the rest of the dissertation, gradually shifts to be understood as a negative state of feeling, that is, loneliness. This shift from solitude to loneliness in the late nineteenth-century indicates that, within an environment where instant communication was possible, finding a positive value to solitude became increasingly difficult. In a time when being connected grew to exist by default, the state of disconnection gradually took on a negative cultural connotation. Indeed, from the beginning of the revolution, proponents of the communications reforms celebrated the idea of connectivity and argued the state of disconnection to be a backward movement in terms of the national progress. An exemplary instance of this impetus for integration, in *The New York Herald* in 1844,

James Gordon Bennett reported a marvelous feat of telegraphy that enabled Henry Clay's speech to traverse more than thousand miles in a day:

> Thus it will be seen, probably in the present year, that all this vast republic will be covered with the telegraphic wires. . . . These wires may be extended to the Pacific, to California, to Oregon, and to every part of Mexico. Steam and electricity, with the natural impulses of a free people, have made, and are making, this country the greatest, the most original, the most wonderful the sun ever shone upon. . . . Those who do not mix with this movement—those who do not go on with this movement—will be crushed into more impalpable powder than ever was attributed to the car of Juggernaut. Down on your knees and pray. (qtd. in Modern 27)

The language of this passage presupposes that everyone in the nation should participate in this national stride toward connectivity. If, as William H. Davidow claims, we are currently living in an age of "overconnectivity" (Davidow 5) due to the development of the Internet, the mid-nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the era of connectivity, the birth of modern solitude.

Thinking about solitude in the nineteenth century helps us reconsider the values of solitude that seem to be eclipsed today by our cultural urge to connect. Unlike us in the twenty-first century, authors in this study came to find virtues of solitude in their own unique ways. Thoreau viewed solitude as a means of deeply engaging with imaginary others in a higher form of communication; Jacobs shrewdly turned her solitary

imprisonment in the garret into empowerment to fight against slavery; Bartleby's solitude

signifies his resistance against the economy of circulation and exchange to protect his

individual self; and Dickinson maintained her solitary life to extricate herself from the

age's cult of speed, embracing what I call "slow solitude." If our culture today regards

solitude increasingly as a negative state of being, each of these authors encourages us to

reclaim the virtues of solitude.

CHAPTER ONE

***Walden*, or Life in Modern Communications**

In *Walden* (1854), Henry David Thoreau famously notes, "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate" (39). Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau voices his discontent with several newly emergent communications media. Regarding the mail system, he writes, "For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it" (67). *Walden* can thus be read as a narrative of withdrawal not only from society, but also from the communications revolution underway during Thoreau's residence at Walden Pond between 1845 and 1847. Within the developing "network nation," to borrow a term from historian Richard R. John, Thoreau lived as a hermit "to front only the essential facts of life" (65). Resisting the technological advancements of his era, Thoreau writes, "the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence" (11). Despite Thoreau's seeming withdrawal into the "timeless landscape of the mind" (Marx 244), his repeated expressions against modernization betray a keen sensitivity to and even fascination with the very developments he calls into question.

Building on recent scholarship on communications history in antebellum America, this chapter aims to advance the current critical discussion regarding Thoreau's relationship with modernity. For instance, Shannon Mariotti argues: "Thoreau's withdrawal from mainstream society and politics paradoxically works to highlight the

deeply situated nature of his critical dialogue with the processes of modernization that

characterized his own time." Thoreau was, Mariotti claims, "in a perfect position to

observe the birth of a nascent form of modernity" (Mariotti 85-86, 87).[12] To illustrate

Thoreau's complex engagement with modernity, the present chapter focuses on his self-

professed solitude, a topic most conspicuous in the "Solitude" chapter in *Walden*. Given

Philip Koch's observation that "Even the *Walden* chapter on solitude is lacking in any

attempt at [defining the concept]" (Koch 3), exactly what kind of solitude did Thoreau

experience amidst the communications revolution? If the surrounding society was

undergoing a novel sense of connectivity, how could Thoreau be vitally engaged with

modernity by withdrawing into solitude? Finally, and not of least importance, what kind

of value did Thoreau attach to the concept of solitude? In spite of the myth of his self-

reliance and individualism, I argue that Thoreau's solitude was mediated and sustained

by the modern communications environment of his time and that his solitude was to a

considerable degree contingent upon this nascent form of modern communications.

Another contention of this chapter is that *Walden* inscribes a complex temporality:

Thoreau's concept of solitude was conditioned not merely by his consciousness of

modernity but by his immersion in the distant past, or what Wai Chee Dimock has termed

"deep time." By attending to the different layers of temporality registered in *Walden*—

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[12] Furthermore, William Rossi discerns Thoreau's ambivalent attitude to modernity: "[Thoreau] was both ambivalent about and preternaturally attentive to its unstable potential. The very multiplicity of his positions marks him as a self-conscious inhabitant of a nervous, bustling modernity, however much for the same reason he sometimes treasured a stance apart from it" (57). From another perspective, describing *Walden* as "a critical record of the making of modern sleep" (Reiss 6-7), Benjamin Reiss has shed light on inscriptions of modernity in the text by directing attention to Thoreau's engagements with sleep in *Walden*. Also see *Thoreauvian Modernities* (2013), in which seventeen contributors address the relationship between Thoreau and modernity from diverse angles. Another recent contribution to this issue of Thoreau's modernity is Robert Fanuzzi's *Abolition's Public Sphere*, 167-203.

from the early Christian hermits called the Desert Fathers to the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*—

we can fully grasp the meaning of Thoreau's solitude within the context of his era's rapid

modernization.

It has often been taken for granted by critics that Thoreau lived a solitary life. As

Michael T. Gilmore observes, "A mood of withdrawal totally dominates the final pages

[of *Walden*], as Thoreau urges his readers to turn their backs on society and look inside

themselves. . . . The image left is of a solitary individual perusing his own

development . . . in utter indifference to the common good" (Gilmore 44). Indeed,

Walden begins with Thoreau's assertion that he lived a solitary life: "When I wrote the

following pages . . . I lived alone, in the woods" (5). In 1837, well before his residence at

Walden, Thoreau wrote of his deep interest in solitude in the very first journal entry titled

"Solitude": "To be alone I find it necessary to escape the present. . . . I seek a garret" (*J* 1:

3). Here Thoreau establishes a nexus between his embrace of solitude and disavowal of

the present, a link that is fortified throughout *Walden*. By living a solitary life, Thoreau

believes, he can live a life dissociated from his present time. However, given that the

United States was becoming rapidly networked and synchronized via the communications

revolution, achieving the kind of solitude Thoreau wished for in his journal was an

increasingly difficult task. Thoreau's desire for a garret nonetheless would materialize

eight years later in the form of a self-built cabin.

In short, the view of Thoreau as merely a hermit disconnected from the socio-

cultural tribulations of his era misrepresents the life he actually lived at Walden. Critics

have tended to see Thoreau's isolationism as an expression of his desire for a kind of

Transcendentalist independent selfhood. Whereas Milette Shamir understands Thoreau's

cabin as "a space designed to resist the threats of permeability from within (domestic womanhood) and from without (homosociability)" and defines the cabin "by distance from the social realm and the dangerous proximity to other men" (Shamir 178), I argue that Thoreau's cabin was not so distant from the social realm and that its proximity did not jeopardize Thoreau's solitude. In the midst of the national communications revolution, Thoreau's solitude was unavoidably porous to the influx of exterior forces. Rather than eschewing these forces as detrimental to his solitary life, he embraced them as necessary catalysts for his ruminations on solitude. It is Thoreau's openness or porousness to his surroundings, both to modern communications and the distant past, that allowed for his sense of solitude at Walden Pond. My reliance on the term "porous" throughout this chapter is to underscore the constant dismantling of several dualisms that Thoreau enacts in *Walden*, the binaries between society and solitude, purity and impurity, religiosity and secularism, and the West and the East. The dialectic between solitude and social connectivity in *Walden* indicates that what may appear to be social disengagement— solitude—actually served for Thoreau as a higher means of engagement with imaginary others.

Solitude in the Age of the Communications Revolution

Historical studies on nineteenth-century communications media and technologies have coalesced to demonstrate that the communications revolution radically reshaped the concepts of spatiality and temporality in antebellum America.[13] For one, William Gilmore argues that by 1830, remote rural communities in the United States were

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[13] See studies by Starr, Henkin, and John.

drastically altered by railroad development to the extent that reading had become a

necessity of life for country residents. Along with the dissemination of print media via

the railroads came the increasing integration of rural communities into a growing national

and even international market (Gilmore 355). According to these communications

historians, the development of long-distance communications in the United States was

inextricably tied to the emergence of new transportation technologies such as the railroad,

which served as the main vehicle to carry the nation's mail (Taylor 149 and Henkin 22-

23).[14] With the integration of rural communities into the connected whole, Gilmore

argues, came the dissolution of localism: "Local influences . . . were seriously weakened

by the challenge of new habits of commercial and cultural exchange" (Gilmore 18). This

dissolution of rural localism calls into question the very distance Thoreau placed between

himself and the surrounding world—the rural town Concord and beyond—as described in

Walden.[15] Taken together, the above information speaks to a novel sense of connectivity

throughout the United State in the antebellum era.[16]

Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to call the new communications environment of

antebellum America a "revolution." With regard to the popular phrase, "the annihilation

of time and space," Richard R. John discusses the wonder of mid-nineteenth century

Americans at the potential to transcend geographical distances via the newly developed

mail system and telegraph technology:

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[14] Also see John 92 and Starr 156.

[15] Referring to the presence of the railroad in Concord, D'Amore views Concord in 1845 as suburbia: "Concord was not a country town when Thoreau decided to retire to Walden Pond in 1845. . . . The railroad reached Concord in 1844, bringing Boston within an hour's travel" (D'Amore 61). Also see Gross 363.

[16] Henkin notes that after the US acquisition of California and the ensuing "Gold Rush," the use of mail as a means of traversing great geographical distances increased. See Henkin 119-47.

"Time and distance are annihilated," exclaimed one essayist in 1831, in
describing the experience of opening a letter sent through the mail from a
childhood friend, and "we are there." The imagination was "overpowered,"
gushed one optical telegraph enthusiast several years later in contemplating the
possibilities of the medium: "Distance is annihilated." Little wonder that one
journalist saw fit to predict in 1838 that time and space would be "almost
annihilated" should the electric telegraph prove a success: by this time, the
annihilation of distance had become little more than a stale metaphor. (John 12)

At this historically transitional moment signaling the annihilation of time and space,

Thoreau decided to "escape the present" (*J* 1: 3) by withdrawing into the woods. In such

an age of rapidly developing connectivity and synchronicity, it seems counterintuitive

and even anachronistic that Thoreau began to live the life of a hermit.

Today, Thoreau's cabin has the "reputation as a remote sanctuary" (Ray 36). Not

only in the chapter "Solitude" of *Walden* but also throughout the rest of the text, Thoreau

persistently uses such words as "solitude," "solitary," "alone," and "lonesome" to refer to

his independent life in the woods. He lived a life disconnected from "society," which is a

term he most often invokes as the antithesis of the solitude he so espouses. Although

"solitude" usually connotes a state of being disconnected from society, in his

philosophical study of the subject, Philip Koch more specifically defines solitude as "an

experiential world in which other people are absent: that is enough for solitude, that is

constant through all solitudes." "Other people may be physically present," he argues,

"provided that our minds are disengaged from them; and the full range of disengaged

activities, from reflective withdrawal to complete immersion in the tumbling rush of sensations, find their places along the spectrum of solitudes" (Koch 15). Solitude for Thoreau meant, one can tentatively assume, not only the state of mental disengagement but also a lack of disturbances from one's surrounding society, as indicated by his use of the phrase "undisturbed solitude" (79). Despite Thoreau's recurrent commentary on his solitude throughout *Walden*, it is worth questioning to what degree he actually disengaged from others, as well as whether he was truly able to live the kind of life that he had planned at the outset of his endeavor.

To begin with, throughout *Walden* Thoreau takes pains to amplify his solitary state. Although Thoreau opens by saying that he lived alone, a mile from neighbors, he selectively omits other social reference points. As Jeffrey Cramer notes, "Much nearer than a mile were the Irish railroad laborers whom Thoreau saw on his daily walks" (Cramer 1). In "Solitude," Thoreau mentions a railroad "half a mile" (91) from his cabin, yet in actual fact, "The railroad tracks were only one-third of a mile [away]" (Cramer 126).[17] Furthermore, Mary Hosmer Brown, who visited Thoreau's cabin, once stated: "His life at Walden was never intended by him to be that of a hermit, nor was his sojourn there a very lonely one. When actually writing he refused to be disturbed; otherwise a chair set outside the door proclaimed his readiness for company" (qtd. in Cramer 135). Given these discrepancies between Thoreau's statements in the text and the actual life he led, one could argue that Thoreau intentionally downplayed the social side of his life in the woods to foreground the reader's sense of his solitude.[18] Leo Marx and Michael

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[17] For a discussion of Thoreau's manipulation of distance, see Ray 36.
[18] For Thoreau's reliance on society during his residence at Walden, see D'Amore 69 and Cain 11-57.

Gilmore concur that in writing *Walden*, Thoreau sought to create a "myth" of experience

based on his actual residence at Walden Pond (Marx 245 and Gilmore 44).[19]

Much of the confusing complexity of *Walden* resides in an apparent contradiction:

at certain points in the text Thoreau celebrates solitude, while at other points he

nonchalantly fashions himself as a social person. Early in the text he admits, "I think that

I love society as much as most. . . . I am naturally no hermit" (97). For the reader,

Thoreau's fluctuation between the poles of the society-solitude spectrum appears to be a

contradiction; for Thoreau, however, it is probably not a contradiction. He easily

alternates between the two extreme poles. Rather than understanding Thoreau solely as a

solitary hermit, it would be more accurate to recognize that, while celebrating solitude, he

was also cognizant of the importance that social relations played in better appreciating his

solitary life. In his essay "Society and Solitude" (1857), Thoreau's mentor Ralph Waldo

Emerson preached the importance of both society and solitude, observing each concept to

actually sustain the other: "Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our

head in the one and our hands in the other" (Emerson 20). One can assume that Thoreau,

like Emerson, was well aware of an individual's need for both society and solitude. What

was distinctive about Thoreau's solitude was its porousness: people often came to visit

Thoreau, he received news by going to taverns, and the sounds of the railroad penetrated

into his cabin. Thus, rather than achieving full solitude, Thoreau placed himself between

the town and wilderness. Leo Marx rightly describes the topography of Walden Pond as

constituting a liminal space that represented somewhere between the two topoi: "The hut

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[19] Indeed, such a myth of independent individualism is emphatically asserted in the concluding chapter of the text: "[E]xplore your own higher latitudes . . . [I]t is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone" (215-16).

beside the pond stands at the center of a symbolic landscape in which the village of Concord appears on one side and a vast reach of unmodified nature on the other" (Marx 245).[20]

Even deep in the woods, Thoreau was constantly and indirectly networked with the surrounding society through the sound of railroad cars passing by. In the chapter titled "Sounds" Thoreau notes the following:

> [F]or the last half hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country. . . . The Fitchburg Railroad touches the pond about a hundred rods south of where I dwell. I usually go to the village along its causeway, and am, as it were, related to society by this link. . . . The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town, or adventurous country traders from the other side. (81)

As Benjamin Reiss puts it, "at Walden, where trains come whipping through the woods, Thoreau still cannot escape the encroachment of industrial time" (Reiss 10). His solitary time in the woods was not immune from but actually open to the influx of "industrial time." Also worth mentioning here is that Thoreau likens the railroad, the epitome of modern technology, to a "partridge" and "hawk," both natural residents of the woods.

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[20] Richard J. Schneider notes that "the location of the pond . . . [was] far enough away from town to provide solitude for inward exploration, yet close enough for periodic excursions into town for contact with people" (Schneider 102).

Just as the boundary between society and solitude was blurred in Thoreau's situation, his own phrases in the text speak to an association drawn between nature and new technologies.[21] In short, the railroad infiltrates not only Thoreau's cabin but also his writerly consciousness in *Walden*. While repudiating the railroad, he also utilizes it as a metaphor on several occasions: "The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. . . . Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails" (69). Here, human life is likened to a "track," which obviously derives from Thoreau's then familiarity with the railroad. Allusions to the railroad recur throughout *Walden* in ways that attest to Thoreau's fascination with this new technology.[22] It is also noteworthy that Thoreau describes both society and solitude using a trope of fluidity: "I had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude, into which the rivers of society empty, that for the most part, so far as my needs were concerned, only the finest sediment was deposited around me" (100).[23] Thoreau's expression bespeaks the notion that the imagined line separating society and solitude is never solid but always porous and blurred.

In further considering the porousness of Thoreau's solitude, one might recognize the trope of a "wall" that appears only fleetingly in *Walden*. In "The Ponds," Thoreau makes a humorous conjecture about the origin of Walden Pond's name: "I observe that

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[21] For a discussion on the railroad's influence on the Concord community and how it connected to a national market, see Cain 27-30.

[22] For a thorough overview of the development of the railroad in the United States, see Taylor 74-103. The following illustrates the rapid growth of the railroad around the time Thoreau began living in Walden woods in 1845: "By 1840 . . . 3,328 miles of railroads had been built in the United States, and all of the larger Atlantic states, except Maine, had appreciable mileage. Within little more than a decade the railroad had grown from an infant to a giant" (Taylor 79).

[23] Michael Warner also calls attention to the fluid images that appear in the concluding chapters. See Warner 162 and 164.

the surrounding hills are remarkably full of the same kind of stones, so that they have been obliged to pile them up in walls on both sides of the railroad cut nearest the pond. . . . [O]ne might suppose that it was called, originally, *Walled-in* Pond" (125-26; italics original). Contrary to Thoreau's expression, however, there were virtually no sequestering walls at Walden. In fact, "walled-in" isolation was arguably no longer fully possible at Walden Pond in 1845 due to the communications revolution. Concerning the trope of a "wall," it is instructive to compare Thoreau with the titular character of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853). Bartleby stands looking out upon "the dead brick wall" (28) that faces his office building and remains inscrutably silent despite much inquiry from his employer and colleagues: he creates an impenetrable wall between himself and others. Contrarily, Thoreau is voluble throughout *Walden*. Indeed, Thoreau specifically wrote the text in response to questions that he received about his residence in the woods: "Some have asked what I got to eat; if I didn't feel lonesome; if I was not afraid; and the like. . . I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book" (5). *Walden* is addressed to the people living in Concord, whereas Bartleby remains a "dead letter" that is illegible to anyone around him and to its reader. When Thoreau writes "I'm alone" in his text, his words are nonetheless intended for the reader, thus counteracting any commitment to solitude. Thoreau's ruminations on solitude hence betray both his rejection of modern society and desire for communication with the readership at large. For all Thoreau's indictment of the telegraph (39)—another modern communications media—he voices his desire to report on his findings in the woods to people in Concord via telegraphy: "So many autumn, ay, and winter days, spent outside the town, trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express! . . . At

other times watching from the observatory of some cliff or tree, to telegraph any new arrival" (15).

Imagined Connectivity in Solitude

Porous to exterior forces such as the railroad, Thoreau's independent, solitary life begins to appear less self-reliant than he professes it to be in the text. Thoreau, I will argue, tapped into the nascent modernity to sustain his solitary life owing to his fear of total solitude. As critics acknowledge, *Walden* is full of obscurities, and Thoreau's attitude toward solitude in the text is no exception in this sense.[24] What is troubling to the reader in the "Solitude" chapter is the ambivalence with which Thoreau treats the state of being solitary. For instance, Thoreau's overt endorsement of solitude in opposition to modernization leads the reader to believe that solitude possesses a positive value for the author: "I have never felt lonesome," he states, "or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude. . . . I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (92, 94). While apparently celebrating solitude in moments such as this one, Thoreau also notes his close encounter with insanity due to his solitary life: "[O]nce, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood" (92). What demands attention

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[24] See, for instance, Ray 40. Barbara Johnson's now classic study also casts light on the obscurities of *Walden*.

in these passages are the subtle shades of meaning attached to the words "lonesome,"

"solitude," and "alone." It can be very easy to confuse "solitude" with "loneliness." What

is helpful here is Philip Koch's definition of "solitude" as a neutral mental state that does

not share in the negative connotation of "loneliness": "Now if you begin by misdefining

solitude as loneliness, the inherent negativity of loneliness is going to lead you to

stigmatize solitude; but then it will be unclear as to whether you have attained some bold

new insight into the subject—or simply changed it" (Koch 45). "Loneliness," he claims,

"is the unpleasant feeling of longing for some kind of human interaction" (31). The

passages quoted above illustrate how Thoreau's attitude toward solitude constantly

fluctuates between his love for solitude and fear of loneliness.

Thoreau appears to be unable to confront loneliness by himself. Threatened with

the possibility of being totally alone, he at one point of the text imagines himself as part

of a community of other solitary figures, including the sun, Walden Pond, and the natural

environment surrounding him: "I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs

so loud, or than Walden Pond itself. What company has that lonely lake, I pray? . . . The

sun is alone, except in thick weather, when there sometimes appear to be two, but one is a

mock sun. God is alone" (95).[25] Rather than a celebration of solitude, the above passage

connotes Thoreau's fear of loneliness, which impels him to include himself in this

community of solitude. At another instance in the text, Thoreau is fascinated by a solitary

bird that flies overhead: "I observed a very slight and graceful hawk . . . It appeared to

have no companion in the universe,—sporting there alone,—and to need none but the

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[25] In his remark on Thoreau's "tendency to anthropomorphize natural things," Philip Koch rightly
notes: "Commonly, those who prefer solitude to society are able to people their silent worlds with
a wealth of imagined encounters and silent conversations which satisfy completely the need for
companionship" (Koch 14).

morning and the ether with which it played. It was not lonely, but made all the earth lonely beneath it" (212). In contrast to the prior passage, Thoreau here appears unable to entirely identify with the solitary nature of the hawk. While he reveres the bird's solitariness, he considers it to "ma[ke] all the earth lonely beneath it."

In recognizing Thoreau's fear of being totally alone in *Walden*, it is worth revisiting the passage on the railroad to see how his sense of solitude was actually contingent upon modern technology: "The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, . . . informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town, or adventurous country traders from the other side" (81). Here, Thoreau appears to enjoy the sound of the rail because it reminds him of the bustling activity in a town not far off. The sound helps him find solace in his solitude. The railroad, which symbolizes for Thoreau a "link" (81) to society, makes it possible for him to live as a pseudo-hermit because it certainly allays his fear of loneliness. Furthermore, Thoreau imagines his connection with the rest of the world through the railroad system: "I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me, and I smell the stores which go dispensing their odors all the way from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain, reminding me of foreign parts, of coral reefs, and Indian oceans, and tropical climes, and the extent of the globe. I feel more like a citizen of the world at the sight of the palm-leaf" (84). As Paul Gilmore argues, "[T]hrough their electrifying presence, the railroad and the telegraph enable Thoreau to 'feel more like a citizen of the world,' to feel more connected to the rest of the world through the material goods passing by his retreat" (Gilmore 108). Thoreau's solitude, then, can be understood as that which was conditioned by modern technologies as opposed to being set apart from them.

The paradox of Thoreau's situation is that he craves solitude and escape from modernization, but he cannot effectively define solitude without the modernizations that encroach upon his solitary cabin. It is true that in *Walden* Thoreau states his desire to avoid overtly intimate relationships: "If we would enjoy the most intimate society with that in each of us which is without, or above, being spoken to, we must not only be silent, but commonly so far apart bodily that we cannot possibly hear each other's voice in any case" (98). Yet this does not mean that Thoreau was capable of doing without companionship altogether. The irony of Thoreau's resistance to modernization and his embrace of solitude is that absolute solitude—a state of being totally disengaged from society—can lead to a loss of one's mental "healthy life," driving one to near "insanity" (92). Although *Walden* has been read as a representative tract of American Transcendentalism, a kind of manifesto that speaks to Thoreau's "adamantine individualism" (Ray 40), Thoreau's solitary residence at Walden was in fact reliant on the presence of the railroad. The modern communications environment served as a prosthesis that sustained Thoreau's pursuit of a solitary life in the woods.

Another conflict between Thoreau's desire for solitude and the modernization of his environment relates to the development of newspapers in his era. Contrary to his self-professed solitude and disavowal of the present, Thoreau's engagement with the newspaper in *Walden* exposes his anchorage and participation in the present time. The years leading up to his sojourn at Walden Pond witnessed the flourishing of the penny press. Beginning with Benjamin Day's *Sun* in 1833, several penny papers surged, including the *New York Herald* in 1835, the *Boston Daily Times* in 1836, and the *New York Tribune* in 1841, to name a few. The emergence of steam power in antebellum

America ushered in the heyday of the penny press (Schiller 13 and Schudson 32). These papers functioned as a social vehicle of communicating "the importance of everyday life" (Schudson 26), conveying the news—literally, what was *new*—to a general readership. The association between newspapers and the present moment became further fortified with the advent of telegraphy, which facilitated rapid news dissemination across the nation. This was particularly true after the formation of the Associated Press (AP) in 1848 (Schudson 4, Schiller 4, and Paul Gilmore 53).

In *Walden* Thoreau frequently offers critical commentary about newspapers. Given the association between newspapers and the present time, Thoreau's expressed distaste for them can be understood as his desire to "escape the present" (*J* 1: 3), the desire first expressed in his 1837 journal entry. Most illustratively, at one point in his text, he mounts a critique of the flourishing penny press: "And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. . . . One is enough. . . . To a philosopher all *news*, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. . . . When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence" (67-68; italics original). Denouncing the newspaper as a medium dedicated to ephemeral trivialities of the everyday present, Thoreau regards reading the newspaper as equaling subservience to the present time. In the chapter "Reading," Thoreau emphasizes his belief that the most important reading materials are classical works and not those found in the trashy, modern penny press (71-72). On Thoreau's refusal to synchronize with the present time, Michael Gilmore argues: "[Thoreau] launches his attack against history rather than in its name, with the result that

he mystifies the temporality of his own experience, presenting it as natural or removed from social time. . . . Thoreau declares open war on history" (Gilmore 39, 44).

However, in actuality, Thoreau was quite well anchored in the present time. For one, his notorious refusal to pay the poll tax in protest against the American government's decision to go to war with Mexico in 1846, which began during his stay at Walden Pond, evidences his engagement in contemporary affairs. Thoreau certainly knew the political news of his day well enough to write "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849). His engagement with the contemporary is also clear in his frequent visits to the village while at Walden: "Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there, circulating either from mouth to mouth, or from newspaper to newspaper, and which, taken in homeopathic doses, was really as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs" (115). Whereas Thoreau dismisses reading newspapers throughout *Walden*, here he gains some refreshment from them. The reading of newspapers was very much a public event at the time, in which information was passed on from mouth to mouth (Leonard 3-32). As the passage above attests, Thoreau kept up with the present time by hearing news read aloud and orally disseminated. Furthermore, Thoreau even admits in his text to reading newspapers on a regular basis: "I usually carried my dinner of bread and butter, and read the newspaper in which it was wrapped" (32). He continues shortly thereafter in the text, "In those days, when my hands were much employed, I read but little, but the least scraps of paper which lay on the ground, my holder, or tablecloth, afforded me as much entertainment, in fact answered the same purpose as the Iliad" (34). It is thus possible to imagine that Thoreau might have read newspapers in the solitude of his cabin. Just as the

sounds of railroad cars were regularly heard by Thoreau, the newspaper infiltrated his solitary life in the woods.

The act of reading a newspaper by one's self might be a solitary, private act, but it can also have the potential to create an imagined society in the reader's mind. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of an "imagined community," David Henkin argues: "The newspapers became a central site in the city's public sphere and, moreover, a dominant force in the construction of the city as what Benedict Anderson has called an 'imagined community.' . . . Anderson emphasizes the role of the newspaper as the center of a mass ceremony in which the coherence of a particular community-in-time emerges both in the text and in the act of reading" (Henkin 122).[26] What the communications revolution of the antebellum era brought was precisely this sense of an imagined community and greater connectivity with others.[27] Of course, however, much like the Internet today, the telegraph, mail, and newspapers could not fully substitute the physical presence of a communicant. Nonetheless, through the act of reading newspapers and pondering the railroad system, Thoreau's solitary mind was networked and synchronized with the people around him. Going back to the "freight train" that reminds Thoreau of "the foreign parts" (84), one recognizes another contradiction within *Walden*. Despite his overt anti-marketism ("trade curses every thing it handles" (51)), Thoreau is offered another sense of comforting connectivity to society through the mercantile train.

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[26] Richard R. John and Thomas C. Leonard also invoke the term "the imagined community." See John 167-68 and Leonard 28-32. Calling the activity of reading newspapers a "ceremony," Anderson observes, "Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar" (Anderson 35-36).

[27] In a similar line of thinking, Leonard observes: "Newspapers demonstrate that one is bound together with a multitude engaged in steady, simultaneous activity, sharing a common culture and symbols" (Leonard 30).

Regardless of his efforts to dissociate himself from the present, the train enables Thoreau to recognize the distinctly industrial time of his era. Hence Thoreau's solitude was not of the pre-modern, pastoral type, but of a highly modern kind that was constantly porous to the influx of society, be it the immediate presence of others or via technological mediation.[28]

Solitude in Deep Time

We can further complicate Thoreau's engagement with modernity by probing another layer of temporality: deep time. In *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (2006), Wai Chee Dimock broached this concept of temporality to reconfigure the discipline of American literature. Originally a geological term, the concept of deep time refers to a geological record of the earth's history, which to an overwhelming degree predated human history. There is a famous passage in *Walden* in which Thoreau is fascinated by strata of sand alongside the railroad, momentarily becoming a geologist who witnesses a deep time link between present and distant times: "Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad through which I passed on my way to the village" (204). In this moment, Thoreau feels a transcendence of time and a deeper connection with Nature: "I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me. . . . The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum . . . but living poetry like the leaves of a

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[28] For discussions on the relationship between *Walden* and the pastoral, see Peck 73-94 and Marx 244-65.

tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth" (205-07). Of importance here is that Thoreau's sense of time transcendence is brought about by the very epitome of his own time—the railroad—indexing another instance of his sensitivity to the nascent modernity. The important question, then, is how Thoreau's interest in the distant past relates to his conception of solitude.

The keyword here is "hermit." Thoreau's contemporary, Robert Coyler, once described Thoreau as "the Hermit of Walden Woods."[29] In the "Brute Neighbors" chapter, Thoreau fashions himself as a "hermit" in the conversation with an unnamed "poet." The word "hermit" invokes a long history of solitude in the West, dating back to the time of the Desert Fathers who "demonstrated their rejection of contemporary society by choosing to live outside it in areas which had been considered unfit for human habitation" (France xi). In the early years of their emergence following the establishment of Christianity, "They became hermits to escape the distractions of life in the village or city" (xi). When viewed within the history of solitary figures in the West, Thoreau's withdrawal into the woods falls in line with a long-standing lineage of hermits. To articulate how Thoreau's version of solitude can be placed in this lineage requires briefly following the conceptual trajectory of solitude in the Christian and Western traditions.

St. Antony (ca. 251-356) is probably the first and most famous hermit in the history of Christianity. He is said to have lived alone without seeing a human face for over twenty years, surviving merely on supplies of bread and water brought to him every six months. His life inspired thousands of the era to leave their homes and follow his solitary mode of living (France 20). The origin of Christian monasticism is commonly attributed to his eremitism (Koch 71). Much as Walden Pond was a retreat from society

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[29] http://thoreau.eserver.org/Collyer.html.

for Thoreau, early ascetic Christians migrated to the desert to pursue spiritual fulfillment:

"One of the primary impulses behind the desire for solitude was the wish to withdraw

from the temptations inherent in the increasing worldly success of the church. The early

desert Christians believed that it was not possible to lead a fully Christian life in the

social and economic world of the late Roman Empire" (Barbour 13). In other words, "For

many hermits aloneness has been a necessary condition for the contemplative life,

providing the interior peace and detachment for meditation and encounter with God" (23).

Following the efforts of the Desert Fathers, monasticism and eremitism spread across

Europe over the next thousand years (Koch 66).

After the Desert Fathers followed a number of writers who reflected on the nature

and value of solitude. A primary example is St. Augustine, the author of *Confessions*

(397). Like his predecessors, St. Augustine, as Barbour states, "saw solitude in positive

terms as a state of total commitment to God" (33). According to Barbour's account, after

St. Augustine emerged secular solitaries who, unlike Christian isolatoes, sought solitude

in a much less religious sense. Petrarch, the author of *The Life of Solitude* (1346), was the

first to devote a full-length text to exploring the value of solitude in secular terms.

Barbour argues that Petrarch's "ethical justification of solitude, based on the value of

discovering and expressing one's individual temperament, represents a crucial stage in

the secularization of solitude" (49). There then followed a group of writers such as

Michel de Montaigne ("Of Solitude"), Edward Gibbon (*The Decline and Fall of the

Roman Empire*), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker*), thinkers

who in various ways sought to discuss the value and meaning of solitude in their writings.

Finally, nineteenth-century America spawned Henry David Thoreau, who derives from a long historical lineage of thinkers on solitude.[30]

The long continuum between the early Christian hermits and Thoreau constitutes one aspect of his engagement with "deep time." Just as Thoreau retreated into the woods to contemplate the essentials of life, the Desert Fathers sought escape from the social realm. As a Harvard graduate more than likely versed in the history of Christianity, it is highly probable that Thoreau had in mind these Desert Fathers as a model to follow in his decision to live a hermetic life.[31] However, while the Desert Fathers sought solitude for the sake of deepening their Christian beliefs, Thoreau did not. This is not to say that Thoreau was unreligious and that, unlike the cases of Montaigne, Gibbon, and Rousseau, his solitude should be comprehended in secular terms. He was certainly religious in pursuit of solitary life, but his commitment was not limited to Christianity. In his journal entry in 1842, Thoreau wrote: "When I look back eastward over the world, it seems to be all in repose. Arabia, Persia, Hindostan are the lands of contemplation" (*J* 1: 343).

Thoreau's engagement with deep time becomes most intriguing when we shift attention from the West to the East. This is where Thoreau differs from the preceding hermits and thinkers on solitude in the Western tradition. Numerous studies have shown

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[30] See France 90-113, Barbour 105-28, Koch 121-24, Buchhloz 190-91, Balcom 144-48, and Anson 197.

[31] Although Thoreau's knowledge of the Desert Fathers does not go beyond the confines of speculation, there exist certain references to the word "desert" as a place of hermitage in his wide array of writings. In his journal entry as early as in 1842, Thoreau meditates on nature: "[Nature] supplies to the bee only so much wax as is necessary for its cell, so that no poverty could stint it more; but the little economist which fed the evangelist in the desert still keeps in advance of the immigrant, and fills the cavities of the forest for his repast" (*J* 1: 360). In *Walden*, he writes: "The really diligent student in on e of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervis in the desert" (95). Finally, in *A Week*, he also observes: "All our lives want a suitable background. They should at least, like the life of the anchorite, be as impressive to behold as objects in the desert" (46).

Thoreau's profound interest in Hindu scriptures.[32] In his personal writings, Thoreau more than once invokes the word "yogi," a practitioner of yoga. In a letter to his friend in 1849, Thoreau writes: "[R]ude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the *yoga* faithfully. . . . To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a Yogi" (*Familiar Letters* 175; italics original). Among other texts, the *Bhagavad Gita* is repeatedly mentioned both in *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). Calling it "the most sacred text in the Hindu religion" (9), Wai Chee Dimock observes that "Thoreau gives this ancient text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, an honored place" both in *Walden* and *A Week* (Dimock 9).[33] Of special note here is that the *Bhagavad Gita* espouses a solitary state to practice yoga: "Day after day, let the Yogi practice the harmony of soul: in a secret place, in deep solitude, master of his mind, hoping for nothing, desiring nothing. Let him find a place that is pure and a seat that is restful. . . . On that seat let him rest and practice Yoga for the purification of the soul" (32). This passage encourages the thought that in his enterprise to withdraw from society, following the dictate of the Hindu scripture, Thoreau sought to fashion himself as a yogi "in deep solitude."

The most illustrative of Thoreau's immersion in the Hindu religion is a passage in *Walden* where Walden Pond is described as merging with the Ganges River:

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[32] See, for example, Albert, Dimock, Hodder, Macshane, Sarma, Stein, Raghavan and Wood, and Weir. Dimock recognizes "deep time" in *Walden* by focusing on the presence of quotes from the *Bhagavad Gita*. See Dimock 7-22. For another criticism on deep time in *Walden*, see Thorson 58-59.

[33] On the genealogy and composition of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Dimock notes that it is "a composite work, layered over and written over a long period of time. Parts of it were taken from the *Katha and Svetasvatara Upanishads*, dating from about 400 BCE. The bulk of it was probably written two centuries after that" (Dimock 9).

> In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy
>
> of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed,
>
> and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and
>
> trivial. . . . I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet
>
> the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits
>
> in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with
>
> his crust and water jug. . . . *The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred*
>
> *water of the Ganges*. (200-01; italics added)

Here, demonstrating another example of deep time in *Walden*, the water of Walden Pond,

which is located in the Christian community of Concord, is comingled with the Ganges

through a creative transcendence of time and space. However, while there is much

reverberation between *Walden* and the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu

religion constitutes only one of the elements that factor into Thoreau's understanding of

solitude. Critics who have focused on Thoreau's immersion in Hinduism have tended to

overemphasize its influence on his solitary mode of living.[34] The connection between

Walden and the *Bhagavad Gita* is partly correct and partly misleading: the hallmark of

Thoreau's solitude, it seems, is its promiscuity that seeks to incorporate everything that

he sees conducive to enhancing his spiritual contemplations. That is, Thoreau's solitude

is situated both in the Western and Eastern traditions, and to attribute it to either one of

these exclusively would be to misrepresent the amalgam, the promiscuous borrowings

that underlay his solitude.

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[34] As Frank Macshane notes, "The world view expressed in *Walden* is substantially that which appears in those portions of the *Bhagavad Gita* which are concerned with Bhaktiyoga, or the path of devotion" (Macshane 339).

Thoreau's imagination transforms Walden Pond into a sacred seat of the Hindu spirituality, yet, elsewhere in *Walden*, he remarks on the "impurity" of Walden Pond: "I have said that Walden has no visible inlet nor outlet, but it is on the one hand distinctly and indirectly related to Flint's Pond. . . . If by living thus reserved and austere, like a hermit in the woods, so long, it has acquired such wonderful purity, who would not regret that *the comparatively impure waters of Flint's Pond should be mingled with it*, or itself should ever go to waste its sweetness in the ocean wave?" (133; italics added). Despite its lack of "visible inlet or outlet," this passage indexes Walden Pond's porousness to the outside sources. Interestingly, Thoreau employs the word "mingled" in both of the passages discussed above: Walden Pond is mingled with the ancient, sacred water of the Ganges as well as the contemporary, secular waters of Flint's Pond. Thoreau does not limit the perimeters of Walden Pond to any definite sources, instead leaving it "impure." The very impurity and lack of clear boundaries of Walden Pond seem to constitute the staples of Thoreau's conception of solitude. Significantly, Thoreau, who constantly refers to himself as a hermit, anthropomorphizes Walden Pond as a "hermit" in the passage in question. Just like a mirror reflecting one's face, the pond's "smooth reflecting surface" (62, 90) suggests it to be akin to Thoreau himself. As if embodying Thoreau's eclecticism, Walden Pond represents a lack of clear demarcations, both physical and temporal. Thoreau's conception of solitude thus finds its natural correlative in this most iconic locus in *Walden*, the ever fluid, impure Walden Pond. All at once religious and secular, solitary and social, Western and Eastern, the conceptual contours of Thoreau's solitude elude a definite demarcation. Defying a reductive dualism, his solitude constantly

vacillates between the extreme poles of several spectrums in a way that challenges the reader's comprehension.

The interrelation between solitude and temporality in *Walden* can be further understood through Philip Koch's definitions of "subjective time" and "objective time." Subjective time is "conditioned by the subject's unique constellation of interests, hopes, and anxieties." On the other hand, objective time refers to "the time of most interpersonal activities but especially of science, technics, and commerce. . . . [It] is clock time: it has a uniform and interpersonally repeatable metric, an invariant order and an irreversible direction" (Koch 22). This distinction serves to explain the different temporalities that Thoreau experienced during his stay at Walden Pond. For instance, Thoreau's solitary life was infiltrated by a sense of "objective time" due to the sounds of the railway and the presence of newspapers. However, at the same time, Thoreau immersed himself deeply in "subjective time" through solitary spiritual contemplation dissociated from objective time. The uniqueness of Thoreau's solitude inheres in those double temporalities that he simultaneously embraces. He blithely shuttles between the two different temporalities. For Thoreau, to embrace each of these does not constitute a contradiction: his subjective time (solitude) is sustained by objective time (his engagement with the surrounding world). To be completely alone could be unwholesome to his mind's "healthy life," driving him near "insanity" (92). Attunement to objective time, or "the time of most interpersonal activities" supports his subjective time of solitude. In short, for Thoreau, subjective time and objective time co-exist in a mutually sustaining relationship.

A further implication of Koch's notion of subjective time is that solitude can serve as a means of deeply engaging with others, rather than enhancing one's

disengagement from interpersonal relations. On this point, John Barbour argues: "Persons

who are alone spend much of their time remembering, thinking about, or longing for

other people. If any memory or thought of others disqualified a period of time as being

true aloneness, there would be very little if any solitude in human history" (Barbour 2).

Pertinent here is Thoreau's composition of *A Week* during his solitary years in the woods,

a text in which he reminisced about and mourned his deceased brother, John. At Walden,

Thoreau was not only an avid reader of classical writings including the *Bhagavad Gita*,

but also "a maker of books, an indefatigable writer who was always writing" (Cain 34).

In his solitary contemplations facilitated and sustained by objective time, Thoreau was

attuned to subjective time which allowed him to revel in the imaginary conversations

with classical writers and to mourn the death of his brother by transcending temporal

distances. His two-year sojourn at Walden Pond enabled him to recognize both the

dangers and advantages of solitude: dangers that might have driven him insane and

advantages that permitted him deep contemplations. If we are to locate the positive value

of solitude for Thoreau, one can argue that, whereas Thoreau's solitude might at first

appear as disengagement from his surrounding society, it was instead a means of deeply

engaging with imaginary others in a higher form of communication.

Life in Modern Communications

Amidst the communications revolution, Thoreau's experiment in the woods

proved the infeasibility of achieving pure solitude in his era, a solitude in which one is

completely dissociated from society. In a journal entry from 1853, Thoreau gives

expression to his lament over the present time: "The poets, philosophers, historians, and all writers have always been disposed to praise the life of the farmer and prefer it to that of the citizen. . . . But now, by means of railroads and steamboats and telegraphs, the country is denaturalized" (*J* 6: 106-08). The agrarian and pastoral life Thoreau envisioned at Walden Pond had become impossible in the mid-nineteenth century's "denaturalized" America. What Thoreau found instead at Walden was a networked solitude, a highly modernized solitude due to the communications revolution of his time.

Instructive here is a comparison between Thoreau, a nineteenth-century American writer, and Michel de Montaigne, a sixteenth-century French thinker whose essays influenced American Transcendentalists.[35] On his thirty-eighth birthday, Montaigne, long weary of public service, began to spend considerable time in the tower library of the family manor at his country estate near Bordeaux. According to Barbour, "[c]hoosing his library as the site of his solitude, [Montaigne] desired to be alone in order to read and write" (Barbour 53). In his essay "Of Solitude," Montaigne celebrates solitude much as Thoreau does: "Now since we are undertaking to live alone and do without company, let us make our contentment depend on ourselves; let us cut loose from all the ties that bind us to others; let us win from ourselves the power to *live really alone* and to live that way at our ease. . . . We must reserve a back shop all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty and our principal retreat and solitude" (Montaigne 177; italics added). Montaigne's words here resonate strongly with the Transcendentalist ideal of self-reliance, and he embraces solitude as a positive state of being. Just as Thoreau used his solitary time for contemplation through reading and writing, Montaigne sought, in his

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[35] For a discussion on Montaigne's possible influence on Thoreau, see Braun 27-29. Thoreau's journal entry also indicates that he read Montaigne. See *J* 4: 239.

own words, "freedom, tranquility, and leisure" (Frame 115) to pursue wisdom in his solitary library.[36]

Although Montagne was not a hermit *per se*, one can discern the similarities between him and Thoreau in terms of their motives for withdrawal. Thoreau stated, "I am naturally no hermit" (97), and Montaigne made similar observations about his own nature: "Solitude . . . makes me stretch and expand outward; I throw myself into affairs of state and into the world more readily when I am alone. . . . By nature I am not an enemy to the bustle of courts" (Montaigne 625). Both Thoreau and Montaigne encouraged solitude because they saw it as conducive to forming a higher engagement with others. However, there are also significant differences between the two, as Thoreau's solitude was conditioned by various factors of his era. Unlike the pre-modern Montaigne, who could experience solitude undisturbed by communications technologies—the railroad and telegraph did not exist in his time—the modern Thoreau was well aware of the impossibility "to live really alone" in his increasingly modernized environment, and such a lifestyle was not on his agenda.[37] The contained, pure solitude envisioned by Montaigne in his essay was not what Thoreau sought out to achieve. Montaigne might have viewed Thoreau's solitude as "impure"; yet for this American isolato, such impurity or commingling constitutes the essence of solitude and assumes a positive valence because his solitary contemplations in subjective time are made possible by the interaction with objective time.

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[36] It is noteworthy here that the private study, a location which Philippe Airès recognizes as an architectural innovation of the Renaissance, enabled Montaigne to experience the kind of solitude he idealized. See Airès 225-27.

[37] Of course, Montaigne was not *absolutely* disengaged from society during his late solitary years since he "continued to be involved in politics" (Barbour 53). For a detailed discussion on the relationship between Montaigne and solitude, see Barbour 53-68.

In retrospect, one can perhaps recognize a continuum between the networked solitude that Thoreau experienced at Walden Pond and certain varieties of lived solitude in the twenty-first century, another era of technological revolution in which individuals are constantly and inescapably bombarded by electronic technologies. Much like the telegraph in Thoreau's time, the Internet has annihilated time and space today, knitting not only the United States but also the entire world together. Tom Standage describes Samuel Morse's invention of the telegraph in 1844 as "the Victorian Internet."[38] Viewing the telegraph as a precursor to today's Internet, Standage notes, "Today, we are repeatedly told that we are in the midst of a communications revolution. . . . Time-travelling Victorians arriving in the late twentieth century would, no doubt, be unimpressed by the Internet" (Standage 213). In this sense, Thoreau's era of the mid-nineteenth century and the twenty-first century are not so unalike. Our age of what William Davidow calls Internet "over-connectivity" (Davidow 4) resonates with Thoreau's *Walden*, in which he details the infeasibility of living in pure solitude. On the other hand, some of us might find solace in Thoreau's impure solitude experienced in the liminal realm between society and solitude, in the transitional period moving toward an ever-increasing connectivity—a certainly modern, yet not so fully modernized solitude that preceded our age of hyper-connectivity. Thoreau's "life in the woods," the original subtitle of the text, was actually a life in modern communications. By this nature, *Walden* can be called a modern text that prefigured and still reverberates with our own time.

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[38] See Standage, *The Victorian Internet.*

CHAPTER TWO

A Rebel in the Garret:

Empowering Solitude in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

As seen in the preceding chapter, in his 1837 journal entry Thoreau described his

ideal solitary space as a "garret." This chapter examines another garret, which appears in

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Originally subtitled *Seven*

Years Concealed in Slavery, Harriet Jacobs's narrative has drawn, from its initial

publication,[39] the reader's attention to the garret she inhabited as a slave for as long as

seven years: "The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was

three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor" (92). Jacobs lived in

this confining, solitary space for years waiting for the chance to escape the institution of

slavery. Virtually excommunicated from the outside world and alienated from her

children, Jacobs, who calls herself Linda Brent in the narrative, underwent a

psychologically painful experience of utter isolation. Although this garret has gained

critical attention over the years, the nature of the solitude Linda experienced there has

eluded thorough scrutiny.[40] Linda's sense of solitude manifests itself most vividly when

she is anxiously waiting in the garret for a letter from her brother, William: "Alone in my

cell, where no eye but God's could see me, I wept bitter tears" (105). Further on in the

text, she repeats the same sentiment: "When I got back to my den, I threw myself on the

bed and wept there alone in the darkness" (111). While these passages may suggest a

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[39] For instance, *The Weekly Anglo-African* published "The Loophole of Retreat" chapter as an
excerpt (Yellin 147).

[40] For a discussion of the garret, see especially Valerie Smith 28-30.

negative sensibility of disempowerment and disconnection in relation to the solitary garret, the principal question to be explored in this chapter is whether Linda's solitude possesses more than this single sense. Put differently, this chapter seeks to locate the positive value of solitude that Linda comes to find in what might appear to be solitary imprisonment. Linda experiences in this garret, I argue, an empowering solitude that allows her to transcend racial and gender restrains imposed on her by slavery.

In probing the value of Linda's solitude, this chapter focuses on her ingenuous employment of communications media, more specifically letters and newspapers, to secure a degree of her freedom from the bondages of slavery. Close attention to Linda's deployment of communications media reveals some surprisingly subversive aspects to her solitude. Being a female slave in the South, Linda is exposed to both racial and gender restraints. In an era that delimited the act of writing and reading as a white people's domain, Linda's use of communications media upsets gender and racial orders of the South. The isolated garret, which goes unnoticed by anyone except for Linda's family and friends, stands as a symbolic void in her community wherein she is able to attain a hybrid subjectivity that straddles the lines between masculinity and femininity, whiteness and blackness, and—paradoxically—isolation and connectedness. Physically imprisoned and enfeebled in the garret, Linda turns her solitary status into a means of empowerment by her tactical employment of communications media.

The intriguing paradox of Linda's isolated situation is that it allows her to become more communicative with the outside world via letters and newspapers, both of which prove conducive to her eventual movement to the North. Though physically constrained, Linda is able to span geographic locations in writing numerous letters and reading

newspapers. Her solitary space constitutes one small front of what might be termed a "communications battle" against slavery. However, Linda was definitely not alone in waging such a communications battle: the entire nation in the antebellum era participated in the battle, in which the postal network and the dissemination of newspapers served as crucial areas of struggle for political dominion between the abolitionists and the antiabolitionists. Initially serving as a staple platform for disseminating abolitionist views in the South, the post office became the target for antiabolitionists' virulence, the most infamous incident of which occurred in 1835 at a post office in Charleston. Angry Southerners seriously attacked the editors of newspapers that supported the abolitionist cause: William Lloyd Garrison in 1835 and Elijah P. Lovejoy in 1837. The communications revolution, which facilitated the dissemination of political views and telescoped geographical distances in America, not only helped unify but also divided the nation by providing antebellum Americans with a means of propagating divisive political views. Against this historical backdrop, Linda Brent's communications battle in her small garret can be seen as constituting an important part of a lager battle over slavery, a battle which Michael T. Gilmore aptly terms "the war on words."[41]

The Heroic Slave Mother

Solitude and gender are intimately connected in slave narratives. Slave narratives commonly foreground solitary figures: Solomon Northup, Henry Box Brown, Henry Bibb, and Frederick Douglass all escaped on their own save for occasional help from others along the way. As Valerie Smith puts it, "most of the narratives by men represent

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[41] See Gilmore's *The War on Words: Slavery, Race, and Free Speech in American Literature.*

the life in slavery and the escape as essentially solitary journeys" (Smith 33). In situating

Jacobs's narrative in this constellation of writing on the institution of slavery, it should be

noted that solitariness and masculinity are closely interwoven with one another in many

of the most famous male slave narratives. Not a slave narrative but a novella, Frederick

Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1852) offers a good example of this connection.

Highlighting its protagonist's masculine character, the narrative represents Madison

Washington as a solitary man of independence. Mr. Listwell, "a Northern traveller,"

happens to catch "the sound of a human voice, apparently engaged in earnest

conversation." Listwell naturally wonders, "To whom can he be speaking? . . . He seems

to be alone" (8). He soon discovers Madison, who is deeply engaged in a "soliloquy" (8)

in which he declares his determination to flee slavery: "But here am I, a man,—yes, a

man!—with thoughts and wishes, with powers and faculties. . . . I am no coward. Liberty

I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it" (8). Madison then emphasizes his own

physical strength: "These trusty legs, or these sinewy arms shall place me among the free"

(9). The narrator proceeds to underscore the masculinity of Madison's body:

> Madison was of manly form. Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong. In his
>
> movements he seemed to combine, with the strength of the lion, a lion's elasticity.
>
> His torn sleeves disclosed arms like polished iron. . . . His whole appearance
>
> betokened Herculean strength. . . . He was just the man you would choose when
>
> hardships were to be endured, or danger to be encountered,—intelligent and brave.
>
> He had the head to conceive, and the hand to execute. In a word, he was one to be
>
> sought as a friend, but to be dreaded as an enemy. (10)

In the solitary space of the woods, Madison's masculinity is expressed both in terms of his emphatic declaration of independence and his physical strength. Together with Madison's consistent use of the first-person "I" in his soliloquy as well as the narrator's description of him as a manly figure, the scene forges an association between masculinity, solitude, and fortitude in the fight against slavery. In his own slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), too, Douglass dramatizes his physical strength in his fight with a white overseer named Covey: "I resolved to fight and suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat. . . . This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my manhood" (*Narrative* 54). Featuring masculine figures resisting the institution of slavery, both of Douglass's narratives share the implicit assumption that the attainment of freedom requires both physical and mental strength, and that each of these qualities is associated with masculinity. Valerie Smith aptly observes that "The conventions of the male-authored narratives thus conflate the experience of slavery and freedom with prevailing definitions of masculinity" (xxx).[42]

Douglass's emphases on Madison's and his own masculinity stand in stark contrast to the description of Linda Brent's weakness and vulnerability as a female slave. When Linda is first brought to Dr. Flint's house after the decease of her kind mistress, she is described as a very weak figure who, in every respect imaginable, represents the antithesis of Madison's masculine image: "When we [Linda and her brother] entered our

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[42] Valerie Smith also observes: "The slave narrative typically extolls the hero's stalwart individuality. And the narratives of male slaves often link the escape to freedom to the act of physically subduing the master. . . . By mythologizing rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographical mobility, the narratives enshrine cultural definitions of masculinity" (Smith 33-34).

new home we encountered cold looks, cold words, and cold treatment. We were glad when the night came. On my narrow bed I moaned and wept, I felt so desolate and alone" (12). Being "alone" for Madison and Linda thus appears to mean completely different things. For Madison, solitariness serves as a prelude to his heroic fight against slavery, while for Linda it represents her weakness and isolation as a slave woman constantly subject to her male master's sexual proposals.

Women are often found in isolated states in early African American writing.[43] For one, Frado in Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) is orphaned and left alone in the world: "Why can't I die? Oh, what have I to live for? No one cares for me only to get my work" (75). Left alone, Frado is too weak to resist poor treatment from whites, passively enduring her adverse fate. The heroine of William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), a captured fugitive slave, expresses her sense of loneliness: "For many days, uncheered by the voice of kindness, alone, hopeless, desolate, she waited for the time to arrive when the chains were to be placed on her limbs, and she returned to her inhuman and unfeeling owner" (181). These narratives each carry an implicit association between isolation, femininity, and sentimentality, whereas, as Valerie Smith notes, in male slave narratives "the path to freedom was marked by the acquisition of literacy, the physical mastery over the slaveholder or overseer, and the solitary journey North." "[T]he narrators of male-authored accounts were able to represent themselves as solitary figures," she maintains,

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[43] In their studies on the history of solitude, John D. Barbour and Philip Koch concur that the Western tradition has excluded women from the purview of solitude. Barbour observes: "In Western culture, solitude has usually been denied to women by social custom, law, and powerful male authorities" (Barbour 156). Koch agrees with Barbour, noting that "solitude is not valuable for women. Solitude, it insists, has always been a male prerogative, a male rite of passage, a male quest for self-knowledge and cosmic wisdom" (Koch 249). For a detailed discussion of women and solitude, see Wear's *The Center of Web: Women and Solitude*.

"because the circumstances of their captivity granted them a greater degree of relative autonomy than that allowed to female slaves" (Smith xxvii-xxviii).

Here it behooves us to define the use of the term "solitude" as distinct from the word "isolation," since the state of being alone can be described both as solitude and isolation. In the case of Madison, his solitude is empowering, according him independent agency free from the constraints of slavery. On the other hand, the weakness and vulnerability that female slaves are often shown to possess in female slave narratives suggests a sense of disempowering isolation, not solitude. Furthermore, solitude should also be distinguished from loneliness. As noted earlier, in an attempt to define solitude, Philip Koch opposes solitude to loneliness by noting that "Loneliness is the unpleasant feeling of longing for some kind of human interaction. . . . Solitude, however, is not an emotion" (33). Solitude, in Koch's terms, is a neutral state of being, devoid of "the inherent negativity of loneliness" (45). In the solitary garret, Jacobs experiences loneliness, as is evident from her repeated shedding of tears. However, as we shall see, contrary to Koch's understanding, in *Incidents* loneliness and solitude do not cancel each other out; a negative sense of loneliness and a positive sense of solitude instead coexist. While feeling an intense sense of loneliness, Jacobs also discovers a potent value of solitude in the garret as she engages with multiple communications media.

Linda Brent initially appears to be yet another vulnerable isolated female figure in the lineage of African American writing in the antebellum era. However, her narrative is quite distinct from other writings on female slaves because it is the story of empowering solitude rather than one of disempowering isolation. Her narrative unsettles an easy binary between manly solitude and female isolation by claiming her aloneness in the

garret specifically as empowering solitude. As mentioned earlier, in her solitary garret Linda weeps "bitter tears." Tears, the most iconic symbol of sentimental novels, are a key identifier of feminine sentimentality. There can be no doubt that Jacobs wrote under the influence of sentimental fiction then holding cultural sway and that she consciously employed its tactics to appeal to white female audiences.[44] However, to understand Linda's aloneness as representative of femininity alone and belonging solely to the genre of sentimental narrative would be to oversimplify *Incidents*'s complex engagement with gender. Despite many expressions of loneliness and vulnerability throughout, the narrative also presents Linda as having a combative, manly attitude toward slavery—as well as toward solitude.

Early in the narrative, Jacobs writes, "The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered" (19). Toward the middle of the narrative, she also states: "I must fight my battle alone. I had a woman's pride, a mother's love for my children. . . . I had a determined will" (70). Here, Linda comingles her maternal love for her children with a masculine language of "fight" and "battle." While appearing to subscribe to her era's ideology of the cult of true womanhood—the cultural expectation that women should assume values such as piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness (Welter 1)—Linda actually represents a peculiar amalgam of female motherhood and masculine militancy, thereby assuming a hybrid subjectivity. She is indeed a fighter to protect her own safety and her children. Twice in the narrative Linda uses the word "weapon."[45] First, in reference to her having given birth

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[44] For Jacobs's tactical use of popular sentimental fiction, see Smith 36-37, 43 and Yellin 145.
[45] Frances Smith Foster observes that African American women from the colonial period "used the Word as both a tool and a weapon to correct, to create, and to confirm their visions of life as it was and as it could become" (Foster 2). Yellin also notes: "Characterizing their situation as a war,

to a child with Mr. Sands, she writes: "My strongest weapon with him [Dr. Flint] was gone" (50). Then, remarking on her hidden place, she states: "Thus far I had outwitted him [Dr. Flint], and I triumphed over it. Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants" (83). In these instances, Linda refers to her own femininity (giving birth to a child with a white man) and to her cunning as "weapons" to combat her enemies, which include Dr. Flint particularly and the institution of slavery more broadly. Lacking the physical strength of a character such as Madison, Linda has to rely on other means of resistance. For her, literacy, or the ability to communicate, is a primary weapon. In her discussion of *Incidents*, Valerie Smith argues, "as long as the rhetoric of the slave narrative identifies freedom and independence of thought with manhood, it lacks a category for describing the achievements of the tenacious black woman" (Smith 35). However, *Incidents* illustrates methods of resistance and escape that differ markedly from those depicted in male slave narratives through the depiction of Linda's engagement with communications media.[46]

Female militancy is quite unique in the lineage of female-authored slave narratives. Henry Louis Gates observes that black female writers since Phillis Wheatley "evolved in the matrilineal line of descent" (Gates x). Indeed, in keeping with this matrilineal tradition, the genre of women's slave narratives almost invariably emphasizes

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they [Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs] present themselves engaged in struggles for freedom, and they successfully invent new identities and new communities, emerging as self-liberated liberating women, tried by fire" (Yellin 79).

[46] David Henkin observes: "Unable to appear in public in her home town, Jacobs nonetheless managed to orchestrate and time the movements of a letter along a round-trip journey between North Carolina and New York and throw her pursuers off the trail by means of an impersonal and authoritative postmark. Whereas Burns's correspondence fulfilled the classic promise of a postal system to transport distant speakers and incarnate absent bodies, Jacobs's ruse underscored other, more modern, features of the post that could prove useful to fugitives from the law" (Henkin 33).

mother figures. William Andrews notes that "the dramatic scenes in the autobiographies

of Jackson, Delaney, and Burton are those that depict the herculean (and usually

successful) efforts of slave mothers to keep their families together in slavery or to reunite

them after emancipation" (Andrews xxxi).[47] Women's slave narratives, he argues,

"celebrate their mother as examples of genuine female heroism" (xxx), a kind of heroism

that runs counter to the manly, militant heroism found in Douglass's Madison in *The*

Heroic Slave. In her discussion of *Incidents*, Jean Fagan Yellin emphatically employs the

word "heroic" to describe Jacobs's character: "Presenting herself as a heroic slave

mother . . . Jacobs articulates her struggle to assert her womanhood and projects a new

kind of female hero" (Yellin xxi).[48] Of import here is that Yellin associates Jacobs's

heroism specifically with motherhood: "Jacobs presents Linda Brent in terms of

motherhood, the most valued 'feminine' role" (xxxvii). However, an easy connection

between female heroism and motherhood is worth calling into question. Jacobs's

narrative, I suggest, complicates common gender stereotypes by inscribing Linda's sense

of motherhood with a latent militancy, as well as by claiming what might usually be

regarded as female isolation as empowering solitude.

What historians have called the cult of true womanhood, a cultural ideology that

dictated the conduct of white women, also extended to define African American women

in antebellum America. Pertinent in this regard is another female slave narrative, *The*

History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave (1831). Interestingly, the editor's afterword

to the narrative finds faults in Prince's resistant nature: "Her chief faults, so far as we

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[47] Noting the fact that most slave narratives were related by men, Foster argues that "black men shared the nineteenth century's predilection for defining women in terms of manners, morals, and motherhood and for limiting the female protagonist to the genteel writing designed for the woman reader" (66). Also see Foster 112.

[48] Foster also describes Linda as a "heroic fugitive protagonist" (Foster 103). Also see Smith 112.

have discovered them, are, a somewhat violent and hasty temper, and a considerable

share of natural pride and self-importance" (35). This charge is surprising, as Mary's

"violent" temper and "natural pride" are precisely the traits that help her endure the brutal

treatment she receives during her years of enslavement. Such a commentary reveals the

prevalent assumption of the era that, while being resistant and forceful for male slaves

were celebratory for the cause of abolitionism, for female slaves, these masculine

attributes ran counter to the era's mythology of true womanhood in the nineteenth

century. As Jacqueline Bacon and Rian Bowie have demonstrated, African American

women were frequently subjected to this gender ideology attached to white womanhood

of the period. Given the matrilineal lineage of female-authored slave narratives, it is

worth questioning to what degree Jacobs's narrative conformed with or diverged from the

cult of true womanhood in antebellum America. Linda is certainly portrayed as a

maternal figure who is constantly concerned for her children; yet she occupies a unique

position in the matrilineal lineage of female black writing in terms of her mixture of a

maternal femininity and masculine militancy.

Recent scholarship on *Incidents* has shed light on the fact that Lydia Maria Child,

an editor of *Incidents*, excised the text's last chapter, "A Tribute to Brown."[49] Child made

the executive decision to cut the chapter on John Brown, a militant abolitionist whose

raid on Harper's Ferry (1859) preceded the publication of *Incidents* by only a few years.[50]

Caleb Smith and Albert Tricomi concur that the overt militancy of the chapter made

Child hesitate to include it in the published version of the narrative. Tricomi argues that

"[Child] directed [Jacobs's manuscript] away from the combustible militarism of

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[49] For the composition history of the chapter, see Yellin 140.

[50] For Jacobs's decision to write this chapter, see Yellin 140 and Mills.

[Brown's raid] . . . and foregrounded those melodramatic and sentimental parts illustrating the destruction of families" (Tricomi 219). Smith and Tricomi both gesture toward the role Child played in sentimentalizing and feminizing Jacobs's narrative by suppressing a potentially controversial chapter in the fear that she might be regarded by her contemporaries as an incendiary abolitionist. This overt suppression of militancy testifies to Linda's latent militancy comingled with her pronounced maternity. To illuminate this suppressed militancy in the text and to better appreciate Linda's version of "heroism" requires examining her use of communications media in her struggle with Dr. Flint.

A Communications Battle

Frances Smith Foster describes Linda's struggle with slavery as "a battle fought less on the physical level than on intellectual, emotional, and spiritual planes" (Foster 103). In this battle, Linda's literacy serves as her cardinal weapon against the slave community's dominant patriarchal order. In her early, happier years as a slave, Linda was fortunate enough to be taught to read and write by her kind mistress: "While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell, and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory" (11). Jacobs's literacy merits attention with regard to the narrative's engagement with gender, as there appears to exist a gendered difference between Linda's (female) literacy and that of many male ex-slave narrators. In slave narratives written by men, such as those by Henry Bibb, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and many others, the attainment of literacy is often highlighted because

"there is an inextricable link in the Afro-American tradition between literacy and freedom" (Gates ix). In her study on African Americans' attainment of literacy, Heather Andrea Williams notes that male slaves had a higher chance of gaining literacy because "[men] were more likely hired out or sent on errands into town, thus acquiring greater knowledge of how to move about without detection as well as greater opportunity to meet people who might shield them from discovery" (Williams 8). Katherine Clay Bassard concurs by observing that "It was easier for a male slave narrator like Frederick Douglass to 'cash in' on the investment of literacy than it was for Harriet Jacobs or Harriet E. Wilson, both of whom were circumscribed in the culture on the basis of race and gender" (Bassard 119).[51] These critical insights suggest that Linda's literacy, gained in the early stages of her life, is quite exceptional compared to other female slaves of her time, and the association of masculinity with literacy serves to further blur her gender role.[52]

Many fugitive male slaves in one way or another made use of their literacy or their ability to manipulate communications media to achieve their freedom. For instance, Solomon Northup actively utilized the postal system in his attempt to flee to the North.[53] Henry "Box" Brown famously mailed himself to the North. Much like these male slaves, Linda Brent utilizes her literacy to achieve freedom from enslavement, though in a different and more indirect way. Daneen Wardrop has noted the positive value of Linda's literacy in *Incidents*: "As a slave, she owns—because of her ability to write—a weapon used by the slave culture to maintain oppression. . . . It is not the scene of learning to

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[51] Christopher Hagar also notes: "Enslaved men may have acquired literacy with somewhat greater frequency than women" (Hagar 6).

[52] Foster notes that "Harriet Jacobs was challenging at least three closely held convictions." One of them, she asserts, is that "she was literate and well read, but 'literate' women were middle-class and 'middle-class' women were white" (Foster 105).

[53] Trish Loughran notes that "Northup's experience of slavery exactly coincides with his lack of access to the federal post office and the basic materials (pen, ink, and paper)" (Loughran 394).

write initially but the scene in which Linda makes use of writing as an instrument of agency and power toward liberation that I target as the quintessential victory in *Incidents*" (Wardrop 210). In other words, Linda's literacy is inherently subversive because such a competence was predominantly possessed by white men, or if by a black person, by men alone.[54] Linda Brent inserts herself into this highly gendered and racial territory of literacy to fight against slavery.

However, in addition to showing its positive attributes, Jacobs shows the drawbacks of being literate for female slaves. While Linda's literacy appears to give her a privileged power uncommon to other female slaves, it also proves dangerous for her when she moves into Dr. Flint's house after the death of her kind mistress. Dr. Flint recurrently approaches Linda in efforts to clandestinely communicate with her through letters:

One day he [Dr. Flint] caught me teaching myself to write. He frowned, as if he was not well pleased; but I suppose he came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme. Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand. I would return them, saying, "I can't read them,

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[54] Wardrop also notes the difference between Frederick Douglass's narrative and Jacobs's *Incidents* in terms of their acquisition of literacy:
"One major difference between the two writers is found in the way each develops the critically heralded scenes of learning to read and write. I concentrate here on scenes of writing: for Douglass, of course, the scene of writing takes on enormous impact as he develops into a male adult attempting to gain his freedom, though he learns to write surreptitiously, while Linda learns to write overtly, taught early in life by her white mistress. For Linda, to write might afford more options in her maneuvering through the white network of power plays, but at the same time, problematically, it renders her more susceptible to Dr. Flint's harassment and pursuit" (Wardrop 209-10).

sir." "Can't you?" he replied; "then I must read them to you." He always finished the reading by asking, "Do you understand?" (29)

This passage catches a revelatory moment for Dr. Flint, who is at first discomfited by Linda's literacy, but soon realizes its potential for his sexual purposes. As Elizabeth Hewitt notes, "The fact that Flint assaults Brent with letters significantly revises the status of literacy in Jacobs's narrative, and unlike so many other slave narratives, reading and writing are aligned not with freedom, but subjugation" (Hewitt 125). The narrative makes it clear that Linda is better off being solitary than in communication with her lustful master. Dr. Flint attempts to turn his slave's literacy, a skill typically undesired by slave masters in their slaves, into a useful instrument for private communication with Linda, one that helps him elude his wife's jealous scrutiny. Wardrop notes that "Linda's recognition of the danger of the written word" (Wardrop 219) upsets the associated connection between literacy and freedom found in many slave narratives, which critics have tended to take for granted.[55] Linda's solitary, independent status is threatened due to her ability to enter a communication circuit of writing. Literacy—a unique, liberating weapon for slaves in many slave narratives— ironically poses a danger to Linda.

In considering the topic of literacy, an important historical subtext of *Incidents* is Nat Turner's Rebellion, which occurs during the timeframe of the narrative: "Not far from this time Nat Turner's insurrection broke out; and the news threw our town into great commotion. Strange that they should be alarmed, when their slaves were so

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[55] Indeed, *Incidents* has led some critics to call this equation into critical question. For instance, Carla Kaplan argues: "The celebration of Jacobs's agency has often rested on valorizing the act of writing itself as a signal achievement of personal power. The conditions slave narrators faced make any published self-authored account a remarkable achievement. Historically, (il)literacy was used as a measure of slaves' (in)humanity" (Kaplan 52).

'contented and happy'! But so it was" (52). As Kim Warren argues, after the insurrection

"anti-literacy laws became more entrenched in southern culture" (Warren 31).

Christopher Hagar also observes that, together with David Walker's *Appeal* in published

in 1829, the Nat Turner Rebellion fortified the Southerners' resistance against slave

literacy: "The circulation of the *Appeal*—Walker explicitly charged literate blacks to read

it aloud to their 'more ignorant brethren'—together with Turner's own ability to read and

write focused panicked southerners' attention on slave literacy as one of their greatest

worries" (Hagar 41). Linda's acquisition of literacy should be placed in this historical

context of the Southern fear about slave literacy and rebellion. What is unique about

Incidents is the fact that Dr. Flint, despite the era's discomfort at the subversive power of

slave literacy, seeks to turn Linda's literacy to his advantage.

The constant threat posed by Dr. Flint to Linda's sexuality accords aloneness a

positive value for her, as it is imperative for her safety that she avoid communication with

her master in written form. In the early part of the narrative, a solitary space represents a

haven from her master's seduction. When she first arrives at Dr. Flint's house, Linda

notes: "On my narrow bed I moaned and wept, I felt so desolate and alone" (12). Despite

her lament, however, her aloneness begins to assume a positive value when, in his efforts

to court her, Dr. Flint's written notes begin to invade her solitary space. Linda's room,

prior to the garret that appears later in the narrative, represents a safe haven for Linda

until Dr. Flint's letters begin to invade her private realm: "His visits were less frequent;

but his busy spirits could not remain quiet. He employed my brother in his office, and he

was made the medium of frequent notes and messages to me" (52). As the narrative

progresses, Linda's aloneness increasingly represents a state of safety and immunity from

Dr. Flint's dangerous courting. The irony of this situation is that literacy, so often a

weapon of liberation for male slave narratives, turns on Linda to become a threat.

The value of being alone undergoes a transition as the narrative unfolds. Toward

the middle of the narrative when Linda imprisons herself within a garret, her ability to

communicate in written form becomes a combative power against Dr. Flint. Linda

ingenuously manipulates this power to secure her safety from her master. Despite the fact

that she remains close to Dr. Flint in the South, she fabricates letters so that they appear

to be sent from New York:

> I resolved to match my cunning against his cunning. In order to make him believe
>
> that I was in New York, I resolved to write him a letter dated from that place. I
>
> sent for my friend Peter, and asked him if he knew any trustworthy seafaring
>
> person, who would carry such a letter to New York, and put it in the post office
>
> there. . . . I expressed a wish for a New York paper, to ascertain the names of
>
> some of the streets. . . . Early the next morning, I seated myself near the little
>
> aperture to examine the newspaper. It was a piece of the New York Herald; and,
>
> for once, the paper that systematically abuses the colored people, was made to
>
> render them a service. Having obtained what information I wanted concerning
>
> streets and numbers, I wrote two letters, one to my grandmother, the other to Dr.
>
> Flint. (101)

Through the manipulation of her letters as well as her subversive use of newspapers (the

Herald was a pro-slavery paper), Linda makes it appear as if she were in New York, not

in the South. Linda "commences using the proslavery *New York Herald* against itself,

sitting down with it by the aperture or gimlet hole, probably to give her light by which to

read" (Wardrop 220). As Yellin notes, the *Herald* "openly expressed its antiblack, anti-

abolitionist bias [and] consistently opposed emancipation" (Yellin 375). The fact that

Linda talks critically of proslavery newspapers in the North and targets Northern white

women as her probable readership indicates *Incidents'*s implicit critique of the North

deeply embedded deep within the narrative.[56] Linda's manipulation of the newspaper is

ironic, because at a time when abolitionist materials were increasingly being suppressed

across the South, she used a pro-slavery paper to fashion her escape.

The communications battle waged by Linda continues in the form of exchanges of

letters. If Linda fabricates letters, Dr. Flint also does the same: "[Dr. Flint] had

suppressed the letter I [Linda] wrote to grandmother, and prepared a substitute of his own"

(102). Further on in the narrative, Mr. Thorne, a relative of Dr. Flint, uses letters to

inform him of Linda's whereabouts in the North: "Mr. Thorne came out with a letter in

his hand, which he tore up and scattered about. Ellen was sweeping the yard at the time,

and having her mind full of suspicions of him, she picked up the pieces and carried them

to the children, saying, 'I wonder who Mr. Thorne has been writing to.' . . . The servants

said they saw him go out with a letter in his hand, and they supposed he had gone to the

post office" (139). However, the threat of white men's letters is fought against with

letters as well: "[M]y fears were confirmed by a letter from the south, warning me to be

on my guard, because Mrs. Flint openly declared that her daughter could not afford to

lose so valuable a slave as I was" (152). Linda's fight against slavery represents a battle

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[56] Furthermore, when Linda finally reaches the North, in fear of being detected by her pursuers, she "kept close watch of the newspapers for arrivals" (152).

in which, through her literacy and shrewd manipulation of communications circuits, an

enslaved woman seeks to outmaneuver the communicative abilities of white men.[57]

To understand Dr. Flint's reaction to Linda's fabricated letters, it is important to

note that letters were prohibitively expensive in the late 1830s, the period in which Linda

forged her letters. David Henkin observes that "by far the most serious obstacle to the

widespread use of the mail before 1845 . . . was financial. Letter postage, which was

assessed based on distance and the number of sheets enclosed, could be extremely costly

(typically to the addressee, who most often bore the burden of postage prior to 1851)"

(Henkin 18). This information indicates that *Incidents* features the use of letters before

they became widely available to the general populace. In this era in which addressees

typically paid postage costs, if a recipient deemed a letter unworthy of its postage cost,

one could refuse to receive the letter. However, for Dr. Flint of Jacobs's narrative, letters

from Linda were too dear for him to reject. Knowledge of the high postage costs to be

paid in the era indexes Dr. Flint's strong desire to maintain communication with his

cherished slave.

If Linda's struggle against slavery is a communications battle, it is also a battle

against imposed silence. Dr. Flint frequently demands that Linda be silent in order to save

his public integrity: "Dr. Flint swore he would kill me, if I was not as silent as the

grave. . . . In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the

north?" (27-28). In a more telling example, Dr. Flint says to Linda: "'Silence!' he

exclaimed, in a thundering voice." (35). Confronted with such injunction, Linda feels

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[57] In a similar vein, Elizabeth Hewitt identifies Linda's struggle specifically as an "epistolary
battle" (Hewitt 130) because of her engagement with letters. However, my argument is more
inclusive than Hewitt's in that I take both letters and newspapers as important means for Linda's
struggle for freedom.

powerless: "I felt too feeble to dispute with him, and listened to his remarks in silence" (52). The trajectory of the narrative from such imposed silence to Linda's active engagement with communications media marks her resistance to white men's language. Michael T. Gilmore argues that Linda "is unable to speak for fear of revealing her location and soon contracts, from immobility, stiffness in the face and tongue" (Gilmore 5). However, specifically in such a state of immobility in the garret, she seeks to resist imposed silence through writing letters. She employs her command of language to fight white men's language that seeks to silence her. By a "communications battle," I intend to index not only Linda's employment of communications media but also her use of language against slaveholder's language. This communications battle is an urgent form of resistance in that Linda engages with the act of writing as a means of liberation, rather than as an instrument tying the enslaved person to the legal structure of slavery through bills of sale and other "proofs" of possession.

The interesting paradox of Linda's solitude is that she becomes most communicative with the outside world in the solitary garret. The meaning and value of solitude become ambivalent and complicated in this space. During her stay in the garret, Linda's ability to read newspapers and write false letters helps her attain freedom. Linda is physically dissociated from the outside world in the garret, yet it is there that she places herself squarely in a communications circuit connected to the outside world. In solitude, she reads newspapers and forges letters intended to deceive Dr. Flint into believing that she is in the North. As Yellin rightly notes, Linda Brent uses her garret as a "war room from which to spy on her enemy and to wage psychological warfare against him" (Yellin

xxxix).[58] However, Yellin leaves the meaning of the garret as a "war room" unexplored. My contention is that Linda's solitary space constitutes a site of an intense communications battle. In one sense, the garret represents an individual and private space immune to the invasion of Dr. Flint's letters. In another, it represents a space of solitary confinement that keeps her in bondage. In yet a third, it represents a haven that Linda converts into a communications hub. Thus, just as Henry Box Brown's box does, the garret oscillates between being a site of liberation and one of bondage. Linda's confinement in the garret is half voluntary in that she chooses to hide herself there, while at the same time half involuntary because there is no other option for her.

Nonetheless, it has to be stressed that some choice is involved in Linda's being brought into the garret. Linda's act of choice is significant because slavery has deprived her of almost any form of agency. In the narrative, she frequently laments her lack of choice while enslaved: "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice" (46). Later on, Linda emphasizes her time in the garret as an act of choice: "Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one; and it was so compared with the fate of others" (92). At another moment, she states: "My friends feared I should become a cripple for life; and I was so weary of my life imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on" (101). Although it might seem that Linda is forced into isolation by the trial of slavery, her seven-year stay in the garret

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[58] Also see Yellin 90.

represents a very purposeful act of resistance to slavery. Describing herself in the garret as "the poor captive in her dungeon," Linda repeatedly mentions her status therein as "imprisonment" (116). However, she also calls the garret a "retreat" (91), a safe haven immune to external threats. If slavery objectifies her as an attractive object of Dr. Flint's sexual desire, Linda's solitary sojourn in the garret accords her independent—albeit in a limited sense—agency and an empowering sense of solitude.

Abolitionism in the Age of the Communications Revolution

Linda Brent's battle with Dr. Flint involves two kinds of communications media: letters and newspapers. The communications battle between these two figures is best understood in the narrative's specific historical context. Harriet Jacobs ran away from Dr. Flint's domicile in 1835 and managed to escape to New York in 1842 after seven years of confinement. That the incidents of Jacobs's narrative occurred during this time period is significant, as the 1830s and the 1840s witnessed the beginnings of the communications revolution. Examination of the developments in the postal system and newspapers throughout the era would allow an understanding that *Incidents* is in many ways historically conditioned by what was occurring in contemporary culture and that Jacobs ingenuously tapped into this newly emergent communications environment to fight slavery. What might appear to be Jacobs's individual battle waged from the small, solitary garret can actually be situated more broadly in the national battle over slavery of her time. Fighting virtually alone in the garret, however, Linda was not alone in participating in this large-scale dispute.

In antebellum America, the postal system and slavery were closely interwoven and stood in a tense relationship. Richard R. John notes that the postal system was a double-edged sword for America, because while it helped bring the nation together following the passages of the Postal Acts of 1792, 1845, and 1851, it also helped to tear the nation apart by providing abolitionists with a means to disseminate messages to the South, which in turn spurred anger and violence on the part of the slaveholders, thus accelerating the sectional divide in the nation.[59] A telling incident in this regard occurred in 1835 at a post office in Charleston, South Carolina. A small group of men broke into the office: "The intruders belonged to a Charleston vigilante society . . . and the purpose of their assault was to destroy the bundle of several thousand abolitionist periodicals" (John 257).[60] The efforts of these men to suppress abolitionist print materials led to a succession of violent incidents in antebellum America. In this cultural milieu, Dr. Flint's effort to "suppress the letter [Linda] wrote" (102) is a representative sign of the South's attitude toward the mail system in the era. In 1835, William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the antislavery paper *The Liberator*, "was dragged by a rope through the Boston streets by an anti-abolitionist mob" (Reynolds 95). In 1837, Elijah P. Lovejoy, another antislavery editor, was killed by a proslavery mob. These violent incidents testify to the subversive threat print media posed to the anti-abolitionists who feared the dissemination of antislavery messages that might be detrimental to their political and commercial interests. Post-office and the postal system, in other words, constituted a battleground for abolitionism.

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[59] Paul Starr also believes that communications held the young republic together (82).
[60] Starr remarks upon this incident: "The South had an extensive postal network, but it imposed censorship on the mails" (108).

Just as Linda and Dr. Flint seek to outmaneuver one another through their respective manipulations of letters, the abolitionists and the antiabolitionists sought to do the same through the postal network. John offers a compelling account of how the abolitionists depended on the postal system to disseminate their political views across the South:

> The postal system boosted the abolitionists' cause in a variety of ways. Most obviously, it facilitated the transmission of an enormous volume of information to a target audience over a geographically vast expanse. During the height of the mass mailing in the summer of 1835, the abolitionists sent into the slaveholding states no fewer than 175,000 separate pieces, or roughly half of the total number of items that the entire New York City periodical press ordinarily sent through the mail in a comparable period of time. . . . Even more important, the postal system provided the abolitionist with an ingenious way to circumvent the formidable constraints that would otherwise have prevented them from agitating the slavery issue in the slaveholding states. (John 261)

In order to counter the abolitionists' attack, "the antiabolitionists mounted a counteroffensive that quickly dwarfed the abolitionist making in its scale and intensity and that, ironically enough, given its organizers' determination to stifle debate, soon thrust the slavery issue onto the national political agenda, where it would remain more or less continuously from 1835 until the Civil War" (John 268-69). Furthermore, the antiabolitionists sought to prevent the dissemination of abolitionist mail by imposing

censorship on the mails (John 270 and Starr 108).[61] In his study on the relationship

between abolitionism and censorship, Michael T. Gilmore claims that "[n]o one living in

the mid-nineteenth century would have presumed an absolute right to free speech"

(Gilmore 21). For fear of the printed word's potential to instigate rebellion, the United

States government enforced the so-called Gag Law in 1836, which was designed "to

prohibit the reading of abolitionist petitions within the halls of Congress," targeting

abolitionists as agents of sedition and insurrection. Following this legislation,

"Washington City ordinance imitated their example in forbidding both slaves and

freedmen from reading *The Liberator*, a law designed to prevent organized insurrection

among the most dangerous members of the abolitionist reading public, the enslaved

themselves" (Fanuzzi 21-23). As Gilmore puts it, an "ideological *cordon sanitaire*" was

erected around the Mason-Dixon line (Gilmore 2; italics original). In her use of written

words, Linda Brent enters into this fierce battleground over slavery, where written words

were a source of contention for both sides of the political spectrum.

Just as we have described Thoreau's solitude as "networked solitude," it is also

possible to see Linda's solitude in a similar manner because in solitude, fully aware of the

potent connectivity of the postal network, her mind was networked with the outside world.

A telling case that attests to her networked solitude is the case of Anthony Burns, a

fugitive who was imprisoned due to the Fugitive Slave Law. David Henkin provides an

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[61] "In Garrison's reading of the abolitionists' persecution, the law that demonstrated the state's monopolization of this force was the Pinckney Gag Law, which, like the Alien and Sedition Acts, depended to a surprising extent on the precedent and logic of libel prosecution. . . . [T]he stated intent of the 1836 Gag Law was to prohibit the reading of abolitionist petitions within the halls of Congress. . . . A Washington city ordinance imitated their example in forbidding both slaves and freedmen from reading *The Liberator*, a law designed to prevent organized insurrection among the most dangerous members of the abolitionist reading public, the enslaved themselves" (Fanuzzi 21-23).

account of how, in ways reminiscent of Linda's maneuver, Anthony Burns made use of

the postal network to connect to the outside world from his prison cell:

> From the depths of his solitary confinement, six letters composed by Burns's
>
> manacled hands made their way out the window, to the post office, inside a U.S.
>
> mailbag, and ultimately to destinations as far away as Massachusetts, where one
>
> of them reached his lawyer, Richard Henry Dana. . . . A man whose status as
>
> chattel under the law of Virginia had had just been reaffirmed by the United
>
> States government . . . managed to use the facilities of the federal postal system,
>
> including those housed in Virginia, to engage in confidential correspondence with
>
> his abolitionist lawyer. . . . Burns's success depended not only on his ingenuity
>
> and courage, but also on a broadly shared awareness of the existence and
>
> accessibility of a national postal network. (Henkin 1-2)

Just as in Burns's case, Linda was fully cognizant of the connectivity that the postal

network in the age of a communications revolution afforded. As a slave woman who

inhabited what Henkin calls "the postal age," Linda Brent joined a national

communications network in which mid-nineteenth century Americans increasingly

participated. As Henkin observes, "During the middle decades of the nineteenth century,

ordinary Americans began participating in a regular network of long-distance

communication, engaging in relationships with people they did not see" (Henkin 2).

Therefore, while Linda's ingenuous employment of communications media is certainly

unique, it is also quite *ordinary* in that she tapped into a means of communication widely available to the general populace of the time.

Empowering Solitude

Incidents offers an eloquent testimony to how the communications revolution played out in the tense relationship between slavemasters and slaves, forming a continuum between a national battle over slavery and Linda's individual struggle for freedom. Above all else, Linda's engagement with communications media serves to empower her by allowing her to assume a hybrid subjectivity that straddles gender and racial divides. In examining gender and race in relation to Linda's narrative, it is important to note that the antebellum postal system was quite inaccessible to the enslaved, both male and female. Henkin describes how slave masters sought to prevent slaves from making use of letters. Referring to Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), Henkin notes, "Solomon Northup's 1853 slave narrative described his own frustrated efforts at 'getting a letter secretly into the post office' and testified directly about the larger obstacle of postmaster who would refuse to mail letters composed by slaves without written authorization from their owners" (Henkin 25). Linda's use of letters represents an effort to infiltrate the protected realm of white slave masters. While Dr. Flint fabricates Linda's letters in the effort to deceive her grandmother into revealing her true whereabouts, Linda seeks to outwit her master by appropriating the very medium he tries to use against her. With this, Linda transgresses gender and racial restraints by engaging in a realm predominantly controlled by white men.

Among others, what distinguishes *Incidents* from other slave narratives is Linda's

sheer lack of physical movement. Bodily strength is a common prerequisite in slave

narratives for any hope of attaining freedom. However, Linda's lack of physical

movement in *Incidents* stands in stark contrast to the manly strength of figures such as

Madison in Douglass's novella. Contrary to Madison's able-bodiedness, Linda's

extended confinement in the garret carries the potential of causing her to become

disabled: "The dread of being disabled was greater than the physical pain I endured" (80).

Such a representation of the garret as a debilitating locus might remind the reader of the

confining space of the slaver in the Middle Passage. Confined and claustrophobic, the

enslaved on the slave ship underwent a physically severe experience. In Linda's

confining space, symbolic of the condition of enslavement, she wages her war on slavery.

However, while her residence in the garret is physically confining, and she is deprived of

nearly all physical movement, physical strength does not really factor into her struggle to

escape to the North. In fact, due to her deprivation of physical movement, she is forced to

rely on a completely different means of resisting slavery from that of many male slaves:

virtual movement through communications media.[62]

A notable feature of letter writing in antebellum America was the association

between a letter and its sender's body. Letters represented their communicants' body,

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[62] One might also recall here Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), a character who attains access to the Northern state by her mythic crossing of the Ohio River: "In that dizzy moment her feet her to her scarce seemed to touch the ground, and a moment brought her to the water's edge. . . . [N]erved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate, with one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond" (54-55). What should be noted here is that Eliza's physical, almost supernatural strength is attributed to her faith in God, which is the point Stowe strove to make throughout her novel. For Stowe, it is only those who believe in God that will be helped. Unlike Stowe's overt association between sentimentality and religiosity in the novel, Jacobs's *Incidents* directs critique at the institution of the Church and its justification of slavery through the Bible.

enabling them to move virtually across vast expanses of the national territory. In her study of the practice of handwriting in nineteenth-century America, Tamara Thornton argues that handwriting gained a new significance in response to the emerging print culture of the era: "It was print that endowed handwriting with its own, new set of symbolic possibilities; script emerged as a medium of the self in contradistinction to print, defined as characteristically impersonal and dissociated from the writer" (Thornton xiii). Thornton views handwriting as "the medium of the self" (30) in calling attention to the dissociation between writing and body: "[I]f print was defined by its dissociation from the hand, the body, and the corporeal individual that created it, then handwritten matter necessarily referred back to the hand, the body, and the individual in new ways. Words transmitted their authors' ideas; scripts, the authors themselves" (29). In the historical context of print culture, letters proved much more connected to a writer's body than the printed word. In the antebellum era, Thornton argues, "the impersonality of the print medium came to be regarded as hazardous" (31). In opposition to print, "Like speech, handwriting was perceived as a transparent medium of the self" (33). When situated on this cusp of a historical transition from handwriting to print, the practice of letter-writing in the antebellum era gained a new significance as a medium that avoids the dissociation between the author and written words. If a letter was a substitute for a writer's bodily presence, then Linda's use of letters can be seen not only as serving to beguile Dr. Flint, but also to virtually transport her bodily presence to the North. Linda's invisible "body," embodied in the form of letters, is able to shuttle between North and South undetected by her pursuers. Physically disempowered in the solitary garret, Linda is nonetheless empowered by her use of letters which enable her to transcend physical distances.

In addition to letters, newspapers serve as a means of enlightenment for Linda. As Elizabeth Hewitt argues, "In *Incidents* Jacobs identifies southern prohibitions against northern newspapers as part of a larger concerted effort to keep the slave community benighted; misinformation as a strategy of subjugation" (Hewitt 122). Indeed, William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator*, "linked the progress of the cause to the circulation of the newspaper and other printed articles" (Fanuzzi xi). At one point in the narrative, Jacobs clearly associates reading newspapers with access to correct information about slavery:

> I have spoken of the pains slaveholders take to give their slaves a bad opinion of the north; but, notwithstanding this, intelligent slaves are aware that they have many friends in the Free States. Even the most ignorant have some confused notions about it. They knew that I could read; and I was often asked if I had seen any thing in the newspapers about white folks over in the big north, who were trying to get their freedom for them. Some believe that the abolitionists have already made them free and that it is established by law, but that their masters prevent the law from going into effect. One woman begged me to get a newspaper and read it over. She said her husband told her that the black people had sent world to the queen of 'Merica that they were all slaves; that she didn't believe it, and went to Washington city to see the president about it. (39)

Illiterate slaves are here described as ignorant as to accurate information about their current status in national politics, while Linda is able to access this knowledge in

newspapers. Proverbially speaking, for both slaves and slaveholders, "knowledge is power," as Francis Bacon put it. Historian Richard D. Brown discusses the democratization of communication that occurred in the antebellum era. In the colonial period, information about international commerce, imperial politics, and high culture used to be largely monopolized by a small group of elites, only later gradually trickling down to the lower reaches of the social order. However, with the advent of the transportation revolution and the subsequent communications revolution—which he calls "the democratizing consequences of mass communications" (Brown 243)—access to information gradually became democratized, forming an "informed citizenry" (Brown 292) in American society. Linda in Jacobs's narrative benefits from these "democratizing consequences" of the period, such as her easy access to newspapers. In his discussion of the postal system, Henkin similarly remarks on the inclusiveness of the mail system: "Well-publicized uses of the post by fugitive slaved reinforced the symbolic link between literacy and freedom among African Americans, but they offered a more specific lesson as well. The postal network, though dominated by prosperous merchants, could also accommodate the enslaved, the transient, the dislocated, and the dispossessed" (Henkin 34). In this age of the communications revolution, which afforded even enslaved people a certain amount of access to media—albeit with insurmountable racial and gender barriers to be confronted—Linda was able to take advantage of her literacy to the maximum.

In recognizing Linda's engagement with newspapers, it is noteworthy that, as Thomas C. Leonard states, newspapers in the antebellum era were customarily associated with a male readership: "The notion that newspapers were male discourse had a powerful hold on journalists of Victorian America. The division of reading by gender was the

rationale for allowing things to be said in a news column that could not be said in a magazine or novel" (Leonard 25). Given the gender-division with regard to newspapers, one could argue that Linda's access to newspapers indicates the narrative's another complex engagement with gender. If women—even *white* women—were isolated from the male act of reading newspapers at the time, Linda's reading of the *Herald* stands as a resistant act against dominant gender roles in the South.

Just as letters represent a medium through which Linda and Dr. Flint seek to outwit one another, newspapers represent yet another battleground between the two figures. Immediately after Linda flees from Dr. Flint's house, he proceeds to publish the following public advertisement: "Before night, the following advertisement was posted at every corner, and in every public place for miles round:—'$300 REWARD! Ran away from the subscriber, an intelligent, bright, mulatto girl, named Linda, 21 years of age. . . . DR. FLINT'" (79). Although *Incidents* includes no mention of a newspaper advertisement, James Norcom, the actual Dr. Flint, "ran ads in eight issues (June 30-July 13, 1835) of the daily *American Beacon* (Norfolk, Va.)" (Yellin 370), a newspaper published from 1827-1851.[63] This indicates that both figures were vitally engaged with the newly emergent newspaper culture of the era, as "the 1830s, a remarkable decade in so many ways, marked a revolution in American journalism" (Schudson 14).[64] Acknowledging this background, it becomes clear that Linda's battle with Dr. Flint was historically conditioned in terms of the tools that she made use of. What the narrative describes, in short, is a battle via the newly emergent communications media in which both the slavemaster and the fugitive seek to outmaneuver one another.

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[63] http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/VNP/results.asp?rl=Portsmouth.
[64] The first penny paper in the United States was the *New York Sun*, first published in 1833, followed by several others such as the *Evening Transcript* and *New York Herald* in 1835.

The fact that Linda makes encroachments on the male-dominated communications circuit, while expressing female-coded sentiments such as devotion to her children, points to a discursive gender- and racial-hybridity than a simple set of reversals. In the isolated garret, Linda's subjectivity is liberated from various gender and racial constraints, assuming a more hybrid, fluid character. Focusing on the binary between public and private in Jacobs's text, Miranda Green-Barteet understands the garret as an interstitial space: "Jacobs consciously positions the garret as a border space, one that exists betwixt and between other more clearly defined spaces. . . . Jacobs's garret is interstitial because it exists literally between other spaces of her grandmother's house and because it is undetectable to those who are unaware of it existence" (53). One might extend Green-Barteet's point here to suggest that the garret represents a space wherein Linda can evade the constraints placed on her in terms of gender and race. In the garret, much like a man of her time, she reads newspapers to outwit Dr. Flint. Though confining, the garret creates a "Loophole of Retreat" (91) in the slave community where Linda can act according to her own wishes. As Michelle Burnham has persuasively argued, the phrase "Loophole of Retreat" speaks to two different gendered aspects. The *OED* defines "loophole" in one sense as follows: "A narrow vertical opening, usually widening inwards, cut in a wall or other defense, to allow of the passage of missiles." In a second entry, the word is defined as "A similar opening to look through, or for the admission of light and air."[65] Most readers would understand the word according to this second definition, but given the recurrent theme of militancy throughout Linda's narrative, I suggest that the word latently carries the meaning of the former in Jacobs's text. Male or female, black or white, the solitary garret enables Linda to read newspapers and write

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[65] See Burnham 283.

letters. In this sense, the garret creates a symbolic vacuum in which the rigid boundaries between masculine and feminine, white and black, are provisionally suspended. Despite being located in the South, the garret serves to nullify racial and gender orders that delimit a female slave's sphere, thereby allowing Linda hybrid subjectivity.

Coming Out of the Garret

The preceding discussion has detailed various ways in which Linda Brent's aloneness in the garret served as a catalyst for a battle, one which was conditioned by the communications revolution of the antebellum era. With an ingenious use of communications media, Linda finally succeeds in getting out of the garret to escape to the North, turning what might otherwise be a disempowering isolation into empowering solitude. Yet one question remains: does her emergence from the garret really put an end to her communications battle? The narrative does not culminate in a happy ending merely by affirming the value of solitude; it instead ends by foreshadowing Linda's—or rather Jacobs'—continuing communications battle in an authorial isolation.

Here it is worth calling into question Jean Fagan Yellin's assertion that at the end of the narrative, Linda "gained her triumph in and through the process of recreating herself as the subject of her own discourse" (Yellin 96), particularly because *Incidents* ends on a rather un-triumphant tone. In the penultimate paragraph of *Incidents*, Jacobs writes: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! . . . The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own" (156). As is evident from this passage, Jacobs

continues to struggle nine years after gaining legal freedom.[66] We can read two levels of

isolation being expressed by Jacobs: one experienced by Linda in the garret, and the other

as felt by Jacobs as the author of the narrative. The latter can be understood in relation to

the flourishing African American print culture of Jacobs's era. Despite escaping the

solitary confinement of the garret, I argue, Jacobs's disempowering isolation resurfaced

in her struggle to gain acceptance as an author in print culture of her time.

Jacobs in the present moment of writing her narrative, not Linda in the garret,

expresses her estrangement from the reader: "O reader, can you imagine my joy? No, you

cannot, unless you have been a slave mother" (135). In her "appeal to the reader for

sympathy and understanding" (Hartman 107), Jacobs appears to be frustrated: "I hardly

expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole,

almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven

years" (116). Even after becoming free from slavery and attaining the potential to be an

author, Jacobs might here be read to express anxiety about the relationship between

herself and her white readership. The irony of this possibility is that, when enslaved, it

was essential for her not to communicate with a white master. However, as an author,

Jacobs must communicate with a white readership to tell of the injustices of slavery.

Jacobs writes in her preface, "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am

telling truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in

your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered. . . . In

view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women in the North?" (27). Here,

Jacobs's tone shifts from one of supplication to that of indignation and frustration with

her Northern readers. Examining narratological devices in *Incidents*, Robyn R. Warhol

[66] Harriet Jacobs was purchased in 1852.

argues that despite Jacobs's intimate address to the reader as "you," she expresses a sense of feeling "othered" by her white readers (Warhol 66). Unlike Madison's soliloquy, which is intended not to be heard, but which nonetheless generates a strong response in the white Listwell, Jacobs's recurrent appeals to the reader throughout her narrative express a sense of being othered by a white audience.[67] Based on the earlier distinction between solitude and isolation, we can posit that Jacobs, as a struggling author, experiences disempowering isolation, rather than empowering solitude that informs her confinement in the garret.

As Francis Smith Foster, Jacqueline Bacon, and Rian Bowie discuss, from Phillis Wheatley onward, African American women have striven to make their voices heard in the public sphere despite limitations imposed on them by a confluence of racism and sexism in antebellum America.[68] African American newspapers such as *Freedom's Journal* (1827-1830), *Colored American* (1837-1841), and *Provincial Freeman* (1854-1857), all of which were edited and published by free blacks in the North, furnished black women with a medium to express their concerns, albeit in a "muffled" voice (Bowie

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[67] Fox-Genovese argues, "All autobiographers confront the problem of readers, of the audience to whom their self-representation is addressed. . . . Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson both seem to have assumed that most of their readers would be white abolitionists. Both, especially Harriet Jacobs, also seem to have addressed themselves especially to white, middle-class women. Neither Jacobs nor Wilson identified with those likely readers, but both sought to interest them. . . . Both texts reveal that their authors harbored deep bitterness towards northern society in general and northern white women in particular, even though they frequently expressed that bitterness indirectly" (Fox-Genovese 166-67). Moreover, Minrose Gwin argues: "[W]hite women . . . rarely perceive or acknowledge . . . the humanity of their black sisters. Most of these white women in life and literature see black women . . . as black Other" (Gwin 5). Given Child's excision of the Brown chapter, one can assume that Jacobs was isolated from her own text.

[68] On Sojourner Truth's struggle to make her voice heard in the public realm, Deborah Clark White notes: "The slave women's condition was just an extreme case of what women as a group experienced in America. Many activities were circumscribed and hopes blunted by the conventional wisdom that a woman's place was in the home" (White 15).

12).[69] African American women such as Maria W. Stewart, Mary Ann Shadd, and Sojourner Truth made a notable impact on the public discourse on black women through their published writings and public speeches. As a free woman sensitive to the abolitionist movement, Jacobs was no doubt cognizant of the accomplishments of her predecessors and contemporaries during the nine years in which she struggled to publish her own narrative.[70] During these years, Jacobs met several challenges in trying to get her narrative published: she had poor contact with Harriet Beecher Stowe, a lack of time to write due to her house servant duties, and Thayer and Eldridge, her original publisher, went bankrupt. In her effort to gain acceptance in the public sphere, she wrote three anonymous public letters in newspapers, each of which was published in 1853 (Yellin 123-34). We might read Jacobs's struggle to have her narrative published as mirrored by Linda's situation in the confining garret, which continues to confine her in a symbolic sense after her attainment of legal freedom. When writing the garret scene in *Incidents*, perhaps Jacobs not only reminisced of her past life in slavery, but also reflected on her current status of exclusion from the public sphere.

There is a biographical connection between these two garrets of past and present concerning the lack of light that Jacobs experienced both in slavery and in her current status as a house servant at the Willis's domicile. As Nathaniel Parker Willis was pro-slavery, and Jacobs was too preoccupied with household work, "for years while living under the Willis's roof she wrote secretly and at night" (Yellin xxvii). Jacobs complained to her friend, Amy Post, "[A]s yet I have not written a single page by daylight. . . . [W]ith

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[69] See Bowie and Bacon for the newspapers' impact on the woman question in African American print culture.
[70] For a discussion on the African American struggle to gain acceptance on public platforms, see Smith 1-22. For Jacobs's actual involvement in the abolitionist movement, see Yellin 117-53.

the care of the little baby the big Babies and at the household calls I have but a little time to think or write" (qtd. in Yellin 129). In *Incidents*, when Linda contrives to bore small holes in the garret, she says to herself, "Now I will have some light" (92). With this light, she begins to read: "My eyes had become accustomed to the dim light, and by holding my book or work in a certain position near the aperture I contrived to read and sew" (93). "[D]eprived of light" (116), the garret of Linda Brent's years of enslavement speaks to Jacobs's ongoing writing process as a free African American woman. In this sense, the garret takes on a double sense in terms of aloneness, as both a literal site of empowering solitude (1835-42) and a figurative site of disempowering isolation (1852-1861), each of which registers Jacobs's aloneness in a different way. The communications battle waged by Linda in the narrative against slavery and silence continues even after her emancipation in the form of Jacobs' authorial struggle in print culture.

Despite Jacobs's isolation from print culture following her emancipation, *Incidents* illustrates an important case in which the communications revolution allowed for a fugitive slave to find positive value of solitude. Without Linda's literacy, the postal system, and the circulation of newspapers, her aloneness in the garret would have simply amounted to imprisonment. However, with her ingenuous employment of communications media, Linda succeeds in transforming her isolation into empowering solitude, which enables her to transcend the gender, racial, and physical restraints of the antebellum South to assume a hybrid subjectivity. In that sense, the value of solitude in *Incidents* is locatable in the specific time of the antebellum period, in which the communications revolution provided many avenues through which Linda was able to make the most of her literacy. Furthermore, Linda's individual use of communications

media constituted a part of a larger communications battle waged on a national scale in her era. Linda unawares entered this much-contested battleground, participating in a far larger battle than she herself believed. Obviously, her participation in the battle was not important to those who were waging the battle at the time because *Incidents* was not published until the Civil War was already underway; but it is important in retrospect, for those studying antebellum America, in revealing the dynamics and the hidden loopholes within a communications apparatus that was generally exclusive of slaves' participation. *Incidents* serves as a testimony to how pervasive the communications revolution was, so much so that even the unknown slave confined in the small garret was deeply implicated in the national communications battle. To understand Linda's solitude in this battle is to appreciate her existence as an African American writer and shrewd cultural critic who ingenuously tapped into a communications revolution to resist slavery. In the extremely constrained situation of the solitary garret, Linda managed to create a "loophole"—a small opening—that released her from the debilitating effects of gender and race that burdened female slaves of her era.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Letters:

Bartleby's Solitude in the Postal Age

"Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?" (34). At the end of Melville's

novella, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), the narrator briefly mentions a vague rumor

about Bartleby's past career at the Dead Letter Office. The importance of the Dead Letter

Office episode to the story is suggested from the beginning when the narrator

foreshadows it in the first paragraph of his tale: "What my own astonished eyes saw of

Bartleby, that is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in

the sequel" (4). This episode has attracted consistent critical attention for decades, and

the critical reception has roughly been divided into two opposing camps: the Dead Letter

Office has both fascinated and frustrated critics. One group of criticism has taken the

episode as a manifestation of the "breakdown of communication" (Thompson 409), a

telling sign that offers a key to understanding Melville's anxiety over communication

after the failures of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. Another line of criticism has viewed the

episode as extraneous to the story itself, some going so far as to comprehend it as an

aesthetic failure of an otherwise superbly rendered novella. Dan McCall sums up the

critical consensus: "Many critics find fault with that final explanation. . . . [N]obody

seems to take seriously the Dead Letter Office as an explanation for what went wrong

with Bartleby" (McCall 128-29).[71]

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[71] More bluntly, Charles G. Hoffman maintains that "the final long paragraph is the flaw that mars the perfection of the whole" (Hoffman 420-21).

These two opposing strands of criticism, however, share the same concern: they seek to understand the Dead Letter Office metaphorically, not historically.[72] The goal of this chapter is instead to take the Dead Letter Office in terms of the concrete historical existence of such "dead letter offices" by anchoring it in the cultural context of antebellum America in order to unearth its significance for the solitude that Bartleby represents. Bartleby is indeed solitude embodied, a character seemingly without any friends and family who does not engage in any substantive communication with other characters in the story. Although Michael Paul Rogin understands Bartleby's "existential loneliness" as being free from "historical referents" (Rogin 194, 201), his solitude is squarely grounded in the cultural milieu of the antebellum era, which David Henkin has persuasively shown to be "the Postal Age." The improved postal system, together with the Postal Acts of 1845 and 1851, which significantly reduced postage, allowed ordinary Americans to undergo "the novel experience of being accessed and addressed by a system of mass communication" (Henkin x). It is against this historical backdrop that we can consider the dead letter episode and Bartleby's solitude most fruitfully. Amidst the world set in flux by the communications revolution and against "the market imperative to move" (Brown 134), Bartleby alone prefers to be "stationary" (30). Bartleby is quite solitary in that he steps away from the rapid flow of exchange and circulation in which his contemporaries eagerly participate. In this regard, it is vital that the story is set in New York's Wall Street, a commercial hub in the United States, where commodities are exchanged, print media rapidly disseminated and consumed, and commercial activities

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[72] For criticism that understands dead letters as a metaphor, see Dillingham 53, Miller 4-5, Wilson 345-46, and Gilmore 145.

vigorously transacted. The story's setting mirrors "the city's lightening transformation into an industrial, commercial, and financial center" (Kuebrich 384).

Unlike Henry David Thoreau, who experienced solitude on the edge of an industrializing town relatively independent of external forces, Bartleby lives his solitude in the metropolis, going against the age's current and solely representing the antithesis to the vibrant dynamics of the city. I would argue that Bartleby's solitude represents his resistance to the logic of the marketplace that put a rigid distinction between the "valuable" and the "valueless," as the Dead Letter Office clerks did when sorting dead letters. Bartleby's solitude confronts the narrator as well as readers with an ethical question about the era's marketplace economy that sought to kill the valueless while preserving the valuable. In probing this language of life and death that informed the commercial activity in the era, "dead" letters proved instrumental in foregrounding the ethical question that Bartleby poses. The line of my inquiry, which examines Bartleby's solitude in relation to the economic circulation through communications media, partly echoes a long tradition of Marxist criticism of "Bartleby" that sees the title character as an alienated worker in the emerging and spreading marketplace. My particular focus, however, is on reading his solitude more as a willful resistance to the communications revolution at large rather than to the marketplace.[73] As I hope to demonstrate, despite his resistance, Bartleby is less *alienated from* than inescapably *implicated in* the commercial circulation enabled by an emerging media environment.

Melville was sensitive enough to the communications revolution in antebellum America to repeatedly mention some notable media in his fiction as well as in poetry. He

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[73] For noteworthy Marxist readings of the story, see Brown, Barnett, Foley, Gilmore, and Kuebrich.

mentions electromagnetic telegraphy, a novel medium the commercialization of which

started in America in 1844, in *Typee* (1846), "Benito Cereno" (1854), "Donelson" (1866),

and *Clarel* (1876).[74] More pertinent to this chapter and in more conspicuous ways than

telegraphy, Melville referred to postal communication in several of his works from

Moby-Dick (1851) onward. What is distinctive about Melville's treatment of postal

artifacts such as letters and letterboxes is that it invariably serves to highlight the failure

of communication. In *Moby-Dick,* "The Jeroboam's Story" chapter describes a letter

intended for a dead man:

> Ahab stolidly turned aside; then said to Mayhew, "Captain, I have just bethought
> me of my letter-bag; there is a letter for one of thy officers, if I mistake not.
> Starbuck, look over the bag." Every whale-ship takes out a goodly number of
> letters for various ships, whose delivery to the persons to whom they may be
> addressed, depends upon the mere chance of encountering them in the four oceans.
> Thus, most letters never reach their mark; and many are only received after
> attaining an age of two or three years or more. . . . "why it's Mercy, and he's
> dead!" "Poor fellow! Poor fellow! And from his wife!" (254)

This episode stands as a basis for Melville's understanding of postal communication. In

"The Story of Agatha" (1852), Melville emphatically depicts a rotten post, highlighting

the lack of communication through the absence of letters; in "The Encantadas" (1856), a

rotten post appears again, foregrounding the islands' separation from the outer world; and

in "John Marr" (1888), the eponymous character is described as incapable of

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[74] For criticism that discusses the presence of telegraphy in Melville's works, see Zlatic's articles.

communicating with his friends because there is "no reachable post-office" (*The Poems* 266), and a rotten post appears for the third time. These examples suffice to show Melville's sustained interest in letters, many of which emphasize not so much their function as their dysfunction as a vehicle of communication. Melville's interest as such is a reflection of his anchorage in the postal age. Melville's sustained engagements with what I generically term postal imagery—a rotten post, the Dead Letter Office, and many other leitmotifs related to postal communication—in this period were not his unique invention. Rather, he tapped into a popular cultural phenomenon with which his early 1850s contemporaries would become familiar. As we shall see, this postal age nurtured what I call the culture of dead letters in which both factual and fictional accounts of dead letters abounded in magazines and newspapers. Melville's treatment of the Dead Letter Office was the product of this unique culture.

This nexus between the antebellum culture of dead letters and Bartleby's solitude ultimately concerns the issue of temporality. Imbricated layers of temporality—past, present, and future—inform and are informed by Bartleby's solitude. Although historical examination of Bartleby's solitude in the cultural context of the antebellum period naturally places it in its specific time, Melville, while setting the story in a contemporary cultural milieu, carefully displaces Bartleby's solitude from the present time by associating it with distant times of Rome and Egypt. Segmented off from the present time that is shaped by the communications revolution, Bartleby's solitude registers his resistance to the cultural ideology that sought to kill what this age considered to be economically valueless. Another layer of temporality that characterizes Bartleby's solitude is futurity. Recorded and disseminated through print media by the narrator,

Bartleby's spectral presence survives mid-century America into the undefined realm of the future. As a case in point, the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 kindled a popular interest in "Bartleby" and the story came to be widely circulated on the web. As a result, "I would prefer not to" has become a shibboleth for the movement. This recent phenomenon testifies to Bartleby's survivability in media as well as his vulnerability to being placed in and consumed by the communications circuit.

By thus focusing on the issue of temporality, I aim to show Bartleby's solitude to be *inter*temporal, not *trans*temporal. This distinction is crucial because Bartleby, despite his desire to be dislocated from the present time, cannot ultimately escape and transcend time. Rather than annihilating the boundaries between past, present, and future, the story demonstrates that these different temporalities are closely interlocked. Despite his flight into the distant past, Bartleby's solitude, which I will read as a resistance to a market-driven communications network, is inescapably implicated in the present time of antebellum New York as well as in the future of the twenty-first century. The trajectory of Bartleby's reception in media, I will conclude, testifies to the impossibility of his solitude in the networked communications environment.

The Culture of Dead Letters

To fully appreciate the cultural meaning of dead letters in antebellum America, we need to start with a historical rather than a metaphorical definition of what dead letters and the Dead Letter Office meant in the era. The origin of the institution dates back to the 1770s when the Continental Congress authorized Ebenezer Hazard to open undelivered

letters that might facilitate the prosecution of the Revolutionary War (Manning 96). The

Dead Letter Office was officially established in 1825 primarily to recover lost money,

vast sums of which were circulated through the postal system each year. If a given letter

had been properly routed through the system yet still failed to reach its proper destination,

it ended up at the Dead Letter Office in Washington, an institution that generated a good

deal of attention in the press. Left unretrieved by their intended recipients, one million

letters were declared "dead" in 1837. Three decades later the annual figure exceeded four

million. In the peak year of 1866, the Dead Letter Office received 5.2 million letters,

which contained almost a quarter of a million dollars.[75] An important point that bears

emphasis is that the Dead Letter Office was inextricably tied to the expanding market

economy of the day. As Richard R. John notes, "The dead letter office was, in short, *a*

shrine to commerce, a safety net for merchants who relied on the central government to

facilitate business on a continental scale" (John 638; italics added).[76] The development of

the postal service brought not merely a medium for long-distance communication through

epistolary correspondence but also helped various commodities such as money,

daguerreotypes, seeds, and autographs circulate across a national expanse. In this whirl of

economic exchange and circulation, Bartleby mutely stands looking at the brick wall,

immersed in "deadwall reveries" (26).

The rapid increase of dead letters was attributable not merely to the improved

postal system; rather, it was conjoined with the myriad developments of communications

media and the technologies that enabled them. Ronald Zboray notes that, with Americans

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[75] See Henkin 158-59.
[76] Although the line of my argument echoes Marxist criticism of "Bartleby" that sees Bartleby as
an alienated worker, my focus is on the relation between this character and the communications
media.

becoming increasingly mobile in the antebellum period due to the improved

transportation system and to their desire to seek better work, land, or opportunity,

traditional kinship ties were eventually broken and many families were dispersed across

the nation. To compensate for the "emotional costs" of increasing mobilization,

Americans turned to letters to maintain affectionate ties with family members (Zboray

111-13). Zboray cites Melville's dead letter episode as a reflection on the poignant

failures of those who wished to connect with those they loved (113).

     The postal network was a double-edged sword to those who wished to connect

with others. In the very act of attempting to connect, they inevitably faced a threat of

sending what might end up being dead letters. In other words, every letter was – and still

is – potentially a dead letter. Dead letters, one can argue, are the dark side of the

communications revolution. William Decker aptly argues that a letter sender is "always

threatened by the possibility that the letter will not arrive, will become a dead letter; a

possibility that for Derrida in *The Post Card* is inevitable destiny" (Decker 15). The Dead

Letter Office did not represent something foreign or exotic in antebellum America; it was

an important part of American life. No one who participated in the antebellum epistolary

culture was exempt from the possibility of sending a dead letter. As the national postal

network was complete by mid-century, even permeating rural areas, almost every

American was networked. The postal system served to create "a national community that

extended to every citizen within its boundaries an invitation to participate in public

affairs" (John 56). This national participation in the postal culture automatically meant

their potential participation in what I call the culture of dead letters.

"The Dead Letter Office" might suggest something enigmatic to today's readers. In Melville studies, the phrase has often been taken out of historical context to emphasize its figural and symbolic implications—most frequently, it connotes Melville's failed writing career and the breakdown of communication. Historical studies instead suggest that stories about the Dead Letter Office were actually quite popular when "Bartleby" was published: "Dead letters" was a phrase that came into circulation in the 1830s through magazine and newspaper articles.[77] For example, hundreds of entries for the phrase "dead letter" can be found in magazine and newspaper articles published between 1830 and 1860, which suggests that the phrase "dead letter" constituted a much more ordinary part of the American vocabulary than critics tend to suppose. More important, especially toward the late 1840s, the number of articles referencing a "dead letter" increased in a way that anticipates the publication of Melville's "Bartleby" in 1853.[78] This pervasive trope also demonstrates how Melville's practice of reading print media affected his literary imagination. To understand the real implications of the Dead Letter Office episode necessitates appreciating how Melville's contemporary readers received it and Melville himself understood it: we need to demystify the Dead Letter Office.

Hershel Parker suggests that Melville is supposed to have discovered the existence of the Dead Letter Office through newspaper listings and he attributes the source of the episode to an 1852 article in the *Albany Register* (Parker 92). Although the Dead Letter Office itself suggests solitude and alienation, it disseminated notices in the mass media of print newspapers, thereby taking firm root in popular imagination. The

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[77] Hershel Parker notes that "[a]ccumulating evidence suggests there was a vogue of Dead Letter Office articles about the time 'Bartleby' was written" (159).

[78] Information about the phrase "dead letters" in this paragraph was gained from online databases, *The Making of America* and *American Antiquarian Society Database*.

irony here is that, although newspaper notices from the Dead Letter Office listed letters spurned from the communications circuit, the office itself stood squarely in the very same circuit, disseminating itself widely across the nation through print media. Melville could mention the Office in "Bartleby" because Americans were constantly exposed to the list of dead letters in widely distributed newspapers. Newspapers served as central circuits through which information about the existence of a letter might pass to an otherwise unsuspecting recipient. The columns of hundreds and even thousands of addressees were a prominent and ongoing feature of the American press throughout the antebellum era and formed a central part of the experience and spectacle of the post at mid-century.[79]

We can reconstruct this culture of dead letters by looking at several newspaper and magazine articles. As noted earlier, it was in 1825 that the United States Postal Service started the Dead Letter Office, which means that almost three decades had passed before the figure of dead letters appeared in "Bartleby." During those decades, newspaper and magazine articles contributed to circulating stories about the Office. In an 1833 article in *Niles' Register*, a newsweekly founded in Baltimore, the following account appears:

"DEAD LETTERS. In the general post office at Washington, there is one department for the examination of dead letters, which has a superintendent and five clerks."

The above paragraph, which we find in circulation in the newspapers, reminds us to say, that the number of dead letters returned to the general post

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[79] See Henkin 159.

office, and there examined, & amounts to the enormous number of six hundred

thousand annually. (269)

In 1841, *The Portland Transcript* also records the growing presence of the Dead Letter

Office: "The dead letter office, in the Post Office Department, is a great curiosity. The

dead letters are returned to the General Post Office, with the quarterly accounts from

13,000 post offices now exist" (40). The variety of locations in which these papers were

published—extending from Baltimore to Portland—bespeaks the widespread circulation

of stories about the Dead Letter Office in the years following its establishment in 1825.

The number of dead letters these articles mention further increased after the Postal

Act of 1845, which reduced the cost of postage. After this Act, letters would now be

charged on the basis of weight at a radically reduced rate of five cents per half ounce for

a distance up to three hundred miles and ten cents per half ounce for greater distances.[80]

In April 1846, *The American Penny Magazine*, published in New York, reports: "There

has been a large increase in the number of dead letters received at the General Post Office

since the reduction of postage. The number received during the last quarter will not fall

short of four hundred thousand" (167). In the same month, *The Harbinger*, another

newsweekly based in New York, also writes: "You will be surprised when I tell you that

it is fourteen hundred thousand a year, and under the cheap postage system is increasing"

(280). In 1851, another Postal Act further reduced postage, transforming the postal

system into a more affordable infrastructure for ordinary Americans. Accordingly, the

number of letters, dead letters, and articles about the Dead Letter Office further increased.

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[80] See Henkin 22.

Another side of this improvement in postal communication is the corresponding growth of failed communication, which is embodied in the growing importance of the Dead Letter Office for antebellum Americans. In 1851, one magazine article expresses surprise at the growing number of dead letters: "The whole number of dead letters returned to the Department we can only vaguely estimate. Thus, in one quarter, the bulk of opened letters equaled about 6000 bushels, crammed; each bushel is supposed to contain 1000 letters. The number returned in a quarter is therefore about six millions, or twenty-four millions a year!" (*Friend's Review* 333, 1851). Given the plethora of articles devoted to dead letters, it is possible that Melville might have encountered one of those numerous accounts, even before the *Albany Register* article that Parker identifies as the original source of the dead letter episode in "Bartleby." The episode was not born out of this single account but concretely grounded in the national culture of dead letters that was nurtured over several decades within antebellum American print culture. By the end of the 1850s, the phrase "dead letters" became so ingrained in American culture that it stood for failed communication in general. In *The Sunday-School World*, an article titled "Prayers in the Dead-Letter Office" meditates on the futility of prayers not properly addressed to God: "What would you think of a person putting a letter into the post-office without an address on it, or putting only unmeaning words, or nothing at all, in the inside of it? . . . Like unaddressed letters, they [prayers] are, as it were, sent to the 'Dead-Letter Office,' and come back as they went away, or are never heard of more; or like blank letters, they is nothing to reply to, and so no reply is received" (108).

By the time Melville wrote the dead letter episode in "Bartleby," the story of the Dead Letter Office had become popularized, so much so that writers in magazines and

newspapers presupposed the reader's general knowledge about the Office. For instance, in 1848, *Youth's Penny Gazette* writes: "We suppose all our readers know that when a letter has remained in any post office a certain time, (say three or six months,) and has been advertised, and no one calls for it or claims it, it is forwarded to the general Post Office in Washington, and is there opened" (6). Some weeklies even created a column titled "Our Dead Letter Office" in which they announced dead letters that had reached their office: "Our Dead Letter Office.—We find on our files several letters, enclosing money and ordering various books and Journals, which we are unable to send for want of proper directions. If correspondents would be more particular in these small matters, they would save themselves from anxiety and delay, and us from blame" (*American Phrenological Journal* 121, 1854).

As this column suggests, Americans living in this culture of dead letters underwent, to varying degrees, anxiety over whether their letters would reach their destinations. As one article estimates, "Nearly four million letters, or about one twenty-fifth of all that are mailed, annually miscarry and go to the dead letter office at Washington" (*The Prophetic Messenger* 144, 1855). That is, nearly four percent of the mailed letters ended up dead. In such an age, it is easy to imagine that sending letters emotionally taxed Americans. Due to that general anxiety associated with postal communication, several magazine articles gave advice on how to avoid sending dead letters. For instance, one article in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* published in 1862, after detailing the great amount of dead letters in recent years, gives two specific recommendations of advice to letter writers: "1. Direct the letter legibly, writing the name of the person to whom it is sent, his town, country, if possible, and State, upon the

envelope." The second runs as follows: "At the head of the letter write your own address—town, county, and State in full. . . . If you observe these directions, and the letter fails to reach the person for whom it was intended, you will, in due time, receive it through the Dead Letter Office, provided always that you have not in the meanwhile changed your residence" (258).

Whether Melville spotted these accounts or not, it is clear that stories about dead letters fascinated the general public, creating a cultural phenomenon in the era. An important fact is that Melville was not the first or the only to treat dead letters as a literary motif. Accounts of dead letters inspired many writers to take up the subject, thereby disseminating the motif through the web of print culture. These literary renderings often focus on the loneliness that letter writers experience due to their failure to reach their addressee. As early as May 1838, *Harvardiana*, a Boston periodical, published a poem "A Dead Letter" composed by an anonymous author. This poem takes the form of a dead letter that was "left in the Post-Office and never called for." This letter was, "by a lucky chance, saved from being sent on to Washington, to be opened by the unfeeling hands of government clerks" (317). The poem presents itself as a love letter that ended up being a dead letter. The first two stanzas read:

I joined the crowd, and I thought of thee only,

And thy bright smile,—

Thou was not there, oh! how heartsick and lonely

I felt the while!

To many maidens I have sent gay letters,

Yet dared not tell

One hope to her, who all my heartstrings fetters

As with a spell. (317)

The mere fact that the poem is titled "A Dead Letter" signals the author's assumption about his reader's knowledge about what it refers to as early as 1838. In 1852, one year prior to the publication of "Bartleby," Jane Revenaugh published a poem titled "Dead Letters" in *Littell's Living Age*. This poem also muses on the loneliness caused by failed postal communication:

Four hundred thousand tokens,

Sent to the loved in vain,

Come back, with seals unbroken,

O'er land and wave again.

From many a happy household,

Far up and down the land,

They sought, with prayers and blessings,

The lost ones of the land—

(…)

O! human love, how faithfully

Thy words are written here,

Folding with yearning tenderness

The absent—yet how dear! (370)

Importantly, this poem is preceded by the poet's quotation of a newspaper article: "Within a few weeks four hundred thousand dead letters have been received at Washington, from California.—*N.Y. Tribune*" (370). This indicates that the culture of dead letters was formed in the web of stories about the Dead Letter Office. As a case in point, this poem was disseminated by being reprinted in another newsweekly, *The Odd Fellow* (5), a month after it was printed in *Littell's Living Age* in February.

The literary treatment of dead letters was not limited to poetry; several short stories were composed around the topic of dead letters. In 1851, a short story titled "The Dead Letters—A Vision" by W.D. Wade was published in *The Carpet-Bag*. Even after 1853, the year "Bartleby" was published, stories of dead letters continued to be written: "The Dead Letter" by T. Hamilton Vananda in 1856, "The Clerk of the Dead Letter Office" by Caroline Orne in 1857, "A Day in the Dead-Letter Office" by Francis Copcutt in 1860, and "The Dead Letter" by an anonymous author in 1866, a work whose narrator is an ex-clerk in the Dead Letter Office. Even a book-length novel entitled *The Dead Letter: An American Romance* by Seeley Regester was published in 1867.

Vananda's short story "The Dead Letter" deserves special attention because it takes up the anxiety about dead letters that we have seen earlier. Mrs. Lee, whose

husband went to California to make a fortune, is anxiously waiting for his letters. Her neighbor, who is the narrator of the story, assists her by inquiring whether her husband's letter has been miscarried: "I had asked the office so long, had written to the Dead Letter Office twice, and was not yet without hope. Might it not occur that a letter by some incidental mishap, had been misplaced? The thing had occurred a thousand times, I believed" (150). It turns out that the letter was somehow misplaced in the local post office, and the narrator succeeds in recovering it. With this recovery of her husband's letter, Mrs. Lee comes to know that he has been detained in California due to illness but he is recovering. The story ends happily when her husband returns to Mrs. Lee shortly after the recovery of the letter.

This array of literary renderings of the Dead Letter Office makes it evident that "Bartleby" constituted just one of those that deployed the motif. At the time Melville composed "Bartleby," he lived in this national culture of dead letters: an anxious byproduct of the communications revolution. Although the dead letter episode in the story may be attributed to *the Albany Register* piece, as Parker claims, it is highly conjecturable that Melville encountered a wealth of other accounts of dead letters, both factual and fictional, through various print media. Indeed, the phrases used in the narrator's description are found in many other articles, such as "cart loads" and "dashed hopes." As one article puts it, "All go down together into the flames, the love, the hate, the repentance, the threats, and nothing is worth saving but the money" (*The Carpet-Bag* 2, 1853). The language of this account strongly reverberates with that used in the narrator's account. Melville drew not only on a single unique account in the *Albany Register* but also extensively on the flourishing culture of dead letters, which his

contemporaries avidly consumed. The narrator, who obviously has a certain amount of knowledge about the Dead Letter Office, also lived in this culture. Yet Melville, while tapping into this popular culture, also diverged from the sentimental strain of those numerous accounts. His important contribution to the culture of dead letters is that, whereas other literary renderings foregrounded a sense of loneliness engendered by dead letters and an accompanying sense of exclusion from the postal system, his "Bartleby" divested itself of such sentimentalism, instead presenting Bartleby's solitude and non-communicative nature as resistance against its own time, against the communications revolution.

Life and Death: Ethics of Value Judgment

To read "Bartleby" against a backdrop of the culture of dead letters, I suggest, is to recover a story that explores the ethics of value judgment that considered the valueless to be dead. To interrogate this issue, I would like to read "Bartleby" as a dead letter and the narrator as a Dead Letter Office clerk, not metaphorically, but literally, according to the historical context of the day. To ponder this analogy is to examine what it meant to be "dead" in the postal age.

It has become so commonplace to interpret Bartleby as a dead letter that it sounds almost like a critical cliché. For instance, Peter Firchow argues:

Bartleby is a dead letter. . . . We can then see Bartleby as a letter sent to the narrator and apparently containing a message of importance for him, though the

narrator is not entirely sure that this human letter is in fact addressed to him or

that it does contain a message for him. Seen in this metaphor, the central situation

of the story is transformed into the attempt of the narrator to decipher the address

and the message of a letter that has somehow fallen into his hands. The central

situation, then, is one of an attempt to communicate and a failure to do so. (345)

The above observation has become so ingrained in the critical reception of "Bartleby"

that scholars seem to have abandoned the attempt to plumb the depths of the implications

of Bartleby's being a dead letter.[81] This metaphor is worth taking seriously and literally

and pushes it further to understand the significance of the Dead Letter Office episode.

What becomes vital in this undertaking is the ethics of value judgment that confronts both

the narrator and readers of the story. In their focus on Bartleby as a dead letter, critics

have largely underappreciated the narrator's role in relation to this misaddressed letter. If

Bartleby is a dead letter, then the narrator can be considered as a Dead Letter Office clerk,

for the narrator is held responsible for handling Bartleby: "'You are *responsible* for the

man you left there.' . . . 'but really, the man you allude to is nothing to me—he is no

relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me *responsible* for him'" (28; italics

added). If Bartleby is a dead letter, then the word "responsible" has a communicative

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[81] William B. Dillingham also says that Bartleby "is a dead letter, for in the world he has no place to go. He has erased the return address of his past and written his future in words that the world cannot understand. The lawyer is stirred by the rumor of the dead-letter office, but without having received any true communication from Bartleby. It is death which really troubles him" (53). As Durham Peters argues, "The narrator's rage at the remoteness of Bartleby's soul escalates: he first tries to fire Bartleby, giving 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. . . . Bartleby is quite literally a dead letter. . . . Bartleby's selfhood has autonomy but no interiority that can be made into an object of power" (Peters 158-59). Also see Gross 217 and Reed 259.

sense of "responding": the narrator is responsible for responding to Bartleby. Notwithstanding his seemingly impenetrable interiority, Bartleby, as a letter, adamantly demands to be read. Janet Gurkin Altman argues that "the reader [of a letter] is called upon to respond. If there is no desire for exchange, the writing does not differ significantly from a journal. To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact—the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world" (Altman 89). How the narrator responds to this letter becomes inevitably ethical: he is constantly asked the ethical question of whether he should dispose of Bartleby as valueless for his business purposes. He cannot escape this question, for the spectral presence of Bartleby pursues him even after he abandons Bartleby by moving into a new office: "When again I entered my office, lo, a note from the landlord lay upon the desk. . . . It informed me that the writer had sent to the police, and had Bartleby removed to the Tombs as a vagrant. . . . The same day I received the note I went to the Tombs" (31).

The communicative circuit between the narrator and Bartleby actually started before the novella opens: Bartleby applied for his job at the narrator's office "in answer to [his] advertisement" (9) posted in a newspaper, a medium closely tied to the postal routes. Thanks to the reduction of postage, sixteen million newspapers passed through the mail in 1830 and by the end of the decade, the figure had increased by close to ten million (Henkin 42-43). Bartleby has replied to the narrator's call, and in turn, Bartleby's very existence calls for some response. In this regard, Bartleby's refusal to comply with the narrator's request to go to the post office can be interpreted as his – the letter's – refusal to be returned to its origin: "'Bartleby . . . just step round to the Post Office, won't

you? . . . ' 'I would prefer not to'" (14-15). Although their relationship started and was enabled by the postal system, it also founders on Bartleby's refusal to be delivered.

In the antebellum era, the postal system had become so prevalent and powerful in American society that it was difficult for anyone *not* to participate in its network. This network was closely tied to the newspapers, which shared with the mail the same distribution routes. After moving to the new office, in response to the claim that he is responsible for handling Bartleby, the narrator feels compelled to do something about him. Part of his motivation derives from a fear about a possible dissemination of this unwelcome association between Bartleby the vagrant and himself the respectable lawyer through newspapers: "Fearful then of being exposed in the papers (as one person present obscurely threatened) I considered the matter, and at length said, that . . . I would that afternoon strive my best to rid them of the nuisance they complained of" (29). This fleeting mention of the newspapers is important when considering "Bartleby" in terms of the postal culture in the era. To go back to the origin of the U.S. postal history, the postal system was established mainly to carry newspapers for the sake, in the words of Benjamin Rush, of disseminating "knowledge of every kind . . . through every part of the United States" (qtd. in Headrick 190). Since newspapers were still distributed primarily through the postal system in antebellum America, the narrator's fear registers his perception that his existence is deeply and inescapably implicated in the postal system. Important to note here is that the postal system was not the sole engine to disseminate the news; instead, the development of newspaper culture owed much to larger workings of communications technologies (Osterhammel 36 and Leonard 13). For one, the postal system depended on a railroad network, a product of what George Rogers Taylor calls

"the transportation revolution" in antebellum America. Given his repeated request to Bartleby to go to the Post Office (14-15, 21), it can be said that the narrator both actively uses and is potentially used by the postal system: while it does benefit his business transactions, it can publicize disagreeable stories about himself. His use of the plural "the paper*s*" indicates the media's capability of wide circulation.

As a clerk at the Dead Letter Office responsible for sorting dead letters, the narrator is also responsible for deciding whether the letter in question, Bartleby, is really worth saving. This language of life and death associated with the Dead Letter Office fascinated antebellum Americans. In one magazine article in which the author transcribes the dead letters that he found in the Dead Letter Office, he talks of those letters specifically in the language of life and death: "This is the last day of a five weeks' sojourn in Washington, and it has been a day in the Dead-Letter Office, and the entrée obtained, all our efforts crowned with success, and the spoils, in the shape of selected letters scattered about the table, where that glorious julep stands to welcome them once more to light and life. How strange and weird they look, these odd anachronisms, dead before their time, but born again" ("A Day in the Dead-Letter Office" 182). Melville's "Bartleby," I argue, critiques the ways in which his culture considers what was beyond the economy of circulation and exchange to be "dead." The story calls into question the modes of thinking that regards writings as dead just because they are not in circulation and do not have an economic value. One can argue that the Dead Letter Office stood for the end of economic circulation. As many newspaper and magazine articles reported, if a dead letter contained no bank notes or other valuable papers, it was summarily burned in a great bonfire in Washington D.C. Letters that had explicit economic value were saved,

while others deemed economically unworthy were destroyed in the flames. The communications revolution set in motion a dynamic nationwide economy of circulation and exchange. Richard R. John argues that the Postal Acts of 1845 and 1851, which reduced the cost of postage, accelerated the establishment of a national market as well as the creation of a public sphere to link the national capital to the rest of the United States. The postal system provided merchants with the only reliable means for transmitting information, bills of exchange, and money throughout the United States (John 53). David Henkin also observes that antebellum Americans relied on the postal system to conduct financial transactions. By 1855, one hundred million dollars in cash passed through the mail each year (Henkin 52-53). Indeed, a countless number of magazine and newspaper articles on the Dead Letter Office never tire of reporting how much money dead letters contained.

It is important to recognize that the kind of documents that the narrator deals with in his business are those that would have been recognized as being "valuable" in the Dead Letter Office: "I am one of those unambitious lawyers who . . . do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds" (4). As one magazine article puts it, "Drafts, deeds, and other papers of value . . . are preserved in the dead-letter office" (*The Friend* 179, 1851). The narrator's repeated request to Bartleby to go to the post office—"Bartleby . . . just step round to the Post Office, won't you? (it was just a three minutes walk,) and see if there is any thing for me" (14)—indicates that he is participating in the circulation of "valuable" documents through the postal system. As if refusing to participate in that logic of value judgment, Bartleby never assents to the narrator's request. The narrator's language in reference to his employees inscribes his

participation in this logic. At one point in the novella, the narrator refers to Bartleby's usefulness to him: "He is useful to me. I can get along with him." He also regards Turkey, another employee at his office, as "a most valuable person" (6). He also calls Bartleby valuable: "[H]is great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances, made him a valuable acquisition" (15). However, the values he attaches to his employees are only economic. As Michael T. Gilmore puts it, "they exist for him as a species of productive property and little else" (Gilmore 135). Once Bartleby ceases to fulfill his duties for the narrator, he is confronted with an ethical issue of how to deal with someone who is totally "useless" to his economic purposes. If the narrator were a clerk at the Dead Letter Office, he would have to label Bartleby "valueless," thus consigning him to the flames.

The narrator's use of "value" reverberates with the same word frequently used in dead letter accounts in print media. The word "value" is recurrent throughout these accounts, serving as a byword in the culture of dead letters for decades: "Every thing of value is carefully preserved, to be restored to its owners, if they can be found" (*Niles' Register* 269, 1833); "The letters containing valuable enclosures are thrown into a basket and destroyed" (*Star in the West and Glad Tidings* 168, 1841); "A very important department in the Post Office at Washington, is the Dead Letter Office. Here all the unclaimed letters . . . are finally received, opened, and if they contain nothing valuable, publicly burned" (*Godey's Lady Book* 284, 1846); "Those letters which contain money or articles of value are preserved" (*Youth's Penny Magazine* 6, 1848); "Drafts, deeds, and other papers of value, and also jewelry, mementoes, &c, are preserved in the Dead Letter Office" (*The Friend* 179, 1851). As one article puts it, "All go down together into the

flames, the love, the hate, the repentance, the treats, and nothing is worth saving but the money" (*The Carpet-Bag* 2, 1853). All the "valueless" documents were eventually destroyed and killed in favor of money.

As an author whose ambitious writings were rejected by the market, Melville certainly turned sympathetic eyes to those expelled from this economic circuit. R. E. Watters remarks on Melville's sympathy for social outcasts:

Not admiration for their self-reliance but the deepest pity for their loneliness dominated Melville's attitude towards his Isolatoes. . . . Melville's abounding pity for all his Isolatoes, the voluntary no less than the involuntary, no doubt issued from his own love of companionship, often thwarted as that may have been. He was himself no lover of solitude, though he probably experienced something of the involuntary Isolato's plight on shipboard because of his different upbringing. (Watters 1145-46)

Melville's novels were also denied a wide circulation in his lifetime, therefore deemed "dead" in the narrator's terms. But Melville, through the figure of Bartleby, resisted the mode of thinking which associates circulation with life and non-circulation with death.

Even before Bartleby dies in the Tombs, the mere fact that he is sent to the Tombs signifies his social death. Stigmatized as a "vagrant" (31), Bartleby, before being physically dead, undergoes what Caleb Smith terms "civic death" by which he means "the legal and ritual processes that produced the figure of the prisoner as the living dead" (Smith 39). The fact that the prison's name—the Tombs—connotes death indicates the

cultural assumption that those sent there are dead. Scott Trafton observes that the

Egyptian Revival in antebellum America, which inspired the architecture of the Tombs

and its name, was most commonly associated with cemeteries and prisons. Between 1808

and 1858, at least seven prisons were built in the Egyptian style (Trafton 152). These

prisons signified "the space of imprisonment and entombment" (153). As one warden

would tell arriving prisoners to these prisons/tombs, "I see your cell as no more than a

frightful sepulchre. . . . [W]hile confined here you can have no intelligence concerning

relatives or friends. . . . You are to be literally buried from the world" (qtd. in Trafton

153). Egyptian imagery, which largely derives from the tomb where a mummy was

buried, contributed to a cultural assumption that prisoners are socially dead.[82]

In this context of economic value, it is significant that the story is set in the

commercial hub of New York City. Georg Simmel's famous definition of metropolitan

life in the city can help us understand the story's setting in Wall Street and Bartleby's

uncomfortable situatedness therein. Simmel associates the metropolis specifically with

the economy of exchange: "The metropolis has always been the seat of the money

economy because the many-sidedness and concentration of commercial activity have

given the medium of exchange an importance which it could not have acquired in the

commercial aspects of rural life. . . . Money is concerned only with what is common to all,

i.e. with the exchange value which reduces to a purely quantitative level" (Simmel 12). It

would be safe to assume that the narrator has lived according to the metropolitan lifestyle,

but his encounter with Bartleby, the embodiment of a life devoid of exchange and

circulation, and therefore irreducible to economic value, seems to turn him into a man of

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[82] Caleb Smith also discusses the Tombs in "Bartleby" in the context of the penitentiary reforms
in the antebellum era. See Smith 65-71.

feeling amidst metropolitan life. However, this drive toward emotion does not change the narrator substantially. After all, he does not forfeit the logic of economic exchange. When urging Bartleby to quit his office, he says: "'The time has come; you must quit this place; I am sorry for you; here is money; but you must go. . . . I owe you twelve dollars on account; here are thirty-two; the odd twenty are yours'" (22). In this passage, a sentiment of sympathy uncomfortably coexists with the logic of economic exchange. Although he feels sorry for Bartleby, the narrator urges Bartleby to quit the place in exchange for twenty extra dollars. The narrator is later surprised to see the money untouched: "[Y]ou have not even touched that money yet" (24). Bartleby refuses to place himself in the communicative circuit of economic exchange that the narrator enjoins him to enter.

However, in one brief yet important passage, Bartleby is seen as participating in the money economy. Early in the story, Bartleby gives Ginger Nut some money for ginger-nuts: "At about eleven o'clock though, in the morning, I noticed that Ginger Nut would advance toward the opening in Bartleby's screen, as if silently beckoned thither by a gesture invisible to me where I sat. That boy would then leave the office jingling a few pence, and reappear with a handful of ginger-nuts which he delivered in the hermitage, receiving two of the cakes for his trouble" (13). Although this passage shows that Bartleby was initially and momentarily in the flow of money to sustain his life, as the story progresses, he begins to extricate himself from it to fortify his solitude against the logic of circulation and exchange.

Once we begin to see the narrator as a Dead Letter Office clerk, we find many reverberations between his workplace and the Dead Letter Office. The narrator's office becomes—despite the lawyer's frenetic attempts to circulate valuable documents—a

Dead Letter Office relocated from Washington to New York. The Dead Letter Office

mentioned at the end of the tale reverberates with what he consistently calls his own

"office" (9), his workplace where he sorts his employees into the valuable and the

valueless. Readers familiar with the dead letter accounts could have heard a reverberation

between the narrator's office and the Dead Letter Office.[83] Physical closeness to the post

"office," a fact mentioned twice in the story, also bolsters that association. Part of the

reason that the Dead Letter Office has been transferred from Washington, the center of

politics, to New York, the center of commerce, lies in its strong affiliation with

commerce. Contrary to the capitalistic logic of Wall Street, Bartleby creates a loophole in

such a world of exchange and circulation by creating a "hermitage" (15) in the office in

which he consistently refuses to be placed in circulation and exchange relationships. His

adamant solitude seems to represent what the narrator calls "passive resistance" (13) to

such logic, urging him to reflect on his own participation in it. Bartleby, who prefers to

be "stationary" (30) and rarely exchanges words, goes against the age's current of

circulation and exchange, trying to remain in stasis and out of the communications circuit.

Bartleby's solitude signifies his out-of-placeness in the metropolis of Wall Street.

Intertemporal Solitude

Although Melville anchors Bartleby's solitude in the antebellum culture of dead

letters, this enigmatic clerk is in another sense dislocated from the present temporality:

Bartleby is not only out of place but also out of time. Although critics have noted

Bartleby's ahistorical status (Brown 134 and Rogin 201), in important ways, his solitude

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[83] Lewis H. Miller, Jr. sees the narrator's office as a dead letter office. See Miller 2.

is situated in the distant past. At one moment in the story, the narrator associates Bartleby with the Roman statesman Gaius Marius: "And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous—a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!" (17). The narrator here refers to a painting titled "Gaius Marius amidst the Ruins of Carthage" (1807; Fig.1) by American painter John Vanderlyn (1775-1852), Melville's contemporary. This was a widely acclaimed painting that won a gold medal at the Paris Salon in 1808 (McCall 17). Unlike the pallid weak image of Bartleby, Marius in this painting wears a determined, though wistful, expression. Although Marius is absolutely solitary in the ruins, he does not appear lonely. Unlike in the bustling city of New York, which Bartleby uncomfortably inhabits, all the modern communications media are absent from the location of the painting. Undisturbed by external forces, Marius is serenely solitary in quietude. As Wyn Kelley aptly observes, "Vanderlyn's Marius, though nothing like the pale and ghostly Bartleby in appearance, has Bartleby's defiance and strength of character" (Kelley 122). Despite the "passive resistance" that the narrator perceives in Bartleby, the impression that this painting gives is less passive than determined. The association between Bartleby's solitude and the ancient times is further buttressed when the narrator muses: "[Bartleby] answered not a word; like the last column of some ruined temple, he remained standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room" (23).

Furthermore, as noted earlier, the Tombs, the New York prison where Bartleby dies in solitude, is associated with an Egyptian Pyramid: "The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sound behind them. The Egyptian character of the

masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung" (33). As Scott Trafton demonstrates, an "Egyptomania" swept through antebellum America, influencing the era's prison architecture (Trafton 148-52). The New York Tombs was designed in 1835 and completed in 1838 by architect John Haviland (Fig. 2). As Haviland himself put it, "The general appearance of the Egyptian style of architecture is that of solemn grandeur amounting sometimes to sepulchral gloom" (qtd. in Trafton 152). Just as in the case of Vanderlyn's painting, this sepulchral Tombs, shut off from the external forces—"the surrounding walls . . . kept off all sound"—severs Bartleby from the present time. These associations of Bartleby with ancient times and places, Rome and Egypt, gesture toward the narrator's perception that Bartleby is unhooked from the present temporality that regulates the rhythms of Wall Street. The narrator's perception dovetails with his description of Bartleby as a ghost: "Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation, at the third summons, he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage" (15).[84] Bartleby is here perceived as being half alive and half dead. Bartleby may live in antebellum America, but he refuses to synchronize with the rhythms according to which other people live in Wall Street by existing in the liminal realm between life and death.[85]

 Refusing to go to the Post Office several times, it is as if Bartleby wishes to be dissociated from the present temporality and to remain out of the contemporary communications circuit. Unlike the solitude in the metropolis represented in Edgar Allan

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[84] Bartleby is also describes as "the apparition" (16) and as an "apparition in my room . . . ghost" (27).
[85] Naomi Reed observes that Bartleby "is an apparition of something in between life and death" (Reed 250).

Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," a decisively modern solitude for its situatedness in the burgeoning city, Bartleby's solitude is uniquely situated both in the contemporary culture of dead letters and in the distant past. This amalgam of different temporalities informs his solitude, which can be called *inter*temporal, not *trans*temporal. For his solitude cannot transcend time; it is deeply situated in the present time of Wall Street, and the past and the present are imbricated over one another. While placing the story in the contemporary culture of dead letters, Melville, in the same gesture, unmoors its protagonist from the present temporality to highlight his adamant refusal to synchronize with the present. Bartleby's solitude is his dissent from the world of circulation which the communications revolution fortified and accelerated.

Indeed, in the office, Bartleby inhabits a different temporality from that which the narrator experiences. What is distinctive about the communication between the narrator and Bartleby is the temporal gap between the two. While the narrator is always busily engaged with his pressing business, Bartleby is slow in responding to the narrator's request. The narrator's initial frustration with Bartleby is precisely this temporal gap: "I abruptly called to Bartleby. In my haste bent over the original on my desk, and my right hand sideways, and somewhat nervously extended with the copy, so that immediately upon emerging from his retreat, Bartleby might snatch it and proceed to business without the least delay" (10). Despite the narrator's haste in conducting his business, Bartleby is slow in responding: "'Bartleby! quick, I am waiting.' I heard a slow scrape of his chair legs on the unscraped floor, and soon he appeared standing at the entrance of his hermitage" (11). The narrator's "business"—the word originally means "being busy"—

conflicts with Bartleby's slowness.[86] While the narrator undoubtingly synchronizes with

the business time of New York, responding to "the hurried pressure of his business"

(Kuebrich 385), Bartleby certainly does not share the same time, which is dictated by the

busy tempo of the market. His workplace in Wall Street demands his conformity to its

rhythms with which he would prefer not to synchronize.

In considering the issue of temporality, it is important to recognize that the

communications revolution altered the concept of spatiality and temporality as is

suggested in the familiar phrase "the annihilation of time and space." As we have seen in

Chapter 1, the revolution effected the dissolution of localism both in time and place as a

result of momentous changes in the media environment.[87] Geographical isolation became

almost impossible in the age of the communications revolution. This dissolution of

geographical localism extended to the dissolution of local time. Connected on a national

scale, antebellum America was increasingly synchronized to a market time. According to

Michael O'Malley (60) and Jürgen Osterhammel (69), the commercial expansion enabled

by technological innovations, such as railroads and telegraphy, created an impulse to

standardize time across the nation. O'Malley argues that industrialization gave rise to "a

complex, interconnected economy that demanded agreement as to time" (O'Malley 260).

As a result, local times disintegrated and the concept of time became standardized in the

national economic system. Bartleby's solitude represents his dislocation from such a

standardized, shared temporality that the communications revolution enabled. Not only

on a geographical level but also on an individual level, this process of integration

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[86] Louise K. Barnett observes that "The course of office events is punctuated by words like *speedily*, *quick*, *hurriedly*, *fast*" (Barnett 380; italics original).
[87] See Paul Starr's *The Creation of the Media* (2004), David Henkin's *The Postal Age* (2006), and Richard John's *Spreading the News* (1995) and *Network Nation* (2010).

worked: every American became networked through the web of communications media. Amidst this interlinked network, virtually no one was left isolated in his or her seclusion. In such an age, keeping one's solitude inviolate was an increasingly difficult task. In this regard, Bartleby's solitude begins to appear anachronistic in this age of an all-inclusive network.

The communications revolution did unify the nation, but its power to integrate what used to be local and various into a unified whole was so strong as to sequester and stigmatize some who found themselves unwilling to submit to such a force of conformity. In other words, it was so inclusive as to be exclusive of those who refused a participation in it. In noting the development of communications media and technologies, John Lardas Modern observes that "To make information universally accessible guaranteed a transparent political sphere, leaving no space for power to congeal. Any resistance, then, would be futile" (Modern 26-27). As an exemplary instance of such strong impetus for integration, James Gordon Bennett reported in *The New York Herald* in 1844 a marvelous feat of telegraphy that enabled Henry Clay's speech in Lexington to reach his office by traversing more than thousand miles in a day:

> Thus it will be seen, probably in the present year, that all this vast republic will be covered with the telegraphic wires, and important intelligence from every extremity of the nation will be known every morning at New York, with as much accuracy and certainty as we know what has taken place in the City Hall. . . . These wires may be extended to the Pacific, to California, to Oregon, and to every part of Mexico. Steam and electricity, with the natural impulses of a free people,

have made, and are making, this country the greatest, the most original, the most

wonderful the sun ever shone upon. . . . Those who do not mix with this

movement—those who do not go on with this movement—will be crushed into

more impalpable powder than ever was attributed to the car of Juggernaut. Down

on your knees and pray. (qtd. in Modern 27)

The violent language toward the end of this article suggests Bennett's strong fascination

with modern communications media and his confidence that his contemporaries would

share his fascination. What he did not foresee in 1844 was that there would appear those

who would endeavor to extricate themselves from this all-pervasive communications

circuit.

Unlike Thoreau's and Jacobs's narratives, "Bartleby"—situated in the national

center of commerce and the modern metropolis—tells a story of how one cannot be alone

by his or her will in the highly networked environment. The collective impulse to

integrate the individual into a synchronized whole both motivates and thwarts Bartleby's

attempt to be solitary. This national impulse for integration, which was fueled by the

communications revolution, was so strong that society could not have tolerated

Bartleby's solitude. In his theoretical understanding of solitude, Matthew H. Bowker

reasons: "[T]he social separation implied by solitude is often taken to be a rejection of

others' needs and desires or of the group and its values. . . . Solitary independence breaks

the hold of the group on the individual, freeing him but exiling him from the sympathy of

others" (Bowker 540). "Bartleby" shows such a tension between the community and the

individual. Rather than leaving solitary figures as they were, mid-century American

society sought to coerce individuals into conforming to a synchronized rhythm and a participation in the market. Psychologist K. H. Rubin distinguishes between "social withdrawal," where the individuals remove themselves from social interaction, and "social isolation," where the individuals are excluded, rejected, or ostracized by their peer group (Rubin 651-55). Bartleby stands somewhere between these two distinctions: because of his voluntary solitude ("social withdrawal"), Bartleby is ostracized by society's intolerance of solitude ("social isolation") and is eventually removed to the Tombs. To consider Bartleby as a figure willfully resisting the communications revolution is also to recognize this seemingly inscrutable, unreachable character as an individual human being who possesses his own voluntary will, rather than as a transcendental being who easily defies the realm of the earthly, as critics tend to suppose. In counterpoint to "the tradition of viewing Bartleby as a Christ figure" (Paliwoda 164), the foregoing endeavor to understand Bartleby's solitude in the context of the postal age is an attempt to see him concretely anchored and deeply implicated in the popular, mundane culture in which his contemporaries participated.

In further understating Bartleby's solitude, it is crucial to distinguish it from an adjacent concept of loneliness. Remarking on Bartleby's "friendlessness," the narrator notes: "For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me" (17). The narrator thus understands Bartleby's solitude as a negative state of being. He feels extremely sorry for Bartleby's friendlessness and tries to befriend him. For instance, he states: "What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible! . . . And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous" (17). For another, "If he

would but have named a single relative or friend, I would instantly have written, and urged their taking the poor fellow away to some convenient retreat. But he seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe" (657).[88] The narrator's understanding of Bartleby is quite simple: solitude is a horrible thing, therefore Bartleby should be pitied. However, we can be never sure if that holds true for Bartleby himself. As the narrator notes, "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach" (19). But what the narrator misses is whether Bartleby really suffers. The critical question is why the narrator unquestioningly assumes that solitude is a negative state of being from which Bartleby should be saved. On the surface, one might read "Bartleby" as a story about the detrimental effect of solitude on human life. Friendless and solitary, Bartleby dies in the Tombs. As noted earlier, Philip Koch opposes solitude to loneliness by identifying the former as a neutral state of being and the latter as the "unpleasant feeling" (33). After all, we have no clue as to how Bartleby feels about his solitary state. With this distinction, the narrator rushes to attach a negative sense of loneliness to Bartleby's solitude, thereby rendering Bartleby as the object of his sentimental sympathy. The narrator unjustifiably sentimentalizes Bartleby's solitude by translating it into a negative state of isolation.

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[88] The narrator himself appears to be a solitary character without friends or family. It is as if Bartleby is his only friend, if any.
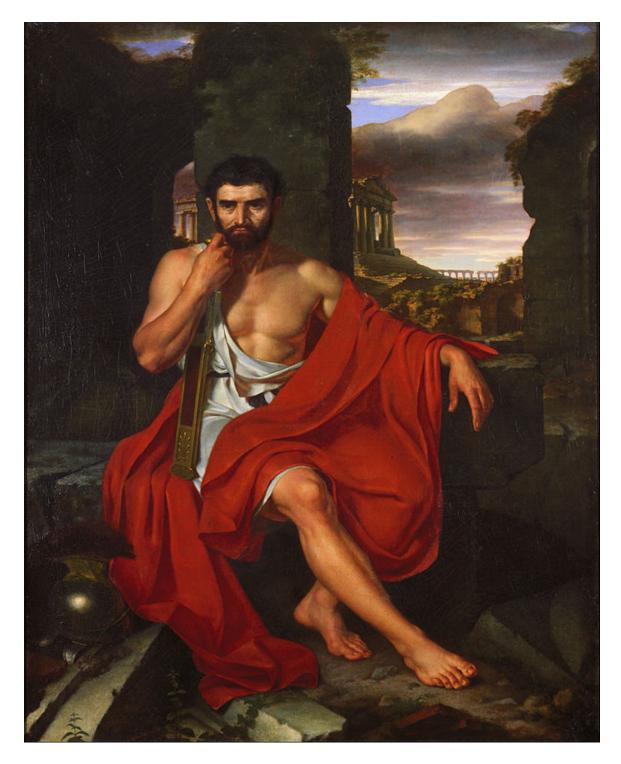
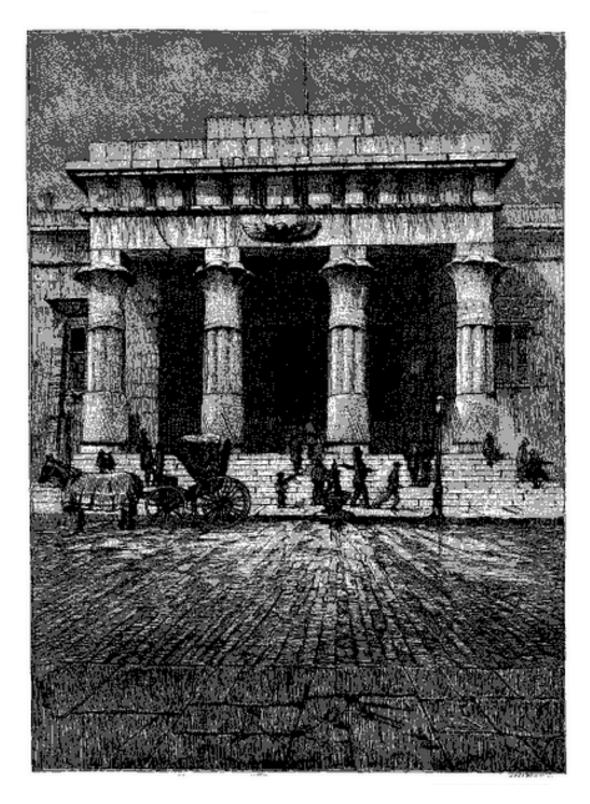Figure 1. "Gaius Marius amidst the Ruins of Carthage" (1807) by John Vanderlyn

Figure 2. "The Tombs." An engraving by J. Clement from *The Century* 45.2 (1892): 169.

The Impossibility of Solitude: Bartleby the Dead Letter Circulated

We can further complicate Bartleby's solitude, which we have seen as intertemporal, by adding another layer of temporality: futurity. Dislocated from the present and anchored in the distant past, Bartleby's solitude is also informed by this temporality. A question here is whether dead letters in the Dead Letter Office are really *dead*. While foregrounding the seemingly self-evident connection, I suggest, the story calls into question the facile association between dead letters and death to imply a dim possibility that dead letters can be rescued from death. While echoing the age's understanding of dead letters as such, the story defamiliarizes the common story about the Dead Letter Office.

As mentioned earlier, Hershel Parker identified the original source for Melville's reference to the Dead Letter Office as an article titled "Dead Letters—By a Resurrectionist. Written for the Albany Register," which was published in *The Albany Register*, September 23, 1852. In this article, the author describes the Office in the following manner:

In the building known as the General Post Office, and on the first floor thereof, there sit from morn till night, and day after day, a body of grave, calm men, whose duty it is to deal with these mortuary remains, sadly exemplifying the scripture teaching of the nearness of life to death. . . . [A]ll the thousand varied emotions, sympathies and expressions that go to make up 'correspondence' are here converted into lifeless, meaningless trash. (qtd. in Parker 92)

This description and the writer's tone graphically portray the morbidity of the Dead Letter Office. After mentioning a rumor that Bartleby used to work in the Dead Letter Office, the novella's narrator laments with a compelling emotion: "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" (34). He associates the Dead Letter Office with death, just as this "Resurrectionist" does. The narrator and the "Resurrectionist" clearly share a sensational tone with which they talk of the Dead Letter Office. They forge a strong linkage between dead letters and death.

Although this association is partly true, the case is far more complicated. Historically speaking, dead letters, according to David Henkin, "were *not quite dead*, but they were in a critical condition" (159; italics added), waiting for their intended recipients to appear and resurrect them. Thus understood, the Dead Letter Office in Melville's day was not a grave for letters but a haven or a purgatory where undeliverable letters were temporarily stored. The possibility of resurrection depends wholly upon the advent of a reader who might deem the letter worth saving. A "dead letter" refers not to a letter's death but to a suspended state where the letter fluctuates between life and death, waiting to be read and resurrected. The dead letter office therefore represents a liminal space between life and death in which the survival of the letter hinges upon the advent of a future reader. Given this understanding, "dead letter" emerges not as the kind of word that the narrator hastens to associate with paleness and hopelessness but as that which is

imbued with hope for the possibility of rebirth. It is in this context that Bartleby's

liminality which we have seen earlier—his spectral presence as "an apparition something

in between life and death" (Reed 250)—should be understood. Bartleby the dead letter,

despite his ghostliness, is "not quite dead," as Henkin puts it. The narrator's and the

Resurrectionist's descriptions of the Dead Letter Office dismiss this important aspect,

focusing narrowly on the imagery of death by invoking such expressions as "mortuary

remains."[89]

Not blinded by its sensational metaphor, Melville shrewdly grasped dead letters'

critical condition. He was interested less in the death metaphor itself than in questioning

those who rush to conclude that those out of the communications circuit are dead—like

the narrator who thinks "Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?" As Graham

Thompson argues, writing for magazines such as *Harper's* and *Putnam's*, Melville used a

familiar motif to appeal to a popular readership. However, he did so by turning the

familiar into the unfamiliar: "By first taking a generic dramatic situation and then

deploying his artful design, Melville makes the familiar and expected sufficiently less

[89] Critics, echoing the narrator and the Resurrectionist's tone, have also uncritically accepted and repeated this easy equation of the Dead Letter Office with death, understanding dead letters as a symbol of a failure to communicate. For instance, Graham Thompson argues that "One of the features of the Dead Letter Office, and of the dead letters that would have reached it, was a breakdown in communication" (409). In a similar vein, Oliver Harris opines: "'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (1853) might have been used to show why, for the writer at midcentury, Melville's figure of the Dead Letter Office so fittingly represented acute anxieties about the alienation of labor and failure of communication" (164). Or, R. E. Watters argues: "After years as a clerk in the Dead Letter Office, where he had sorted for the flames the unsuccessful attempts of men to communicate with one another—where he had, in short, witnessed the breakdown of social fellowship—he would not or could not adapt himself to the necessary usages of society" (1144). Thus, critics make the consistent claim that the Dead Letter Office signifies the "breakdown" and "failure" of communication, foregrounding only its negative aspect. However, that is the very mode of thinking that Melville's novella seems to critique. Critics have also pointed out the sentimentality inherent in the narrator's story: he sentimentalizes "his own narration," defining himself "in sentimental tones" (Post-Lauria 185). For criticism that points out the narrator's sentimentality, see Parker 163, Brodwin 174-96, McCall, and Emery 186.

well known that it becomes intriguing but does not entirely confound. To read 'Bartleby' as magazine fiction is to see how the magazine format disciplines and releases Melville's creative energy" (Thompson 110-11). In this context, one could argue that Melville used the familiar story about the Dead Letter Office to defamiliarize its surface meanings so that the Dead Letter Office implies not a mortuary but a deferral of the moment of death in anticipation of the advent of a future reader.

Further pushing the Bartleby/dead letter analogy begs the question of whether this dead letter embodied in the figure of Bartleby finally dies when he undergoes a physical death in the Tombs at the end of the story. Probably not. The narrator composes a story about Bartleby, thus leaving and consigning the act of judging Bartleby to future readers, which is also the deferral of the value judgment. The narrator fails to read Bartleby, but Bartleby the dead letter is then forwarded to the unknown presence of the reader. This does not mean that there exists a supreme, absolute meaning of Bartleby awaiting to be revealed; instead, the dead letter episode represents a deferral of the final reading and an anticipation of the reader in the future. The narrator, after all, cannot be a genuine Dead Letter Office clerk because he finds himself unable to label Bartleby as "valueless" and "dead" without certain qualms. His publication of the history of Bartleby disseminates this dead letter in print, deferring the moment of his death and the final reading of him. Although "in destroying the letters it receives the Dead Letter Office puts an end to circulation" (Burrows 23), the narrator, through writing about Bartleby, resists the termination of circulation, instead perpetuating the circulation. Stuart Burrows argues: "The attorney's story is the story of his endless attempts to read Bartleby from what he thinks and what he feels. The problem is that Bartleby cannot be read; his face is as blank

as his past and his preferences, indeed as blank as the dead wall of the prison at which he

ends up staring" (Burrows 21). That Bartleby cannot be read is less a problem than an

important part of the story because his illegibility and open-endedness guarantee the

deferral of the moment of death. "Bartleby" refuses to end.

Despite the narrator's misinterpretation of Bartleby's solitude as loneliness, he

does a certain amount of good to Bartleby by saving him from death by perpetuating him

in print form. His existence, which is metamorphosed into the form of a published story,

survives its moment of publication into the future.[90] This survivability of Bartleby in print

serves to defy the present temporality that he refuses to inhabit. However, "Bartleby,"

while indexing a possible resistance against the communications revolution,

simultaneously betrays a deep contradiction and irony: without being put in circulation in

print media, Bartleby is destined to be dead. It is only by being morphed into print and

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[90] If this guarantee-less anticipation of the reader informs Melville's treatment of the Dead Letter Office, then it might serve to explain why he kept writing fiction after the commercial failures of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. "Melville's writerly alienation and its encoding in his scrivener" (Thompson 100) is certainly an accurate way of interpreting "Bartleby," but the story is about much more than that. It is about alienation that patiently and hopefully anticipates the reader. The real import of "The Story of Agatha" lies not in that she fails to receive a letter from her husband, but that she keeps waiting for a letter for as long as seventeen years. Like Agatha, despite the alienation of the failures of his most ambitious books and the growing distance from his mentor and ideal reader Hawthorne, Melville kept on writing fiction – magazine fiction in the early 1850s, two novels in the mid-1850s, and later poetry until his death in 1891 – in anticipation of a reader. William Charavat is right in rejecting "the old theory that [Melville] bid farewell to his public in *Pierre*" (Charavat 256), as Melville could not have sustained such a level of productivity without any anticipating any reader. Michael T. Gilmore expresses the more popular, pessimistic, mistaken understanding: "To write fiction subversive of the current order of things is to resign oneself to the composition of texts without readers; this, surely, is one more meaning of the phrase 'dead letters.'. . . [I]t is possible to sense Melville's long withdrawal from fiction and to understand the significance of 'dead letters' as a literature without authorial presence" (Gilmore 145). Yet Melville continued to write in his alienated years as an author *despite* the fear of misdelivery. As Durham Peters notes, "Communication is a risky adventure without guarantees. Any kind of effort to make linkage via signs is a gamble" (Peters 267). The image of the Dead Letter Office expresses this dim, uncertain, but faithful possibility of communication, where unread documents await the advent of the readers who might resurrect them. Melville believes that being out of the communications circuit—being in solitude amidst the communications revolution—is the only way to resist the society's stigmatization as "dead."

disseminated through the communications media—the very thing that Bartleby defies—

that his life can escape the fate of death. The fact that "Bartleby" was published in a

magazine story is telling in this regard. Melville's entry into mass-magazine circulation

after the commercial failures of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* involves Bartleby in this

commercial circulation. Unlike *Pierre*, which sold only 283 copies of an edition of 2,310

eight months after its release (Wilson 335), *Putnam's Monthly* boasted 20,000 readers

(Post-Lauria 197). "Bartleby" ends by indexing this unresolvable contradiction. The

narrator's history of Bartleby, which is published and circulated through print media, runs

counter to Bartleby's adamant refusal to be put in the economy of circulation. This might

suggest that the narrator's act nullifies Bartleby's endeavor to dislocate himself from the

communications circuit and to maintain his inviolate solitude. The irony here is that,

without dissemination in the form of print, Bartleby's solitude could not exist in the first

place. It is because the narrator's story makes the existence of Bartleby visible and

perceivable to the reader that we are able to identify his solitude. In other words,

Bartleby's solitude is predicated upon the communications circuit, which simultaneously

nullifies it.

One addressee of the futurity of "Bartleby" was the Occupy Wall Street movement

that started in 2011 in New York's Zuccotti Park and is still active nationwide, most

visible today as a web presence.[91] The Occupy movement, which has posed a challenge

to corporate wealth and income inequality, from its initial stage found a strong resonance

with Melville's story written nearly 150 years ago. On October 11, 2011, just a few

weeks after the first protest, a freelance writer Hannah Gersen posted a blog article

entitled "Bartleby's Occupation of Wall Street." She observes that "The parallels between

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[91] For a critical analysis of "Bartleby" in relation to the Occupy movement, see Castronovo.

Bartleby's peculiar form of rebellion and the protestors of Occupy Wall Street should be obvious." "The point of Occupy Wall Street," she claims, "is to put a face to America's dwindling middle class." After this, there followed a surge of writings that found an analogy between Bartleby's passive resistance and the protestors of Occupy, mainly in the form of web blog posts: "A Patron Saint for Occupy Wall Street" by Nina Martyris (October 2011), "I would prefer not to" by Michele Hardesty (October 2011), "What Bartleby Can Teach Us About Occupy Wall Street" by Lauren Klein (November 2011), "Bartleby, A Story of (Occupy) Wall Street" by Robin Bates (November 2011), "Occupy Wall Street's Debt to Melville" by Jonathan D. Greenberg (April 2012), and "'Preferring Not To' in the Age of Occupy" by Jac Asher (March 2013), to name notable posts among many.

An interesting and ironic fact is that "Bartleby," which I have shown to be a story about non-circulation, came to be circulated specifically through the Internet, arguably the most important innovation in communications media in recent decades, which critics such as Tom Standage has called another communications revolution (213). Those blog posts continue to be disseminated worldwide through twitter, Facebook, and other social networking services. Bartleby, who refused to be placed in communications media, appears a most visible literary figure in today's media environment. Bartleby the dead letter, whose reading has been deferred into the future, has been avidly read and interpreted by the protestors of the Occupy movement. On the surface, one could say that the ways in which the Occupy protestors read Bartleby as a symbolic naysayer of capitalism conforms to what the story is all about: he fittingly serves as an icon of Occupy's anti-corporate and anti-capitalist agenda. However, one can also argue that

Bartleby is *used* and consumed by the movement. The protesters wore t-shirts and carried

tote bags emblazoned with the shibboleth, "I would prefer not to" (Hardesty), a slogan

also used in a billet that advertises a protest (Fig. 3).[92] Bartleby has become "an unofficial

mascot" (Poore) of the movement. Such gestures indicate that the movement has found

Bartleby "useful" and "valuable" for their political purposes. As Lee Edelman aptly

observes, such use of Bartleby "betrays a logic of corporate branding, marketing, and

commodification" (102), the very logic that Bartleby would have defied. The protestors

have found a usable value in his story, just as the narrator finds him valuable as a

workforce. Stated another way, the Occupy's avid consumption of Bartleby in today's

media hazards dissolving his inscrutable existence into a manageable entity to put him to

its political uses. In one article in *Blue Oklahoma*, a left-wing paper supportive of the

Occupy movement, the writer goes so far as to apotheosize Bartleby as "a hero" (*Blue

Oklahoma*, November 2011). As several commentators have noted, Bartleby's character

has been oversimplified for the sake of fitting his image to their political agenda and at

the expense of his original inscrutability.[93] Or, because of this unaccountable

inscrutability, his story is malleable to various purposes. Bartleby's prevalent presence on

the web today demonstrates how communications media, even after 150 years since the

story's publication, are still defeating his resistant solitude and implicating him in the

economy of circulation.

　　Bartleby's solitude, which is informed by imbricated layers of temporality, is

uncomfortably situated both inside and outside the communications revolution, both in

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[92] Figure 3. "I Would Prefer Not To." http://www.cognitivedissident.org/2012/05/i-would-prefer-not-to.html. Image redacted due to copyright restriction.

[93] For commentators who express a doubt about the analogy between Bartleby and the Occupy movement, see Poore, McArdle, Hardesty, Edelman, and Castronovo.

the present and beyond. It simultaneously defies and relies on it for his survivability. I noted earlier the prevalence of the postal system by mentioning the narrator's fear that his relation with Bartleby might be disseminated through newspapers. The eventual implication of Bartleby in print and today's digital media, after all, evidences such powerful prevalence of the communications circuit. Bartleby's solitude—his resistance against the communications revolution—gets ultimately defeated by being soaked up in the economy of circulation, both in the past and today. Despite the appearance of absolute solitude, Bartleby, after all, cannot be truly alone in the networked environment. Their similitude notwithstanding, Bartleby cannot be Gaius Marius who presents himself as serenely and perfectly solitary in the ruins. In that Bartleby's solitude is motivated by his refusal to participate in the communications circuit and that he is nevertheless intertwined with it, Bartleby's solitude can be seen as the unhappy product of the communications revolution, which powerfully involves Bartleby in its system. "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is in many ways a historical testimony to the dynamics of communications media, which worked to implicate even a solitary, defiant figure like Bartleby in its interlocked system, as well as to the constitutive impossibility of his solitude.

CHAPTER FOUR

"This Is My Letter to the World":

Dickinson's Invention of Modern Solitude

The entrenched image of Emily Dickinson has long been that of a solitary poet. In recent years, however, Dickinson scholarship has done much to demystify the popular image of the poet as an "inaccessible, ethereal hermit" (Hart and Smith xiii) by exposing Dickinson's receptiveness to various social forces such as the popular culture of her time. Indeed, presenting Dickinson as "a highly receptive witness of many phenomena in nineteenth-century popular culture," David S. Reynolds opines that "the myth of Dickinson's alienation from her society is slowly dissolving" (Reynolds 167-68).[94] More specifically, Dickinson scholars have attended to the poet's active engagement with developments in communications media of the mid-nineteenth century, such as letters, newspapers, and the telegraph. Dickinson constantly read the *Springfield Daily Republican* and was an avid reader of periodicals such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Monthly*, and *The Hampshire and Franklin Express*.[95] Through her habitual reading of such print materials, Dickinson also indirectly benefited from the telegraph, which conveyed news across the national expanse with unprecedented rapidity.

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[94] Ryan Cull notes that "During the past generation, however, scholars have challenged much of the Dickinson mythology by more extensively documenting her intense relationships with a small circle of intimates; her epistolary exchanges with many, more distant friends; and her family's broader socio-political context" (Cull 38). Caleb Smith observes: "[I]n recent decades, scholars have begun to doubt the perfection of Dickinson's solitude. Even the sanctuary of the Dickinson homestead, it seems, was open to newspapers and literary movements, visited by lawyers and reformers and people of letters" (Smith 2). For other discussions of Dickinson's withdrawal, see Wolosky.

[95] For Dickinson's engagement with print materials, see Thomas 60-67.

While Dickinson actively participated in the communications revolution of her time and was clearly connected to the outside world, however, it nonetheless holds true that she lived in solitude throughout much of her adult life. As one of the most notable Dickinson biographers puts it, Dickinson's withdrawal from society was "almost complete by [her] late thirties" (Sewall 3).[96] Indeed, Dickinson composed most of her poems in her private chamber at the Homestead.[97] If Dickinson was receptive and connected to the outside world, the question arises as to what kind of solitude Dickinson lived in her solitary room and what it meant for her to be alone in the age of connectivity brought about by the communications revolution. This chapter aims to connect Dickinson's existence in a highly networked environment to the long-standing subject of her solitude by probing the relationship between her simultaneous disconnection from and connection to the exterior world.

To understand Dickinson's solitude, this chapter focuses on the trope of distance that permeates both her poems and letters. Given that all communication media serve to bridge distances, there is no wonder that Dickinson, an avid letter writer who vigorously wrote to her distant friends and relatives, betrayed a keen sensitivity to various kinds of distance, geographical, psychological, and temporal. With a particular focus on "This is my letter to the World" (Fr519) and "I like to see it lap the Miles" (Fr383), I argue that Dickinson's solitude actually served as a means to achieve intimacy with her distant correspondents and cope with her sense of loneliness, an emotion that is given constant

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[96] Thomas H. Johnson also notes: "During the final decade of her life Emily Dickinson's withdrawal from outside association became nearly absolute. She chose now communication through the medium of letters, and more than half of all that survive were written in the brief span of years that remain" (L536).

[97] See Fuss 4.

expression throughout her numerous letters.[98] Paradoxically, it was in solitude that

Dickinson sought to find society by ingenuously tapping into the novel media

environment. In Dickinson's poetics, solitude presents the antithesis of loneliness,

suggesting a positive state of being: solitude allowed Dickinson to overcome geographic

and psychological distances. Dickinson preferred these distant relationships to the near

ones. However, such distances constituted only part of what concerned Dickinson. This

chapter concludes by arguing that Dickinson, through the figure of letter-writing,

expressed her desire to transcend a temporal distance by writing the "letter to the World,"

to posterity. By looking at how Dickinson utilized the railroad and postal artifacts such as

envelopes in her poems, this chapter aims to present the poet as an ingenuous

appropriator of communications media to invent her unique solitude in the age of

connectivity.

In comparison to other writers considered in preceding chapters, Dickinson's

relationship to communication technology is distinctive in several respects. Dickinson

was much less critical of the kinds of human relationships fostered by the new

technologies than Thoreau and Melville, each of whom displayed ambivalence toward

them or even went so far as to reject them. Making vigorous use of the new media

environment, Dickinson experienced a more thoroughly "networked" solitude than

Thoreau's: unlike Thoreau, who retreated into nature, Dickinson intentionally placed

herself in the communications circuit by writing numerous letters and derived a joy from

distant communication. In contradiction to Melville's Bartleby, who spurned the

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[98] Fr *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R.W. Franklin. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP,
1998. Citation by poem number.
L *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols.
Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958. Citation by letter number.

communications revolution altogether, Dickinson instead embraced it because it enabled her to connect with her loved ones while staying in her solitary chamber. Unlike Jacobs, who was denied full access to communications technologies because of her race and gender, Dickinson was granted what Jacobs wished to possess. From her own "loophole of retreat," Dickinson was able to send letters and read periodicals without any societal restraints.

However, this is not to argue that Dickinson fully embraced the advancements of new communications environment. While benefiting from various fruits of the revolution, Dickinson distanced herself from the cult of speed of her age—"the annihilation of time and space"—to preserve her solitary realm and her own tempo: Dickinson, as I will demonstrate, invented "slow solitude" in the age of speed by re-purposing postal artifacts such as envelopes for her poem-writing. By inscribing poems on envelopes—poems that were never published during her lifetime and that reached posthumous readers only slowly—Dickinson resisted the idea of speed that fascinated her contemporaries. What Dickinson's version of solitude tells us in today's age of instant communication is that solitude proves an effective way of slowing down and controlling our lives amidst the overflow of information. Dickinson's solitude in the mid-nineteenth century greatly reverberates with what Carl Honoré proposes to the twenty-first century readers in his *Praise of Slowness*. Dickinson was an innovative forerunner of Slow Movement of our century, and for that reason, her solitude was very modern.

Distant Nearness: Dickinson in the Postal Age

The mystique of Dickinson's solitary persona derives partly from abundant

anecdotes concerning her tendency to shy away from direct contact with people. As early

as 1854, when she was twenty-four years old, Dickinson wrote to her friend, Abiah Root:

"You asked me to come and see you—I must speak of that. I thank you Abiah, but I dont

go from home, unless emergency leads me by the hand, and then I do it obstinately, and

draw back if I can. Should I ever leave home, which is improbable, I will with much

delight, accept your invitation; till then, my dear Abiah, my warmest thanks are your's,

but dont expect me" (L298-99).[99] Additionally, in response to Thomas Higginson's

request to come to Boston, Dickinson writes: "Could it please your convenience to come

so far as Amherst I should be very glad, but I do not cross my Father's ground to any

House or town" (L460). Dickinson kept true to this declared principle of social

withdrawal: as noted above, she famously refused to go to Boston to meet her mentor,

Higginson, despite his repeated invitations[100]; she communicated with Susie most

frequently in correspondence, rather than meeting in person; in 1857, she did not go to

meet Ralph Waldo Emerson, who paid an overnight visit at Austin and Sue's home next

door to the Homestead, despite her admiration of his writings. Her seemingly antisocial

behaviors notwithstanding, Dickinson was a most communicative person: she wrote an

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[99] On Dickinson's social withdrawal, Shira Wolosky notes: "At around the age of twenty-eight in
the year 1858 . . . she began to display distinctive behavior: declining to go out; dressing in white;
speaking to visitors from behind screens and stairwells or from other rooms; refusing to address
the envelopes of her correspondence, from letters and myriad condolence notes to messages for
her sister-in-law next door" (Wolosky 444).
[100] "Dickinson met Higginson only twice in the twenty-four years that they corresponded. It was
precisely in this state of physical distance that she was able to play with the tension between
public and private communication that is activated in both poetry and epistolary correspondence"
(Socarides 53).

innumerable number of letters, which both generate and record extraordinary intimacy.
However indirectly, alone in her chamber, Dickinson cultivated human relationships by
means of the pen, actively placing herself in a communications circuit.

Dickinson wrote "an estimated ten thousand letters during her lifetime," only
1,049 of which are currently available to today's readers (Newman 101).[101] As a
testament to her love of letters, Dickinson more than once celebrates the invention of pen
and ink: "If it were not that I could write you—you could not go away—pen and ink are
very excellent things!" (L153).[102] Dickinson's version of society was primarily "textual"
in that she maintained companionship by exchanging a variety of texts with her friends
and relatives, texts including letters, poems embedded therein, and scribbled notes.[103] In
response to Dickinson's obstinate refusal to come to Boston, Higginson writes: "I think if
I could once see you & know that you are real, I might fare better" (L461). Rather than
presenting herself as a "real" and corporeal existence, Dickinson had offered a purely
textual persona to her mentor for many years before they actually met in person in 1870,
nearly a decade after she initiated correspondence with him in 1862. Dickinson thus
chose to confine her mode of communication to the textual one. In a letter to Susie,
Dickinson complains of writing's limited capacity: "Susie, I write most hastily, and very

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[101] Studies of Dickinson's epistolary poetics are abundant. See Miller, Lebow, Scheurer, Polak, Tingley, Bennet, White, Juhasz, Esdale, Socarides, Hewitt, Salska, and Messmer. Also see a collection of essays on Dickinson's letters, *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*, Ed. Jane Donahue Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie.

[102] In another letter, Dickinson writes: "How farcical it seems to sit here a writing, when another Sunday's sun shall shine upon us all in each other's society, and yet thanks to a being inventing paper and pen, they are better far than nothing! By means of them indeed, 'tis little I can tell you, but I can tell how much I would if I could, and there's something comforting in it" (L157).

[103] In today's context, Dickinson resembles a reclusive person who is constantly posting on social media such as Twitter and Facebook but refuses to go out to have direct social interaction, although with a difference that, unlike letters, posts on these social media are not directed to a particular addressee.

carelessly too, for it is time for me to get the supper, and my mother is gone and besides, my darling, so near I seem to you, that I disdain this pen, and wait for a warmer language" (L216). Despite such disdain, Dickinson kept writing letters and sought to form textual relationships.[104]

Dickinson's life-long engagement with letters was promoted by the historical development of the postal system. Born into the postal age, Dickinson greatly benefited from the improved postal system of her day. The Postal Acts of 1845 and 1851 significantly reduced postage costs, allowing ordinary Americans to become better connected across the national expanse. In an 1845 letter, Dickinson conveys her excitement over the recent reform: "[T]he reduction of the postage has excited my risibles somewhat. Only think! We can send a letter before long for five little coppers only, filled with the thoughts and advice of dear friends" (L9). No wonder, then, that an avid letter writer like Dickinson exulted over this recent reform. It is thus no exaggeration to say that her reliance on letters as a means of distant companionship grew out of her contemporary media environment. Dickinson's solitary life was made possible in part by the cheap postage. For, without easy access to the postal system, Dickinson could not have engaged in communicative act in her solitary chamber. Dickinson's deep engagement with letters was a historical product, not something ascribable solely to her personal interest. In this regard, Marta Werner is right in noting that "Dickinson lived and wrote at the very historical moment when the possibility of delivering through the

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[104] In using the term "textual," I am indebted to Sara Polak's insightful observation that Dickinson "cast herself as a textual being: her letters as well as her poems can only be read as projecting personae, and never 'the real Emily Dickinson'" (Polak 6). Cindy MacKenzie similarly argues: "Built into the writing of letters is a riddling element created by both a deliberate and an unconscious textual self-construction that never fully discloses the self, an element that Dickinson utilizes in an emphatic way" (MacKenzie 16).

modern postal system a private message to a specific addressee was first realized"

(Werner 209). Often regarded as ahistorical due to her relative inattention to

contemporary events such as the Civil War, in terms of communications media,

Dickinson was in actuality quite anchored in and affected by her own time.[105]

And yet one of the hallmarks of Dickinson's letters is her recurrent expression of

loneliness. As a most exemplary instance, in a letter addressed to Susie, Dickinson broods

on her loneliness:

> Susie—it is a little thing to say how lone it is—anyone can do it, but to wear the
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> loneness next your heart for weeks, when you sleep, and when you wake, ever
>
> missing something, this, all cannot say, and it baffles me. I would paint a portrait
>
> which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be—
>
> solitude, and the figures—solitude—and the lights and shades, each a solitude. I
>
> could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there;
>
> then haste grateful home, for a loved one left. (L310)

Dickinson's confession of intense loneliness as such is prevalent in the corpus of her

letters. In one of her letters to her brother Austin, Dickinson writes: "How much I miss

you, how lonely it is this morning—how I wish you were here, and how very much I

thank you for sending me that long letter, which I got Monday evening, and have read a

great many times, and presume I shall again, unless I soon have another" (L232). In

another letter to Austin, she notes: "I sit here alone, writing a letter to you, and whether

your joy in reading will amount to as much or more, or even less than mine in penning it

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[105] For Dickinson's engagement with the Civil War, see Richards.

to you, becomes to me just now a very important problem" (L166). In yet another letter,

Dickinson meditates on a sense of loneliness that encompasses the world: "I hope you are

encouraged since you were at home—do not be lonely. Susie is lonely, and Martha, and I

am lonely too, and this is a lonely world, in the cheerfullest aspects of it" (L158). In her

letters to Austin in the early 1850s, when he was studying away from home, Dickinson

grieves the distance that separates her from her beloved brother.

Dickinson's sense of loneliness appears to inspire her to write letters to bridge

such physical distances. Or, it might be argued that Dickinson is cultivating this kind of

aloneness through writing. In an 1871 letter to Susie, Dickinson takes her friend's

corporeal absence as an inspirational power: "To miss you, Sue, is power. The stimulus

of Loss makes most Possession mean" (L489). In another, Dickinson suggests that

receiving a letter alleviates her sense of loneliness: "I have got the letter, Susie, dear little

bud, and all—and the tears came again, that alone in this big world, I am not quite alone"

(L210). These letters seem to vacillate between highlighting her loneliness and lessening

it. In her correspondence with Susie and Austin, Dickinson presents herself as a letter

writer sitting before desk alone in her private room, most often at night, trying to address

a keen sense of loneliness through the power of the pen. Writing letters served Dickinson

as a means of bridging geographical as well as emotional distances from the loved ones.

Although any letter writer pens letters, to varying degrees, for the same purpose as

Dickinson's, her repeated expressions of loneliness that cut across numerous letters is

remarkable.[106] The sense of loneliness and the act of writing were intimately conjoined in

Dickinson's mind, with her loneliness constantly feeding her desire for epistolary

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[106] For Dickinson's expression of loneliness in letters, see L62, 83,86,90,102, 132, 135, 150, 155, 158, 213, 218, 221, 224, 225, 229, 230, 249, 267, 281, 288, 302, 427, 489, 512, and 824.

communication. Or, one might argue that the letter-writing habits also produced

loneliness as they served to lessen it, because of the extended periods of sustained

solitude to write letters as frequently as she did. In this sense, Dickinson placed herself in

an endless cycle in which writing letters both produced and lessened her sense of

loneliness.

In writing letters, Dickinson relishes imagining how distances are bridged through

correspondence. In an 1852 letter to Abiah Root, who was then away in Philadelphia,

Dickinson meditates on the distance that separates her from her beloved friend:

> I sit here alone, writing a letter to you, and whether your joy in reading will
> amount to as much or more, or even less than mine in penning it to you, becomes
> to me just now a very important problem. . . . Amherst and Philadelphia, separate
> indeed, and yet how near, bridged by a thousand trusts and a 'thousand times ten
> thousand' the travellers who cross, whom you and I may not see, nor hear the trip
> of their feet, yet faith tells us they are there, even crossing and re-crossing. Very
> likely, Abiah, you fancy me at home in my own little chamber, writing you a
> letter, but you are greatly mistaken. I am on the blue Susquehanna paddling down
> to you; I am not much of a sailor, so I get along rather slowly, and I am not much
> of a mermaid, though I verily think I shall be, if the tide overtakes me at my
> present jog. (L166-67)

What Dickinson refers to as "The travellers who cross, whom you and I may not see"

might be understood as couriers engaged in postal communication who "cross and re-

cross" the land to deliver letters. Through correspondence, Dickinson imagines herself

being vicariously transported to her distant friend. Another instance of Dickinson's

meditation on distance comes in a letter to Susie in 1852:

> Oh my darling one, how long you wander from me, how weary I grow of waiting
> and looking, and calling for you; sometimes I shut my eyes, and shut my heart
> towards you, and try hard to forget you because you grieve me so, but you'll
> never go away, Oh you never will—say, Susie, promise me again, and I will smile
> faintly—and take up my little cross again of sad—sad separation. How vain it
> seems to write, when one knows how to feel—how much more near and dear to
> sit beside you, talk with you, hear the tones of your voice. . . . Only want to write
> me, only sometimes sigh that you are far from me, and that will do, Susie! (L175-
> 76).[107]

Despite Dickinson's frustration with letter-writing—"How vain it seems to write"—she

nonetheless relies on the medium to virtually reach her beloved friend. These intimate

letters to Abiah and Susie demonstrate that, although Dickinson herself cannot traverse

the long distance, the letter has a potential to bridge the distances that separate her from

them. Developments in postal communication of the antebellum period allowed

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[107] As another instance of Dickinson's meditation on distance, In a letter to her friend Jane
Humphrey, Dickinson writes:
> I have written you a great many letters since you left me—not the kind of letters that go
> in post-offices—and ride in mail-bags—but queer—little silent ones—very full of
> affection—and full of confidence—but wanting in proof to you—therefore not valid—
> somehow you will not answer them . . . . I have written those at night, when the rest of
> the world were at sleep—when only God came between us—and no one else might hear.
> (L81)

Dickinson what Eliza Richards terms "distant nearness," a sense of being psychologically near the loved ones while remaining geographically distant from them.[108]

However, letters cannot fully bridge distances to the degree Dickinson wishfully describes in the above letter to Abiah Root. While a letter might emotionally bring Dickinson "near" a friend such as Abiah, a geographical distance inevitably remains. Janet Gurkin Altman's *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982) illuminates the distances engendered by epistolary communication: "Epistolary discourse is a discourse marked by hiatuses of all sorts: time lags between event and recording, between message transmission and reception; spatial separation between writer and addressee; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript." Thus, letters foreground temporal, spatial distances between addresser and addressee. "Yet," Altman adds, "it is also a language of gap closing, of writing to the moment, of speaking to the addressee as if he were present. Epistolary discourse is the language of the 'as if' present" (140). Thus letters are involved in the double contradictory motion: opening and closing gaps.

Dickinson's famous poem, "This is my letter to the World" (Fr. 519), best demonstrates her skepticism about epistolary communication: letter-writing is not necessarily a reciprocal, fully satisfying mode of communication:

This is my letter to the World

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[108] In her discussion of Dickinson's engagement with the telegraph during the Civil War, Eliza Richards notes: "This electrical activity brings the far and near together in an unprecedented way and makes newly crucial the question of how to respond to the disaster of strangers. Dickinson suggests that extending sympathy to strangers is not automatic, especially when their suffering is invisible and distant, transmitted through signals in an electrical wire and then converted to words. . . . . Dickinson formulates, explores, and seeks to solve the problem of *distant nearness* created by Civil War era news circulation" (Richards 166; italics added). Also see McCormack for Dickinson's engagement with the telegraph.

That never wrote to Me—

The simple News that Nature told—

With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed

To Hands I cannot see—

For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—

Judge tenderly—of Me— (Fr519)

Just as in her letter to Abiah, the persona's "letter" is committed to invisible agents, "Hands I cannot see." Or, the "hands" could mean the hands of the letter's reader. However, the persona does not share faith in epistolary communication to the degree Dickinson exhibits in her letters. The persona may fail to receive a response from "the World" that "never wrote"—and therefore might never write—to her. The persona thus expresses some uncertainty about the future in which her letter might be read. Toward the end of the poem, the tone of the persona becomes supplicant, asking the unknown reader(s) to "judge tenderly of" her. In her 1852 letter to Jane Humphrey, Dickinson writes: "Seems to me I could write all night, Jennie, and then not say the half, nor the half of the half of all I have to tell you" (L198). Thus, while writing a letter might be a preferable mode of communication, it is ultimately never satisfying for Dickinson due to its inability to fully bridge distances between correspondents.[109] The above poem indexes the limits of letter-writing as a means of reciprocal communication.

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[109] Cristanne Miller observes: "All epistolary correspondence—perhaps all writing—assumes some kind of separation or distance, whether unavoidable or willed (Miller 31).

Despite such limits, however, letters nonetheless fascinated Dickinson throughout her lifetime. Part of what she attempted in her letter-writing, one might argue, was to construct a textual relationship with her correspondents, the mode of communication that allowed her a sense of psychological intimacy while maintaining physical distance. Dickinson once wrote to Samuel Bowls: "Because I could not say it—I fixed it in the Verse" (L394). Letters provided Dickinson with an intimate space in which to articulate her private sentiments, as is illustrated by her repeated expressions of loneliness in letters to Austin and Susie.[110] Rather than fully isolating her, Dickinson's desired state of solitude actually facilitated a sense of intimacy with her loved ones. Solitude was a means of and precondition for constructing her version of networked society.

However, to make a clear-cut distinction between psychological intimacy and physical distance would be erroneous. Here, a focus on the practice of handwriting in the mid-century helps articulate a new idea of body that emerged in response to the flourishing print culture. As seen in Chapter 2, Tamara Thornton argues that, in nineteenth-century America, handwriting gained a new significance in response to the emerging print culture (Thornton xiii). Most important, Thornton views handwriting as "the medium of the self" (30). She makes this case by calling attention to the dissociation between writing and body: "[I]f print was defined by its dissociation from the hand, the body, and the corporeal individual that created it, then handwritten matter necessarily

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[110] Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that, by maintaining solitude and putting a distance from direct human contact, Dickinson sought to retain "an inviolate integrity of an isolated self": "Dickinson's poetry apotheosizes this central human paradox: the poignant, inevitable isolation of each human being—the loneliness and the yearning to be seen, acknowledged, and known—on the one hand; on the other, the gleeful satisfaction in keeping one part of the self sequestered, sacred, uniquely powerful, and utterly inviolate—the incomparable safety in retaining a secret part of the 'self' that is available to no one save self. . . . [S]he had clung to independence and the inviolate integrity of an isolated self" (Wolff 130, 135).

referred back to the hand, the body, and the individual in new ways. Words transmitted their authors' ideas; scripts, the authors themselves" (29). Implicit in this association between handwriting and body is a Platonic notion of "presence," a notion that there is a perfect correspondence between spoken words and the speaker. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, speech is seen as being in direct contact with the speaker because spoken words directly issue from the speaker as the spontaneous and transparent signs of his or her thought. The origin of spoken words (speaker) is always "present," whereas the origin of written words (author) is always absent, unable to control their own writings. A written word is likened to an orphan, who has lost ties with its father (author). Thus writing is relegated to an inferior position to speech because it is removed from its origin. Helpful here is Jacques Derrida's concept of writing which sees writing as an orphan cut off from its father: "This essential drift bearing on writing as an iterative structure, cut off from all absolute responsibility, from consciousness as the ultimate authority, orphaned, and separated at birth from the assistance of its father, is precisely what Plato condemns in the *Phaedrus*" ("Signature Event Context" 8).[111]

Within the terms of Platonic understanding, a handwritten script is at a far greater remove from its origin than speech. However, in the historical context of print culture, it proves much more connected with the writer's body than printed words. In the antebellum era, Thornton argues, "the impersonality of the print medium came to be regarded as hazardous" (31). In opposition to print, "Like speech, handwriting was perceived as a transparent medium of the self" (33). When situated on this cusp of a historical transition from handwriting to print, the practice of letter-writing in the mid-

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[111] Derrida's idea of writing as an orphan is developed more thoroughly and in greater detail in his "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination*.

nineteenth century gained new significance as a medium that avoids the disassociation

between the author and written words. The handwriting associated with letter-writing

fostered a new sense of corporeality, which can be felt in the materiality of the letter and

the physical act of touching received letters. In a sense, Dickinson enjoyed an indirect

physical intimacy when holding and reading letters sent from her loved ones. Writing and

reading letters in solitude helped create a strong sense of intimacy with her

correspondents, both psychological and physical.

"I like to see/hear it lap the Miles": The Railroad in Amherst

One of the most important historical events that account for Dickinson's

engagement with letters was the opening of the railroad in her hometown of Amherst in

1853. It is well known that Edward Dickinson, the poet's father, contributed significantly

to bringing the railroad to this rural town.[112] As Christopher Benfey notes, "[T]he Whig

father lobbied and labored hard to bring the railroad—that symbol of the Gilded Age,

dear to all Whig politicians—to water-power-poor Amherst, in order to improve

prospects of commerce and trade. (A locomotive was named in his honor.) Emily

Dickinson attended the opening ceremonies for the Amherst railroad station, a stone's

throw from the Homestead on Main Street" (Benfey 40).[113] Born in 1830, Dickinson

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[112] Edward Dickinson was also instrumental bringing the telegraph to Amherst: "Dickinson witnessed the telegraph come to Amherst in 1861; her father, in fact, was central in the negotiations between the American Telegraph Company and the city of Amherst" (Quinn 71). As *The Hampshire and Franklin Express* reported on October 25, 1861: "On Friday evening of last week, the citizens of Amherst met at the Amherst House to hear from Hon. Edward Dickinson a proposition made by the American Telegraph Company to extend their lines to this town. . . . We believe some action is being taken" (qtd. in Quinn 76).

[113] For studies of Dickinson's relationship to the railroad, see Erickson, Benfey, and Mitchell.

began life in the age of the "transportation revolution," which George Rogers Taylor

argues started roughly in the same period, the age marked by the developments of

turnpikes, canals, and the railroad. By 1860, Taylor argues, the railroad had triumphed

over all other competing forms of transportation (Taylor 84-87). Dickinson therefore

came of age when the railroad became the staple of American life.

In an 1852 letter to Austin, Dickinson takes account of her town's jubilant

celebration of the opening of the railroad, which she describes as "a most miraculous

event":

> Since we have written you, the grand Rail Road decision is made, and there is
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> great rejoicing throughout this town and the neighboring. . . . Every body is wide
>
> awake, every thing is stirring, the streets are full of people talking cheeringly, and
>
> you really should be here to partake of the jubilee. . . . Father is really sober from
>
> excessive satisfaction, and bears his honors with a most becoming air. Nobody
>
> believes it yet, it seems like a fairy tale, a most miraculous event in the lives of us
>
> all. (L173)

Letters and the railroad share an intimate connection in Dickinson's mind due to her

awareness of the former's dependency on the railroad. As she noted in the letter to Abiah,

Dickinson was well cognizant that the delivery of letters depended on those who "crossed

and re-crossed" the land. As Erika Scheurer notes, "[T]he mail system in Dickinson's

time was far from inefficient, especially after the mail train replaced the horse-drawn

stage-coach in about 1859. Whereas mail stages traveled between Western Massachusetts

villages and Boston three times a week beginning in 1816, by 1877, the trains made three

deliveries and pick-ups a day. No doubt Dickinson took advantage of the increasing

efficiency of the system" (Scheurer 99). Indeed, Dickinson was fully aware that the

railroad served as a link that circulated letters. In an 1852 letter to Susie, Dickinson

writes: "She has'nt got your letter, owing she thinks to the great snow storm, which

blocked up all the railroads, and dont give us mail" (L168). Crucial here is the fact that

Dickinson, even in her early twenties, had sufficient knowledge about how

communications worked in her time, the system in which letters and the railroad were

inseparably connected. She knew how letters were distributed across a national expanse

and she knew that the railroad was much more than an efficient means of carrying

people: it was also a means of carrying the mail to her loved ones and from them to her.

The opening of the railroad in Amherst marked a significant event for Dickinson, who

depended on letters and therefore on the railroad to maintain private communication.

Probably the most important aspect of the railroad for Dickinson was its

penetrating sound. In her letters, Dickinson more than once describes the sound of

railcars in positive terms: "When I write, *the whistle is playing*, and the cars just coming

in. It gives us all new life, every time it plays" (L250; italics added); "You [Austin] asked

me about the railroad—Everybody seems pleased at the change in arrangement. *It sounds

so pleasantly to hear them come* in twice" (L269; italics added). The railroad's sound

penetrates Dickinson's house, room, and mind, invading what may appear to be

Dickinson's hermetically contained existence. Alone in her bedroom, Dickinson could

not have been oblivious to certain activities outside. The Homestead, Dickinson's

domicile, faced Main Street, the most public and bustling location in Amherst: "In the

1850s, Main Street was a dirt road with lumbering horse drawn carts transporting goods between the railroad, the village factories, farms, and town center shops, and the Connecticut River. A steady stream of neighbors, workers, students, and visitors strolled past the Homestead and Evergreens throughout the day" (Emily Dickinson Museum).[114] Thus, while sitting and writing alone in her private room, Dickinson no doubt heard the activities of people and the railroad passing by outside. Therefore, while confined in her bedroom, Dickinson was in a sense connected not physically but imaginatively and sensorially to the outside world via her ears, or even more directly through the inevitable rumbling and shaking of the house.

Dickinson's 1852 poem, "I like to see it lap the Miles" (Fr383), takes up the railroad as its central subject. In this poem, much as she does in her letters, yet in more ambiguous ways, Dickinson muses on the sound of the rail:

I like to see it lap the Miles—

And lick the Valleys up—

And stop to feed itself at Tanks—

And then—prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains—

And supercilious peer

In Shanties—by the sides of Roads—

And then a Quarry pare

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[114] https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/town_and_times.

To fit it's sides

And crawl between

Complaining all the while

In horrid—hooting stanza—

Then chase itself down Hill—

And neigh like Boanerges—

Then—prompter than a Star

Stop—docile and omnipotent

At it's own stable door— (Fr383)

That the variable in Franklin's variorum edition for the verb "see" in the first line is "hear" gestures to the persona's interest in the sound of the rail. The persona likes to both "see" and "hear" the railroad. However, further on in the poem, she describes the resounding sound of the rail as a "horrid—hooting stanza." Thus, the reader appears to be presented with the persona's ambivalent attitude toward the rail. Yet, while the sound is irritating— "horrid" and "hooting"—it also delights the persona's ears like a poem ("stanza"). The rail's sound serves here as a means of poetic inspiration for the persona. Furthermore, rather than taking the railroad car as an unfeeling machine, the persona humorously transforms it into a "neighing" horse that appeals to her acoustic sensibility. This poem thus highlights the persona's keen interest in the railroad's sound.

In this poem, given the two variants in the first line—"see" and "hear"—seeing and hearing are conjoined. Hearing the sound of the rail, the persona in turn sees the

train's travel through "the Valleys" and "a pile of Mountains" in her imagination. Sitting in her room, Dickinson does not need physical movement to gain a sense of mobility. Dickinson likes to "hear" the sound of the railroad as well as to "see" the letter traveling to its recipient, relishing her imagined connections over the distances. Here, a potentially hidden theme behind the persona's imagining of the rail is the mail's travel via the railroad. Indeed, in an 1852 letter to Susie, Dickinson draws a poetic connection between the mail and its means of travel:

> You know how I must write you, down, down, in the terrestrial; no sunset here, no stars; not even a bit of twilight which I may poetize—and send you! Yet Susie, there will be romance in the letter's ride to you—think of the hills and the dales, and the rivers it will pass over, and the drivers and conductors who will hurry it on to you; and wont that make a poem such as can ne'er be written? (L181-82)

Dickinson later turned this fantasy of a letter's travels into the poem, "I like to see it lap the Miles," almost a decade later in 1862, which suggests her continued interest in the railroad as a source of poetic inspiration. In imagining "the letter's ride," Dickinson appears to enjoy the *process* of connecting, not the *state* of connection. Also worth noting in this regard are the words "the Miles" in the first line of the poem because it highlights the great distance that the railroad covers in the persona's inner vision. It is because she "likes to see" the railroad cars traverse thousands of miles that the persona, despite its irritating horridness, delights in hearing the railroad's poetic sound.

Diana Fuss makes a contrast between Dickinson's interest in sound and sight:

"Sound emerges in Dickinson's intensely musical poetry as a far more reliable organ of

perception than sight. Unlike the body's other orifices, the ear is the only organ that

cannot close itself. . . . Sound succeeds where sight fails, passing through windows and

doors, penetrating walls and floors, infiltrating corners and crannies" (Fuss 24). Fuss's

insight into Dickinson's distrust of sight is important because Dickinson struggled with

her eyesight in the early 1860s. Dickinson's interest in sight as a poetic subject began as a

result of an eye disease that required her to travel to Boston for eight months of therapy

in 1864. She returned to Boston for seven more months of care in 1865. Zaroff and Chan

speculate that Dickinson's "vision began to deteriorate in 1861," noting that "In 1862 she

began to visualize both the outer and inner eye."[115] In an 1865 letter to Joseph Lyman,

Dickinson gives vent to her anxiety about blindness: "Some years ago I had a woe, the

only one that ever made me tremble. It was a shutting out of all the dearest ones of time,

the strongest friends of the soul—Books. The medical man said, 'avaunt ye (books)

tormenters. . . .' He might as well have said, 'Eyes be blind, heart be still'" (*The Lyman

Letters* 74-76). Importantly, the timeframe concerning Dickinson's eye problem—the

early sixties—corresponds with the year in which "I like to see it lap the Miles" was

composed, 1862. Perhaps it is because Dickinson had to rely on her inner vision due to

her failing sight that she increasingly turned to hearing as another way of connecting with

people in her imagination. Dickinson's "hearing" of the railroad speaks to the ability of

her inner eye to "see" herself connected to others. Herein lies the significance of the

variant of "hear." Fuss further meditates on Dickinson's failing eyesight by noting that

her "poetic eye turned inward, irradiating the private recesses of the soul with all the

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[115] For a more detailed account of Dickinson's eye problem, see Wand and Sewall.

cognitive power previously expended on the world of empirical phenomenon" (Fuss 25). Although Dickinson's "poetic eye" certainly "turned inward," it can also be maintained that her inward eye also turned outward in imagining the connections that the railroad enabled.

Indeed, Dickinson poetizes this process of connecting in several of her poems. In "Going to Him! Happy letter!," the persona imagines a letter's travel to "Him," its recipient:

> Going to Him! Happy letter!
>
> Tell him—
>
> Tell him the page I did'nt write—
>
> Tell Him I only said the Syntax—
>
> And left the Verb and the pronoun-out—
>
> Tell Him just how the fingers hurried—
>
> Then—how they waded—slow—slow—
>
> And then you wished you had eyes in your pages—
>
> So you could see what moved them so— (Fr277; lines 1-9)

In "How News must feel when travelling," the persona again imagines the travelling of the news:

> How News must feel when travelling
>
> If News have any Heart

Alighting at the Dwelling

'Twill enter like a Dart!

What News must think when pondering

If News have any Thought

Concerning the stupendousness

Of it's perceiveless freight! (Fr 1379; lines 1-8)

Dickinson, who did not travel throughout much of her life, becomes mobile in a sense by

fantasizing the travels of letters and news. Immobile as she was, Dickinson gained

mobility in her mind by imagining the process of how communications operated in her

time. Here, Benedict Anderson's discussion in *Imagined Communities* helps articulate

this process by which Dickinson imaginatively constructs her society in solitude.

Anderson argues that the act of reading newspapers creates what he terms "an imagined

community" in the reader's mind:

> [The reading of the newspaper] is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the
>
> skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is
>
> being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose
>
> existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.
>
> Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals
>
> throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically
>
> clocked, imagined community can be imagined? (Anderson 35)

An avid reader of the *Springfield Daily Republicans* as well as several print materials, the solitary Dickinson synchronized with her contemporary world by imagining the ways in which these print media were circulated and consumed. In reading a variety of texts—letters, newspapers, and periodicals—Dickinson constructed an imagined, textual community in solitude.

Anderson's argument suggests that the imagined community consists of a bond with an invisible, anonymous group of people, not limited to one's known friends and relatives. Despite her physical isolation, Dickinson did not feel entirely lonely because her mind was constantly networked. In an 1853 poem, Dickinson suggests the impossibility of solitude by meditating on "couriers within":

Alone, I cannot be—

For Hosts—do visit me—

Recordless Company—

Who baffle Key—

They have no Robes, nor Names—

No Almanacs—nor Climes—

But general Homes

Like Gnomes—

Their Coming, may be known

By Couriers within—

Their going—is not—

For they're never gone— (Fr303)

Here, the persona has "couriers within," who bring an anonymous group of people to her mind. These unknown visitors never leave her ("they're never gone"), thereby keeping her mind constantly busy with interacting with them. Because of this great inflow of fantasized visitors, the persona cannot be alone. This poem might explain why Dickinson felt no need to go out to meet friends in her real life. Her inner life was busy with interacting with these imagined visitors. In yet another poem composed in 1862, Dickinson similarly observes that the soul does not need to go outside to communicate with others:

The Soul that hath a guest,

Doth seldom go abroad—

Diviner Crowd at Home—

Obliterate the need— (Fr592; lines 1-4)

In yet another poem, Dickinson gestures toward a possibility that even in solitude, one can possess society:

The Soul selects her own Society—

Then—shuts the Door—

> To her divine Majority—
>
> Present no more— (Fr409; lines 1-4)

The above poems converge around the notion that the soul, if it has guests within, does not need direct contact with people. Distinct in these poems is the fact that the personas are absolutely immobile and solitary. Shut within their private spaces, the personas nonetheless create their version of "Society." They do not need to move because they can possess society without "going abroad" and because they have invisible agents who "cross and re-cross" geographical expanses.

Solitude in "Soft Prison"

In relation to Dickinson's many expressions of solitude, several of the poet's works meditate on a sense of being in prisons to emphasize the positive aspect of solitude as opposed to the negative connotation of loneliness. A close look at Dickinson's representations of solitary confinement helps articulate this important distinction between solitude and loneliness. As in "The Soul selects her own Society," the persona "shuts the Door" to maintain her solitary privacy. In a sense, Dickinson willingly incarcerates herself to achieve solitude. On Dickinson's self-incarceration, Caleb Smith argues: "As she explored her own removal from the world into the privacy of the home, Dickinson often imagined herself as a prisoner. She depicted the walls of her chamber as those of a cell, her seclusion as a kind of solitary confinement. Imprisonment, however, was an ambiguous condition for Dickinson, sometimes oppressive but also sometimes

mysteriously liberating" (Smith 2). Commonly understood, prisons carry the negative

implications of solitary imprisonment. However, as Smith argues, the poet presents the

notion of a prison in much more ambiguous ways. The figure of prisons in Dickinson's

poetics, I will demonstrate, vacillates between confinement and liberation.

For example, in "How soft this Prison is" (Fr1352), the persona suggests that

being in prison is a favorable mode of life:

> How soft this Prison is
>
> How sweet these sullen bars
>
> No Despot but the King of Down
>
> Invented this repose
>
>
> Of Fate if this is all
>
> Has he no added Realm
>
> A Dungeon but a Kinsman is
>
> Incarceration—Home. (Fr1352)

Nearly all of the descriptions of the prison in this poem are counterintuitive: The prison is

"soft" and its prison bars are "sweet." The prison affords the persona "repose," and

incarceration constitutes her "Home." Usually conceived as impenetrable and hard, the

"soft prison" in this poem is suggested as malleable and perhaps porous to external forces.

Solitude in this soft prison thus appears not totally absolute. This poem suggests a tension

between connect and disconnect that resurfaces in Dickinson's poetic representations of

prisons.[116] As another instance of such contradictory coupling of confinement and liberation, in "No Prisoner be—" (Fr742), a prisoner is given "liberty":

> No Prisoner be—
>
> Where Liberty—
>
> Himself—abide with Thee— (Fr742)

If one has liberty within the soul, this poem suggests, he or she cannot be a prisoner even if they are physically imprisoned. One can argue that the figure of prison represented in these poems reflects the solitary status in which Dickinson composed her poetry. In an 1864 letter to Higginson, she writes: "I work in my Prison, and make Guests for myself" (L431). Even in solitary imprisonment, Dickinson suggests, one can avoid total isolation by conjuring up guests in imagination via "couriers within." In several other poems, such as "A Prison gets to be a friend—" (Fr456) and "Bind me—I still can sing—" (Fr1005), Dickinson continues to explore the tension between confinement and liberation.

In this context of self-incarceration, "The Way I read a Letter's" (Fr700) emerges as an important poetic meditation on the subject:

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[116] Worth noting here is the fact that this poem was originally inserted into one of Dickinson's letters. After the decease of her father, Dickinson writes to Mrs. J. G. Holland in late January 1875:

> My House is a House of Snow—true—sadly—of few.
> Mother is asleep in the Library—Vinnie—in the Dining Room—Father—in the Masked Bed—in the Marl House.
> How soft his Prison is—
> How sweet those sullen Bars—
> No Despot—but the King of Down
> Invented that Repose! (L432)

In this version, the prison is imagined as Dickinson's father's, not hers because "this" in the first line is substituted for by "his" and "those" in the second line by "these." Dickinson, in remaking this poem, turned her father's prison into her own. For important discussions of this poem, see Davinroy 7-9, Crumbley 138, Olpin 21, and Hopes 16.

The Way I read a Letter's—this—

'Tis first—I lock the Door—

And push it with my fingers—next—

For transport it be sure—

And then I go the furthest off

To counteract a knock—

Then draw my little Letter forth

And slowly pick the lock—

Then—glancing narrow, at the Wall—

And narrow at the floor

For firm Conviction of a Mouse

Nor exorcised before—

Pause how infinite I am

To no one that You—know—

And sigh for lack of Heaven—but not

The Heaven God bestow— (Fr700)

The persona here incarcerates herself within a private room by "locking the Door," just as the persona in "The Soul selects her own Society" "shuts the Door." She does so

willingly in order to form a private sphere in which to read the letter. Christanne Miller argues that the persona in this poem "makes reading a letter the most intimate form of communication possible," requiring "locked doors, absolute solitude, and as great a distance possible from others" (Miller 30). The persona needs "absolute solitude" to fully savor the letter's content. Thus, solitude appears to be a necessary condition for Dickinson to address her sense of loneliness and to form substantive human relationships. In his discussion of Dickinson's engagement with the emerging media environment, Domhnall Mitchell argues that in the age of increasing connectivity, solitude was becoming more and more difficult to achieve for her (Mitchell 14). However, it can be argued that Dickinson nonetheless sought to carve out a solitary space by placing herself at a safe distance from the era's developments in media as well as benefiting from its technological advancements. To cope with a sense of loneliness engendered by distance, Dickinson paradoxically required solitude as a way of intimately engaging with others and getting better networked. Solitude is so necessary that even the writer of this letter might be an interruption for the persona who wishes to create a truly intimate, private space for its perusal. Solitude is another word for textual intimacy.

It is here that we need to distinguish loneliness from solitude. For Dickinson, loneliness connotes a sense of longing for human companionship, a desire to bridge distances. Solitude, on the other hand, represents a positive state of being, in which she can intimately communicate with others via texts. These two seemingly opposing concepts, however, do not cancel out each other; rather, they are closely interlocked because Dickinson requires solitude to overcome a sense of loneliness. One possible reason for Dickinson's embrace of solitude may have been that, in solitude, Dickinson

could control her human relationships on several levels. In solitude, she was able to read letters at her own pace and engage with them uninterrupted. While depending on the contemporary media and technologies, Dickinson at the same time maintained a distance from them to manage her own mode of communication and to create her own society.

One such instance of Dickinson's resistance to the new media environment of her time concerns the issue of temporality. Marta Werner observes the shift in temporality in the age of the communications revolution by noting that Dickinson "lived and wrote in the century of suddenness, amid the rise of new telecommunications technologies that altered forever the forms of human contact" (Werner 214). Although such increasing rapidity of time certainly affected Dickinson, she endeavored to preserve her own sense of temporality.[117] As seen in the previous chapter, Michael O'Malley (60) and Jürgen Osterhammel (69) argue that the commercial expansion enabled by technological innovations, such as railroads and telegraphy, created an impulse to standardize time across the nation. Hearing the railroad in her room and keeping abreast of contemporary affairs through the reading of periodicals, Dickinson must have sensed the pace at which other people lived. However, she did not fully synchronize with it, but lived her own time by metaphorically "locking the Door" to the outside world. Dickinson was not totally oblivious to or uninterested in the present time; rather, she sought to find a balance

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[117] Dickinson kept abreast of contemporary affairs by constantly reading the *Republican*. In her discussion of Dickinson's engagement with the telegraph, Eliza Richards opines: "While it is true that after a certain age Dickinson preferred 'not to cross [her] Father's garden to any House or town,' it is also true that she didn't need to travel anywhere to keep track of current events, for the news came to her" (Richards 163). Indeed, in an 1854 letter, Dickinson writes to the editor of the newspaper: "One glimpse of The Republican makes me break things again—I read in it every night. Who writes those funny accidents, where railroads meet each other unexpectedly, and gentlemen in factories get their heads cut off quite informally? . . . .The Republican seems to us like a letter from you, and we break the seal and read it eagerly" (L264). For Dickinson's engagement with newspapers, also see L491, 657, and 884.

between the present and her private, solitary time. Dickinson thus shuttled between

different temporalities in solitude.

"Oh Sumptuous Moment": Slow Solitude

In this context of temporality, it is worth returning to the poem "This is my letter

to the World," which specifically addresses the issue. The recipient of the poetic

persona's letter mentioned in the first line—"the World"—is unidentified, unspecified,

and all-encompassing, presumably including posterity. Indeed, several critics have

proposed a possibility that Dickinson intended to commit her poems to posterity. For

instance, in his note to Dickinson's letters in the early 1860s, Thomas H. Johnson

observes: "It is, finally, the period when she was beginning to think of herself as one who

might write for posterity" (L332).[118] Furthermore, in condensed ways, this poem engages

with imbricated layers of temporality. This letter "is" written to a world that never "wrote

to" the persona, which indexes her attention to a double temporality consisting of both

past and present. In the second stanza, however, the persona begins to look forward with

half expectation and half anxiety to a future, in which her "sweet countrymen" might

"judge tenderly of" her. This anticipated moment of being read is also left unidentified.

The verb "commit" in the second stanza has different meanings that converge

around the binary between confinement and liberation. According to *OED*, the first

definition of the verb is as follows: "To give to some one to take care of, keep, or deal

with; to give in charge or trust, entrust, consign to (a person, his care, judgement, etc.)"

(*OED*). This letter-poem is entrusted to "Hands" she cannot see for delivery—this is the

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[118] For other criticisms that propose this view, see Hewitt 149 and Miller 34.

most usual definition and therefore a most commonplace understanding of the word. However, "commit" has two other definitions that counteract one another. On the one hand, to commit is "to put in writing, write down for preservation, record in writing" (*OED*); on the other, it is "to consign officially to custody or confinement; to send to prison, *esp.* for a short time or for trial" (*OED*). While the former definition liberates the writing from its anchorage in the present temporality to futurity, the latter has a meaning of confinement. The expression "*is* committed" therefore registers both imprisonment in and liberation from the present. Perhaps the persona's hope rests with the latter, because she is anticipating a future in which her "countrymen" might read the letter.[119]

Importantly, in contrast to the persona's use of both the past and present tenses in the first stanza—"this *is* my letter" and "That never *wrote*"—she never uses the future tense in the second stanza, despite her anticipation of the future. She can only say "Her message *is* committed to/ Hands I cannot see—" only in the present tense. Her anticipatory tone in this stanza notwithstanding, she proves trapped in the present moment of writing this letter/poem. This is probably because she cannot be fully confident of the possibility of being read in the future. The most she can do is to commit the message to the future in the confined moment of the present. This poem thus presents a tension between a double temporality, between the persona's situatedness in the present and her desire to transcend its limitation.

Noteworthy in this context of temporality is the recent publication of *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings* (2013), a visual book that reprints more than a hundred of Dickinson's so-called "envelope-poems," the poems written on used

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[119] Lea Bertani Vozar Newman also reads this poem addressed to futurity. Newman argues that the persona hopes "her 'Message' will somehow get to those who are out of her reach now—to posterity" (Newman 104).

envelopes. Upon first glance at these envelope-poems, one recognizes their confinement

to tiny spaces (Fig. 4 and 5).[120] Physically squeezed onto a limited material space, these

poems are also removed from a communications circuit because they were never

published during Dickinson's lifetime. Such non-circulation of the envelope-poems

makes an interesting contrast with the very materiality of envelopes, because they are

supposed to contain letters addressed to particular recipients. Writing on the envelopes

can be seen as Dickinson's attempt to create a textual intimacy with the unknown

readers—"the World"—from a distance. In the new age of instant communication

inaugurated by the advent of the telegraph, Dickinson's envelope-poems represent "slow"

communication, in which her poems/letters are committed to unknown recipients over a

temporal distance, thereby dislocating the poet from the present. They materially and

visually represent the resistance against the idea of speed, the hallmark of the

communications revolution which is said to have "annihilated time and space," because

these poems/letters have come to reach the reader only *slowly* after the poet's death.

Given the contradictory tension between confinement and liberation in Dickinson's

poetics, one might also interpret a sense of liberation in the entrapped words of her

envelope-poems. These envelope-poems, I suggest, register Dickinson's desire to

transcend the confines of the present temporality.

Historically considered, envelopes were novel postal artifacts of the mid-

nineteenth century that came into wide use after the Postal Acts of 1845 and 1851.

According to Richard R. John, prior to the Postal Act of 1845, should the letter contain

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[120] Figure 4. "Oh Sumptuous moment" (Fr 1186), *The Gorgeous Nothings* (77). Figure 5. "In this short life that lasts only an hour" (Fr1292), *The Gorgeous Nothings* (63). Images redacted due to copyright restriction.

two enclosures, the expense would be tripled to 75 cents. For this reason, envelopes were

rarely used; instead, postal patrons would simply fold up their letter and write the address

on the back. The Acts of 1845 and 1851 contributed to eliminating these problems,

dramatically reducing and simplifying the basic letter rate. No less important is the fact

that the Acts facilitated prepayment of postage through the use of postage stamps, which

the government first introduced on a national basis in 1847 and which became common

after 1851, and prepayment became mandatory in 1855 (John 158-161). Envelopes were

thus the product of the developments in postal communication in the mid-century,

developments with which Dickinson's active usage of envelopes for poem-writing went

in tandem.

However, in these envelope-poems, Dickinson appropriates and defamiliarizes

envelopes in a unique fashion: they operate to estrange readers' understandings of

common communication media. While envelopes are used primarily for the purpose of

enclosing letters for delivery, Dickinson did exactly the opposite. By writing poems on

used envelopes, Dickinson did away with the latter's original function and ensured their

removal from postal circulation. Despite her lifelong dependence on the postal system, in

these envelope-poems Dickinson distanced herself from it by writing poems that would

never enter the postal circuit. Just as she did not use the railroad for travel but gained a

sense of virtual connection via its existence, Dickinson did not use these postal artifacts

for their supposed purposes. Similarly, the poem written on a Union telegraph blank (Fig.

6) also serves to counteract the intended purpose of a telegraph.[121] First, it does not

transmit the message to a particular recipient. Second, being thus placed outside the flow

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[121] Figure 6. "Glass was the street in tinsel peril" (Fr1518, 1880), *The Gorgeous Nothings* (215). Image redacted due to copyright restriction. For studies of Dickinson's engagement with the telegraph, see Quinn, Richards, and Thomas.

of communication exchange, it lacks the speed that enables instant transmission, the most

remarkable feature of the telegraph. Shannon L. Thomas notes Dickinson's dislike of the

telegraph by noting that she "faults it for destroying the characteristics of person-to-

person communication that she most valued" (Thomas 69). With this, it is as if Dickinson

wanted to step away from or speak back to the world of speed and circulation that the

communications revolution enabled.

Among several envelope-poems that reflect on time (Fr1251, 1312, 1354, 1405,

and 1506), the following (Fig. 4) is worth particular attention because it takes up the

subject of slowness:

Oh Sumptuous moment

Slower go

That I may gloat on thee—

'Twill never be the same to starve

Now I abundance see—

Which was to famish, then or now—

The difference of Day

Ask him unto the Gallows led—

With morning in the sky (Fr1186)

In this poem, the persona meditates on the transience and evanescence of things. She

pleads time ("Sumptuous moment") to go slower so that she can savor its sumptuousness.

The basic message of the poems is that things gain importance and attraction by

comparison with the opposite. Now that one sees abundance, famishing will be hard to bear; going to the gallows would be harder for a prisoner if the sky were bright and beautiful in the morning. In the same logic of comparison, each passing moment feels sweeter to the persona because it goes so fast. Despite that recognition, the persona cannot help wishing that time went slower for her to "gloat on" it. Written on the used envelope displaced from the communications circuit, the content of the poem reverberates with its material production. This envelope, a postal artifact that is supposed to speedily carry its content to a recipient, is no longer speeding anywhere because Dickinson took it out of the rapid system of postal communication and turned it into a mere writing sheet. The poem inscribed on this envelope bears neither date nor addressee, and so remains in stasis on its material surface. Unlike the letter that this envelope originally contained, this poem is not in any rush to reach its destination and does not have any particular addressee: in short, it does precisely the opposite that a letter is supposed to do.

In yet another envelope-poem (Fig. 5), Dickinson explores this interplay between text and medium:

In this short life that only lasts an hour

How much—how little—is within our power (Fr1292)

At first glance, the persona here seems to recognize that the passing of time is beyond our control. However, read together with "Oh Sumptuous moment" and given its material condition of being written on the envelope, it might be argued that Dickinson is resisting

the passing of time by removing the poem from the world of speedy communication. While the persona is expressing frustration with "how little" we can do to stop time, she is also suggesting the opposite when she says "how much." Rather than synchronizing with the speed of communication that the postal system enabled, Dickinson instead writes a poem that is not speeding anywhere. The slow communication as such might be a way of showing "how much" is within her power to resist the speedy passing of time. Dickinson's employment of the used envelopes for her poem-writing can be seen as counteracting the cult of speed that they symbolize. In our age of the Internet, we might not readily associate letters with speed, but Americans in the mid-nineteenth century did. As David Henkin notes, "encouraged both by the increasing speed and frequency of the mails . . . letter-writers frequently imagined being brought into some sort of instantaneous communion with the people they addressed" (Henkin 110).

Dickinson, while embracing the networked solitude, refuses to synchronize with the world of speed the communications revolution brought about: a new age of speed threatened to violate her secure, private realm of solitude. In one of her envelope-poems, she wrote on such an inviolate realm: "As there are Apartments in our own Minds that we never enter without Apology—we should respect the seals of others—" (*The Gorgeous Nothings* 176). Dickinson's ingenuity is that, rather than being controlled by the new media environment, she asserted a control over it to create her unique solitude, the kind of solitude in which she was able to write letters and poems, and read the texts of her choice at her own pace. Unlike Melville's Bartleby who adamantly refuses the communications revolution, Dickinson's attitude toward the new media environment is malleable in that she manages to stay away from its rapidity while benefiting from the

"networked solitude" it made possible. Defying the publication of her poems and instead leaving them to posterity, she allowed her own writings to escape being consumed in any specific moment of time. Going against the cult of speed was Dickinson's unique way of protecting her solitude. Certainly her version of solitude was "networked solitude" in which she was indirectly connected to others through texts, but her solitude also meant a way of stepping away from the jarring rapidity of her surrounding world.

This issue of slowness concerns not only Dickinson but also the reader of her poems in the twenty-first century. In reading her cryptic poems closely and languorously, the reader becomes unwittingly seduced by Dickinson's project of slow communication and her resistance to the culture of speed. The reader of her works enters into solitude impervious to the bustling speed of our time, experiencing the slowness at variance with the quickening tempo of today's highly networked environment. In *In Praise of Slowness*, Carl Honoré has proposed that, in our age of the cult of speed, we can better control our lives by slowing down and staying away from modern communications media. As he notes, "There is plenty of evidence that the world remains stuck in fast-forward. Not long ago a literary critic announced that he could no longer read poetry because it was 'too slow'" (Honoré 311-12). Reading Dickinson's poems and understanding her poetics of slowness in envelope-poems might provide us with a way of practicing the Slow philosophy that Honoré embraces.

Coda: Modern Solitude

In an age of connectivity effected by the communications revolution, Dickinson betrayed ambivalence toward the novel possibility of human connection. While she placed herself in a communications circuit by writing letters and reading print materials, Dickinson simultaneously expressed resistance to it by spurning the telegraph and refusing to travel on the railroad. Dickinson's ingenuity in tapping into the new media environment is that she appropriated it for her own use: she channeled the sounds of the railroad to gain a sense of virtual mobility; she re-purposed used envelopes as a means of "committing" her letter-poems to posterity. Dickinson was certainly affected by the communications revolution, but not controlled by it. Instead, she cleverly devised a means of harnessing new technologies to achieve intimate communication with the loved ones as well as anonymous, posthumous readers. Rather than passively benefiting from the development of communications media of her era, Dickinson creatively took advantage of them for her unique way of poem-writing. Amidst increasing connectivity and speed, Dickinson invented solitude to create her version of a more perfectly networked society than Thoreau's.

Dickinson's solitude could be rephrased as "modern solitude" because of her *modern* way of resisting modernity. Her mode of retreat from modern communications is one suggested by the communications revolution itself. The revolution fetishizes communication and speed, but its products can be re-purposed, slowed down, and assigned new meanings, as can be seen in Dickinson's recycling of envelopes. Her solitude is modern not just because of her active participation in the new media environment but also because of her mode of resistance to it. Unlike Bartleby, who stepped away from the world of speed and circulation to resist the communications

revolution, Dickinson uniquely resisted it by re-appropriating its very products.

Dickinson managed to be both inside and outside the communications revolution, and,

compared to other writers considered in this study, she is the one who most benefited

from the solitude that her age afforded her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Techno-Mediated Reality:

The Promise of Unity in Telegraphic Literature

After Samuel F. B. Morse's first demonstration of an electromagnetic telegraph line in 1844, the telegraph sparked the imagination of nineteenth-century authors. Authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Herman Melville actively responded to the new climate of connectivity in their writings. A most salient example, Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* (1852) speaks to the era's fascination with telegraphic unity. Near the end of the novel, Clifford Pyncheon expresses his excitement over the telegraph's capacity to unite distant people:

> Then there is electricity;—the demon, the angel, the mighty physical power, the all-pervading intelligence! . . . . Is it a fact—or have I dreamt it—by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time? Rather, the round globe is a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence! . . . . 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. (186)

Clifford's almost hyperbolic language bespeaks the era's fascination with the promise of

unity that new technologies of the time suggested. His lofty words present a sanguine

vision of what Paul Gilmore has termed "techno-utopianism."[122] Telegraphy will connect

distant lovers by enabling them to communicate "their heart throbs from Maine to

Florida." In this almost utopian vision, there is no space left for solitude, which appears

to be annihilated alongside time and space.

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) also

addresses telegraphic unity in relation to civilization. Hank Morgan, mysteriously

transported from late nineteenth-century America into sixth-century England, finds

himself in King Arthur's court. From the perspective of a late nineteenth-century

American, what he finds there is a sheer lack of civilization: no railroads, newspapers,

telegraphs, or telephones. What he discovers prevalent instead is slavery, an institution

that the United States had abolished several decades earlier. After establishing an

authoritative position in the court, Morgan embarks on the effort to civilize uncivilized

English people. After introducing nineteenth-century technologies to the uncivilized

Arthurian England, Morgan proudly claims: "I was pretty well satisfied with what I had

already accomplished. In various quiet nooks and corners I had the beginnings of all sorts

of industries under way—nuclei of future vast factories, the iron and steel missionaries of

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[122] Paul Gilmore has called the era's optimistic faith in the telegraph's potential to connect human beings "techno-utopianism." Gilmore argues: "Because the telegraph was understood as both a spiritual and physical medium, even by some scientists, it was imagined it could bring 'mankind into [a] harmony of faith and life' based in spiritual interconnection. . . . A rapid expansion of the telegraph became a prime motor in more tightly knitting together both commercial markets and European (and American) empires. Enabling the dispersion of information at speeds unthought of before, the telegraph brought people—at least some people—and data, especially commercial data, together in a way that seemed to erase all distance, all time. . . . In such techno-utopian fantasies, the telegraph would peacefully unify the world by rendering the whole world the same" (Gilmore 50-58). With the invention of the telegraph came such a fervent faith in connectivity.

my future civilization" (50). Morgan expresses a clear sense of techno-utopianism in his blind faith that the introduction of new technologies will easily lead to the establishment of civilization.

Rather than examining such canonical texts in greater detail, however, this chapter will examine the impact of the telegraph on the popular imagination in popular accounts of the day. A new technological invention has often given birth to new genres of literature. In Chapter 3 on Melville's "Bartleby," we saw how the popular interest in the Dead Letter Office of the time led to the creation of works of fiction and poetry on the office, thereby facilitating a culture of dead letters. Similarly, in the wake of the invention of the telegraph, the United States in the 1870s and 1880s witnessed the emergence of what is generically termed "telegraphic literature," a constellation of popular fiction written by telegraph operators about their work and lives. Unlike the sporadic treatments by those canonical authors, telegraphic literature offers us a direct glimpse into telegraphers' life. These works of fiction appeared mainly in the telegraph industry's paper, the *Operator*, which was published specifically for the telegraph operators. Published from 1874 to 1885, the *Operator* provided a forum for laborers in the industry to express themselves.[123] The readership of telegraphic literature, however, was not limited to industry insiders, but also appealed to the general public. Collections of

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[123] The era of telegraphic literature, the 1870s and 1880s, belongs, according to Richard R. John's categorization, to a period of "popularization": "Although the telegraph and the telephone differed in many ways, each evolved through three stages. In the first stage—commercialization—the network was established; in the second stage—popularization—the network was scaled up from a specialty service into a mass service; and in the third stage—naturalization—the network was depoliticized through the constant repetition of the seductive dogma that existing institutional arrangements were rooted in technology and economics rather than politics and culture. . . . The telegraph was commercialized in the 1840s, popularized in the 1880s, and naturalized in 1910" (John 7). Given this three-step development, telegraphic literature emerged specifically in the period of popularization.

telegraphic literature, such as *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes* (1879), were published for readerships beyond the industry itself. In the preface to this book, editor W. J. Johnston notes: "While the primary object has been to make the book of especial interest to telegraphers, an endeavor has been made to avoid all technical terms and expression not understood by those unconnected with the business. For this reason it is hoped that the book will be welcomed not only by telegraphers themselves, but also find friends among the great outside world as well" ("Preface").

Hawthorne's and Twain's texts each speak to promises of technological advancement in the future. While looking to the potential that the telegraph may realize in the time to come, these stories do not meditate long on whether or not such a technology will actually fulfill its promise. The following inquiry in this chapter is focused on a more personal, actual experience of unity, specifically on romantic love nurtured through the telegraph. As cited earlier, Clifford Pyncheon states: "Lovers, day by day—hour by hour, if so often moved to do it—might send their heart-throbs from Main to Florida." But to what extent did the telegraph fulfill this hope? How was the telegraph understood to change human relationships? How did it change the concept of solitude? While discussing solitude in relation to the telegraph may sound counterintuitive, the public fervor over the connectivity brought by the telegraph encourages examination of the concept's antithesis. In this chapter, after offering a historical overview of the telegraph's development in nineteenth-century America, I explore to what extent the prospect of telegraphic unity lived up to its ideal specifically by focusing on the issue of class. Telegraph operators in the late nineteenth century were predominantly young white women who belonged to the working class with low wages.

While the telegraph fostered a romantic vision of liberty from the physical limitations, as I hope to show, it ultimately failed to annihilate a class barrier for these operators.

This chapter also seeks to demonstrate how the telegraph created a distinctly modern form of human relationship. I use the word "modern" here to refer to novel human interactions that are nurtured online through telegraphy. Online relationships are what we in the twenty-first century experience on a day-to-day basis through the Internet. However, with the telegraph, Americans began to experience the kind of relationships that form continuity with today's online communication. At the heart of this modernity, I argue, is a paradox that communications technology can foster loneliness while enabling one to share it with an online communicant. In telegraphic literature, the telegraph certainly helps lessen telegraph operators' sense of loneliness, but ultimately augments it because online communication after all fosters an unreal and intangible human relationship. This chapter probes this paradox that accompanied the invention of the telegraph, one that can be called "modern" because of its continuity with today's media environment. Telegraphic romance, I hope to demonstrate, is a form in which romance can be imagined without presence, and yet with immediate interchanges. In that way telegraphic love would combine the distance of epistolary romance with the immediacy of "real-time" interactions. Telegraphic literature, I argue, captures the historical transformation of solitude as a neutral and oftentimes positive state of being into loneliness as a negative state of emotion, a transformation that accompanied the development of a new communications technology.

In addition to popular fiction, this chapter also examines Henry James's novella, "In the Cage" (1898) about a female telegrapher who experiences loneliness in her

workplace. This work of fiction deserves independent scrutiny because James's realist approach to the telegraph problematizes the concept of reality mediated through the technology in a different manner than telegraphic literature does. As we shall see later, telegraphic literature in general is informed by the elements of romance, the most distinctive of which is a happy ending with marriage, while Jamesian realism differentiates itself from the genre of romance by ending the tale with the telegrapher's disillusionment about the promise of unity that the telegraph offers. Addressing the interrelationship between reality and technology, James's novella theorizes what I term "techno-mediated reality," a new form of experience that emerged in response to the telegraph and that was removed from the physical reality. James's protagonist, a working-class female telegrapher, believes herself to be in possession of secrets of her wealthy customers. However, the story concludes with her disillusioned realization that what she has believed to be a "reality" proves far removed from the actual reality her customers live in. The kind of solitude this chapter probes concerns not only telegraphers' sense of loneliness experienced in their confined existence but also the sense of isolation from physical reality facilitated by technology. In this sense, James's novella, together with other telegraphic stories, highlight an origin of what we now call "the digital divide," whereby access to connectivity is reserved for the privileged.

American Progress

In May 1844, Samuel F. B. Morse first demonstrated an electromagnetic telegraph line between Washington D.C. and Baltimore. Morse's invention did not occur out of the

blue. It actually dates as far back as 1811, when Morse, a young American painter

training in London, wrote home to complain to his family about the duration of time it

takes for his letters to arrive in America: "While I am writing, I can imagine mama

wishing that she could hear of my arrival, and thinking of thousands of accidents that

may have befallen me, and I wish that *in an instant* I could communicate the information;

but three thousand miles are not passed over *in an instant* and we must wait for long

weeks before we can hear from each other" (*Samuel F. B. Morse: His Letters and

Journals* 41; italics added). With his repetition of "in an instant," Morse here expresses

his impatience with the slowness of letters' delivery. More than three decades later,

Morse answered his own longing for instant communication with his invention of the

telegraph, which was thus born partly out of his personal desire to "annihilate time and

space." Visitors who came to view Morse's experiment with the telegraph in 1838

marveled specifically at its speed: "'Time and space are now annihilated,' was the far

seeing-conclusion of one visitor. His comment was to be on the lips of millions" (qtd. in

Rosenheim 91).

The ensuing development of this new technology was remarkable, with a forty-

mile electric telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore being rapidly extended to

network the entire nation. By 1850 there were 12,000 miles of telegraph line in the

United States whereas Britain only contained 2,215 miles. The industry continued to

grow, and by 1853, the US total reached 23,000 miles (Starr 169). Far exceeding the

postal system in terms of speed of transmission, the telegraph was celebrated by

nineteenth-century Americans as a magical means of linking the world together. The

most distinctive feature of the telegraph was its independence from transportation. Unlike

the postal system, which depended mainly on the train for delivery, the telegraph did without physical transportation.[124] In the words of James W. Carey, "the telegraph freed communication from the constraints of geography" (157).

With the advent of the telegraph, the communications system in the US entered a new phase of instant telecommunication. With the establishment of the Associated Press (AP) in 1849, the news came to be instantly and systematically disseminated across the nation. The formation of the Associated Press was spurred by this new technology because "Telegraphy made possible, indeed demanded, systematic cooperative news gathering by the nation's press" (Czitrom 16). Czitrom opines that "The dramatic impact of the telegraph on national politics during the first days of Morse's experiment line demonstrated the extraordinary potential of the telegraph for news dissemination" (Czitrom 15). Indeed, it was newspapers that most quickly understood the great potential of the telegraph. James G. Bennett of the *New York Herald*, for instance, was a constant patron of the telegraph, spending tens of thousands of dollars on dispatches. In the first week of 1848, Bennett boasted of his *Herald* containing seventy-nine thousand words of telegraphic content, at a cost of $12,381. The Mexican War (1846-1848) also instigated public demand for news. With the establishment of a sophisticated system of news distribution enabled by the telegraph, the United States increasingly became, to borrow a phrase from Richard R. John, a "network nation."

As early as 1838, Morse predicted the impact that the telegraph would have on the world's communication system. It would not be long, he wrote, "ere the whole surface of this country would be channeled for those nerves which are to diffuse with the speed of thought, a knowledge of all that is occurring throughout the land; making in fact *one*

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[124] See Carey 157.

neighborhood of the whole country" (qtd. in Czitrom 11-12; italics added).[125] The word

"neighborhood" might remind one of Marshall McLuhan's claim that electric

technologies have quickly transformed the world into a "global village," a unified

community via telecommunications media. McLuhan argues: "[T]he electromagnetic

discoveries have recreated the simultaneous 'field' in all human affairs so that the human

family now exists under conditions of a 'global village'" (McLuhan 36). Here, a poem by

an anonymous author, entitled "To Professor Morse, In Pleasant Memory of Oct. 9, 1856,

at the Albion," is illustrative of the association between the telegraph and connectivity

during the era:

> A good and generous spirit ruled the hour;
>
>   Old jealousies were drowned in brotherhood;
>
> Philanthropy rejoiced that Skill and Power,
>
>   Servants to Science, compass all men's good;
>
>   And over all Religion's banner stood.
>
> Upheld by thee, true patriarch of the plan
>
> Which in two hemispheres was schemed to shower
>
> Mercies from God on universal man.
>
>   Yes, this electric chain from East to West
>
> More than mere metal, more than mammon can,
>
>   Binds us together—kinsmen, in the best,
>
> As most affectionate and frankest bond;

---

[125] The trope of neighborhood was also used in reference to the postal system. In 1829, William Ellery Channing argued that the postal system could transform the whole country from a confederation of separate states into "one great neighborhood" (qtd. in John 13).

Brethren as one; and looking far beyond

The world in an Electric Union blest! (qtd. in Cary 160)

This eulogistic celebration of telegraphic unity encapsulates the age's reaction to a variety of promises the telegraph held. The telegraph would nullify national borders to unite the world ("two hemispheres") and facilitate a sympathetic bond among human beings ("most affectionate and frankest bond"). The trope of family in this poem resonates with McLuhan's statement that "the human family now exists under conditions of a 'global village.'" Another instance of telegraphic unity during this period came in reaction to the assassination of President William Garfield in 1881, a death which received international sympathy due to telegraphic news dissemination. The editors of *Scientific American* spoke of an international sympathetic bond via the telegraph:

It was the touch of the telegraph key, a favorable opportunity being presented, that welded human sympathy and made possible its manifestation in a common, universal, simultaneous heart throb. We have just seen *the civilized world gathered as one family* around a common sick bed, hope and fear alternately fluctuating in unison the world over as hopeful or alarming bulletins passed with electric pulsations over the continents and under the seas. ("The Moral Influence of the Telegraph," *Scientific American*, Oct. 1881, 240; italics added)

Again, we see another instance of a "global village" enabled by the telegraph in the writers' employment of the trope of family to represent the unity not only in the US but

in the world. By 1858, 2,050 miles of cable had been laid out to establish the telegraphic

networks of Europe and North America (Standage 80). Telegraphy thus promised to

connect not only the United States but also nations between continents.

In his discussion on the railroads of mid-nineteenth century America, Wolfgang

Schivelbusch notes that the transportation revolution gave birth to a faith "that

communication, exchange, motion bring humanity enlightenment and progress, and that

isolation and disconnection are the obstacles to be overcome" (Schivelbusch 40). In this

growing era of modern communications, connectivity was idealized to such an extent that

isolation took on a more negative connotation. As increased connectivity promised to

better the nation by bringing America "enlightenment and progress," being disconnected

became increasingly regarded as a backward movement, a sign of dissent from the

national collective progress. This urge for connection was so inclusive that it became

exclusive of those unwilling to participate in it. Proponents of the new communications

media took it for granted that Americans would enjoy the fruits of new technologies and

share the same interest in the connectivity they afforded.

The cultural obsession with connectivity, which Schivelbusch observes in terms

of the railroad, was given further impetus with the advent of the telegraph. In an 1852

issue of the *American Telegraph Magazine*, editor Donald Mann notes: "[N]early all our

vast and wide-spread populations are bound together, not merely by political institutions

but by a Telegraph and Lightning-like affinity of intelligence and sympathy, that renders

us emphatically 'ONE PEOPLE' everywhere" ("Telegraphing of Election Returns,"

American Telegraph Magazine, Nov. 1852, 74). Furthermore, in *The Story of the*

Telegraph and a History of the Great Atlantic Cable (1858), authors Charles F. Briggs
and Augustus Maverick note the following:

> It has been the result of the great discoveries of the past century, to effect a
> revolution in political and social life, by establishing a more intimate connection
> between nations, with race and race. *It has been found that the old system of
> exclusion and insulation are stagnation and death*. National health can only be
> maintained by the free and unobstructed interchange of each with all. How potent
> a power, then, is the telegraph destined to become in the civilization of the world!
> This binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth. (21-22; italics
> added)

The authors here regard connectivity as conducive to enhancing civilization, whereas
they consider disconnection ("exclusion and insulation") as opposed to the advancement
of civilization ("stagnation and death"). In writing that "National health can only be
maintained by the free and unobstructed interchange of each with all Being," they suggest
disconnectedness to be "unhealthy" for the body politic. Disconnection therefore was
regarded in an increasingly negative light in this new age of connectivity. For nineteenth-
century Americans, "The electric telegraph promised a unity of interest, men linked by a
single mind. . . . Universal peace and harmony seems at this time more possible than ever
before, as the telegraph binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth." "It is
impossible," Czitrom further observes, "that old prejudices and hostilities should longer

exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth" (Czitrom 10).

The postbellum era witnessed the consolidation of developments in communications media. The Pacific Telegraph Company completed a transcontinental telegraph line in October of 1861 and the transcontinental railroad was completed in May of 1869. Expressive of the era's fascination with these advancements is the 1872 painting "American Progress" (Fig. 7) by Brooklyn-based painter and lithographer, John Gast. Gast painted this picture on commission for George Crofutt, the publisher of a popular series of western travel guides. The image came to symbolize the era's ethos in its broad reproduction in print media. Depicting national westward expansion, the image captures the essence of what the communications revolution promised. Railroads and telegraphic wires are juxtaposed, depicting "the political and social transformations wrought by the Pacific telegraph, the Civil War, and the transcontinental railroad" (John 112). In the middle of the painting, a goddess holds a telegraphic wire as if it were the most important component of American progress. Crofutt himself once explained this goddess as follows: "[W]ith the left hand she unfolds and stretches the slender wires of the telegraph, that are to flash intelligence throughout the land."[126] In the lower left-side of the image, the Indians appear to flee from the encroachment of progress, unable to resist the speed of new transportation systems. While not yet completed, railroad tracks can be seen in the upper right of the image, destined to cover the yet untamed land and fulfill its Manifest Destiny. In response to this optimistic prospect of unity, telegraphic literature emerged in the 1870s and 1880s.

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[126] http://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/item.php?item_id=180.

Figure 7. "American Progress" (1872) by John Gast

Telegraphic Romance

The majority of the protagonists in telegraphic literature are female operators, many of whom often feel lonely, bored, discontented, and caged in small work environments. These stories speak to a sense of loneliness shared between distant operators over the wire, a paradox that communications technology fosters a keen sense of loneliness that also becomes shared. Telegraphic literature problematizes this paradoxical tension between connect and disconnect. For example, in Charles Barnard's "Kate—An Electro-Mechanical Romance," a short story collected in *Lightning Flashes*,

the eponymous character forms a friendship with another female telegrapher over the wire: "[T]he two friends, one in her deserted and lonely station in the far country, and the other in the fifth story of a city block, held close conversation over it for an hour or more" (57). Laura Otis captures the loneliness that telegraph operators normally experienced: "[T]he long hours and monotonous work required of telegraphers created frustration and loneliness. Ironically, those entrusted with nineteenth-century society's communications were among its most isolated members. In the United States, particularly, with the vast spaces encompassed by its new communications net, workers in rural offices spent far more time listening to their machines than to the voices of other human beings" (Otis 206). Constantly sending and receiving customers' telegraph messages, telegraph operators were often disengaged in terms of emotional human relationships.

Many telegraphic fiction stories deal with romance that is born of and conditioned by the new technology. The telegraph appears to annihilate the distances between lovers. In J. M. Maelaehlan's "A Perilous Courtship," another story collected in *Lightning Flashes*, the protagonist Frank Willis, infatuated with a telegraph romance, states: "[S]uch a burning stream of affection, solicitude, and sentiment flowed over that senseless iron thread . . . that I often thought, when our words grew warmer than usual, that the wire might positively *melt*, and so cut the only link that bound us in love together! That link was over four hundred miles long . . . and yet we seemed as near to each other as if 'twere only a clothes line!" (66; italics original). The excitement conveyed in Willis's language appears to realize Clifford Pyncheon's prophesy of how "Lovers, day by day—hour by hour, if so often moved to do it—might send their heart-throbs from Maine to Florida."

However, Nattie Rogers, a female protagonist and telegraph operator in Ella Cheever Thayer's *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1880), calls into question the telegraphic unity that Willis and Clifford eulogize. In her workplace, she is "alone all day," where "loneliness and the unpleasant sensation known as 'blues' are not uncommon" (12). The unnamed narrator continues to forge Nattie's image as a lonely person: "[H]ers was a lonely life, poor girl" (25). Despite such loneliness and confinement, however, Nattie is able to cultivate an indirect mode of social relation. From her office, Nattie "could wander away through the medium of that slender telegraph wire, on a sort of electric wings, to distant cities and towns; where, although alone all day, she did not lack social intercourse, and where she could amuse herself if she chose, by listening to and speculating upon the many messages of joy or of sorrow, of business and of pleasure, constantly going over the wire" (12). Thus, Nattie's ability to get inside the private stories of her telegraph customers allows her an indirect form of "social intercourse." However, this word "intercourse" carries an ironic connotation because she is never a direct participant in such exchanges, but only a receiver and sender of other people's messages.

Being privy to the private lives of others does not ultimately lessen Nattie's sense of loneliness. Due to her acute sense of loneliness, when she is unoccupied, she begins to flirt with another telegraph operator, nicknamed "C," who is stationed seventy miles away from her workplace. "C" is similarly motivated by his loneliness to communicate with Nattie. In the initial stage of their relationship, "C" says to Nattie over the wire: "I was thinking only last night how unbearable would have been the solitude of my office, had I not been blessed with your company. I was lonesome enough before I knew you,

but I never am now" (46). Nattie soon falls in love with "C," whose real name and face remain romantically mysterious. Nattie thinks to herself: "There certainly is something romantic in talking to a mysterious person, unseen and miles away!" (11). Asked by her friend, "Don't you find the confinement rather irksome?" Nattie replies: "Sometimes . . . but then there always is some one to talk with on the wire" (28). At first, the distance between the two lovers thus adds to romance of their relationship. Nattie's friend, Miss Archer says: "It must be very romantic and fascinating to talk with some one so far away, a mysterious stranger too, that one has never seen." Nattie concurs: "Yes, telegraphy has its romantic side—it would be dreadfully dull if it did not" (28-29). Speaking romantically of the telegraph, Miss Archer fantasizes about further advanced telecommunications media: "[W]e will soon be able to do everything by electricity; who knows but some genius will invent something for the especial use of lovers? Something, for instance, to carry in their pockets, so when they are far away from each other, and pine for a sound of 'that beloved voice,' they will have only to take up this electrical apparatus, put it to their ears, and be happy. Ah! blissful lovers of the future" (32).

While telegraphic romance thus seems to ameliorate Nattie's sense of loneliness, it also serves to augment it. After growing accustomed to communication with "C," Nattie begins to feel a stronger sense of loneliness when not connected with "C" over the wire: "A broken companionship of any kind must ever leave a certain sense of loneliness, and this was none the less true now on account of the unique circumstances. Indeed, until to-day she had not fully realized how necessary 'C' had become to her telegraphic life. Naturally, she had woven a sort of romance about him who was a friend 'so near and yet so far.' Perhaps too, a certain yearning for tenderness in her lonely heart, a feeling that

every woman knows, found something very pleasant in being always greeted with 'Good morning'" (55). Constant online communication with "C" during her working hours leads Nattie to a state of imagined connection with "C," where even a brief moment of disconnect makes her more lonely than before. In a sense, Nattie becomes addicted to the telegraph, which fuels a craving for constant connection while creating a kind of loneliness that had not yet existed before.

After a while, Nattie begins to long for a personal, embodied acquaintance with her online lover, "C." As Otis argues, telegraphic literature portrays operators' "deep frustration with the limits of electronic communication, which only stimulates the desire for physical presence by offering fleeting, tantalizing contact" (Otis 195). Toward the middle of the novel, Nattie actually meets "C," whose real name turns out to be Clem. What complicates the concept of aloneness in this novel is that the actual relationship Nattie and Clem develop cannot easily replace the one they cultivated online. As Nattie develops a real-life romantic relationship with Clem, she begins to feel that something is lacking: "Undoubtedly the few weeks that had passed since Clem's appearance on the scene ought to have been the happiest in Nattie's hitherto lonely life, happier even than those in which she talked to the then unseen 'C,' and speculated about him with Cyn [Nattie's female friend]. But yet—she sometimes felt that a certain something that had been on the wire was lacking now; that Clem, while realizing all her old expectations of 'C,' was not exactly what 'C' had been to her" (106).

W. J. Johnston's "A Centennial-Telegraphic Romance," one of the stories collected in *Lightning Flashes*, includes another lonely telegraph operator longing for human companionship. Unlike many other works of telegraphic literature, this story

portrays a male telegrapher, Sydney Summerville. "[A] denizen of the Western Union main office," Summerville finds himself in an unhappy situation similar to Nattie's: "For years he had wandered comparatively friendless and forlorn in a cold, unsympathetic world, feeling the lack of a kindred spirit to whom he might pour out his soul in love, and who would love him in return" (109). Riding on a train one day, Summerville happens to be attracted by "a fair, young girl" (101) named Eva, who is with her parents in the same train car. Hearing Eva tapping on the window sill, Summerville quickly notices that she understands Morse's alphabet. Thus, "the young people kept up a pleasant telegraphic communication" (103), privately exchanging words undetected by the girl's parents.

As Summerville and Eva's relationship develops into a romantic love, their mode of communication becomes less telegraphic, less indirect. When they part at a rail station, Summerville hands Eva a written note, which says: "If not asking too much, it would afford me great pleasure to receive a note from you at your convenience. Please address C. S. St. John, care P. O. Box, 3,393, New York" (105). Thereafter, their relationship continues to develop mainly through the exchange of letters. In this sense, the story's title, "A Centennial-Telegraphic Romance" is deceptive, as the couple's romance is nurtured predominantly through letters. Figure 8 portrays the young couple secretly communicating via Morse's alphabet. As can be seen in the images placed just above these lovers, their telegraphic communication is depicted in terms of reading letters. Historically speaking, such a depiction might indicate that these lovers still reside in a transitional period, in which private communication began to be affected by the telegraph, yet was still maintained mainly through letters. Indeed, the telegraph was costly for everyday people in the nineteenth century. As Richard R. John notes, "The high cost of

telegraphy raised related questions about its accessibility. The telegraph was so expensive that its users were necessarily restricted to the 'wealthier classes.' . . . In contrast, the mail—'cheap, uniform, and certain'—remained 'emphatically' the 'institution of the middling and poorer classes of the community'" (John 105). This transition from telegraphy to letters as a means of courtship can also be observed in L. A. Churchill's "Playing with Fire," a short story collected in *Lightning Flashes* (70).

Previous chapters of this study have sought to delineate positive aspects of solitude, such as Thoreau's networked solitude, Jacobs's empowering solitude, Bartleby's resistance toward capitalistic exploitation, and Dickinson's slow solitude. Contrary to these instances, telegraphic literature presents aloneness predominantly in negative terms as emotional disconnection, which jibes with Briggs and Maverick's note on disconnectedness as detrimental and unhealthy for national progress toward civilization. For the operators of telegraphic literature, to become connected is the supreme objective of their lives. These stories speak to the emergence of a stronger obsession with connectivity, less tolerance for disconnectedness. As chances for personal connection increase, moments of disconnect accordingly increase. One can argue that the telegraph, while offering an optimistic prospect of unity, brought into being a paradox that communications technology can foster a sense of loneliness. In *Wired Love*, for instance, Nattie experiences greater moments of loneliness in front of the telegraphic machine than when she is outside her office. The machine makes her only *potentially* connected with those on the other side of the wire. As one can easily and instantly communicate through telegraphy, one experiences increased loneliness when not engaged in telegraphic communication. When Americans depended exclusively on letters for private

communication, they did not feel an intense sense of disconnect and impatience when waiting for a reply letter. Letter-writers no doubt felt some impatience, as can be seen in Morse's letter to his mother quoted earlier, yet this delay of exchange constituted an inherent part of epistolary communication. Sitting before a telegraphic machine, the idea of instant communication is so seductive to the telegraphers that they frequently enter into online romance. The speed of telegraphy brings a contraction of the sense of time as well as an impatience for being solitary. Increased connectivity through telegraphy brought not merely a promise of unity but also equally increased intolerance for the very idea of being disconnected. When one is without any means of connection, one can accept the fact that one is alone, thereby experiencing moments of solitude. But when one possesses a means of instant communication, these moments of solitude begin to feel intolerably painful, transforming into moments of loneliness. In this sense, telegraphic literature captures the transformation of solitude into loneliness that accompanied the development of a new communications technology. In telegraphic literature, we witness various ways in which the characters experience loneliness *because* they are connected by telegraphy, a paradox that is not obvious in the cases of the authors previously examined in this study.

Figure 8. "A Centennial Telegraphic Romance"

Fantasy of Mobility

The elements of romance in telegraphic literature foreground not only romantic love fostered through the telegraph but also the issue of class. As can be seen in Nattie's case in *Wired Love*, the telegraph serves to virtually unmoor its operators from the mundane nature of real life. One of the distinctive features of the telegraph was its liberty from physical constraints because, as noted earlier, the telegraph was the world's first mode of communication that did not rely on physical transportation. "[B]y annihilating time and space," Shawn James Rosenheim agues, "[the telegraph] allows humankind to escape its physical limitations" (Rosenheim 93). However, telegraphic romance calls into question this association between the telegraph and the liberty it allows. The question here is whether the telegraph is liberating in a figurative sense of the word. If the telegraph virtually annihilated the physical distances, could it annihilate the lines of social class? Many of the stories of telegraphic literature depict female telegraph operators who are physically confined in their workplace. Their confinement can also be figuratively understood because their class status is low and fixed, and their situatedness in a small workplace represents their social immobility. In this sense, their situation can be likened to that of Bartleby, who is also contained in his workplace and fixed in terms of his class status. Yet, these female operators distinctly differ from Bartleby in that they meekly obey a larger labor system that confines them, while Bartleby mounts an open resistance to it through his adamant solitude. Despite their apparent submission to the current situation, however, online communications helps these discontented operators deal with the sense of being stuck in single place. While the telegraph promises its users

virtual mobility, as I hope to show, telegraphic literature ultimately shows that such mobility does not essentially alter the real condition of lives of these female operators.

Many of the operators in telegraphic literature are young and single women.[127] Katherine Stubbs has discussed possible reasons for why telegraph operators were predominantly female: "For capital truly to control the technology, the laborer had to be reduced to a component of the machine. . . . This desire to control more closely the unpredictable human operator helps explain how the telegraph industry came to prefer women as operators. Female operators were assumed to be less likely to agitate for better working conditions and higher wages, less likely to strike, and more amenable to management's disciplinary strategies" (Stubbs 95-95).[128] Stubbs' argument is convincing because, according to Paul Gilmore, "The downward pressure of wages and the increased regimentation of the profession spurred the growth of the telegraphic workers' union in the late 1860s and were the main issues leading to two major strikes, in 1870 and 1883" (Gilmore 178). On the back cover of *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes*, an advertisement for the *Operator* can be seen in the right column, the newspaper within which the stories of the collection originally appeared (Fig. 9). The language of the ad speaks directly to labor solidarity among telegraphers: "If you want an *Independent Telegraphic Journal*, devoted entirely to the interests of the Telegraph profession, and not controlled by any corporation or company—subscribe for *The Operator*" (italics original). By reading romantic stories in the *Operator*, one could argue, female operators like

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[127] Thomas C. Jepson observes that "Telegraphy in the mid-nineteenth century was a young person's game, and women operators in particular tended to be young and single. . . . The majority of women tended to leave the workforce to marry after a few years" (60).
[128] Jeffrey Kieve also notes that "the telegraph industry was a new area of female employment" (Kieve 85). Jennifer Wicke also opines that by the 1890s, secretarial and clerical work, such as telegraph operator, had become women's sphere (Wicke 147).

Nattie could fantasize an escape from their real condition of confinement. In other words, these stories offered fantasies of solidarity among fellow operators in order to distract them from another more dangerous kind of solidarity or unionism.

Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, threats of strikes by telegraphers posed serious challenge to Americans who depended on the telegraph for long-distance communication (Otis 162). It is also useful to recall that the 1870s and the 1880s saw major labor violence such as the railroad strikes of 1877 and the Haymarket riot of 1886. The telegraph industry, too, witnessed two major strikes by telegraph operators. As a reaction to the threats of lowered wages after the booming war years, telegraphers founded the Telegraphers' Protective League (TPL) in 1868. After Western Union rejected the TPL's protest against its plan to cut wages, the union, which was led by male telegraphers but of which many women were active members, called a nationwide strike in January 1870. The concept of women going on strike was such a novel idea in the period that the *Chicago Tribune* expressed a surprise that the women "made common cause with the men, and also suspended work. They belong to the same association, and are governed by the same rules" (qtd. in Jepsen 151). The strike, however, ended up unsuccessful with the strike participants replaced and not re-hired. In 1881, another labor organization, the Brotherhood of Telegraphers (BT), was formed in response to the cut of wages by Western Union due to the long recession that began in 1873. This union was more sensitive to the place of women in the telegraph industry than the TPL because the BT "actively promoted the rights of women telegraphers and issued a call for equal pay for equal work, regardless of gender" (Jepsen 156). And supporters of the women's suffrage movement appreciated the union's support for equal rights. Finally, on July 19,

the BT called a national strike. However, the strike eventually failed after Western Union rejected their request for higher wages. Western Union, in short, was "simply too large and powerful" (Jepsen 162) to fight against.

Against this background of failed strikes against Western Union, one could argue that telegraphic literature served telegraphers as an imaginative vent for their frustrations with their working-class status, thereby lessening the social anxiety over potential strikes by these workers. In reality, Western Union was too powerful to combat for female telegraphers; but in imagination, they could form a solidarity that would deflect their vexation about their working conditions. In her influential study on contemporary romance novels, Janice A. Radway argues that, in the private act of reading romance, female readers create a sympathetic, imaginary bond with other readers: "[Reading romance] permits them to focus on themselves and to carve out a solitary space within an arena where their self-interest is usually identified with the interests of others" (Radway 211). Radway's discussion on the twentieth-century romance is well applicable to telegraphic literature in the late nineteenth century. Although the act of reading is certainly a solitary activity, it also fosters sympathetic solidarity among female operators or serves as what Radway calls "a collectively elaborated female ritual" (212).

Figure 9. The back page of *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes*

Female telegraphers typically belonged to the working class in the late nineteenth century, with telegraph operators "enjoy[ing] scant occupational prestige compared with other electrical professionals" (Marvin 10). Although a single woman could make a living on the pay she made as a telegrapher, she had "little opportunity to save money" (Jepsen 64).[129] Thayer's *Wired Love* speaks to this historical situation. It is said within the story that Nattie's father died after the failure of his business, which leaves her mother the near impossible challenge of supporting two young children (13). Nattie's situation was typical of female telegraphers of the period because most of them came from a working-class background and "a family with an absent or irregularly employed father" (Jepsen 50).[130] As a middle-class woman leading a working-class life, Nattie stands to win over readers from both classes.

Frustrated with her working-class status, Nattie constantly expresses her desire for upward mobility. She has an ambition to become an author: "There were certain dreams she indulged in of the future, now hopefully, now utterly disheartened, that she was so far away from their realization. These dreams were of fame, of fame as an authoress. Whether it was the true genius stirring within her, or that most unfortunate of all things, an unconquerable desire without the talent to rise above mediocrity, time alone could tell" (13). Later in the story, she reasserts this desire: "I am ambitious for fame! I want to be a writer!" (73). For Nattie, her life as a telegraph operator is one of sheer mediocrity. Her life is relegated to "the constant confinement" (69) in her office. Precisely because of her

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[129] According to Edwin Gabler, 65 percent of women telegraphers in the United States came from blue-collar backgrounds. See Gabler 85-91 and 123 for his discussion of the class status of telegraphers.

[130] Gabler also notes that, in the late nineteenth-century, immigrants constituted a major part of the workforce of the industry. Of seventy women operators in New York City in 1880, 71 percent were of Irish ancestry (Gabler 119).

current situation, she yearns all the more for a life of fame. Toward the middle of the novel, she confides to Clem: "I am tired of living with no object; with nothing but a daily routine. Can it be there is no better place in the world for me? That my life must be always thus?" (118). What further augments her frustration is Miss Archer, Nattie's most intimate friend who aspires to be an opera singer. Much like Nattie, Miss Archer openly expresses her desire for upward mobility: "I am learning something everyday, and I am determined . . . to fight my way up!" (39). Archer's words bring to Nattie "an uneasy consciousness that she herself was making no progress towards her only dreamed of ambition" (39). Even towards the end of the novel, a sense of class immobility persists in Nattie's mind. To her friend, Nattie says: "I am only unhappy because—because—I am nobody!" (123). While telegraphy promises Nattie virtual mobility, it does not give her class mobility in the real life.[131]

Telegraphic literature itself offered female telegraph operators the prospect of class mobility through romance. In this context, it is important that Thayer, as Laura Otis observes, was an advocate of women's rights: "Thayer, an advocate of women's rights, depicts a telegrapher not so much to explore a new technology as to convey working women's struggle for self-expression and economic survival. . . . Written by and for operators, the stories of *Lightning Flashes* formed part of the telegraphers' support network, providing an opportunity to share frustrations. *Wired Love*, on the other hand, is intended for all working women" (Otis 147). In the case of *Wired Love*, it is noteworthy that Nattie's online lover, Clem, promises her upward mobility. Originally from an

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[131] Jepson argues that the telegraph industry granted female operators a relatively high degree of physical mobility: "Railroads often offered free passes to telegraphers, enabling them to move easily from place to place in search of work. Moving around was a way of advancing one's pay scale relatively quickly" (67).

upper-middle-class family, Clem involuntarily chose the career of a telegraph operator in resistance to his family's urging him to become a doctor. He takes up the position of a telegraphist only temporarily to escape his family's demand. At the moment of his physical encounter with Nattie, however, he has already accepted his father's offer to control a branch of his father's firm (100). The novel ends with Nattie and Clem's marriage pledge, and Nattie is finally offered a chance to move up the social ladder. Thus, the ending of the story presents female readers the fantasy of escaping one's social condition.[132] A happy ending with marriage, which characterizes many of telegraphic narratives, equates it with the form of romance fiction because it is one of the essential components of romance, according to Pamela Regis's theorization of the genre (Regis 9). In addition, in Regis's definition, the removal of a social barrier, which in the case of telegraphic literature concerns class, informs the genre of romance (Regis 32-33).[133] In this sense, the generic term "telegraphic literature" is almost interchangeable with "telegraphic romance." Furthermore, Radway defines the act of reading romance for women as a means of "refus[ing] momentarily their self-abnegating social role" (Radway 210) as well as a means of self-empowerment. Explicitly taking the form of romance fiction, telegraphic literature thus served female readers as a means of coming to terms with their real condition of life.

To further elaborate the genre, it is worth making a comparison between telegraphic literature and what Nina Baym terms "woman's fiction" produced over the long nineteenth century. In her *Woman's Fiction* (1993), Baym dubs the popular fiction

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[132] Working in the telegraph office was generally conceived as "a transitory phase in the lives of women" (Jepsen 72) because a female telegrapher was expected to terminate their career by marriage after a few years of work at the telegraph office. Hence the happy ending with marriage, which informs much of telegraphic literature, reflects this general career of female operators.
[133] For a detailed definition of "romance," see Regis 19-45.

written by American women about women between 1820 and 1870 "woman's fiction." In popular novels by Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and others, Baym argues, one distinctive feature resurfaces: "They chronicle the 'trials and triumph' . . . of a heroine who, beset with hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them" (Baym 22). Female heroines in woman's fiction generally overcome their obstacles "through a hard-won, much tested 'self-dependence'" (xiv). While sharing the genre of "popular fiction" written by women about women and the typical happy endings with marriage (Baym 12), telegraphic literature markedly differs from Baym's woman's fiction by doing without female protagonists' self-dependence. Female operators are certainly self-reliant in that they work to sustain their own life. However, in dealing with their frustration with their life, such as Nattie's, they are dependent on the telegraph to facilitate their romantic relationship with men. What might be termed "techno-dependency" informs the genre of telegraphic literature.[134] It should also be noted, however, that the telegraph itself does not offer an ultimate solution to the problem of class for these operators: it serves only as a means of mediating a romantic relationship between a working class telegrapher and an upper-class man.

The recurrence of marriage in telegraphic literature should also be understood in relation to the socioeconomic background of female telegraphers. As noted earlier, many of the female operators were from a family with an absent or irregularly employed father, a condition which forced them to work outside a domestic sphere. In Justin McCarthy's

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[134] This difference between telegraphic literature and woman's fiction bespeaks the changing working conditions for women in the late nineteenth-century. "During the period between 1820 and 1870," Baym argues, "there were virtually no satisfying and well paid occupation for women" (Baym 30). However, as seen earlier, the telegraph industry increasingly demanded female workers, thus offering women the opportunity to sustain themselves.

"Along the Wires," a short story published in the February 1870 issue of the *Harper's Monthly*, begins by describing Annette Langley, the story's protagonist, as an orphan: "Annette was an orphan. Her mother, a Frenchwoman by birth, had been some years dead; her father, a New Englander, she could now but dimly remember" (416). The story depicts a romantic plot between Annette, a poor telegrapher, and Dr. Childers, her constant customer and an eminent physician, a story which eventually comes to a happy ending with their marriage. Before they began to develop romantic feelings for each other, Dr. Childers, studying Annette's expression, suspects that she is "an orphan, perhaps, and lonely" (419). Thomas C. Jepson, in his argument on telegraphic literature, attributes the sense of loneliness and isolation that pervades the genre to female telegraphers' familial background: "[T]hey have no patriarchal family to support them and thus are lacking both familial connections and the time to enjoy a social life" (Jepson 132).[135] Their weak economic independence, one could argue, made female telegraphers susceptible to the idea of marriage to move out of their relative poverty.

In the British context, too, telegraph operators were predominantly female and they belonged to a working-class. Employment of women was likewise motivated for financial reasons. In the words of the head of the telegraph department, women would solve the problem of increasing wages based on seniority "by retiring for the purpose of getting married as soon as they get a chance" (qtd. in Menke 182). Illuminating in this context is Anthony Trollope's "The Telegraph Girl" (1877), a short story that describes a

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[135] Jepson observes this point by discussing not only "Along the Wires" but also two other stories: Josie Schofield's "Wooing by Wire" published in the *Telegrapher* in 1875 and Barnet Phillip's "The Thorsdale Telegraphs" which appeared in the October 1876 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. "All these stories," Jepson argues, "suggest that women operators experienced a sense of isolation; Annette, Mary, and Mildred are all described as being 'alone' to one degree or another" (132).

female telegrapher aspiring for a financially independent life. The story starts by presenting Lucy's independent nature: "[W]hen Lucy Graham, the heroine of this tale, found herself alone in the world, she was glad to think that she was able to earn so much by her work, and that thus she possessed the means of independence" (245). Lucy Graham thus prides herself on earning three shillings a day for her job at the telegraph office, an earning which, however, is insufficient for sustaining a reasonably comfortable life in London.[136] Although Lucy is less ambitious than Thayer's Nattie, who dreams of becoming an author, she also possesses a strong will for upward class mobility. To lessen the financial burden, Lucy shares a lodging with her fellow telegrapher, Sophy Wilson. However, a crisis comes to Lucy when Sophy is suddenly removed to the countryside because of her illness, which requires a rest from her working place. Unable to pay a rent for the current lodging, Lucy is forced to move into "a small garret" (272) and to send part of her earning to Sophy, who is no longer unable to support herself. This sudden change of fortunes dooms Lucy to a life of poverty, leaving her in utter isolation in the metropolis of London.

The word "solitude" repeatedly appears throughout the story to describe Lucy's financial status in which she has to maintain her life independently. Solitude in this story equals an economic independence, which is hard for Lucy to achieve with her meager earning from her telegraph job. Given the distinction that was made earlier between empowering solitude and disempowering isolation in Chapter 2 on Jacobs's *Incidents*, it

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[136] "The Telegraph Girl" is based upon Trollope's actual visit to the telegraph office in London, where he found "eight hundred young women at work" (27). In his article "The Young Women at the London Telegraph Office" (1877), Trollope reports on the working conditions of female telegraphers. See http://www.jimandellen.org/trollope/nonfiction.TelegraphGirls.html. For critical studies on this story as well as on the social history of the telegraph in Britain, see Shelangoskie and Menke 181-88.

is more appropriate to call Lucy's unstable and vulnerable situation isolation, not solitude. Reminiscing about a suitor whom she turned down in the past, Lucy meditates on her current status: "In her troubles and her poverty,—especially in her solitude, she had often thought of that other older man who had wanted to make her his wife,—sometimes almost with regret. There would have been duties for her and a home, and a mode of life more fitting to her feminine nature than this solitary tedious existence" (292-93). As is hinted in this passage, the only thing that would lift her out of the financial predicament is marriage. Just as in American telegraphic literature, Trollope's story finally gravitates toward a romantic plot, when Abraham Hall, whom Lucy believed to be in love with Sophy and whom she has loved all along, asks her to be his wife.

In terms of class mobility, there is a key moment in the story. When Abraham goes to Lucy's office to make his marriage proposal, his request to meet Lucy during the working hours is turned down by the office's doorkeeper. In response, Abraham exclaims, "She is not a prisoner!" (285). Indeed, when Lucy accepts his proposal, Abraham succeeds in getting Lucy out of her figurative imprisonment in the working-class status. Lucy's isolation finally comes to an end with her marriage to this wealthy man who earns "four pounds a week" (287). Both in American and British telegraphic literature, marriage thus functions to remove female telegraphers from their isolation—their vulnerable economic status. What these romantic stories reveal is the fact that the telegraph, which certainly becomes a means of fulfilling a fantasy of romance across the lines of social class, ultimately does little in removing the social barrier between classes. What serves to eliminate the barrier is invariably marriage, not the telegraph *per se*.

Speaking of romance, it is noteworthy that, with the telegraph, a new form of human relationship emerged: anonymous communication. Telegraph operators communicated with other operators whose names and faces they did not know. In the story of Nattie, the anonymity offered by the telegraph allows her to temporarily forget her lower-class identity. In his discussion of the impact of the telegraph on business relations, James W. Cary observes that "With the telegraph . . . the volume and speed of transactions demanded a new form of organization of essentially impersonal relations— that is, relations not among known persons but among buyers and sellers whose only relation was mediated through an organization and a structure of management" (Cary 158). The anonymity inherent to this process enabled telegraphers to create "online" identities. Female operators sometimes pretended to be male, or vice versa, to deceive their respondents. For instance, in L. A. Churchill's "Playing with Fire," a female protagonist stationed at a telegraph office thinks about impersonating a male profile to deceive another female telegrapher: "I suppose it isn't just the thing to fool her, but I must do something to keep from stagnating in this dull office. Yes, I will sign a man's name and fool her in grand shape" (69). The story eventually reveals that the telegrapher on the other end of the line turns out to be a man. Thus, while on the wire, telegraph operators could assume different avatars and enjoy playing a different person, experiencing a discrepancy between the real and the online selves. This also meant that the telegraph enabled operators to virtually unmoor themselves from their physical bodies: "Rendered invisible, temporarily freed from her body, she [a female telegrapher] is also freed from conventional rules of female behavior and seems no longer subject to the traditional forms of discipline, prejudice, and violence that exploit corporeal

difference" (Stubbs 103). In *Wired Love*, after the appearance of the real "C," Nattie becomes anxious as to whether the real "N" (Nattie's online nickname) will meet Clem's expectations, fearing that "he might be disappointed in her" (106).

The anonymous nature of the telegraphic communication led to certain confidence games. Several cases of "telegraphic weddings" were reported, in which women were conned into having a marriage ceremony via telegraphy with a suitor whom they had previously known only through written correspondence. Among others, widows and lone women were particularly susceptible to the deception (Marvin 93). In one case, a wedding that turned out to be a fraud cost a Milwaukee widow $3,000. This widow met a con-man who represented himself as a grain broker from New York. Courting her through letters from St. Louis, he wrote to her that he had been summoned to Europe on business. As they would be unable to meet in person before departure, he proposed a marriage through telegraphy. One newspaper article reported the following on this case:

> [T]he lovers were "married" by wire, the bride sending him, she said, an "electric kiss." His reply came from England in the shape of a request for a speedy remittance of $2,000 to help him in a business transaction. This was sent him and was followed by another request for $1,000, which sum was also sent, after which all trace of him was lost. ("A Marriage by Telegraph Annulled," *Electrical World*, Nov. 1884, 211)

In yet another instance, in 1883, a white woman married a man through a telegraphic ceremony whom she believed to be white, yet the man was of African descent (Sterne

151). The anonymity of telegraphic communication allowed deceivers to capitalize on the loneliness of these women. Just as Nattie becomes romantically attracted to an anonymous operator, several lonely women were seduced into a marriage with male correspondents whose real identities remained hidden.

Techno-Mediated Reality in Henry James's "In the Cage"

Speaking to the possibility of multiple identities, telegraphic literature constantly foregrounds a tension between reality and imagination. In many such stories, physical relationships ultimately triumph over imagined ones. In *Wired Love*, Nattie says to Clem over the wire: "I am sure I am perfectly willing you should imagine me as beautiful as you please. . . . As long as we don't come face to face, which in all probability we never shall, you will not know how different from the real was the ideal" (23). In response to this, C says: "I hope sometime we may clasp hands *bodily* as we do now *spiritually*, on the wire—for we do, don't we?" (23; italics added). In telegraphic literature, those fascinated by the telegraph often end up doing without the telegraph in the end. Nattie, for instance, is no exception in this respect in her relationship with Clem. After learning of Clem's love for her, she "arose hastily, with a quick joy suffusing her face, and their eyes met, and neither words or dots and dashes were needed. Love, more potent than electricity, required no interpreter, and that most powerful of all magnets drew them together" (160). While at first fascinated by the idea of online communication, many of the characters in telegraphic literature ultimately find satisfaction with lovers in the physical world. As Otis argues, "The telegraph appears to offer unlimited opportunities

for private communications in a rigid, tightly controlled world. In reality, though, the telegraph provided only very limited possibilities for exchanging confidences" (Otis 154). Along with its unification of the world, the telegraph introduced a new sense of isolation by increasing the sense of distance between individuals and fueling their desires for physical contact with others.

A similar tension between reality and imagination surfaces in Henry James's novella, "In the Cage" (1898).[137] James's tale portrays an unnamed female telegraph operator who is, just as the title suggests, "caged" in a small, dingy workplace in Cocker's, a grocery store. She is described as being in "the innermost cell of captivity, a cage within the cage, fenced off from the rest by a frame of ground glass" (233). Just as other female operators in telegraphic literature, the protagonist is, in the words of John Carlos Rowe, "a working-class woman" who belongs to "a class whose access to power has traditionally been foreclosed" (Rowe 489). In other words, the cage represents "the class barrier" (Nixon 187). It is suggested at the beginning of the tale that the telegrapher used to belong to a higher class because her family went through a "great misery, her own, her mother's, and her elder sister's": "[T]hey had slipped faster and faster down the steep slope at the bottom of which she alone had rebounded" (230). No wonder, then, that the girl feels all the more frustrated with her current working-class status where she has to serve, from morning to night, upper-class customers who can afford to send telegrams. The girl's "captivity" also has to do with her geographical fixedness in London: "She had not been out of London for a dozen years" (261). So as to avoid cementing her current

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[137] Although it is unlikely that James knew such a minor genre as telegraphic literature, James must have gained an inspiration from newspaper accounts of female telegraphers' life. William B. Stone speculates that James would have seen materials in the *Times* about potential labor strikes by telegraphers (Stone 244-45).

social status further, she defers from marrying Mr. Mudge, her dull yet faithful fiancée and a grocer: "Mr. Mudge was distinctly her fate; yet at this moment she turned her face quite away from him" (275). Another "cage" within the story, in the words of Dungan Aswell, comes in "the barrier of deluding fantasies she erects between herself and the world outside" (Aswell 376). To deal with her caged existence, the girl finds an imaginative escape in reading romance novels. Her imaginative nature is fostered by her constant reading of "borrowed novels, very greasy, in fine print and all about fine folks" (231) and "ha'penny novels" (255). Just as female telegraphers consume telegraphic romance to escape their mundane everyday life, James's protagonist looks to romance fiction for a means of dealing with her uncomfortable reality. As Nicola Nixon puts it, as the reader of romance, the telegraphist believes that "life is a mode of fiction, and that she can be absorbed into the delicate architecture of romantic fiction with its promise of eventual rescue and elevation" (Nixon 191). In this sense, James's story is as much about the reader of romance such as telegraphic literature as about the telegrapher's life, offering a metacommentary on the practice of reading romance fiction.

Constantly serving upper-class customers, whom James describes as "fine folks," the girl confuses the line between reality and imagination, going through an imagined experience of contracting the distance between her working-class status and the upper-class clients. Trapped within several cages, the telegrapher nonetheless comes to find the "framed and wired confinement" of the telegraph mentally liberating, as it allows her "a certain expansion of her consciousness" (232). Serving as a mediator of the adulterous relationship between Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen, she "pressed the romance closer by reason of the very quantity of imagination that it demanded" (237). Just as the other

telegraph operators discussed thus far, this protagonist feels lonely, trapped, and bored in her caged life. However, by glimpsing into her customer's romantic life, she begins to lead a "double life" (239), both real and online. The telegraph allows her to form an imagined connection with the rich and powerful, thus undermining the cage and the barriers that exist in reality. This novella probes, as James puts it in his preface, "the question of what it might 'mean' . . . for confined and cramped and yet considerably tutored young officials of either sex to be made so free, intellectually, of a range of experience otherwise quite closed to them" ("Preface" 415). The word "range" here reverberates with another word "margin," for which the girl repeatedly expresses a wish throughout the text (245, 250, 253, 279).[138] In this context, it is noteworthy that the girl defers the marriage with Mr. Mudge, which will enable her to terminate her usual contact with upper-class customers. For Mr. Mudge urges the girl, upon marriage, to transfer from the wealthy district of Mayfair in London to Mr. Mudge's establishment in middle-class Chalk Farm, where they can spend more time together. Despite her class-envy, she clings to the current position because it allows her, in the words of James, "a range of experience" or a "margin" available to her in imagination: "With Captain Everard she had simply the margin of the universe" (253). "[H]er imaginative life," the narrator writes, "was the life in which she spent most of her time" (232). Rather than fixing her lower-class status, the girl opts for living the life of imagination through the telegraph.

In portraying a working-class protagonist, James's novella captures the female telegrapher's class consciousness: "During her first weeks she had often gasped at the sums people were willing to pay for the stuff they transmitted—the 'much love's, the 'awful' regrets, the compliments and wonderments and vain, vague gestures that cost the

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[138] For a detailed analysis of the word "margin," see Gabler-Hover 268.

price of a new pair of boots" (239).[139] Unable to afford such a high communications

medium, she marvels at her upper-class customers' willingness to pay for it. To her,

telegraph customers represent "the class that wired everything, even their expensive

feelings" (237). As Richard R. John notes, "[t]he telegraph was so expensive that its users

were necessarily restricted to the 'wealthier classes'" (John 105). What irks the

protagonist is "the way the profligate rich scattered about them, in extravagant chatter

over their extravagant pleasures and sins, an amount of money that would have held the

stricken household of her frightened childhood, her poor pinched mother and tormented

father and lost brother and starved sister, together for a lifetime" (239). Feeling jealous

about her customers' social status, the protagonist of the story begins to gloat over the

fact that she is in control and possession of the private information that goes through her:

"[Their] struggles and secrets and love-affairs and lies, she tracked and stored up against

them, till she had at moments, in private, a triumphant, vicious feeling of mastery and

power, a sense of having their silly, guilty secrets in her pocket, her small retentive brain,

and thereby knowing so much more about them than they suspected or would care to

think" (240). The protagonist also envies Mrs. Jordan, a friend and a flower arranger,

who is of a similar class status yet has relations to her rich and powerful patrons. Her

envy stems from a fear that her friend may get married to one of her patrons and thereby

enter a different social sphere than hers.

Believing herself to be deep into the illicit relationship between Everard and

Bradeen, the girl thinks to herself: "How much *I* know—how much *I* know!" (259; italics

original). James's novella emphasizes that the protagonist knows almost everything about

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[139] For factual information about the working conditions of female telegraphers stationed in
London in the late nineteenth century, see Stone 244. Also see Galvan for James's female
telegrapher's class-consciousness (Galvan 297).

Everard. She says to him: "Your extravagance, your selfishness, your immorality, your crimes. . . . I like them, as I tell you—I revel in them. . . . for all I get out of it is the harmless pleasure of knowing. I know, I know, I know!" (271). One day, Everard urges the protagonist to produce the earlier telegraph that he sent through her, and due to her remarkable memory of the transactions she has conducted, she feels triumphant: "[S]he held the whole thing in her hand, held it as she held her pencil, which might have broken at that instant in her tightened grip. This made her feel like the very fountain of fate, but the emotion was such a flood that she had to press it back with all her force" (287). With this sense of control and power over Everard, the girl begins to feel as if she is becoming the hub of communication in the nation: "There were times when all the wires in the country seemed to start from the little hole-and-corner where she plied for a livelihood" (239).

The problem with the girl's "double life" is her constant conflation of the line between the real and the imaginary. Rather than separating the two, she recognizes the "parallel lines of her contacts in the cage and her contacts out of it" (249). Indeed, the reality constructed out of her fragmented knowledge about the relationship between Everard and Bradeen begins to outweigh the romance that she savors in "ha'penny novels." Believing that their relationship is in some kind of peril, the girl thinks to herself: "They were in danger, they were in danger, Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen: it beat every novel in the shop" (256). However, because her knowledge about them is after all fragmented as their telegrams are, she cannot define what kind of "danger" they are in. In her conversation with Mr. Mudge, she can only say, "They're in awful danger, but his is the worst," without specifying the nature of his peril. Later on, when the girl

and Everard chance to walk together in the park—outside the cage—Everard observes that being outside the grocery feels quite "different" (266) than being together in her workplace. But the girl instantly says, "It's quite the same" (266). Everard's remark here reflects his perception that getting outside the customer-telegrapher relationship somewhat alters the relationship between the two. However, the girl, who believes herself to be so deep into the secret of Everard, does not recognize the difference between the real relationship and the one mediated through the telegraph. In their conversation in the park, the telegrapher repeats to Everard, "I'd do anything for you" (268, 269), fortifying her misguided idea that she is in a superior position to the helpless Everard.

Despite her conceit that she knows everything about Everard, however, toward the end of the novella, her imagined knowledge crumbles. As James himself puts it in his preface to the novella, "The action of the drama is simply the girl's 'subjective' adventure—that of her quite definitely winged intelligence; just as the catastrophe, just as the solution, depends on her winged wit" (416). Contrary to her imagined, purely subjective understanding of Everard as a rich man, it turns out that he is in great debt and about to get married to Lady Bradeen, who coerces him into marriage. Ironically, despite the telegrapher's conceit that she is at the center of national communication and a reliable source of information about the Everard-Bradeen relationship, she happens to hear the above information through her casual chat with Mrs. Jordan, who gained all this information from her fiancée, Mr. Drake, Lady Bardeen's servant. When Mrs. Jordan says, "Didn't you know?," her words drive home the fact the girl actually knew little about the real situation. Interestingly, the rumor, a very old mode of transmitting information, defeats the girl's knowledge gained from the telegraph, a new, rapid mode

of gathering and disseminating information. With this new knowledge, the protagonist

finally decides to get married to Mr. Mudge, and her imagined contact with "reality"

fades. And the telegrapher's desire for annihilating the class difference through

telegraphy ultimately meets disillusionment, with the distance between her and the upper

class remaining intact. The telegraph, supposedly a magical means of overcoming

distance, proves to be insufficient for overcoming the class distance. As seen earlier, in

her definition of the romance novel, Pamela Regis cites eight "narrative elements"

essential to the form, one of which is removal of a social barrier between the heroine and

the hero (Regis 32-33). In this sense, James's novella, at first setting a scene for a typical

romance novel, eventually gravitates toward an anti-romantic ending that sends the

romantic telegraphist back to reality: "[W]hat our heroine saw and felt for in the whole

business was the vivid reflection of her own dreams and delusions and her own return to

reality. Reality . . . could only be ugliness and obscurity, could never be the escape, the

rise" (298).

What is distinctive about James's novella compared to other works of telegraphic

literature is its explicit digression from the form of romance, which characterizes the

genre of telegraphic literature in general. While the telegraphic romance that we have

seen eventually comes to a happy ending with couples romantically bonded, James's

realist tale lays bare the fact that the telegraph offers only a fantasy of contact with reality.

As Joel Salzberg observes, none of the impending marriages at the end of James's

novella promises to be happy, neither the telegrapher's to Mr. Mudge nor Everard's to

Lady Bradeen (Salzberg 63). In telegraphic romance, its typical happy ending with

marriage masks the fact that the telegraph ultimately changes nothing about mundane

reality, which James's novella exposes by ending the story with the protagonist's disillusionment about the "romantic fantasies" (Goble 33) that the telegraph deceptively promises. Indeed, despite Nattie's happy betrothal to Clem in *Wired Love*, her dream of becoming an author remains unfulfilled till the end. For James's telegraph operator, "reality" consists of her fragmented understanding of the situation obtained from coded messages of telegraphy. The tale's anti-romantic ending, however, shows how detached from the real this "reality" is. In this sense, Richard Menke is right in noting that James "stages a character's loss of illusion as an encounter between the seductions of romance and the grounded truths of the real" (Menke 212). While depicting the protagonist who avidly consumes romance fiction, James explicitly departs from the form of romance that typifies telegraphic literature to re-work the genre in his own terms. In his preface to *The American*, James offers his view on romance: "The only genteel attribute of [romance is] . . . the kind of experience with which it deals with—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it" (*Critical Muse* 474). By examining the interior life of the romantic telegrapher, James's novella probes the kind of reality mediated through telegraphy and experienced subjectively by the protagonist, a distinctly modern, virtual reality that ultimately proves to be "disengaged" from the real. As Ralph Norrman rightly observes, the central question in James's tale is "how far the subjective reality of the romantic telegraphist squares with objective reality" (Norrman 425). In this conflict, Jamesian realism, at least in this novella, shows the supremacy of objective reality to triumph over the romantic imagination of the female telegraphist.[140]

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[140] Generally speaking, Jamesian realism is closely tied to character's perception, as can be seen in *The Portrait of a Lady*, which minutely portrays the psychology of Isabel Archer. While

The kind of aloneness portrayed in James's novella is not only the telegrapher's sense of loneliness fed by her caged existence but also her isolation from reality itself. This isolation is made possible specifically by the telegraph, a technology that is supposed to bring into being an increased sense of unity. In short, James utilizes the means of connection to show how it leads to disconnection. More than any other telegraphic literature, James's novella reveals this paradox inherent in the telegraph. Earlier chapters have elaborated on the concept of "imagined connectivity" in positive terms in the discussion of Thoreau, Jacobs, and Dickinson to argue that communications media enabled these authors to create an imagined community in their mind that helped sustain their solitary life. However, the version of imagined connectivity in James's tale assumes a negative connotation. "In the Cage" demonstrates that the telegrapher's imagined contact with reality is ultimately an illusion, making her painfully aware in the end how detached she has been from the real situation. By taking up the telegraph as a central literary motif, James addresses "beliefs that technological change will bring new access to knowledge and new kinds of connection between people" (Menke 39) only to demonstrate that those beliefs in techno-utopianism are illusory. "In the Cage" powerfully presents, taking a cue from Amy Kaplan's famous argument of the "mass-mediated realism" in W. D. Howells's fiction, what can be termed "techno-mediated reality" that collides with truth in the end.[141] The meaning of the new technology for

offering a glimpse into the girl's subjective perception, "In the Cage" ultimately puts an emphasis on objective reality which outweighs her subjective reality.

[141] In a chapter entitled "The Mass-Mediated Realism of W. D. Howells" in her now classic study *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan discusses Howells's version of realism in relation to the development of the mass media in the late nineteenth century. Through his realist fiction, Kaplan claims, Howells defended against "the rise of mass media and the restructuring of popular culture in the form of mass-circulation newspapers and magazines" (Kaplan 17). See Kaplan 15-43.

James lies in the fact that it reinforces certain class distinctions while also providing an illusion of release from them.

Despite the promise of unity that the telegraph offered, the technology does not fully live up to its ideal in the lives of the telegraph operators described in telegraphic literature as well as in James's tale. While online communication offers telegraphers temporary respite from a mundane life, one ultimately has to return to the physical world in the end. Despite the significant difference in terms of ending, telegraphic literature and James's tale together follow this trajectory from fantasy to reality. As the telegraph fuels a tantalizing desire for physical contact, it gives its users a redoubled desire for contact in reality, augmenting the sense of isolation from real life. In his classic study of the late nineteenth century, *The Incorporations of America*, Alan Trachtenberg argues that with the development of communications technologies, such as the telegraph and the accompanying mass-circulation of newspapers, new human relations appeared: "In technologies of communication, vicarious experience began to erode direct physical experience of the world. . . . The upsurge of information in media answered to needs created by growing physical distances among sections of cities" (Trachtenberg 122-23). Yet Trachtenberg does not end by implying that vicarious experience mediated through technology completely overcame the limitations of embodiment in physical space. Rather than making the otherwise unknown world more knowable and less foreign to readers, the dailies posed a paradox: "[T]he more knowable the world came to seem as information, the more remote and opaque it came to seem as experience. The more people needed newspapers for a sense of the world, the less did newspapers seem able to satisfy that need by yesterday's means, and the greater the need for shock and sensation,

for spectacle" (125). The works studied in this chapter show that communications media, first promising to make the world smaller and more knowable, end up widening the gap between vicarious experience and embodied presence. Together with James's tale, telegraphic literature showcases the emergence of this novel form of disconnection facilitated by a perceived split between reality and imagination. This disconnect is distinctly modern, an experience that resonates with our own time in which we live a "double life" in the real and online worlds.

EPILOGUE

From the mid-nineteenth century to the present, Americans have constantly and strenuously devised new ways in which to connect with one another. Improved transportation, an affordable postal system, the telegraph, the telephone, and today's Internet have all contributed to enhancing connectivity among Americans as well as people in the world. The history of communication, in other words, can be seen as the history of human efforts to lessen if not remove aloneness and disconnection from the purview of human experience. However, the question that arises from the previous chapter on the telegraph is: are we really less solitary on account of these telecommunications media? Probably not. My analysis in the last chapter gestured toward the idea that, as the media environment changes to remove one form of aloneness, another form of aloneness emerges. While the telegraph certainly allayed the telegraphers' experience of physical confinement in their workspaces, the constant connectivity it offered also served to double the pain of being alone, making moments of aloneness more unendurable. When solitude is gone, loneliness comes in in its stead. We have also seen how the telegraph functions to remove James's telegrapher from a sense of physical reality, isolating her from the truth that exists in the real world. Solitude, the state that was sought to achieve in the works of Thoreau, Jacobs, Melville, and Dickinson, began to be eschewed, as connectivity became something of a default as a result of the maturing of the communications revolution. The positive values of solitude gradually came to be replaced by the negative connotation of loneliness. The case is even truer today because

our cultural urge to be connected through technology, it seems, de-valorizes solitude, rendering solitude and disconnectedness the sign of social backwardness.

Spike Jonze's movie *Her* (2013), which interrogates the relationship between technology and the human experience of solitude, offers a valuable insight into the above question on whether or not technology can makes us less alone. *Her* is set in the not-so-distant future in Los Angeles, in which connectivity is in a highly advanced state and everyone carries an updated version of the iPhone in their shirt pockets, a tiny machine to which they constantly speak. Theodore Twonbly, the protagonist of the movie, is a lonely man going through a wrenching divorce from his wife. He lives alone in a spacious, stylish apartment overlooking the city of Los Angeles, playing a computer game every night to kill time as well as to find an escape into virtual reality. Reminiscent of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Theodore is working for a firm called BeutifulHandwrittenLetters.com as a professional letter writer for clients who ask him to write love letters in their stead, probably because of their inability to communicate on their own or because they are too busy to write. Theodore does not have to write letters by hand: he speaks to a computer that instantly turns his spoken words into elegant cursive. Although Theodore is very good at this job, he is doubly and trebly alienated from his writing. First, he is not the actual person who loves his letter's recipients—he just pretends to be. Second, his handwriting is not his own because a computer processes it. Lastly, although his job is to help foster an affective connection between the client and the letter's recipient, he has absolutely no part in this network. After all, he is just an outsider to the love that he helps nurture with his great writing skill. Theodore writes as if he really loves the person he is writing to; but in reality, he is just a lonely man. This

discrepancy between his job and his life makes him look even lonelier. Moreover, his job

makes evident one of the movie's central points that, in the age of the Internet, love can

be vicariously mediated and fostered through technology. The movie also makes a bold

claim that love itself can actually be produced by technology.

His recent breakup makes Theodore so vulnerable that he cannot move himself to

start building a new relationship with someone else. Just like the clients he writes letters

for, Theodore is unable to form human relationships on his own. A moment of change,

however, occurs in his lonely life when he purchases "the world's first artificial

intelligence," a new product whose advertisement he comes across on his way to his

lonely apartment. This product is obviously based on Apple's Siri; but this OS possesses

much more intelligence and feeling than Siri and is almost indistinguishable from a real

human except for the fact that the OS does not have a body. After purchasing the OS,

Theodore quickly gets fascinated with this automated system, which names itself

Samantha.

Samantha becomes a savior for the lonely Theodore. Samantha's entry into

Theodore's life is timely because he is in a sort of interim period, in which he is trying to

recover from the shock of the breakup with his wife. Theodore's inability to move on in

his life derives from his fear that he might hurt someone and that someone might hurt him,

just as in his botched marriage. Despite his vulnerability, Theodore now can turn to

Samantha for companionship, probably because it seems safe. After all, it is only a

machine and there is no risk taken. In her social study on the relationship between today's

technology and solitude, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle observes: "These days, insecure

in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in

relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time. . . . We fear the risks and disappointments of relationships with our fellow humans. We expect more from technology and less from each other" (Turkle xii). In Turkle's terms, technology protects us from human relationships as it maintains them. "We are lonely but fearful of intimacy," Turkle tells us, "Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other" (1). Turkle's observation points to the paradoxical function of technology to connect and disconnect at once, and is well applicable to Theodore's relationship with Samantha, at least in its initial stages. Samantha is tender and gentle all the time, and Theodore can talk to her and disconnect the line with her at any time by turning the machine off, thereby maintaining control of their relationship. The place of Samantha in Theodore's life at this point is similar to Paro, a sociable robot designed for the lonely elderly who seeks companionship. In her remark on a woman who owns Paro, Turkle notes: "She was looking for a 'no-risk relationship' that would stave off loneliness. . . . People disappoint; robots will not" (8, 10). It is this "no risk" part of the relationship that initially draws Theodore to Samantha.

Theodore's casual involvement with this OS becomes increasingly serious, as he develops an amorous sentiment toward Samantha, who—or which—tenderly speaks to Theodore and cures the pain caused by his marriage. Like the female telegraphers examined in the last chapter, Theodore finds a haven and respite in online communication. However, quite unlike those telegraphers who communicate with the real person online, Samantha does not possess a body and exists totally in virtual reality. Theodore's online love can be seen as an advanced, futuristic version of "wired love" that we have seen in telegraphic literature of the late nineteenth century. However, *Her* is not only about the

dichotomy between human and technology: it goes much further than that by complicating the line between the two. As intimacy develops between Theodore and Samantha, she begins to mean much more than an intangible operating system to him. In her effort to make their relationship more real, Samantha sends a real woman, Isabella, to Theodore's apartment as a proxy to have sex with him. At this point, the safe line between the real and virtual realities begins to be crossed over. So far, Samantha has met Theodore's demands for companionship without any return: their relationship has been only one-sided. But now, Samantha begins to expect intimacy from him. In other words, their relationship starts becoming mutual, becoming more like a real human relationship. And Theodore himself probably cannot be satisfied with the current relationship: he wants more intimacy with Samantha whose lack of body frustrates both of them, making them feel lonelier all the more for their desire for tangible, real intimacy.

Theodore's romance with Samantha suddenly comes to a tragic end when the company running the OS terminates its service. Suddenly disconnected from Samantha, Theodore is thrown into an emotional coma. However, here we witness the great change and progress that have taken place in Theodore's mind. Although disconcerted by the sudden disappearance of Samantha, Theodore does not isolate himself as before; instead, he goes over to his old female friend, Amy, who is similarly disconcerted by the termination of the service because she had also developed an emotional bond with her OS. The movie ends with Theodore and Amy sitting shoulder to shoulder on the building's roof, looking over LA's beautiful skyline. Theodore remains certainly vulnerable, but not so alone: he now shares his vulnerability with Amy. Interestingly, just as in telegraphic literature, this movie tells a story that starts with Theodore's online communication with

no physical contact and ends with his return to the physical world, where Theodore and Amy are sitting closely together with Amy's head on his shoulder. It is left unknown whether Theodore will develop a romantic relationship with Amy, but at least the ending suggests that, after his relationship with Samantha, Theodore is probably ready to move on in his real life. *Her* ultimately demonstrates that technology does not eliminate aloneness from human experience. Instead, Samantha helps Theodore go back to face the reality of his life. Initially starting with the theme of technology up front, the movie ends up focusing more on human relationships than about technology. As Spike Jonze himself puts it, "There's definitely ways that technology brings us closer and ways that it makes us further apart—and that's not what this movie is about. It really was about the way we relate to each other and long to connect, fears of intimacy, all the stuff you bring up with any other human being."[142] What helps Theodore grow is his genuine relationship with Samantha, in which the two demand from each other, clash with each other. Samantha stops being a mere technology when she begins to love Theodore. As Jessica Gross puts it in her review, Theodore is "learning from Samantha by watching her become human. . . . [T]hey're both becoming human at the same time."[143] Going back to my initial question, "are we less solitary for technology?," *Her* offers an answer that technology certainly helps one deal with aloneness, but it does not yield an ultimate solution. However much technology changes our environment, aloneness persists in our human experience, especially in the form of loneliness.

What *Her* also foregrounds by depicting the inner life of Theodore is the tacit equation between being alone and loneliness. While questioning technology's capability

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[142] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/movies/spike-jonze-discusses-evolution-of-her.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[143] http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/becoming-human-spike-jonzes/.

of eliminating aloneness, the movie essentially presents connection as a better mode of being, granting the state of being alone a negative attribute. This dissertation has sought to excavate virtues of solitude, which nineteenth-century authors explored and of which today's age tends to be oblivious. Thoreau viewed solitude as conducive to a higher form of communication with imaginary others and also as a pre-condition for self-reliance; Jacobs manipulated her forced imprisonment to fashion her empowerment against slavery; Melville's Bartleby posed a challenge to the capitalist economy of exchange and circulation through his adamant solitude; and Dickinson sought to protect her independent life from the encroachments of the rapid rhythm of modern life by her slow solitude. It is because we are living in an age when solitude tends to connote a negative meaning of loneliness that these authors offer valuable ways in which to reclaim the virtues of solitude. Even though the forms of solitude studied in this dissertation certainly prefigure our solitude in the age of modern communications, they also significantly differ from ours with their emphasis on solitude as a positive state of being. In the forms of solitude in the nineteenth century, we witness the birth of modern solitude, whose variations we are still experiencing today.

In our age of overconnectivity, which puts a premium on connection, the value of solitude is certainly hard to find; yet solitude itself is even harder to find. Seeking solitude can be a heroic thing. Take, for instance, Sean Penn's movie *Into the Wild* (2007). After graduating from Emory University, Christopher McCandless abandons his promised future, family, and society to seek out a solitary life in Alaska. Early in the movie, it is suggested that Chris's foray into the wilderness is partly motivated by Thoreau's *Walden*, which can be found on his desk among his favorite books. Unlike

Thoreau, who can easily find solitude in his native town, Chris takes pains to travel to

Alaska and meets several people on his way who advise him against the idea. After

hearing Chris's plan to go to Alaska, one of them says, "This is a mistake. It's a mistake

to get too deep into all that kind of stuff. Alex [Chris's pseudonym], you're a hell of a

young guy, a hell of a young guy. But I promise you this. You're a young guy. Can't be

juggling blood and fire all the time." Finding solitude requires a strong will to accomplish

it. It should also be noted that this movie is set in the early 1990s, when today's media

environment was not available. If the movie were set today, it would be even harder to

achieve the kind of solitary life that Chris wished for. Even if one wished to go to Alaska

today, could one resist the temptation of carrying a smartphone? If one were physically

alone in Alaska but with access to the Internet, would it still count as solitude? As Turkle

acutely notes, "a stream of messages makes it impossible to find moments of solitude,

time when other people are showing us neither dependency nor affection. In solitude we

don't reject the world but have the space to think our own thoughts. But if your phone is

always with you, seeking solitude can look suspiciously like hiding" (203).

In this context, it would be interesting to imagine what it would be like if the

nineteenth-century authors examined in this study lived in today's network age. Figure 10

shows cartoons describing Emily Dickinson addicted to social network services (SNSs)

such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.[144] Even though Dickinson is certainly solitary,

only with her three friends on Facebook and eight followers on Twitter, her experience of

solitude would be significantly different from that she experienced in the nineteenth

century: she is constantly sharing her solitude with invisible others online. What is also

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[144] Figure 10. "The Slanted Life of Emily Dickinson" by Rosanna Bruno. Image redacted due to copyright restriction. The cartoons can be found at http://bombmagazine.org/article/702033/the-slanted-life-of-emily-dickinson.

intriguing about these cartoons is their hand-written aspect, as if the cartoonist is

foregrounding something of Dickinson's aesthetic and her mode of writing: Dickinson

left most of her poems in a hand-written form, rather than putting them into print. The

cartoons show, one could argue, a remarkable reversal of the digital archives of

Dickinson's work that use contemporary technology to reproduce her hand-written

aesthetic.[145] It would be equally interesting to imagine Thoreau in his solitary cabin with

a smartphone, constantly sharing his life and thoughts on the Internet. Given Thoreau's

intention of narrating his experience of solitude to the people in Concord in the form of a

book, it is imaginable that Thoreau would be an SNS addict today and report on his

independent life: "Some have asked what I got to eat; if I did not feel lonesome; if I was

not afraid; and the like. . . . I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book"

(5). With access to the Internet, Thoreau might have found it unnecessary to write the

whole book of *Walden* because tweeting from his cabin could have sufficed to report on

some of his findings in his solitary life. In her study, Turkle tells a story of an art critic

with a deadline who took drastic measures to focus on his work. This man says, "I went

away to a cabin. And I left my cell phone in the car. In the trunk. My idea was that maybe

I would check it once a day. I kept walking out of the house to open the trunk and check

the phone. I felt like an addict . . . . I kept going to that trunk" (227). Technology can

easily obstruct one's solitude even if one is physically alone. In his meditation on solitude,

Anthony Storr writes about the importance of solitude to creativity: "The creative person

is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find

meaning in the universe through what he creates. . . . His most significant moments are

those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these

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[145] The digital archive of Dickinson's manuscripts can be found at http://www.edickinson.org/.

moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone" (xiv). Despite this

attractive quality of solitude, finding the kind of solitude that Thoreau experienced 150

years ago would be truly hard to achieve today, probably even for Thoreau if he were

living in this age of overconnectivity. With today's technology, he might not have been

productive enough to write *The Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and notes for *Walden* in

his solitary cabin. *Networked Solitude* has demonstrated, I hope, that the history of

communications media conditions human experience of solitude. Thinking about solitude

in different times, therefore, would enable us to experience it differently and to imagine a

different mode of solitude to come in the future.

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