Machine and Metaphor

The Ethics of Language in American Realism

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Jennifer Carol Cook

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American literary realism flourished at a time of such tremendous technological innovation that the resigning head of the U.S. Patent Office declared in 1899 that “everything that can be invented has been invented” (qtd. in Bryson 93). In an era when Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell were considered the “authentic heroes” (Cashman 17), life in the United States impressed visitors to its shores as “one perpetual whirl of telephones, telegrams, phonographs, electric bells, motors, lifts, and automated instruments.”

Most notable for this study, however, is a particular subset of this technological burgeoning: the dramatic increases and improvements to transportation and communication, related phenomenon that can be grouped under a rubric of radically increased circulation. While railroads increased their freight from ten billion tons per track of mile in 1865 to seventy-nine billion by 1890, the number of telegraphs increased seven-fold. The bicycle, the interurban trolley, and the motorcar all came into use during this period, profoundly affecting modes and means of social circulation. At the same time, rural free delivery, the mail order house, the rotary press (which increased the production speed of newspapers), and inexpensive new means for book binding and publishing also transformed the lingual landscape by dramatically increasing the circulation of words.

Thomas Edison’s 1878 article for *North American Review* stated in bullet-point clarity the ways in which his phonograph, just one of the startling inventions associated with this “communications revolution,” would revolutionize and immortalize the word. “Even a whisper has been reproduced,” Edison proudly conveys. Indeed, one of the chief benefits he saw in his new machine was the potential for the “indefinite multiplication and preservation of . . . sounds, without regard to the existence or non-existence of the original source.”
This “indefinite multiplication” had profound ramifications for social life in America, and responses to its impact were largely optimistic, even utopian, in tone. As Alan Trachtenberg puts it in *The Incorporation of America*, “factories, railroads, and telegraph wires seemed the very engines of a democratic future” (38). The machine was the great “human benefactor,” the “great emancipator of man,” not only from “the bondage of labor,” (42) but from moral and intellectual shackles as well. Along with his fellow communitarians, who emphasized the power of communication to unite peoples, John Dewey saw in the new technology the potential to “break down the barriers of ignorance,” to “make the nation a neighborhood” (qtd. in Quandt 26, 30) by encouraging mutual sympathy that, for the first time in history, could transcend the boundaries of space, time, and locale. Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley concurred, believing that the increased circulation of language would essentially replicate familial bonds on a much grander scale. And William Allen White espoused the belief that “the people, through the telegraph, the telephone, and the rural free delivery . . . and all sorts of organs of communication and understanding, are getting ready for another step in evolution” (qtd. in Quandt 72).

The Darwinian vocabulary evident in White’s declaration should not be overlooked. Many thinkers read the advent of new technologies with unabated optimism precisely because the evolutionary theories propounding in the culture seemed to have predicted such a turn. This was a period in which “the intelligentsia . . . preached the gospel of progress,” and “the most evident proof of progress was the accelerating success of technology” (Budd, “American Background” 26). Hamlin Garland proclaimed that the “golden age” had arrived; many others subscribed to the idea that “change in both society and literature is slowly but inevitably progressive” (Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism* 39). If technology was providing the tools for such progress, science had provided the principles.

Both forces were profoundly affecting the language of the period. With the rapid popularization of the telephone, for example, “scores of new words entered the language or were given new meaning” (Bryson 92). Popular magazines, claiming unprecedented distribution to American homes, ensured that the populace “imbibed a steady stream of technological messages”—written in a language that was itself becoming more technical (Tichi 25). Theoretical science was also gaining increasing amounts of public exposure, literally subsuming the subject matter in print journals for the first time. *The Atlantic Monthly*, which, until 1865 had been subtitled “A Magazine of Literature, Art, and Politics,” added “Science” to its title in its October issue (Cummings 4). *Nature* and *Popular Science* began their editorial runs in
the late 1860s and 1870s, while “Scientific Miscellany” began to appear as a regular column in the publication *Galaxy* (ibid).

Indeed, it was the *Galaxy* that characterized the time as an “epochal earmark” to be noted by future generations, precisely because of the impact science was claiming on language and literature. According to one article, anyone retrospectively examining the era would “discover a universal drenching of belles-lettres with science and sociology” (qtd. in Budd, “American Background” 28). It was not only the subject of science which was commanding journal space, but its language: “the favorite logic of the leading article is ‘survival of the fittest,’ and the favorite jest is ‘sexual selection.’ In the last new book, in the next new book, you will detect it” (ibid). At the same time, “images of machinery filtered into the language, increasingly providing convenient and telling metaphors for societies and individuals” (Trachtenberg, *Incorporation* 44). The unbounded forces of science and technology in fin de siècle America, then, exerted intense pressure on language and lingual usage, and, indeed, on what was to become the dominant voice in late-nineteenth-century literature: American realism.

The critical history shows that the worlds of science and American literary realism have typically been paired rather unproblematically. In fact, science is often credited not only with significant influence on the realist aesthetic, but with the very emergence of realism as an identifiable literary genre. Early twentieth-century critic V.L. Parrington asserted that “out of science was to come a new spirit of criticism and realism” (190); for Sherwood Cummings, it was “Science [that] said: ‘Be realistic.’” (5). William Dean Howells, chief proponent of and spokesperson for the new genre, himself attributed the rise of realism to the “twin sources of science and democracy.” Not coincidentally, Howells was continually exposed to many scientific treatises and their authors during his tenure as editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic Monthly*. His influential column “Editor’s Study,” in *Harper’s Monthly* (later to be published as *Criticism and Fiction*), suggests the influence of such texts, offering as prime directives for writers the ways in which evolutionary ideas and principles should be applied to literature.

Realism was touted as the genre to pursue a truth undistorted by the excesses of emotion, a discipline which would, like science, employ disinterested rationality to represent life as it really was. We can see additional affinities between the disciplines in a number of significant ways: the methodology of science, which observes and records with fruitful objectivity; the value system of science, which privileges rationality over emotion; the language of science, which prefers an economy of expression; and the ultimate aims of science, which seek to find the objective truth, and in so doing,
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to disabuse the populace of its myths. “Just as the scientific spirit digs the
ground from beneath superstition,” T.S. Perry argued, “so does its fellow-
worker, realism” (qtd. in Pizer, Realism and Naturalism 64). Simply put, the
ethical call of Howellsian realism was to “represent life with the accuracy
and fidelity to experience which an age of science demanded,” and, in so
doing, to catalyze “the downfall of conventionality” (ibid).

But accomplishing such a feat in an age in which technology so pro-
foundly affected language and its uses was more complicated than it may
first appear. While many of the writers I discuss in this study—Mark Twain,
Stephen Crane, Charles W. Chesnutt, Edith Wharton, and Sherwood And-
son—exhibit the expected affinities with science and technology both prac-
tically and philosophically, their views on the ethics of language in American
realism take unexpected turns. On one hand, most of these authors were
well-schooled in the principles of Darwin and Lamarck, and, especially, Hip-
polyte Taine, whose seminal works on the use of the scientific method in lit-
erature and the arts is frequently cited. This interest in the theoretical aspects
of science was matched by a fascination with its technological applications:
Mark Twain demonstrated an increasingly mechanistic philosophy while
pursuing his hobby as an amateur inventor with patents on the books; Ste-
phen Crane, in articles for McClure’s and other journals, betrayed his thrill at
the speed of the new rail; and Edith Wharton, the self-proclaimed “priestess
of reason” whose Darwinian lexicon and penchant for the “unmitigated joy
of motoring” are both frequently cited. The influence of these pursuits can
be seen in their writing as well, from the adoption of industrial metaphors to
the popularizing of a “telegraphic” prose to the express intention of creating,
as Mark Twain was fond of saying, prose photographs.

And yet the works represented in this study, Adventures of Huckleberry
Finn (1884) “The Monster” (1899), The Conjure Woman (1899), The House
of Mirth (1905), Ethan Frome (1913) and, finally, Winesburg, Ohio (1919),
problematic any notion of easy partnership between science and technology
and American literary realism. Despite the seductive appeal the new
machines obviously claimed on their imaginations, these writers exhibit a
level of discomfort with and distrust of science and mechanization, precisely
at the crucial intersection of ethics and language. Specifically, the works
I explore in this study recognize and register an anxiety about the ethical
ramifications of the technologizing of the word, anxiety that seems in each
case traceable to the very increase of circulation that so many others saw as
a liberating force. It is precisely the threats of the “indefinite multiplication
of sound” and the “drenching” of language with mechanical and scientific
tropes that most concerns these writers. Each author investigates the
propensity for mindless repetition, the ways in which stereotypes are codified and perpetuated through iterative language, and the ways in which such endless and mechanical utterance precludes the authentic and “truthful” communication the realist project sought.

I should admit at the outset that I do not by any means offer a comprehensive or exhaustive catalogue of “realistic” texts for study in this project, nor even approach a significant survey of turn-of-the-century realistic fiction. Consequently, I do not intend to speak to “realism” as a whole, even if such an enterprise were possible.11 Instead, by offering what I hope is a suggestive sampling of texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, I intend to trace a particular strand of “realism,” a trajectory of concerns and conflicts that reflect the incursions of science and technology during the period and the ethical questions they raised.

While I might have chosen texts that seem to confront science and technology more directly (Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court*, which ends in a violent cataclysm of technologically galvanized destruction, for example; Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*, which more overtly contends with the “scientific” racism of the day; or Sherwood Anderson’s *Poor White*, which, like many other works of the period, takes an engineer as its central character),12 my central concern in this study, at the risk of emphasizing it too myopically, is the ethics of *language* in American realism. I have therefore chosen those works in which language itself is foregrounded. Because my goals here primarily involve analysis of this language, I provide close readings of each of these works and incorporate substantial amounts of quotation from each text. I hope, first, to reveal the preoccupation with language these writers themselves demonstrate; and, second, to underscore these authors’ very real concerns with lingual usage during their time—usage which they viewed as increasingly mechanical, increasingly repetitive, increasingly distanced from any meaningful ethics.

Similar phraseology is found in many of these works to describe the phenomenon: Twain’s “humbug talky-talk;” Wharton’s “hideous mustering of tongues;” Anderson’s “roar and rattle of affairs”—all emphasize the unsettling cacophony of endlessly iterative voices that characterized the era, and begin to suggest the difficulties of finding an authentic voice within the tumult.

Indeed, the problem of originality and individuation is a central concern of this study. When we speak of the communications revolution we speak, after all, of *mass* communication, a phrase which these writers likely saw in a double sense: mass construed as the sheer volume of information conveyed to a public that had become mere “masses.” Twain and Crane especially shared a distrustful apprehension of the mob and its mentality, but
each of these writers in his or her own right fears the homogenizing and conventionalizing power of newly mechanized language. Progressive idealism may have celebrated the capacity for the “indefinite multiplication of sound” as a means to yoke people together in “common understanding,” but the phenomenon could also be read as more pernicious—a formidable force that would ensure conformity. As Jean B. Quandt puts it, “Standardized consumption, the rapid imitation of styles and ideas through the quick distribution of goods and dispersion of information, were already creating homogeneity” (53). Indeed, Franklin Giddings asserted in the late nineteenth century that “Ideas, fashions, fads, ‘crazes’ of every description, are carried by imitation from east to west and from north to south . . . with unflinching certainty and astonishing rapidity” (qtd. in Quandt 63). For these writers, the unswerving rapidity and pervasiveness of lingual imitation was precisely the problem: it promulgated rather than challenged conventionality; it entrenched clichés more resolutely in public consciousness. Most troubling, the unending iteration implied by the “indefinite reproduction of sound” threatened to smother the possibility of individual dissent, and inhibit the independent thinking necessary for ethical action.

In other words, the writers represented in this study recognize that wide-reaching lingual circulation does not necessarily facilitate communication or lead to “common understanding.” Indeed, for them, it was more often than not the common misunderstandings and prejudices that were most readily perpetuated. Further, iterative language bears the pernicious potential to regress into idle or invidious talk, to perpetuate destructive rumor and gossip. These are the forces on which each of these writers most acutely focuses, continually emphasizing what for them was the profound gap between speech merely put into circulation and an “authentic” language intended for substantive communication.

Certainly gossip was not a new phenomenon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nor was it new that literature should represent its destructive potential or that writers should concern themselves with the representation of its ramifications. But the stakes during the realist period had been raised significantly. Never before in history had such an explosion in language taken place; never had words been empowered with such unprecedented reach or speed of transmission. I would argue, then, that when the writers I have selected present language itself as a sort of machine, there is nothing sanguine about such a representation. While Cecilia Tichi and others have argued that “technological figures . . . enter the texts without awareness by their authors that they are inconsistent—or that they create problems” (33), this study raises questions about whether or not these
authors were “oblivious” to their own technological renderings and metaphors. Recognizing the trend towards greater mechanization, I would suggest, or even adopting the newly available mechanistic metaphors circulating around them, does not necessarily imply complicity or complacency with the trajectory of science and technology. Rather, these writers most often employ mechanical tropes in their works as a means of drawing critical attention to the dangerous conflation of man and machine.

Criticism of this sort aimed at the darker implications of the machine age during the period did exist, although it was certainly more scarce than praise. Henry George speculated in his *Social Problems* of 1883 whether technology was “degrading men into the position of mere feeders of machines;” Henry Adams expressed wariness at the “dynamo” in his autobiography; George M. Beard traced the onset of “American nervousness” to the deluge of technologies and their assault on the human senses; social reformers of several stripes expressed concern for the effects of industry and, especially, the conditions of factories on the physical well-being of the workers. But typically the criticism that focused on the internal consequences of technological innovation—the moral and ethical repercussions of the trend towards mechanization—emerged from very different generic quarters. We can find early critiques in a strain of Victorianism, especially Thomas Carlyle’s view that “scientific rationality is spreading far beyond its proper sphere, and that the result is that the culture is permeated by ‘mechanical’ or technological thinking” (Marx, *Pilot* 166). In American thought, we need only look to Transcendentalism, including Thoreau’s potent warning that men had become “the tools of their tools.” Leo Marx’s important *The Machine in the Garden* traces these romantic objections of the incursion of technology into the pastoral American landscape throughout the antebellum period. But as even his title suggests, the dynamic is often conceived of as a dichotomy between romantic and progressive impulses; in this conception it is invariably a romantic sensibility that is responsible for challenging the claims of and credibility of science and technology.

Clearly this could not be the impetus for the American realists. The realist aversion to romance and sentimentalism, familiar enough not to require lengthy explanation here, informs each of the works of this study: Twain’s objections to the romances of Sir Walter Scott; Wharton’s frustration with the “rose-coloured fictions” that preceded her New England novels; Crane’s disdain for the popular boys’ stories of his day; Chesnutt’s scorn for the sentimental plantation tales of the Old South; Anderson’s dismissal of “asinine sentimental nonsense.” For my purposes, the significant point about the realist recoil from romance and sentimentalism is its important lingual
component. The products of the romantic and sentimental schools, realism has it, obscure the truth, and, far more pernicious in the eyes of these writers, adopt and promulgate language that will further destructive myths and stereotypes into perpetuity. The language of sentimentalism becomes codified into recalcitrant clichés that are almost impossible to extricate from society, precisely because people cannot think outside of the language into which they have been indoctrinated. As a school of literature often defined precisely by its opposition to such insidious practices, realist writing can very much be seen as revisionist writing. As William Dean Howells said to Stephen Crane in 1894, realism was to be a “corrective to faulty vision” (qtd. in Trachtenberg, Incorporation 185).

The realist objection to sentimental genres, then, is based not only on aesthetics but ethics. But the idea that science would put an end to conventionality and provide the antidote to prejudice and cliché was not uniformly embraced by writers now seen as “realists.” What I have found in these works is an implicit suspicion that the seemingly unimpeachable worlds of science and technology may also be guilty of the cardinal sin of realism: falsifying experience, inuring one to reality, numbing the capacity to ascertain truth. Howells impugned the sentimental novels that “merely tickle our prejudices and lull our judgment,” but, significantly, some of his realist counterparts represented in this study seem to understand that science no less than its over-emotive counterpart could be charged with precisely these faults. Paradoxically, these writers object to the polar worlds of science and sentimentality on the same grounds, and with a consistent ethical standard. If the communications revolution promulgated the hackneyed and clichéd, there was nothing revolutionary about it at all. If the result of the indefinite multiplication of sound was greater homogeneity and conformity, then its power could not be read as benign or beneficial. Far from proffering a society which would catalyze new ideas, new altruism, new sympathies, such language would codify and ingrain the old and outworn modes of expression, the old prejudices and traditions, and do so with the dubious benefits of unprecedented speed and reach.

The works in this study, then, suggest that the mechanical arm of the communications revolution posed real dangers to the ethical ideals it was supposed to bolster, as technological advancements were providing swifter, more efficient means of dispersing destructive mythologies. Theoretical science, supposedly the discipline that would empower democratic forces, was not only complicit with these improved means of transmission for damaging falsehoods, but, indeed, was rightly perceived by writers such as Charles W. Chesnutt as the very source of certain pernicious beliefs, generating some of
the very superstitions it was supposed to undercut. Perry had asserted that science would dig beneath the ground of superstition, but, in some cases, it was simultaneously constructing new and dubious platforms for it. Indeed, the myths of science are even more dangerous and insidious than those of the old romances, precisely because they are obscured in language that is readily regarded as the unimpeachable bastion of fact. Literary realism might make headway against the prejudices and fantasies of sentimentalism, but social myths inscribed within the rational rhetoric of science posed a far more daunting threat.

Perhaps the most damaging of these old prejudices was race prejudice. If the realist period can be characterized by technological change, it can equally be characterized as a nadir of race relations in American history. My study suggests that these two phenomena are not unrelated. The advent of new forms of post-Darwinian science, such as anthropology, gave rise to the “science” of racism; the unprecedented dissemination of language gave racist treatises the most formidable platform ever before seen. Films being shown with the new movie camera only “reinforced racial stereotypes” (McGerr 246),15 as did wide-spreading periodicals. Frederick Hoffman’s *Race Traits and Characteristics of the American Negro* is one compendious example of the field of what would later be termed “scientific racism,” which employed the scientific method and a rationalist rhetoric to further a racist agenda, but there were many others, proliferating in many of the most esteemed publications of the time. Not only did the scientific culture produce such works, but the language in which they were inscribed obscured their bias, insuring that these texts would be read as fact, not myth; as progress, not tradition. Mark Twain and Stephen Crane both expose the ways in which racial stereotypes are mindlessly promulgated in mechanical language; Charles W. Chesnutt impugns the rationalist rhetoric behind which the scientific racism of the period so successfully obscured itself. And each of the chapters ultimately brings into question not only the communitarian thesis that science and technology were benefactors that had transformed language to enable greater sympathy, but also the realist presumption that language that aligned itself with science and technology could be trusted as “truthful.” In so doing, they distance themselves from both Howellsian realism and many progressive thinkers of the day.

What the writers of this study do seem to share with Howells and conventionally- understood realism is a desire to present the truth; what they share with their progressive counterparts is an interest in furthering sympathetic response. But while the progressives had claimed that the communications revolution would engender greater sympathy, the inevitable effacement
of the individual voice during an increasingly standardized age promised ethical disaster for the writers of this study. For them, sympathy, between races or between individuals, is the first victim of mechanized language. Rather than forging new sympathetic ties between peoples, automatic iteration renders such connection inert and ultimately impossible. Sympathy demands the ability to think beyond oneself, and, of even more concern during this time of social foment, it often also demands the capacity to think outside of the status quo, of the accepted standards. Iterative language precludes independent thought of this kind because it merely reflexively repeats without thought. It matters little whether that repetition is a sentimental cliché or a newly forged scientific cliché (the oft-repeated jests on sexual selection in the *Galaxy* are a suggestive example). In rendering man and his words machine-like, the human capacity for both original thought and sympathetic identification with others is severely inhibited.

But in trying to further an ethics based in “truth” that strives for sympathetic communication, while not aligning itself with the promises of science and technology, these realists find themselves in a familiar bind. Any means of articulating their critical views of the mechanized world might position them in the well-known camp of the opposition: to be anti-technology is to be romantic; to expose the dangers of rationality is to be emotive; to work against what are perceived to be core tenets of a deterministic genre is to be sentimental. The question for a realist writer in this period is how to forge an ethical position between two dangerous poles. Neither the machine nor the garden offer viable havens for these realists. But nor do these writers call for a return to some halcyon day before the communications revolution. Edith Wharton’s work in particular displays the difficulties inherent in a pre-communicative world: both the world of hyper-circulatory language and the stunted pre-modern world before such circulation was possible present the problem of true communication. In seeking a language that could reveal truth and engender sympathy and not merely reiterate the pernicious commonplaces of their societies, realist writers were forced to walk a tightrope between sentimentalism on the one hand and science on the other, and to forge ahead into an unknown literary future.

My reading of “realism,” then, emphasizes its uncomfortable compromises: trapped generically between sentimentalism on the one hand and science on the other; trapped chronologically between an idealized past and a future not yet comfortable with the breakdowns and fragmentation that came to characterize modernism. But this struggle brings an ethical awareness to these works which, ultimately, save them from precisely the sort of
unthinking iteration they criticize. Aware of the dangers of language, realist writers took special care with their *own* language.

As such I argue against the presumption that all realists saw their work as a transparent medium to reflect the world. The writers here, with the exception, perhaps, of Stephen Crane, whose conspicuous irony nonetheless does call attention to his narration, foreground their own language, emphasizing their stories as stories, from Twain’s famous opening (“you don’t know about me, without you have read a book . . .”) to Chesnutt’s and Wharton’s framed narratives and finally to Anderson’s obtrusive narrator, who continually interrupts his own narrative to pass judgment on the language he employs. Far from being unaware of the medium of language, my study emphasizes these writers’ intense awareness of language’s power not only to reflect but to forge and control meaning. Indeed, it is precisely that ability—the monopolistic control language claims over the thoughts and actions of their characters and contemporaries—that emerges as the crucial issue in each of these five chapters.

Because these works unexpectedly betray the opacity of the medium in which they are inscribed, I see certain realist writers as ahead of their time, seeming to understand tenets of socio-linguistics before its advent, seeming prescient of certain tenets of structuralism and even post-structuralism. Indeed, my argument suggests that this strand of realism laid the groundwork for such twentieth-century movements heretofore considered a rejection and repudiation of the “realist” aesthetic and its supposed assumptions; that the seeds of modernism are to be found in the lingual concerns of the “realists.”

And yet I would agree that these writers are not comfortable with the realizations they come to about language’s limitations. The force that continues to root these writers in generic “realism” is in fact their *anxiety* over the inability to reach the sort of disclosure they hope for; the incapacity of their language to culminate in ethical, authentic communication. As Hildegard Hoeller has it, sentimentalism rejoices in the very artificiality of its construction, while realism is always struggling against the sense of its own construction.16 There is not to be found any celebration of the inadequacies of language, in the trajectory towards fragmentation and the schism between sign and signifier. Rather, these works are characterized by intense frustration over language’s inadequacies and failures. Despite moments of only dubious confidence in language’s beneficial power, each of these writers still earnestly searches for a language that can fulfill its aesthetic and ethical promise. Although each of these writers seems to realize that language cannot possibly reach the full disclosure realism as a genre purported to strive for, each
still yearns for such a destination. Such a language would free itself from mechanical repetition and forge original expression, would transform the mere circulation by which they were surrounded into a genuine speech that could command and catalyze ethical action.

Stephen Crane is perhaps the most recalcitrant on this point, offering few alternatives to what he sees (and hears) in his society. I argue against the bulk of criticism, however, that sees Crane as staunchly adhering to naturalistic determinism and/or nihilism. Crane does believe in the possibility of ethical action, even as he records the extreme difficulty of finding a language in which to raise one’s own voice. Mark Twain, while professing in his personal life an increasingly staunch mechanistic determinism, nevertheless explores the possibility of a language outside of conventionalized standards, a heart-speech that might allow Huck and Jim to genuinely communicate. Charles W. Chesnutt looks back to oral tale telling and the mystical realm of conjure for the sorts of metaphor that might enable a new speech that could engender sympathetic identification with others and thereby combat racism. Edith Wharton repeatedly refers to “the fitting word,” “the word that made all clear,” the “word to utter the secret soul,” positing a type of authentic speech outside of the manic circulation of gossip that characterized her society. And Sherwood Anderson, the most modern of these writers—stylistically and chronologically—and also one who offers the most symbolic and fragmented work, demands that a writer become more than “a mere peddler of words.” He seeks, in his commitment to the “essence” of things, to allow for the heart-speech Twain covertly hoped for, to find Wharton’s elusive “fitting word,” to transform the insidious gossip represented by Crane into authentic storytelling.

Such a search is often, if not inevitably, doomed to failure, and the language of these texts reflects this trend, trailing off or breaking down in important moments. In some instances, we see that the central characters, like Twain’s Huck Finn or Crane’s Dr. Trescott, struggling to break free of iteration, simply find themselves without words at all. In other instances, the authors themselves seem to grapple with a betrayal by their own language. Wharton never does find, or at least never directly articulates, her “fitting word,” Anderson, searching for the right combination of words to tell his story with the authenticity he seeks, finds himself in a perpetual state of revision. Anderson’s poignant claim, “I have a wonderful story to tell but no way to tell it,” seems to be the unspoken destination of many of these writers.17

It is no accident, then, that the trajectory of this movement is towards metaphor and symbolism. As I will argue in the chapter on Chesnutt, metaphor
stands in opposition to the rational rhetoric of science, as an alternative to
the highly literal and therefore prescriptive language of the technologized
times and opens up new possibilities of communication. In linguistic
terms, metaphor creates “cohesion—by making sameness out of difference”
(Traugott and Pratt 209)—which is another way of saying sympathy
between disparate people, races, languages. Metaphor is also in some ways
an iconoclastic action, “involving deviation from the rules governing how
concepts may be combined” (ibid). Working towards metaphor is a way,
then, both of attempting to forge sympathetic connection and a way of
liberating language from the mechanical, iterative, unoriginal utterances that
had indeed impeded or prevented the development of sympathy.

But of its very nature metaphor is a language of indirection and sub-
stitution that mirrors the vagaries into which many of these writers fall, the
unspecified and unspecific “word which would make all clear,” vagaries that
are perhaps inevitable in the admirable but not fully achievable pursuit of
a fully “authentic” or wholly “truthful” language. Because they cannot say
directly what needs to be said without falling themselves into the trap of
inauthentic effusiveness on the one hand or codifying iteration complicit
with the mechanization of language on the other, symbolism is an under-
standable destination. It is a destination of suggestion, not statement, of
increased fragmentation rather than full disclosure, and it is the mark of an
increasingly modern genre in an increasingly modern world. In moving away
from the machine, the trajectory of American letters is to move toward the
modern metaphor.

Implicit in each symbol and metaphor is both the promise of com-
munication and the evidence of its failure. Anderson resorts to repetition
and creates symbols because he can’t get the stories right; modernism turns
to fragments because “the centre cannot hold.” What we find here, though,
are authors who underscore the pervasive inauthenticity of the speech around
them and the chaos it causes, while struggling earnestly for an authentic lan-
guage that would rise to greater distinction. The last chapter of this study
examines a new strategy in this pursuit: the effort to reclaim—rather than
repudiate—the repetition of the times and use it for beneficial purposes. By
foregrounding the role of storyteller and consciously reworking and re-iterat-
ing tales, Sherwood Anderson hopes his work will convey, even in its broken-
ness, some element of an eloquent truth.

Although we do not reach the symbolic turn in this study until the
fifth and final chapter on Anderson, we can nonetheless credit a strand of
American literary realism and its ethics of language with earnest attempts
to convert the mechanical into the meaningful. While many of these works
seem to end in frustration, futility, or nihilism, their efforts to seek a new ethics of language endures. “Our lips are cracked with dust and with the heat of furnaces,” Sherwood Anderson wrote. “We but mutter,” he conceded, yet still added: “we feel our way to the promise of song.”
Chapter One
“Humbug Talky-talk:” Rhetoric, Ethics, Mechanics in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In religion and politics people’s beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second hand from other non-examiners, whose opinion about them were not worth a brass farthing.

—Mark Twain, *Autobiography*

Much has been written about the language of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, from Louis Budd’s praise of “Twain’s central, precedent setting achievement” in Huck’s speech to the polyphony of critical voices whose objection to the copious use of the word ‘nigger’ still is the source of much controversy today.¹ But in *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain demonstrates his own awareness of the ethical weight of language, particularly in the ways in which it functions as a medium to perpetuate the cultural clichés he so disdained. Indeed, Twain seems to anticipate the Whorfian hypothesis that “mind is in the grip of language,” displaying an awareness of language’s role in socialization that was ahead of his time.² Twain explores the mechanical and endlessly iterative rhetoric of his society and demonstrates its ramifications, from the ways in which lingual conventions maintain corrupt social standards to the ways in which iteration inhibits both originality and human sympathy. Ultimately, he grapples with whether any system of ethics can defy such strict socio-lingual confines, or whether man has become so thoroughly programmed by the “humbug talky-talk” of his society that he is to be considered little more than a machine.
The Band of Robbers scene, which occurs only six pages into the text, is a scene of socialization, and in many ways stands as a paradigmatic scene in which Twain establishes the themes which recur with increasing gravity throughout the novel. Significantly, the prerequisite for joining Tom's gang is an act of language; “everybody that wants to join has got to take an oath, and write his name in blood” (9). But a closer look at the content of this oath reveals more specifically the degree to which signs and language are emphasized:

It swore every boy to stick to the band, and never tell any of the secrets; and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person and his family must do it, and he musn't eat and he musn't sleep till he had killed them and hacked a cross in their breasts, which was the sign of the band. And nobody that didn't belong to the band could use that mark . . . And if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets, he must have his throat cut . . . and his name blotted off the list with blood and never mentioned again by the gang, but have a curse put on it and be forgot, forever. (ibid)

Although we can easily see the conventional nature of Tom Sawyer's oath—which amounts to little more than a motley collection of literary clichés—his foregrounding of linguistic conventions is an important feature of this passage. Every boy must verbally and in writing swear not to betray the gang; the band is represented by a sign, an inscription that they will leave on their victims; anyone who is not recognized as a valid member of this society is forbidden from using their “mark.” Even those things perceived to threaten the gang and its integrity are lingually based. In fact, it is verbal perfidy that is most feared—the telling of the gang’s secrets. If any member should so betray the spoken and written code, he will putatively be punished physically, but his sins will also be punished through language: not only will his name be stricken from the written record and not be mentioned again (an act of verbal banishment), but it will also be cursed (an act of linguistic revenge).

Twain begins his novel, then, with a demonstration of language’s role in socialization and establishes the centrality of linguistic conventions in maintaining this child society—and, by extension, any society. Indeed, the conventions which provide the terms for Tom’s microcosmic society were in their own right obtained directly from the larger society which dictates terms to Tom. It is from the books of his culture, which operate as a written code he feels compelled to follow, that Tom has appropriated all of his terms, and it is to their authority that he appeals: “Everybody said it was a real beautiful
oath, and asked Tom if he got it out of books or his own head. He said some of it, but the rest was from pirate books, and robber books, and every gang that was hightoned had it” (10). Tom even mimics the act of writing itself by insisting the oath be put to paper: Tom “got out a sheet of paper that he had wrote the oath on, and read it,” “Tom said it was a good idea, so he took a pencil and wrote it in” (ibid). Not coincidentally, the writer of the group is also the leader of the group. He compels the boys’ allegiance by initiating them into the system of language he has codified, insisting that they stick “a pin in their fingers to get blood to sign with, and make [their] mark on the paper” (ibid). Among his peers, then, Tom is not only a keeper of conventions but the keeper of the language in which they are inscribed.

And yet Tom, who appears to be in control, is a largely unconscious part of a much larger mechanism perpetuating the language into which he has been socialized without understanding its meaning or implications. Indeed, Twain derives much of the humor in this scene from this very fact. The scene is comical because of the schism that exists between the language of Tom Sawyer’s oath and the meaning it purports. Both the oath and Tom’s description of the gang’s activities, that they will be highwaymen who “kill the people and take their watches and money,” putatively involve acts of violence, but it is violence without consequences, violence that has been emptied of its true horror. We laugh at the boys’ innocence and naïveté, at their harmless pretensions of being robbers and murderers. The language is humorous precisely because it is unreal, because the boys don’t know what they are saying.

When one of the boys sweetly asks “Must we always kill the people?” Tom responds:

Oh, certainly it’s best. Some authorities think different, but mostly it’s considered best to kill them. Except some that you bring to the cave here and keep them till they’re ransomed.

Ransomed? What’s that?

I don’t know. But that’s what they do. I’ve seen it in books, and so of course that’s what we’ve got to do.

But how can we do it if we don’t know what it is?

Why blame it all, we’ve got to do it. Don’t I tell you it’s in the books?

Do you want to go doing different from what’s in the books, and get things all muddled up? (11)
Tom’s exasperation here is telling. He emphasizes that the boys must follow the precedents established in the language of the culture he has gleaned from books, despite not knowing what they mean or would entail, or things will get “all muddled up.” Tom’s impatience seems to derive from an instinctual awareness that a threat to the lingual authority of his books is a threat to his and all authority. Though frequently considered a rebel who shrewdly defies such authorities, these passages suggest that there is nothing subversive about Tom Sawyer after all. Not only are his boyish rebellions carried out safely within the bounds of sanctioned society, but his games actually serve to perpetuate his society’s conventions, maintaining his “authorities’” power by ceaselessly perpetuating their clichés.

The degree to which Tom Sawyer and his gang are fully conditioned by the moral standards of their society is made clear in another way as well, when the same fearful band of robbers who have taken an oath to rob and kill unanimously declare it “would be wicked” to gather the band on a Sunday. Again it is their language that betrays an indoctrination which, in this case, is two-fold: not only do they believe the content of the convention (that playing such a game on a Sunday would be wrong), but they articulate their internalization of this concept in the very same language in which it was conveyed to them (that they are “wicked”). Clearly, then, the genre fictions Tom Sawyer has read are not the only source of his cultural myths. Sunday school, and the religion of the community that stands monolithically behind it, is one of the most influential of determining forces in the children’s lives, and, indeed, in the lives of their adult counterparts. Nonetheless, it is the language of this force that Twain most acutely registers. Again Twain does not merely criticize the institution but the ways in which the institution naturalizes and perpetuates its conventions through a rigidly controlled rhetoric.

Twain considered these matters in two early sketches, “The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn’t Come To Grief” (1865) and “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper” (1870), which satirize the language found in the Sunday school readers of his day. Specifically, Twain satirizes the formulaic and iterative nature of the stories these texts contained, from the names of the characters (“bad little boys are nearly always named James in your Sunday school books”) to the plot devices (“most bad boys in the Sunday books are named James, and have sick mothers . . .”). The utter predictability of both the plot line and the language in which the stories are told (even the characters’ names are identical from story to story) provides Twain with the occasion for his satire. What follows in Twain’s perverse “bad little boy” sketch is a litany of ironies: everything the bad little boy does, and every consequence of his actions, stands in sharp opposition to established
clichés. The boy proves guilty of a multitude of sins, from stealing to delinquency to tormenting his mother, but isn’t punished in any conventional manner. Twain continually points to the radical difference between his constructed tale and the ones his readers are accustomed to finding in their Sunday school materials, and in so doing, relentlessly mocks not only the clichés themselves but the preposterous power they claim over churchgoers’ reflexive and undoubting belief in them: “it was very strange—nothing like it ever happened in those mild little books with marbled backs” (ibid). Of course, there is nothing strange about it. But because of the unaltering formula by which these stories are written, a formula which has been naturalized to the point of being utterly expected, anything contrary would seem strange to his readers. It is precisely this fact which Twain exploits for his own ironic purposes, continually emphasizing just what Tom and his gang are unable to realize, that “everything turned out differently with him from the way it does to the bad James in the books” (ibid).

In fact, the bad little boy James is never punished for any of his mischief or malice, and grows up to marry, start a family, and then “brain[s] them all with an axe one night, and got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality; and now he is the infernalist wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the Legislature.” (13). Meanwhile, despite his utter devotion to the precedents set in the Sunday school books and his unquestioned belief in them, “nothing ever went right with this good little boy; nothing ever turned out with him the way it turned out with the good little boys in the books” (29–30). He is never rewarded for adhering to sanctioned behavior, and he ultimately meets with a laughably grisly fate—blown to pieces in a nitro-glycerin accident while trying to rescue maltreated dogs.

Clearly, and characteristically, Twain enjoys the lengths to which he can push his hyperbole in both these cases. But his intent is actually quite serious, and his very real concern about the tendency to adhere to cultural dictates recurs throughout his work. It is not only that things do not happen as they do in the fanciful world of books. It is that an unquestioning belief in the clichés of books becomes so ingrained, so naturalized that one cannot perceive of a reality beyond them or articulate a language that deviates from them, particularly not when they continue to turn to them as infallible “authorities.” Twain’s early sketches and the earliest scenes in Huckleberry Finn, then, are not as benign as they first appear. Like much of the novel, the Band of Robbers incident, which may seem at first only an episode in a humorous boys’ story, has far greater import and far deeper—and darker—insight into a society whose ceaseless iteration leads to disastrous results.
Although these examples look at the childhood tendency to accept the sanctioned tropes of their society literally—something we might expect from children who have not yet learned the distinction between fact and fiction, who have not learned to question what they are taught—a close look at *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reveals that this tendency is not limited to children. The adult society represented in the novel is just as guilty of what Shelley Fisher Fishkin has called “the sin of literalness” (61–3). Twain seems to imply that the emphasis on lingual conventionality in childhood is so absolute that citizens never learn to question and therefore grow into similarly unthinking and mechanical adults characterized by their own unoriginal and iterative language. Miss Watson mocks Huck’s tendency to take what she says literally, for example, calling him a fool for expecting his prayers for fish hooks to be answered, but, ironically, she exhibits the same sort of literalized thinking herself by actually taking Huck into a closet to pray because of her literal reading of a Biblical verse.

Clearly the most potent example of adults caught in the meaningless perpetuation of cultural precedents is the Grangerford/Shepherdson feud, which Twain tellingly links with a bookish old-world code. Twain conspicuously includes (albeit with his tongue in his cheek) that Colonel Grangerford is a gentleman, and that the Shepherdsons with whom they carry on their endless private war are “another clan of aristocracy” (144). Describing them as “hightoned” instantly links them with the “authorities” that informed Tom Sawyer’s band and its code; indeed, the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons are precisely the sort of people Tom would wish to emulate. And in the Grangerford/Shepherdson feud, we see the real-world implications of complete unthinking surrender to such a code, and the very real violence which does erupt as a consequence. Far from raising them above brutality and immunizing them from barbarism, the imprimatur of aristocracy on these “hightoned, and well born, and rich and good” gentleman clad in white linen actually predisposes them to unthinking action and unremitting violence. Their status as aristocrats depends on their adherence to an empty term, the “feud,” and the reflexive actions it requires. Huck declares them a “mighty nice family,” but any inherent kindness and generosity they may possess is not enough to liberate them from the thrall of custom and tradition that leads them into an endless cycle of murder.

In the Grangerford/Shepherdson incident we see one of Twain’s most scathing critiques of aristocracy, but Twain had already established his longstanding disdain for hierarchies of the sort, particularly those that had developed in his native South. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain discusses his abhorrence for chivalric romances, and holds them, especially the work of Sir Walter Scott, to blame for the re-popularization of the “hightoned”
practices and beliefs that are as dangerous as they are absurd. Although this is a critique of a fellow writer, Twain does not merely quibble here on the basis of aesthetic taste: he blames such works and their influence for nothing less than crippling the American South. Twain states plainly that “The South has not yet recovered from the debilitating influence of [Sir Walter Scott’s] books” (285). Twain also objects to the influence on Southern architecture; the imitation castle in Baton Rouge, for example, works as “a symbol and breeder and sustainer of maudlin Middle Age romanticism” (286). But it is to the rhetoric of these chivalric romances, the “inflated language and other windy humbuggeries,” to which he most vehemently objects, that he sees as infecting not only the discourse of the south but also Southern mentality. Indeed, the two are inseparable; to introduce lingual corruption is to introduce social and ethical corruption. As Arthur Pettit has put it, “so long as the Southerners continue to write such flowery and idiotic trash . . . they would never become wholly modern, and moral, men” (71).

The Grangerfords, and, by extension, the Shepherdsons, are indeed failures as both modern and moral men, and Twain seems to offer their language—from the empty code of the feud to Emmeline Grangerford’s sentimental poetry—not merely as a reflection of their failure but as a root cause. Huck’s series of questions to Buck about his encounter with Harney Shepherdson are intended precisely to demonstrate this crucial point:

Did you want to kill him, Buck?
Well, I bet I did.
What did he do to you?
Him? He never done nothing to me.
Well, then, what did you want to kill him for?
Why nothing—only it’s on account of the feud.
What’s a feud?
Why, where was you raised? Don’t you know what a feud is?
Never heard of it—tell me about it.
Well . . . a feud is this way. A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then the other man’s brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in—and by and by everybody’s killed off, and there ain’t no more feud. But it’s kind of slow, and takes a long time. (146)
The repetition evident in this passage is significant. In Buck’s concluding statement, “other/another” is repeated four times and “brothers” twice; “man” and versions of the verb “to kill” are in evidence three times in the span of just several lines. Clearly, this is a repetitive lexicon which not only reflects the family’s repetitive actions but indeed perpetuates them; “killing” goes on both verbally and literally in endless repetition. Structurally this speech is also repetitive; hinging on the iteration of the word “then,” one term takes the place of another in an endless string: the “man” is replaced by the “brother” who is replaced by the “cousin.” Thus the lingual configuration of Buck’s speech mirrors what it conveys; both the feud and the language used to describe it continue in perpetuity.

Buck’s utter inability to recognize the insanity of his explanation can be attributed not only to the unquestioning way he has been raised to carry on the tradition, but, more precisely, the unquestioning way he’s been inculcated into the language of the feud. The significance of the word has been completely drained. It is merely an empty symbol, a sound that raises in Buck an habitual and preconditioned response. Buck is so accustomed to the sound rather than the meaning of the word “feud” that he is shocked when Huck asks what the word means. Buck’s initial response to Huck’s question (“Why, where was you raised? Don’t you know what a feud is?”) is telling. With these indignant questions, Buck unwittingly displays the central point—that the word has an illusory significance to him only because of where—and with what words—he was raised. To Huck, to others outside of that socio-lingual community, it is merely a word like any other. And yet, ironically, Twain makes clear that while Huck could not define the term, the word is more radically empty of meaning for Buck, who was raised in a society which ceaselessly iterated the term to the point of non-significance. Iterating and acting on the word have become so habitual that it does not require meaning; it is a totemic word, the power of which is above questioning. The very nature of mechanical and thoughtless iteration precludes real meaning; repeated for generations reflexively, it becomes increasingly a mere abstraction.

Indeed, when Huck asks Buck if the feud had been going on long, Buck’s response is replete with abstractions:

Well, I should reckon! It started thirty years ago, or som’ers along there. There was trouble ’bout something and then a lawsuit to settle it; and then the suit went agin one of the men, and so he up and shot the man won the suit—which he would do, naturally, of course. Anybody would. (146)
Rather than a specific year, the original incident occurred “som’ers” and the trouble was about “something,” an unspecified type of lawsuit to settle the unspecified grievance, which in turn went against “one of the men”—an unspecified claimant. And yet Buck is completely oblivious to the inadequacies of his abstract language. He ends his explanation by maintaining that the violent outcome was natural, and that “anybody” (yet another generalization empty of concrete specificity) would have reacted in the same way. The inevitability of the explanation for the action makes the action itself appear inevitable. Buck’s response therefore underscores the impossibility of his conceiving of, much less advocating, any other course of action when trapped in iterative language. Of course the man who lost the suit would resort to murder—such things occur in his world as inevitably and “naturally” as can be. The words “natural” and “naturally” appear frequently in Twain’s lexicon, and are employed in almost every case for ironic purposes; those things considered most “natural” come not from nature but from a decidedly unnatural society.7 They are, in fact, artificial and arbitrary, but have been so deeply inculcated as to seem both natural and inevitable.

What follows is another interchange between Huck and Buck, characterized once again by conspicuous repetition, particularly the verb to know. Huck asks Buck what the trouble was about. Buck replies “I don’t know.” Huck asks another question to which Buck responds “Laws, how do I know?” Huck himself then asks “Does anybody know?” To which Buck replies “Oh, yes, Papa knows,” but quickly modifies his answer with the oft-repeated phrase of speculation or uncertainty, “I reckon,” and goes on to say that even the old folks “don’t know, now, what the row was about in the first place” (146). Twain simultaneously establishes that the feud is perpetuated in ignorance (no one knows), and demonstrates the ways in which iterative language allows for such mindless perpetuation. He underscores the epistemological point that we know what we know through language, but also that, conversely, language can blind us to what we do not know.

As with the Band of Robbers, Twain takes his implicit argument about iterative language again to another force in socialization—the church. The following paragraph begins with what seems at first an ironic juxtaposition: “Next Sunday the men went to church . . . the men took their guns along” (147). Further, the sermon is “all about brotherly love,” and, though it doesn’t meet with Huck’s approval, the Grangerfords all declare it to be “a good sermon,” and, without a whiff of self-recognition of awareness, leave the church with “a powerful lot to say about faith, and good works, and free grace” (147). Again, the emphasis on language’s culpability in this passage is clear; it is a sermon, a speech-act that perpetuates church mores, and the
feuders are, significantly, vocal—they have a lot to say. On one level we could read this as a dark and ironic joke, a revelation of the most blatant contradiction and hypocrisy, and Twain does intend this irony. But this scene also functions in another way. The Grangerfords see no contradiction between the Sunday sermon and the ways in which they live their lives because, for them, there is no contradiction. Believing they are behaving "naturally," they have no conception of their own hypocrisy. Significantly, they talk, almost reflexively, about faith and good works, but they are caught within an iterative language that is so mechanical that they are never able to perceive the contradictions inherent in the content of what they say.

There seems to be little difference, then, between Tom Sawyer’s gang intending to ransom people without knowing what such a word means or entails, and the Grangerfords’ perpetuation of the feud based on a hollow aristocratic principle—without knowing fully the meaning of the word or remembering the reason for their devotion to the cause. And the same schism that exists between the speech and action of the children in the Band of Robbers exists between the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, between gentleman murderers and church-going gun-toters. We can push the point one step further, as Twain seems to intend, by recognizing that these are also slave-owning churchgoers. Indeed, we are told that these hightoned Southern aristocrats own over a hundred slaves (143). A kind and churchgoing family who maintains a plantation of slaves exhibits the same blindness of custom they demonstrate by carrying on the feud. By depicting the absurdity of the feud, Twain also underscores the hypocrisy of slave owning, a practice also completely inscribed and naturalized in language.

It need hardly be stated that the Grangerford slave plantation was in no way anomalous, nor was the unexamined belief in the moral rectitude of slavery. Twain could claim enough personal experience from his own boyhood, with his own slave-owning family, to understand both the practice and the mentality that justified it. Twain later explained the reasons for his moral ignorance about the evils of slavery, pointing to “natural” customs and codes of the South:

I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing, and that the doubter need only to look at the Bible to settle his mind . . . and then the texts were read aloud to make the matter sure. (qtd. in Foner 193)
The emphasis on language’s role in inculcating the young Sam Clemens in this passage is clear. No one arraigned it verbally in his hearing; the local papers said nothing about it in writing; the sermons orally delivered at church taught that it was a moral good, and used the written sanction of the Bible to support their claims. The unanimity of these voices is a striking feature of the description. Indeed, in trying to reconcile his otherwise kindhearted mother’s belief in the institution of slavery, Twain identified nearly identical sources, with the same emphasis on the transmission of these standards through language:

She had never heard it assailed in any pulpit, but she had heard it defended and sanctified in a thousand, her ears were familiar with the Bible text that approved it, but if there were any that assailed it they had not been quoted by her pastor; as far as her experience went, the wise and the good and the holy were unanimous in he conviction that slavery was right, righteous, the peculiar pet of the deity, and a condition which the slave himself ought to be duly and nightly thankful for. (qtd. in Foner 193)

In this environment, every speech genre univocally proclaimed the rectitude of the institution to such an extent that even questioning the language of the culture became inconceivable. As one slavery proponent put it, “to maintain that Slavery was in itself sinful, in the face of all that is said and written in the Bible upon the subject, with so many sanctions of the relation of the Deity himself, does seem to me a little blasphemous!” (qtd. in Parks xxxv). One of the frequent attacks leveled at the abolitionists was in fact a suspicion of their manipulation of language; they were accused of “pervert[ing] the inspired writings” and adhering to a “presumptuous philosophy, which theorizes on the affairs of men as of a problem to be solved as some unerring human reason, without reference to the designs of a superior intelligence” (Harper 5, 8). Just as Tom Sawyer has “authorities” to which he appeals for the basis of his actions, and just as the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons submit to the titular power of the “feud,” the white citizens of the novel look to the rhetoric of cultural forces from the law to the church not only for the right but the implicit command to uphold the system of slavery. And this fact informs every incident in the novel. It is not merely that Huck and Jim encounter circumstance after circumstance in which characters unthinkingly enact speech without meaning and act for no other reason than cultural precedent; it is that such mindless iteration and its concomitant actions have placed Huck, and especially Jim, in the position of outlaws in the first place. Jim is forced
to run not only because his society maintains a system of slavery, but because it has unthinkingly perpetuated in its iterative speech the racial stereotypes and biblical justifications that sanction and excuse such a system.

For Twain, the disastrous consequences of this sort of lingual naturalization and mechanization were not to be seen as safely in the past. The ostensible authority of the myth of black inferiority continued to wield powerful influence long after the time of the novel’s conclusion, long after the abolition of slavery, and into Twain’s contemporary moment as he wrote the novel. As Arthur Pettit put it, “Huck Finn damn the postwar as well as the prewar South” (83). Certainly, *Huckleberry Finn* registers Twain’s frustration and disgust with his fellow citizens’ endless circulation of such pernicious myths and the destructive acts they fueled. At the same time, Twain’s interest in the period of the writing of *Huckleberry Finn* was turning to a philosophic determinism that contended that human beings were really no more than sophisticated machines themselves who could not help but do so. Deliberately appropriating the terminology of one of the very socio-lingual forces he was to criticize, Twain professed his “own gospel” at a meeting of the Monday Evening Club in Hartford in February of 1883, while he was completing the manuscript of *Huckleberry Finn*. He maintained that “man is merely a machine automatically functioned [sic] without any of his help” and that “no machine is entitled to praise for any of its acts of a virtuous sort nor blamable for any of its acts of the opposite sort.” He also “observed that the human machine gets all its inspirations from the outside and is not capable of originating an idea of any kind in his own head” and finally that “there is no such thing as free will and no such thing as self-sacrifice.” “We mortals can’t create, we can only copy” he stated, and what they copied perpetuated injustice from the antebellum society that maintained slavery through to the post-bellum world that still denied Afro-American citizens their rights.

But the origins of Twain’s philosophical determinism is a bit of a chicken-egg quandary: did he adopt it based on his perceptions of these habits, or did his adoption of the philosophy lead him to characterize his observations in mechanical terms? In his *Mark Twain and Science*, Sherwood Cummings traces the evolution of Twain’s thought culminating in a fatalistic and increasingly pessimistic determinism, documenting the influence of several seminal books: Oliver Wendell Holmes’ *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*; Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*; W.E.H. Lecky’s *History of European Morals*, and, especially, the work of Hippolyte Taine in *History of English Literature* and *The Ancient Regime*. Cummings asserts that determinism had been “foreign to [Twain’s] thinking” until his exposure to these authors
and credits them with Twain’s adoption of the belief that “training is every-thing.” ¹⁴

But there was another constant influence on Twain’s psyche besides his reading in science and philosophy—his own first-hand experience with the new machines. Critics have cited Twain’s fascination with industry as one of the chief paradoxes of his nature, pointing out “the infatuation this man of literature displayed for the machine civilization that was the very antithesis of art.”¹⁵ Twain was indeed enthralled by the newest inventions of the day, and was to be found always on the cutting edge of technological innovation. He claimed to be the first common citizen to own a telephone for private use, and took it as a matter of pride that he assisted in the “bloodless historical birth” of the telharmonium. He allowed his friend Thomas Edison to record his voice and was intrigued by his new projecting kinetoscopes. He recorded his unpleasant attempt to ride a bicycle in letters to his friend William Dean Howells and others, and eventually committed his experiences with the contraption to the essay “Taming the Bicycle.” Twain even became one of the new inventors, taking out several patents of his own—for an improved scrap-book, an adjustable garment strap, and a new board game.

Twain’s preoccupation with industry began to infiltrate his writing life as well. This is quite literally true on a material level in several ways. Twain is said to be the first writer to “apply the type machine to literature” and submit a typewritten manuscript to a publisher. As T.H. Watkins put it, it was in the type machine that “the world of letters and the world of machines came together gloriously” in Twain’s mind. He intended to dictate A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court to the phonograph before abandoning the idea, and later did attempt to dictate The American Claimant. Twain’s letters, journals, and the late autobiographical dictations are even filled with details of his experiences with various types of pens and the effects that have on his writing, which declare warnings to his brother and his friend Howells to beware the new fountain pen—preferring instead the stylograph. And Twain’s near obsession with a new device which in its very name—the Paige automatic typesetter—inadvertently puns on Twain’s fascination with the mechanization of language, is well known. Indeed, Twain’s conflation of art and technology is evident in his pronouncement that its inventor, James W. Paige, was “the Shakespeare of mechanical invention.”¹⁶

Industry was clearly coming to influence the very ways in which Twain spoke and wrote. Industrial metaphors made their way into Twain’s writing; one of the most common in Twain’s casual writings and speech was the “tank” needed to be “full” for him to write; or that manuscripts must be set aside when the “tank ran dry” (qtd. in Cummings 66). Twain also took up

“Humbug Talky-talk”
Howells’ metaphor, writing in tribute to his friend, “every where your pen falls, it leaves a photograph” (qtd. in Cummings 75). And in an interview with the Portland Oregonian, we see an eclectic combination of technological metaphors Twain uses to describe the process of character design: “It is like a star so far away that the eye cannot discover it through the most powerful telescope, yet if a camera is placed in the proper position . . . a photograph of the star will be the result.”

When Twain declares, then, “I now know beyond a doubt or question that his mind is quite incapable of inventing a thought, and is strictly limited to receiving suggestions from the outside and manufacturing secondhand thoughts out of them” (my emphasis) the linkage between the language of industry and his deterministic philosophy is clear. Yet when Sherwood Cummings argues that for Twain “the past meant superstition, ceremony, tradition, and tyranny. The present meant science and technology, and, along with them, an experimental and egalitarian view of life” (124), he oversimplifies the matter. If Twain found hope in his new technological enterprises, if he was proud of aiding in the “bloodless revolution” of the telharmonium and looked with confidence to a more egalitarian future made possible by machines, the influence of the mechanical world and his mechanical philosophy also exerted an opposite effect—a hopelessness when the principles were applied to the realm of human ethics. The newly-mechanized world does not offer greater freedom and egalitarianism if mechanization is to be found in the language and therefore the behavior of people themselves. Indeed, encroaching mechanization understood in this way is precisely the force that will keep society locked in superstition and tradition, the very force which will perpetuate the old timeworn, outworn tropes and precedents Twain detested. If language could be seen as another gear of society operated by mechanical men, there would be no hope for the type of autonomy and originality required to become truly ethical men. Technology alone, then, could not serve as a model for the new egalitarian America Twain hoped for. An alternative was needed, an anti-mechanical alternative, which was not based on science. Twain was searching for a language which could defy, subvert, or transcend cultural conventions—and which, most importantly, could undercut the convictions presented in his own speech at the Monday Evening Club and push back against the powerful claim the machine age was asserting on his intellectual and ethical life.

In this way, Huckleberry Finn can be seen as a grand experiment in which Twain tests his own hypotheses—and fears—about the power of the mechanical age against on his own sense of ethics, and language provided the testing ground. Clearly the alternative ethics Twain seems to advocate
can be located in one’s capacity for sympathy. But if such an ethics were to succeed it would have to somehow bypass or transcend the most formidable of societal machines—iterative language itself. The sympathy Twain envisaged must break through the literalization of language and the endless circulation of “humbug talky-talk,” a phrase which itself suggests the repetitive nature of the speech Twain hoped to transcend. He looks to the one realm not within the domain of the machine for this potential—and that is emotion. “When the heart speaks it has no use for the conventions; it can rise above them,” Twain would later confide. And yet Twain could not bear the “maudlin romanticism” of his literary predecessors. What Twain implicitly seems to hope for in Huck’s speech is a new language that threads an ethical needle between science and sentimentalism, a new “heart-speech” enabling originality, authenticity, and sympathy beyond the prescribed bounds of societal norms. The search for this language would be the ethical force driving *Huckleberry Finn*.

It is therefore not surprising that the novel details the evolution of a character’s maturation into compassion. Even from the early stages of the novel, we see evidence of Huck’s capacity for sympathy. In the Packard episode, Huck reflects on the men’s fate: “I began to think how dreadful it all was, even for murderers, to be in such a fix. I says to myself, there ain’t no telling but I might come to be a murderer myself, yet, and then how would I like it?” (87). During the murders of the Grangerfords, Huck is able to demonstrate the very human identification and compassion the families in the feud are not, saying the violence “made me so sick I most fell out of the tree” (153). Huck even shows compassion for the King and the Duke when they are tarred and feathered later in the novel: “Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn’t ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another” (290).

In Huck we see not only a battle between custom and human sympathy but between inculcated language and the authentic heart-speech that can dispense with such convention. But the real test comes in Huck’s relationship with Jim, precisely because of the socio-lingual indoctrination that has reduced Jim to a thing supposedly incapable of eliciting human compassion. As many critics have pointed out, then, the entire novel can be seen at heart as the story of Huck’s overcoming this bias and learning compassion for Jim. In an early example, when the raft is lost in the fog and Huck plays the trick on Jim of letting him think it was all a dream, Huck is racked with guilt at having hurt Jim. “I didn’t do him no more mean tricks,” Huck
declares, “and I wouldn’t done that one if I’d a knowed it would make him feel that way” (105). And when Huck sees Jim “moaning and mourning to himself,” he believes he “knowed what it was about” and declares “I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for theirn. It doesn’t seem natural, but I reckon it’s so” (201). But this is a problematic moment in the text. On the one hand, Huck does make a sympathetic connection with Jim, even going so far as to revise his lingual understanding up to this point by comparing, even equating, Jim’s care for his children with the care that white people feel for their children. Even so, this utterance also simultaneously marks Huck fully as a member of his culture; deeming what is “natural” and unnatural according to lingual-cultural precedent. Huck, as even his name implies, is here just another version of Buck, who has naturalized the lingual conventions applied to blacks in his society just as Buck has naturalized the lingual conventions of the feud.

With this in mind, the apex of Huck’s sympathetic connection to Jim, when the king and the duke sell Jim to the Phelps family, becomes even more dramatic:

After all this journey, and after all we’d done for them scoundrels, here was it all come to nothing, everything all busted up and ruined, because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life, and amongst strangers, too, for forty dirty dollars. (268)

In this scene Huck Finn serves to show Twain’s conviction that “education consists mainly in what we have unlearned.” Such anti-education works against the inculcation of his society, the dictates instilled in him not only by church, school, and family, but by language itself.

Importantly, in the moments of greatest ethical intensity and crisis in the novel, Huck’s language actually breaks down—a contrast with the endless “humbug talky-talk” of the novel’s other morally suspect characters. After Buck and several of the other Grangerfords are murdered, Huck declares “I don’t want to talk much about the next day. I reckon I’ll cut it pretty short” (157) and goes on to say “I ain’t agoing to tell all that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that” (153). And when Huck sees the farmers gathered with guns at the conclusion of the novel and runs to tell Tom, he tells us “I couldn’t hardly get my words out, I was so anxious” (338). Finally, in the novel’s most climactic scene, when Huck tries to pray and will himself to turn Jim in, he finds that “the words wouldn’t come” (269):
I knewed very well why they wouldn’t come. It was because my heart warn’t right; it was because I warn’t square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting on to give up sin, but always inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth say I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that nigger’s owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knew it was a lie—and He knewed it. You can’t pray a lie—I found that out. (269)

Huck’s realization is that he was trying to make his mouth say something he didn’t feel; that he would be able to write to Jim’s owner to turn him in. His conclusion alludes to two more lingual acts—praying and lying. The entire speech, then, points to the inscription of these cultural customs in language, and it is the language of his culture that Huck must move beyond in order to act ethically.

If men are machines, Huck malfunctions in this climactic scene when he decides to go to hell to help his friend. He is most assuredly programmed to think and speak in a certain way, or, perhaps more precisely, to think in a prescribed way because he speaks in a certain way. And yet in this scene Huck acts in direct opposition to his programming. He chooses to do otherwise, thus seeming to negate Twain’s philosophical hypothesis that man the machine has no will of his own and confirm the possibility of a sympathetic new language that could defy socio-lingual training.

But of course this counter-education takes place on the utopian space of the raft, where Huck is temporary liberated from a society and a speech that are both “cramped up and smothery.” And when Huck reaches his moral conclusion, he is, crucially, alone, with the space and will to think about his relationship with Jim without the intrusion of the social engine. Nonetheless, because society’s standards are internalized through language, its voice is never far from Huck’s mind. After detailing his memories of his relationship with Jim, in which he “couldn’t seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind,” he tells us “and then I look around, and see that paper” (270). The letter he wrote is the symbol of his cultural inculcation. Facing it Huck faces the crucial moment when he has “got to decide, forever, betwixt two things” (ibid). The world of sympathy, of experience that transcends the familiar uses of language, collides with the world of culture, the written, prescriptive word, that demands nothing less of Huck than a complete and mechanical obedience to cultural dictates.

When Huck decides “all right then, I’ll go to hell” he significantly and symbolically tears up the letter—destroying the language that compels his allegiance. And as soon as the decision is made, Huck almost immediately
separates himself from the corrupt company of the king and the duke. More radically now than before a social outcast, he intends to be alone; he “want[s] to be left free to work [his] plans” (274). But Huck cannot escape language or culture. No sooner has he set out to work his individual plans is he swept back up into familiar society. He is mistaken for Tom, and it is when Huck begins this impersonation (a type, after all, of imitation), that the power of his counter-education begins to fail. Huck’s desire to get the Phelps children alone and “pump them a little, and find out who [he] was” (280) indicates that once again his identity is dependent on what will be conveyed to him through language. “It was like being born again, I was so glad to find out who I was” Huck declares (282). His rebirth into society and its standards provide him with a sanctioned label—Tom Sawyer’s name. Huck’s perpetual loneliness is temporarily replaced by a powerful, and seductive, feeling of belonging, but not before he has participated in two hours of talking his way into Tom Sawyer’s skin: “Well, they froze to me for two hours,” Huck tells us, “and at last when my chin was so tired it couldn’t hardly go, any more, I had told them more about my family—I mean the Sawyer family—then ever happened to any six Sawyer families” (ibid). Only then does Huck confess “Being Tom Sawyer was easy and comfortable” (ibid). And once again Huck’s observation is more important than he realizes. Being Tom Sawyer is easy and comfortable; it grants the security of being restored to familiar language and culture, of operating within the bounds of society’s sanctions and a relief from the sheer loneliness of social rebellion.

This turn in the narrative leads straight into the infamous “evasion” sequence of the novel’s last nine chapters. Critics have often and with various degrees of persuasiveness detailed the failures of the novel’s ending, including the ways in which this section of the novel deviates from its overall tone, structure, and theme. But in so doing many have overlooked some of the ways in which the evasion sequence is consistent with Twain’s design up to this point. I would argue that these chapters are consonant with Twain’s goals, of his emphasis on the power and dangers of iterative language and the testing of his own mechanical philosophy. Admittedly, his conclusion about the validity of mechanical determinism in light of the evasion ending is difficult to assess, and perhaps the failures of the evasion section of the book reflect Twain’s own conflicts in attempting to solve the matter. On one hand, Huck continues to give us hope with an ethics that rejects the lingual and social confines of his culture; on the other, Huck serves to demonstrate the near impossibility of liberation from such lingual and psychological constraints.

But Rhett Jones’ point that Huck is “made to forget his warm companionship with Jim” certainly overstates the case. Huck never reneges on
his decision to steal Jim out of slavery, and he remains concerned about his friend’s safety and well-being even throughout what admittedly seems an absurdly overdrawn sequence. When he hears that Jim will be advertised in the St. Louis and New Orleans papers, Huck tells us “it give me cold shivers, and I see we hadn’t no time to lose” (332). He tries to interject common-sensical objections into Tom’s plans and protests, especially when Tom goes so far as to consider sawing off Jim’s leg. When the doctor speaks to Jim’s helpfulness when Tom is injured, Huck is “mighty grateful to the old doctor for doing Jim that good turn” (354). And when he believes he has finally rescued Jim, Huck declares triumphantly: “Now, old Jim, you’re a free man again, and I bet you won’t ever be a slave no more” (340).

Nevertheless, it is true that Huck seems so cowed not only by Tom’s presence but by his relentless appeal to his “authorities” that he goes along with Tom’s outrageous schemes—even risking Jim’s safety and his own—because he seems unable or unwilling to disappoint Tom and the authority he represents. Huck does at least try to interject, but concedes when Tom “looks disgusted,” saying “I ain’t going to make no complaint. Any way that suits you suits me” (332). Here Huck again makes his concession to Tom by behaving verbally, by promising not to make a complaint. He thereby adheres not only to Tom’s plans of actions but also the lingual confines Tom establishes merely by his presence, the power of which stems from the precedent he had earlier set as leader of the gang. Twain here underscores Huck’s own insecurity and simultaneously emphasizes the crucial fact that Huck has never believed that he was right or good or worth anything at all, precisely because he has internalized the lingual assessment of his characters, that he is “low down and ornery.” The evasion sequence will not allow us to forget, even in the poignancy of Huck’s moral triumph in the novel’s previous episode, that Huck never concludes or even suspects that his decision is in fact moral or admirable. In fact, he is convinced beyond doubt that it is a wicked choice, so evil that he will be condemned for eternity.

As usual, Huck’s diagnosis, that he feels the way he does because of his “low down” origins and the way he was “brung up,” is incisive in ways he does not realize. Huck’s fallacious belief that helping Jim is evil is directly attributable to his upbringing, to the ways in which he’s been inculcated into a rigid social schema that not only condones slavery but insists upon its virtue—most specifically, to the socio-lingual power of Sunday school. But, ironically, his decision to free Jim is not attributable to his upbringing. On the contrary, it is a courageous aberration from the standards of his cultural education, a decidedly unmechanized, unconditioned break with his mechanically functioning society. In that sense it offers hope for an ethics
that can exist beyond religious and cultural dictates and a speech more substantive than “humbug talky-talk,” a speech beyond mere convention.

But Huck can never move entirely beyond the language he has internalized—that he is a “low down abolitionist” and a “nigger stealer.” Significantly, these are terms that are repeated from the beginning of the novel onward. It is when Huck first encounters runaway Jim on Jackson Island that he first employs the term: “People would call me a low-down abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don’t make no difference. Ain’t agoing to tell, and I ain’t agoing back there anyways” (52–3). Again, this passage reveals how conventions are maintained verbally, and the perils that a betrayal of the verbal confines of one’s society poses: they would punish Huck with derogatory language, and despise him for not saying what he is supposed to say. But the very repetition of the term “low-down abolitionist,” and the consistency with which it is employed in every case that Huck considers Jim’s freedom, also reveals much about this iterative society and the control it wields over one’s sense of ethics. Huck’s decision not to tell at this early stage is relatively meaningless; it doesn’t matter to him because he’s not “agoing back there.” Separated from his society and its verbal condemnations and punishments, Huck feels relatively safe. But the fact that Huck continues to repeat these exact terms even after he has made a substantive ethical decision and is willing to accept the consequences demonstrates the tenacious hold of lingual convention. In some sense, it suggests that lingual conventions are the most formidable, impossible to root out from the psyche because of their very relationship with thought itself. On one level Huck recognizes the predictable conventionality of his society’s sanctioned language (though he certainly does not recognize its pernicious power), exclaiming to Tom “I know what you’ll say. You’ll say it’s a dirty low-down business” (284). But Huck does not and cannot contradict this thesis. He still uses and believes in these terms, so much so that the only defense of his actions is to embrace them: “but what if it is? I’m low down; and I’m agoing to steal him, and I want you to keep mum and not let on” (284).

Huck is not armed, then, with a bolstering conviction of righteousness as he moves into the novel’s final episodes. Concluding that Huck has abandoned his care for and commitment to Jim, many critics have overlooked that Huck rather behaves the way he does because he admires Tom, admires him for his ostensible moral superiority, conveyed by his unerring knowledge of the language of his culture. “He knowed everything,” Huck marvels. Huck believes he is bad enough to liberate a slave, but he is shocked that Tom would be willing to participate in the morally suspect activity of helping Jim escape: “Tom Sawyer,” he exclaims, “a nigger stealer!” (284) Huck
tries to understand it, to no avail, telling us “It was the most astonishing speech I ever heard” (ibid), an astonishing speech because it breaks all the conventions of the language he understands. A “respectable” boy cannot be a “nigger stealer” because the two exist in completely opposite lingual categories, as Huck demonstrates in the following passage:

Here was a boy that was respectable, and well brung up; and had a character to lose; and folks at home that had characters; and he was bright and not leatherheaded; and knowing, and not ignorant; and not mean, but kind; and yet there he was, without any more pride, or rightness, or feeling, than to stoop to this business, and make himself a shame, and his family a shame, before everybody. I couldn’t understand it, no way at all. (292–3)

The abstractions of Buck’s language appear here again in a different form. Huck’s speech is a list of binaries that reveal the inflexibility of his society’s moral standards inscribed in an equally inflexible language. One is either going to heaven or hell; one is either knowing or ignorant; mean or kind. Huck cannot make any sense of a topsy-turvy world which seems to reverse these terms, or even an ambiguous world which blurs them. It is not until Tom reveals that Jim is actually a free man that Huck declares, “I couldn’t ever understand, before, until that minute and that talk” (my emphasis) “how he could help a body set a nigger free, with his bringing up” (258). In other words, it is not until Tom again aligns himself with what is lingually and therefore ethically acceptable that Huck can understand his behavior. Tom’s temporary—and illusory—lingual and social aberration is utterly beyond Huck’s comprehension.

The true explanation for Tom’s participation is certainly not a moral conversion. Like all of Tom’s actions, his decision to take part in stealing Jim is attributable directly to his desire to live out the hackneyed tropes of his story books, which in one sense confirms Huck’s suspicion that a boy like Tom could not change substantially enough as to liberate a slave. As we have seen, we are introduced to Tom’s unflinching adherence to the cultural precedents of books early in the novel, when we believe it to be just a game. But after working our way through a narrative that exposes again and again the consequences of such speech and behavior we cannot read Tom’s character in the same benign way. For Tom, Jim is not a real-world slave, he is a prisoner in an adventure tale. His suffering is not for a moment taken seriously, not for a moment thought of as more than part of a standard plot. Again we see that while Tom plays at being the rogue, he is perhaps the best example of
society’s powers of indoctrination, ceaselessly appealing to “authorities.” “He was always just that particular,” Huck observes, “Full of principle” (307). But as Twain stated elsewhere, “principle is another word for prejudice.” And Tom’s re-emergence into the narrative after Huck’s custom-defying decision to free Jim again emphasizes Twain’s central point about the inescapability of cultural precedents inscribed in lingual conventions and the allegiance they compel. Here the stakes have been raised, but Tom has not changed. In fact, Tom’s complete allegiance to verbal and written codes, established from very early on in the novel, makes him the least likely to change.

Twain emphasizes the point through Tom’s own language. Each time Huck proposes a practical or original idea, Tom protests that he “never heard of such a thing” (my emphasis, 301) which at once reveals the repetitive nature of his own language (he uses this phrase throughout the novel) and his complete dependence on what he has received verbally at second-hand, what he has heard from his culture. Tom’s propensity for repetition is so ingrained as to have become unconscious; he repeats even when he is not aware that he is repeating. Twain’s language in describing Tom’s reactions makes this point all too clear: over and over Tom states that Jim has “got to do [it]: they all do;” “That’s what they all do; and he’s got to, too” (300), even when his insistence risks Jim’s safety and freedom. Just as Buck is blinded by sheer repetition to the insanity of his speech, Tom refuses to see the dangers, impracticalities, and cruelties of what he proposes with his speech. Huck’s occasional objection to the absurdity is both refreshing and telling, and, significantly, impugns Tom’s speech: “How you talk,” Huck sighs at one point (ibid). Tom’s retort is equally telling, revealing both his absolute confidence in the language he employs and the ways in which he uses it to keep Huck in his place: “How you talk, you better say” (ibid).

Throughout the evasion sequence, Twain emphasizes Tom’s complete lack of awareness about the emptiness of his own talk despite (or perhaps because of) such unflinching confidence and attempts at control. Tom’s insistence that Jim be made a coat of arms is yet another incident in the novel which features characters who do not know the meanings of the words they advocate. It repeats what we have learned in the Band of Robbers scene and in the Grangerford/Shepherdson feud; it offers a repetitive structure for the repetitive society it means to represent. When Huck queries him as to what the words mean, Tom dodges the question by telling Huck that Huck doesn’t need to know such things, and that they “ain’t got no time to bother over that” (322). In fact, Tom does not know the meaning of the rhetoric he employs. He is an imitator only. Returning to Twain’s own language in his Monday Evening Club speech, Tom does not make; he only copies.
But the reasons for Tom’s imitation are more troubling than they first appear. Tom is always acutely aware of his reputation and his standing, which, not coincidentally, is directly tied to his ability to generate the right kind of “talk.” When Huck first proposes a direct means of liberating Jim, Tom balks, exclaiming “What’s the good of a plan that ain’t no more trouble than that? . . . Why, Huck, it wouldn’t make no more talk than breaking into a soap factory” (292). Later in the chapter, when he finally concedes that they must try to use picks rather than caseknives to dig under the cabin where Jim is being held, Tom pushes this ethos even further when he declares “it ain’t right, and it ain’t moral, and I wouldn’t like it to get out” (307). Tom maintains strict, if reflexive, control over his social position through control over his language—over what sort of talk he can generate; over what kind of talk he can keep from “getting out.” Though he would never be able to articulate or explain the principle, Tom seems to have internalized some sense that the talk of his culture dictates the morality of his culture, and he therefore perpetually seeks to establish both his good name and his good standing through control of language.

The most disturbing thing, then, about Huck from Tom’s perspective is what seems like irreverence toward establishing lingual conventions and the consequent potential for creativity—precisely the forces that could change the standard talk, the standard actions, the standard code of ethics. Tom stands aghast that Huck “don’t ever seem to do anything that’s regular,” that he “want[s] to be starting something fresh all the time” (301). For Tom Sawyer, one always does what is “regular” (a word he repeats continuously); anything fresh is both a stylistic—and moral—failure. Tom again demonstrates, then, the central point that the cultural precedent to which he aspires and the cultural rhetoric to which he unfailingly defers influence not only one’s actions, but one’s perception of the ethics of those actions. In other words, it controls not only one’s outer life but one’s inner life. Huck’s dismissive statement about conscience, then, is more true than he could possibly be aware: “It don’t make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person’s conscience ain’t got no sense, and just goes for him anyway . . . it takes up more room than all the rest of a person’s insides, and yet ain’t no good, nohow” (290). This is truly the pernicious nature of humbug talky-talk: the damage done to one’s judgment, without which man might as well be a machine. Twain sees this damage as nothing short of catastrophic, and emphasizes its dangerous potential throughout the novel through relentless eruptions of violence. The evasion chapters are no exception, again demonstrating that Twain had not retreated from the seriousness of his central themes.
Following Tom’s lead, Huck seems at first as unaware of the true potential for danger as he was when he took the oath for the Band of Robbers. When he does come to the realization—by spying a group of farmers gathered with very real shotguns—he wants Aunt Sally to let him “get away and tell Tom how we’d overdone the thing, and what a thundering hornet’s nest we’d got ourselves into, so we could stop fooling around, straight off, and clear out with Jim before these rips get out of patience and come for us” (336–7). But Tom is so blinded by his code that nothing is real to him. Even when Tom is wounded, Huck tells us that Tom is “gladdest of all, because he had a bullet in the calf of his leg” (340), a fact which he clearly hopes will generate the right kind of “talk.” Just as the reality of violence never was able to shake the Grangerfords from their blind and mechanical perpetuation of custom, Tom is not deterred by his encounter with real danger. His response is predictable and, significantly, repetitive: each time Tom speaks in the last chapters, he recalls his behavior during the evasion with pride, repeating his mantra “we done it elegant.”

Fritz Oehlschlager, like many other critics, however, argues that there is a sharp “shift in tone from one of high seriousness to one of low burlesque” (26) in these chapters which explore Tom’s antics. For him, “Clemens has simply made the issues too serious for us to accept a return to the boyhood world of the novel’s opening” (ibid). But this is precisely the point: the issues are indeed too serious to be treated as mere cliché and have been from the beginning of the novel. The “boyhood world” was never as benign as we thought it to be. Rather, it was evidence of the coercive power of society’s inculcation writ on a smaller scale. In this way the structure of the novel, which both begins and ends with Tom’s absurdly committed attempts to adhere to the tropes of his books, continually underscoring the debilitating effects of iterative language on ethical life and relentlessly depicting the disastrous consequences that ensue, is completely consistent with Twain’s thematic intent. It is an intent which reached beyond the novel itself and into his contemporary political world.

In the evasion chapters, which abandon “free” Jim to continue to wallow in captivity while the young “hightoned” Tom lives out his social indoctrination, Twain quite literally shows his deeply held belief that “Loyalty to petrified opinions never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul in this world and never will.” He makes clear the irreverence needed not only to free Jim but to change race relations in America. As Twain stated in his notebook, “irreverence is the champion of liberty and its only sure defense.” But most critics agree that ultimately Adventures of Huckleberry Finn does not give us this satisfaction. And we might conclude that in Twain's intellectual
battle between an empathy-based ethics and mechanical determinism, the final nine chapters of his novel seem to suggest that the mechanical world, enslaved in its own mechanical language, is the victor.

But in so doing, we face the real dilemma of how to account for both the man behind this novel and the ethical ambitions of the novel itself. Samuel Clemens, after all, did change, from the boy inculcated by the language of his culture to believe there was nothing wrong with slavery to the man who served as benefactor and champion of the rights and aspirations of Afro-Americans. And in his writing Mark Twain sought to create change, from his early newspaper exposés on the treatment of Chinese immigrants to his works on the dangers and abuses of American imperialism. Huckleberry Finn, despite the caveat to readers at its beginning and the failings at its end, clearly also hopes to make its mark. If Twain’s primary concern was the perpetuation of pernicious stereotypes, he sought in this work to subtly undermine them. If he objected to the mindless iteration of language without true meaning, he sought to question our lingual usage. The characters in Twain’s work might fall into hopeless mechanical predictability, but their author does not.

Several critics have reevaluated the novel in light of Twain’s lingually based ethical project. Joe B. Fulton considers the ethical dimensions of Twain’s attention to accuracy in language and dialect in his Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism. Shelley Fisher Fishkin has persuasively shown in Was Huck Black? the ways in which Twain relied on black and white voices to create Huck’s speech and how, in so doing, he subverted conventional expectations and stereotypes. David L. Smith examines still another dimension of Twain’s attempt to dispel stereotypes. According to Smith, Twain deliberately “focuses on a number of commonplaces associated with “‘the Negro,’” that they are “uniformly superstitious, ignorant, only transiently affected by sorrow” and “systematically dramatizes their inadequacies” to “elaborate them in order to undermine them” (105, 108). To expand on Smith’s point, I would argue that the superstitious nature with which whites characterized the Negro to differentiate them from their white “superiors” is also exposed as a hypocritical sham. By emphasizing, from the Band of Robbers scene to the concluding “evasion” chapters of the novel, the thrall under which custom holds the white citizens of the community, Twain demonstrates that they are just as disposed to superstition (and, indeed, that their superstitions are more destructive). The distinction heretofore made to justify their moral superiority over blacks (and therefore to justify slavery and continuing discrimination) is a specious one. “When the human race has once acquired a superstition, nothing short of death is ever likely to remove it,” Twain wrote
in his autobiography. He illustrates the point by littering *Huckleberry Finn* with corpses.

But as many other critics have noted, the very nature of Jim’s character alone brings racial stereotypes into question. He is kind and sensitive; he cares deeply for his family and for Huck; he is noble and self-sacrificing. If the novel advocates sympathy as the ethical paradigm, Jim stands as its closest exemplar, standing as the foil to Tom and his behavior in the final chapters. When he finally finds an opportunity to escape, Jim sacrifices the chance for freedom to demonstrate precisely what Tom Sawyer fails at every turn to demonstrate—true compassion for someone else. Ironically, Jim sacrifices himself to help Tom, the very person who not only botched his escape but withheld the information from him that he was already free. Sheer compassion—and not a cultural mandate—is his motivation.

But Twain uses Jim’s exemplary behavior to subvert racial stereotypes in another way as well; by placing it in juxtaposition with the language that continually denies Jim the humanity he clearly demonstrates. The novel is replete with these instances (the use of the word “nigger” alone is legion), but, significantly, Twain does not abandon even the evasion episode without making this point. He tellingly includes commentary by the doctor who tends Tom’s bullet wound. On the surface, this is a scene in which the doctor tries to defend Jim by telling his captors that he “never see a nigger that was a better nuss or faithfuller, and yet he was resking his freedom to do it” (353). This is how Huck reads it, and he is grateful to the doctor for his intercession on Jim’s behalf. But because of his own unquestioning adherence to his culture’s precedents and the language which has codified them, the doctor does not stop to question what such a recognition means. He recognizes the humanity Jim displayed in his faithfulness and self-sacrifice, but he is prevented by his language from recognizing Jim as a human being. The most he can say is that he “liked the nigger for that” and goes on to say “I tell you, gentleman, a nigger like that is worth a thousand dollars—and kind treatment, too” (ibid). The doctor is as incapable of seeing the contradictions in this astounding declaration as Tom is incapable of carrying out a plan that deviates from books and the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons are from seeing the grisly absurdity of their feud. Despite his actions, Jim is still lingually and socially categorized as only a “nigger,” and, sadly, Twain knew from his contemporary experience, would still be only a “nigger” even after the abolition of slavery.

In fact, as David L. Smith points out, “the categories and even the vocabulary of Negro inferiority were formalized into a tedious and unmodulated litany” by century’s end, and the uniformity of the vocabulary of race
“increased rather than diminished during the course of the century” (108). By the time he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain had already been fighting the ramifications of this pejorative and reductionist language for some time. Clearly, Twain recognized the dangerous implications of such objectification in language. The objectification that could lead his characters to reject the humanity of the novel’s most humane character and subject him to brutality and slavery is the same objectification that could condone the violence done to African Americans in the Reconstruction era and beyond, particularly in the form of lynchings. It was in his 1869 editorial for the *Buffalo Express*, aptly titled “Only a Nigger,” that Twain first expressed his outrage at the practice of lynching while exposing the dangers inherent in such codified terms. “Only a nigger killed by mistake—that is all,” Twain mocks (qtd. in Foner 218). “Of course, every high-toned gentleman whose chivalric impulses were so unfortunately misled in this affair . . . is as sorry about it as a high-toned gentleman can be expected to be sorry about the unlucky fate of a ‘nigger.’” (ibid).

The correspondences between this passage and elements of *Huckleberry Finn* some fifteen years later should not be overlooked. Twain’s earlier essay can be linked with the Sherburn incident, a scene explicitly about lynchings, and, even more specifically, the cowardly mob mentality that fuels them. But more to the point, the fact that Twain singles out those “hightoned” gentleman in his critique establishes a connection to the Grangerfords and to Tom Sawyer, who relentlessly adhere to hightoned “principle.” If it is pushing the point too far to suggest that this passage implies that Tom Sawyer could grow up to be a participant in lynch mobs, it at least suggests that he would not be very disturbed by it, only as sorry as a hightoned gentleman could be expected to be about the fate of something so trifling as the fate of a ‘nigger.’ The evasion chapters, which tirelessly emphasize the complete indifference to Jim’s suffering that lay at the heart of Tom’s iterative language, emphasize this point.

Next, Twain’s deliberate choice to place the word “nigger” within quotation marks necessitates a reevaluation of his liberal use of the word in *Huckleberry Finn*. It provides ample evidence to critics of the novel that Twain does not use the word in a callous or casual display of his own racism, but rather as a critical tool to expose the truth about the “hightoned gentleman” who did use the term. But, as David L. Smith and others have suggested, there is more than mere lingual accuracy at stake. Twain’s continual use of the term exposes the continuing reduction of Afro-Americans to a less-than-human status; it is another lingual justification for their treatment of blacks. Indeed, to push the point further, the very unchanging repetition of the word allows
it to be emptied of meaning, to successfully obscure the fact that it refers to human beings and to nullify any compassion or ethical obligation that might entail. Twain makes this point abundantly clear in the oft-quoted interaction between Huck and Aunt Sally:

Good gracious! anybody hurt?

No’m. Killed a nigger.

Well, it’s lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt. (279)

While critics have often pointed to this passage as proof of the novel’s offensiveness, Twain’s ironic use of the word here to reveal the inculcated prejudices behind it takes a firm stand *against* both racism and the ways in which language has perpetuated it while obscuring culpability.

At the end of the century, Twain responded with another anti-racist essay, “The United States of Lyncherdom.” Twain’s focus here is what he unapologetically calls Moral Cowardice—which he again links with the “inborn instinct to imitate” a criticism, as we have seen, not only of people’s behavior but of the speech that invariably affects their behavior. Indeed, Twain pairs these two aspects together when he asks, “Why does [the crowd] lift no hand or voice in protest?” “Only because,” he concludes, “it would be unpopular to do it.”24 Like Tom Sawyer, the mob is afraid of a “fresh” language and ethics that breaks with the iterative. In his own attempt to enact the unpopular, to lift his voice in protest and break the iterative language that inhibited ethical action, Twain sought to write an entire book on the history of lynching. His notes indicate that he wanted “details of all the lynchings” to expose them to public view. “Nothing but a book can rouse up the sheriffs to put down the mobs and end the lynchings,” Twain concluded. Unfortunately, the book was never brought to completion and “The United States of Lyncherdom” was not published until 1923, well after Twain’s death.

The book the public was given, however, is *Huckleberry Finn*. But as readers, are we not placed in the position of Tom Sawyer? Have books and language not been shown to be the very sources of destructive cultural clichés? *Huckleberry Finn* is thoroughly modern in its self-reflexive nature, in the ways in which it continually emphasizes that what we are reading is a story, or, more precisely, many stories within a story. Huck, of course, who has determined “what a trouble it was to make a book,” abandons the enterprise at the novel’s conclusion. He does not consciously recognize but nonetheless seems to intuit that books, as they have been represented in his own narrative, filled with humbug talky-talk, are as suspect as Sunday school and
other social forces out to “sivilize” him, and he has “been there before” (362). In a last attempt to escape the society and the language that has imprisoned him, Huck completely abandons “humbug talky-talk,” abruptly ending his narrative to “light out for the territory.” But the prospect of such an “escape” is illusory, and attempts to actualize it will necessarily be doomed to failure. Indeed, the “territory,” representative of a “natural” world beyond the mechanical speech and action of society, a realm of potential independence and self-creation, is yet another boys’-story cliché, itself perpetuated by “humbug talky-talk,” itself another iterative trap.

And yet Twain himself did seem to harbor an escape fantasy of sorts. If language established pernicious ideas and perverted the conscience, perhaps language could work to correct the damage. Perhaps people were more than machines; perhaps they had heart enough to change and perhaps narrative could foster their counter-education, compel compassion, ignite a genuine new heart-speech. If there is a spirit of disingenuousness in Huckleberry Finn, then, particularly its concluding chapters, it does not stem from an evasion of the ethical repercussions of his narrative. It is not because Twain lacked the ethical vision or commitment, as many have assumed. Quite the contrary: Twain’s sense of ethics, and his outrage at the hollow and destructive speech, beliefs, and practices that allowed and condoned so many abuses, is fully intact throughout the narrative. The source of any insincerity rests in Twain’s putative reduction of his society into mechanical compartments, a reduction so complete that he claims to believe that man is “purely a piece of automatic mechanism as is a watch, and can no more dictate or influence his actions than can a watch”—that the people involved bear no responsibility for the injustice of their actions. But it is clear not only in the substance of Twain’s writing but in the very act of his writing as an ethically fueled enterprise that while Twain was fixated on the iterative quality of language he did not fully believe his own rhetoric of mechanistic determinism. Huckleberry Finn shows us if nothing else that though men can behave like machines, they are fully culpable for the destruction they leave in their wake. And in his writing, Mark Twain holds them culpable—culpable for the continuing use of the pejorative terms that kept Americans enslaved; culpable for the continuing denial of civil rights; culpable for the senseless violence; culpable for all their endless, dangerous, humbug talky-talk—the ramifications of which Twain knew all too well. He, too, had been there before.
Chapter Two

Stephen Crane’s “The Monster:” Iteration, Ethics, and the Engine of Convention

Though Stephen Crane would not live to hear Teddy Roosevelt voice the sentiment, he seemed to intuit that “The most successful politician is he who says what everybody is thinking most often and in the loudest voice” (qtd. in Brogan 447). Politics as such were not of interest to Crane in his novellette “The Monster,” but much of the story is concerned with what everyone thinks most often and says, repeatedly, in the loudest collective voice. Like *Huckleberry Finn*, “The Monster” delves into the most common modes of thought and expression in society and reveals how customary speech and action are perpetuated and recycled; how society maintains its conventions with an elusive but effective coercion. While Twain, testing his thesis of mechanistic determinism, focuses on the iterative quality of his characters’ speech, Crane goes a step further by foregrounding the technological innovations of turn-of-the-century Whilomville and forging direct connections between the new machines and the unthinking lingual and social propensities of the town’s inhabitants.

“The Monster” is a story that closely studies the ways in which the collective voice of the town functions. Section IV, in which Crane describes the townspeople gathering on a Saturday night, is crucial in this investigation. The absence of individuals in this section of the story is conspicuous. Instead, Crane points out that “group regar[ds] group with interest” (72). Crane’s diction relentlessly emphasizes that the town is a homogenous crowd, not a grouping of distinct individuals, and employs nearly every conceivable synonym to do so. In a single paragraph Crane describes a mass, a gang, a band, a crowd and a throng (72). He focuses on a “rather large company of young men;” a “throng of boys;” and a “gang of obstreperous little boys.” The girls,
too, are represented not as solitary but collective; they are “linked closely in pairs, or preferably in threes” (ibid). But Crane’s emphasis on the collective will of the crowd makes these more than benign descriptors. We are told that the “young men . . . turned out in force,” (ibid) and this seemingly innocent figure of speech is more telling than it first appears. The coercive force of the people lies precisely in their collective power to ensure social conformity. There is a distinctly conspiratorial flavor to the townsfolk, even early in the story. Clearly this is not a crowd composed of a number of individuals, but a Nietzschean herd that wields a single will. Even their bodies cannot be distinguished: “the throng swarmed,” “the gathering crowd swayed this way and that,” and “the company of men’s muscles released” simultaneously, as if each set of muscles were not his own, but part of a larger organism (73).

Repelled, like Mark Twain, by mob mentality, Crane often represented the dangerous repercussions of the crowd as collective consciousness in his stories, most notably in “The Men in the Storm.” In this story a crowd that is waiting to be admitted into a shelter for the night becomes an indistinguishable mass. Indeed, they “were all mixed in one mass so thoroughly that one could not have discerned the different elements” (68). Nietzschean diction occurs again in a conspicuous simile: the men press “close to one another like sheep in a winter’s gale” (69). En masse their humanity is more than altered, it is nullified. They become mere sheep, one indistinguishable from another.

But in “The Monster,” Crane emphasizes how the single will and single body of the crowd expresses itself in a single speech, language that is choral rather than individual, a phenomenon Crane saw realized in his own society. The citizenry of Whilomville speak in startling uniformity, and it is this compulsively conformist speech that most concerns Crane in the story. The townspeople gathered for the band performance “wheeled upon each other simultaneously and, in a single explosion they shouted” when they hear the whistle (73). A second time, they “wheeled upon each other, and, in chorus, yelled” (83). It is no accident that the crowd’s uniform and simultaneous exclamation is a response to the factory whistle, the town’s mechanized system of warning. While Crane emphasizes the Nietzschean metaphor of sheep in the “Men in the Storm,” here he likens the crowd to machines; the people respond mechanically to a mechanical device. The factory whistle is personified; it has a kind of voice, emitting a “great, hoarse roar,” and “sing [ing] on the night wind one long call” (ibid). But while the industrial objects exhibit human characteristics, the human inhabitants of Whilomville take on the attributes of machines. Crane makes this clear with the telling verb “wheeled;” it is as if the men themselves are cogs in a machine, whirring about in a sort of socially mechanized program. The circularity implicit in
the term “wheeled” also incisively conveys the meaningless circularity of the
crowd’s speech and behavior. Further, the wheeling crowd erupts in a single
“explosion,” a striking phrase which works in tandem with the section’s final
sentence (“the company . . . vanished like a snowball disrupted by dynamite”) (ibid), to cast the scene in the language of industrial metaphor.

While Crane employs this type of language in his other works, he seems
particularly concerned with the connection between industry and social life
in “The Monster.” The landscape of the story is strewn with new technol-
ogy: there are electric lamps and arc lamps, telegraphs, machines, a factory
and its accompanying whistle, and a new engine pumping water on the hill.
Crane also includes multiple references to the mail, newspapers and tele-
graphs, seeming to register the “unprecedented diffusion and diversification
of communication techniques” that saw a seven-fold increase in newspaper
distribution and telegraph volume in his lifetime (Schlereth 177). While
such details root the story in its historical context, they are more than mere
descriptors included to characterize the age, more than evidence of Crane’s
adherence to a realist aesthetic. Crane uses machines in “The Monster” to
forge a connection between new technology and social conformity, between
a social world increasingly ruled by mechanization and a type of social speech
that had become increasingly mechanized.

Such a connection is perhaps made most explicit in the telegraph.
Indeed, the telegraph functions on the literal level as the technology by which
gossip is transmitted, but also as a metaphor for the circulation of informa-
tion throughout a social space. It is a mechanical aid to transmit words, a
sort of highly efficient gossip-machine, a mechanized way of efficiently dis-
persing the “news.” Nothing is too trivial or too private to be circulated in
this way. When the impressively-dressed Henry Johnson steps out into the
town, for example, the news of his “extraordinary arrival” is “instantly tele-
graphed . . . to his companions” (79).

The telegraph appears again during the fire: “the news had been tele-
graphed by a twist of the wrist of a neighbor who had gone to the firebox
at the corner” which leads in turn to the “whistle roar[ing] its hoarse night
call” (77). In Whilomville, news travels from technology to technology, from
machine to machine. The ease which the new technology has usurped the
town is clear; it takes no more than a “twist of the wrist” to use it. Rendering
the body in mechanical terms, this gesture seems in fact like a mere reflex,
one that parallels the social reflex at the heart of the story—the unthinking
reactions and iterations of Whilomville’s “mob.”

Mechanical reflex is in fact pervasive throughout the tale. Dispatching
the fire engines to combat the blaze is a mechanical response on a literal and
understandably pragmatic level. But the automatic and utterly predictable
response to the town’s bells of warning is equally mechanical:

In Whilomville, on these occasions, there was always a number of peo-
ple who instantly turned their attention to the bells in the churches
and schoolhouses. The bells not only emphasized the alarm, but it
was the habit to send these sounds rolling across the sky in a stirring,
brazen uproar until the flames were practically vanquished. There was
also a kind of rivalry as to which bell should be made to produce the
greatest din. (80)

The people involved do not think at all in any self-conscious or self-reflective
way. Rather, they respond to the bells and enact their rivalries out of “habit.”
The schools, supposedly about the business of education, and the churches,
ostensibly about the business of saving souls, do not seem to recognize the
paltriness of such a competition during something as potentially catastrophic
as a fire. Habit, the unthinking and undiscerning perpetuation of these rit-
uals, again creates a parallel between the townspeople and the mechanical
innovations on which they depend.

Another primary means of dispersing and perpetuating conventions is
of course the newspaper. It is a vital instrument in this literal circulation of
myths, lies, and clichés. A journalist from the time he was nineteen, and cor-
respondent for The New York World and, subsequently, The New York Jour-
nal in Cuba during the Spanish American War, Crane’s knowledge about the
“yellow press” in America was personal. Crane knew that urban newspapers,
concerned with greater circulation, were not above inventing stories or deliber-
ately instigating adversity to generate “news.” William Randolph Hearst
eventually became notorious for his unscrupulous tactics. The business, like
others, was driven by fierce competition with other publishers, such as Joseph
Pulitzer. Despite his position as a journalist, Crane rejected sensational jour-
nalism (Fox ix), and in “The Monster” he reveals his distrust of the business
of “news.”

It is the newspaper that originally prints the fallacious news of Henry
Johnson’s death. A reporter descends upon the scene after the fire and tell-
ingly circles the area each hour on his bicycle: an apt image for one con-
sumed with a sort of cycling, with circulation. Indeed, the bicycle functions
as yet another machine in the story, an ideal image with which Crane con-
flates technology with human beings. Like the twist of the wrist that sends
the telegraph, and like the bicycle that circles each hour, the press seems to
roll on reflexively. Without further attempts to verify the facts of the story,
“the morning paper announced the death of Henry Johnson” (84). The editorial about the incident is “built from all the best words in the vocabulary of the staff” (ibid). Here, writing is represented in the language of industry (it is built), while the staff, like the crowd earlier in the tale, is represented as a collective pool from which words can be chosen and strung together, as if uttered by a single voice.

Like an efficient generator, the editorial’s valorization of the presumed-dead Henry Johnson begins a chain-reaction in the town: because of the newspaper’s sanction everyone seeks to canonize Henry. Bella, Henry’s romantic interest, comes forward to announce that she had been engaged to him. As readers, we do not know for certain whether or not Bella and Henry were ever actually engaged. Crane constructs this situation, however, in a way that raises our suspicions. Bella, deeply implicated in the social generator, seems to want to capitalize on Henry’s “posthumous” badge of heroism, which she presumes will give her status in the community by association.

It is not merely, then, that Crane has created a realistic turn-of-the-century community laden with the new machines that characterized the times. Rather, for Crane, the community is itself a machine. This is society as “engine,” a word Crane employs from the beginning of the story. That first scene seems, initially, innocent enough: young Jimmie Trescott plays outside with his toy cart while his father mows the lawn with yet another “whirring machine.” But Crane’s language suggests that Jimmie does not merely play with the toy, he becomes it: “Little Jim was, for the time, Engine Number 36, and he was making the run between Syracuse and Rochester” (65). The irreparable damage he does to the peony is the result of his mechanized play. After the accident, we are told that “Number 36 slowed down at once and looked guiltily at his father” (ibid). In this representation Jimmie literally is a machine in the garden; he has become the engine, he is “number 36.” Jimmie’s speech also tellingly reflects his mechanization. Three times he calls for his “Pa,” and he points to the damage he has done with the single word “there!” no fewer than five times. Indeed, this monosyllabic utterance is the only language Jimmie produces for most of the scene, and Crane continually emphasizes the point, stating that the child “repeated his former word,” and “could only reiterate” (66).

In a break with sentimental fiction in which childhood is portrayed as innocent and potentially even angelic, children in Crane’s world are the new and improved societal engines, the “little soldiers” that will perpetuate the mechanized traditions of their society. Chester Wolford argues that society exists in part in Crane’s fiction to “curb the natural, chaotic barbarity of children” (44). Wolford is correct to recognize that children in Crane’s work
are barbarous; one need not look further than the bloody fights which open *Maggie* for evidence of this point. But Crane places no trust in society to better the child’s condition, to raise him above barbarism and form him into a truly civilized being. *Huckleberry Finn* revealed the ethically disastrous potentiality of being “sivilized” into a corrupt society; for Crane, “civilized” society is equally savage in its own right, and thus society’s inculcation of children simply trades one form of barbarism for another. To become a civilized adult in “The Monster” is to shun mercilessly a man who acted heroically, and to punish and ostracize the only other man who is willing to help him.

But because both Twain and Crane concern themselves not only with this failure of morality but how such unethical behavior is perpetuated, each makes children’s behavior a central focus, children who simply repeat—in word and in deed—the tacit conventions of their society. It is significant, then, that in “The Monster,” “‘My father says’ was a very formidable phrase in [the children’s] argument[s]” (82). Crane demonstrates interest not only in what is said, but the very fact that it is being said again and again, passed from generation to generation in unthinking and automatic iteration. Indeed, this one expression reveals a two-fold problem: first, the boys are merely repeating the content of their respective fathers’ argument (the implication, of course, is that those fathers were once boys who ‘learned’ and mimicked their own fathers’ arguments), and, second, the very language they use to preface such arguments is also uniform, beginning invariably with “my father says.” This repetition is a putative appeal to authority, and by enacting it, the children implicate themselves in the engine of society.

Crane explores this theme in his other fiction as well. The children in the ironically titled “The Angel Child,” for example, are depicted not as innocent creatures as yet uncorrupted by adult society, but rather as nascent versions of that corruption, the future carriers, as it were, of the cultural malaise. They resemble “in a tiny way, drunken, reveling soldiers within the walls of a stormed city” (136) when they besiege the candy store with their five dollars, one of several incidents in which the children are described as “soldierly.” Tellingly, “soldier” metaphors also appear in “The Monster.” Mrs. Williams stands on her porch with her “battalion of children” (98), while the boys who approach the disfigured Henry are revered as military heroes: “If they had been decorated for courage on twelve battlefields, they could not have made the other boys more ashamed of the situation” (108). The smallest of the boys becomes “entangled” in the other boys’ legs as he “attempts to reach the front rank and become of some importance” (110). And like a little minstrel he is “always piping out his little claim to glory”—a reference which again suggests the role of language in such familiar conventions (ibid).
Critics such as June Howard have observed that Crane’s descriptions (using Homeric language to describe the fighting in Rum Alley in Maggie, for example) are incongruous with the objects and events he describes, that his language “widens the chasm between the ignorance and brutality of the slum dwellers and the literary sensibilities of the narrator and the reader” (105). But we need not suppose such a breach is unintentional or arbitrary. Crane’s use of hyperbolic language functions on a number of levels. First, he does find an affinity between the behaviors of the children, their initiation into their society, and the rigorous indoctrination of soldiers. But I would argue that Crane repeatedly makes use of these overblown martial metaphors specifically to emphasize that these are the convenient tropes of this society, the culturally accessible clichés. As Michael Davitt Bell has discussed, “the narrator’s artificiality of expression reflects an analogous artificiality in the ways these characters view themselves and others” (138). Bell does not take up a discussion of “The Monster,” but it, perhaps more than any other Crane story, reflects Crane’s interest in the artificiality of expression, in the ways in which metaphors are generated and maintained by society’s lingual conventions.

Crane’s language in “The Monster,” then, draws attention to how figures of speech become the available touchstones whereby a culture defines itself. After Henry is spotted by young Sadie Winter at the birthday party, for example, the boys assume and enact the most readily available cultural myths, much like Tom Sawyer and his story-book clichés: “None wished particularly to encounter a dragon in the darkness of the garden, but there could be no faltering when the fair ones in the dining room were present” (99). With playful irony, Crane adopts the language of the children to present the very modes of thought they have unconsciously adopted. The backyard becomes a garden where dragons may dwell; the same girls who had snubbed them become the fair ladies of chivalric romances. When one of the boys fabricates a lie, it is indeed to the language and tropes of gothic tales and romances that he turns: “he described a grim figure, bending low and slinking along the fence. He gave a number of details, rendering his lie more splendid by a repetition of certain forms which he recalled from romances. For instance, he insisted that he had heard the creature emit a hollow laugh” (99–100).

The repetition of this description is of course a conspicuous feature. Like the boys who repeat both the phrase “my father says” and the content of their fathers’ utterance, this boy simply re-circulates expressions. He does not create his own story; his literal fabrication is fashioned from the cultural material available to him, from the stories he has read and recalled. His lie is therefore dependent on a cultural precedent. The repetition of certain forms, because of their very commonality, makes them seem more credible. The
details that link his lie with a larger and familiar mythos lend it credence. Of course, Crane reveals how untrustworthy the mythos of the community really is. Lies fabricated from fictions (which are in themselves, of course, lies) are perpetuated in the culture in unending circularity.

Further, Crane suggests that the lie was inevitable: “Of course there was a lad who told a lie” (my emphasis). But, we have to ask, does the inevitability rest on Crane’s understanding of children and their propensity to embellish the truth, or is it a more far-reaching symptom of this society? In Crane’s fiction, one lies to garner attention, but one also lies because it is so easy to do so, so effortless to appropriate the fictions already circulating in the culture. Since fabrications are not the exclusive dominion of children in the story, we cannot dismiss Crane’s claim as either childhood mischief or fantasy. Rather, the children are merely the tiny versions of an adult world that re-circulates corrupt cultural clichés routinely. In this sense children really are “little soldiers,” inculcated into the ranks of the adult world of false utterance.

We are reminded again of the crowd in section IV. Not only do the people speak in unison, their speech is frequently disingenuous. When a young man says “the music reminded him of the new engines pumping water on the hill” he “did not say it because he disliked the band’s playing. He said it because it was fashionable to say that manner of things concerning the band” (72). The man fails to notice that in his unthinking perpetuation of artificial language he himself sounds like one of the new engines; indeed, he is a new engine working in society, perpetuating, rather than producing, “fashionable” cultural material. Crane also focuses on other falsehoods: Mrs. Farragut, for example, who for eight years spoke ceaselessly of her ailments, scales the fence “with speed and agility” when the “monstrous” Henry Johnson appears. And Mrs. Williams, who had been absurdly paralyzed with fear while Henry he resided in her house, “proclaim[s] her illimitable courage” once he is safely away (98).

Bella Farragut, meanwhile, practices the art of imitation: she actually “encourag[es] herself in the appropriation of phrases” (71). To appropriate means to seize for one’s own, to take for one’s own property. But the very fact that these phrases have been circulating ensures that they cannot become her own: they are public and common. Indeed, they are the most common utterances of the community, chosen not in order to distinguish oneself as an individual, but rather precisely to sound the same as others, to become part of collective iteration. Like a character from Twain’s antebellum South, one woman who is denied access to the Tresco’s home after the fire accomplishes this by quoting “most damning Scripture” (84). Mr. and Mrs. Williams take this a step further by actually assuming (or imagining, in their
pretension, to assume) the roles of other figures from their cultural mythos: Alec Williams pushes open the door to Henry's room “like the fearful slave liberating the lion,” while Mrs. Williams “raise[s] her eyes to the ceiling in the supplication of Job” (98). The usurped biblical archetypes become the sources of their prevarication.

But Crane pays more particular attention than Twain to a particular type of lie—the rumor; its curious derivation, its widespread circulation. In Crane stories, characters frequently “howl gossip to other people on other rickety porches,” (100) and Crane attempts to reveal not only the pervasiveness of this false speech but to trace the roots of its circulation. “The man who had information,” at the scene of the fire, we are told, “was at his best” (83). This is ironically put: there is nothing admirable about the man, but he knows how to create and disseminate falsehoods effectively. He speaks in “low tones” to heighten the effect. Like the boy at the birthday party, this man understands on some level that the most successful lies are those which tap into a cultural myth or assumption, those lies that appear in the guise of the society’s most deeply held “truths.” His fabrication therefore places Henry Johnson at fault:

That was the kid’s room—in the corner there. He had measles or somethin’, and this coon—Johnson—was a-settin’ up with ‘im, and Johnson got sleep or somethin’ and upset the lamp, and the doctor he was down in his office, and he came running up, and they all got burned together until they dragged ’em out. (83)

The derogatory and racist language makes the source of this lie all too clear. Accessing another of society’s promulgated myths, this time about the inferiority of another race, the man fashions a lie that would seem believable to any other latent racists in the crowd. His version makes the black man guilty, and the white man heroic, when, indeed, the doctor was not even present, and Henry Johnson saved the boy’s life.

Because of the prejudices and myths circulating about race in Crane’s cultural moment, more formidable in the 1890s than ever, Henry is a prisoner even before his accident. As a black man in an 1890s racist community, Henry is locked within the strict bounds of racial stereotypes. After the fire this imprisonment becomes literal: he is locked in a cold room in the Williams’ house, and is carted to jail on his night of inadvertent terror. But even more significantly Henry remains a prisoner to societal dictates and conventions, bound within their classifications. As we have seen, such conventions are performed again and again; their proliferation depends on unthinking,
habitual repetition. The perpetuation of racist stereotypes, then, is implicitly linked with mechanical iteration.

While Crane does not spend much of the story detailing the transmission of racial clichés before the fire, he does concentrate on the clichés that erupt in the community after Henry is maimed saving Jimmy’s life. The categories the community access represent polar extremes: when the town believes him dead he is a saint; when he proves to be alive but disfigured he becomes a devil. These totalizing metaphors equally deny Henry his humanity and obscure the townspeople’s responsibility to act humanely. The saint and devil are both convenient clichés, culturally accessible, culturally promulgated archetypes that require no deeper thought, no attempt to get to and contend with the truth about Henry Johnson. The only instance when the town stops and interrupts the ceaseless reiterative motion of their social speech, they do so only again to implicate themselves in another culturally disseminated cliché: “the town halted in its accustomed road of thought, and turned a reverent attention to the memory of this hostler” (84). Crane’s irony mocks this putative reverence, performed en masse and right on cue. But even when attempting to act in accord with the respect that appears to be required of them, the townspeople cannot resist the temptation to categorize; Henry is a type, a stable hand.

When Judge Hagnethorpe correctly (though hypocritically) tells Williams that the crowd’s talk is “idle nonsense,” Williams replies that it “’tis nonsense, jedge; but he looks like er devil” (92). The society seems to have no words or models to contend with a man who acts heroically but who appears outwardly like a devil. He exists outside of their convenient categories, and for this reason he is literally disenfranchised. Early in the story we are given a preview of the townspeople’s inability to reconcile the label they have assigned to a particular person with any deviations in his or her appearance. The community has difficulty reconciling Henry’s position as a Pullman-car porter with his appearance of a well-bred gentleman. “How could that be Henry Johnson?” they repeatedly ask (70). In this case, the question, though unasked, is the same. They fail to recognize that “the devil” is Henry Johnson, regardless of his appearance. Even Jimmie is unable to see Henry for what he is. “These two were pals,” and Henry unquestionably saved Jimmie’s life, and yet Jimmie, groping for social categorization “could not identify it in any way” (105). The “it” of the sentence is a completely objectified Henry Johnson. But a human being incapable of being recognized as one is a subject that resists facile categorization. At best he is only the catalyst for a “weird fascination,” the type that instigates a game of “dare” among the schoolboys.
Sadie Winter’s inability to recognize Henry’s humanity after the birth-
day party, then, is emblematic of the town’s refusal to do so. The question
posed to her (“Was it a man?”) hangs suspended throughout Whilomville;
to the girl, to Jimmie, and to the town at large, Henry is reduced to “simply
a thing, a dreadful thing” (100). Caught within cultural myths and stereo-
types, the townspeople are unable to answer the most crucial question, or to
act ethically in response.

We now see why Crane should exhibit, in Michael Davitt Bell’s terms,
such “profound skepticism” towards “the outworn styles of expression” cir-
culating in his society (139). Like Twain before him, Crane understood the
“dreadful power of established styles to determine consciousness” (ibid), and
was astutely aware of the behavioral and therefore ethical ramifications such
determination could produce. Indeed, Crane’s implicit conclusion seems to
be that because it has been emptied of any real content or meaning, iter-
tative language, the mechanical perpetuation of hackneyed tropes, inhibits and
even deadens the capacity for human sympathy.

In fact, the scenes characterized by iterative gossip suggest not only
a lack of compassion but an active, if somewhat covert, sadism. Section
XII of the story begins with an ecstatic Carrie Dungen asking “Have you
heard the news?” Predictably, she repeats the question. The response is also
doubled, as Kate asks “What was it? What was it?”(112). The “delight”
in Carrie’s eyes and her “triumphant” manner as she delivers the gossip
about Trescott’s altercation with Winters reveals a perversity, a sort of mor-
bid delight in others’ misfortunes. Carrie’s dedication to the cause of gos-
sip parallels the boys’ “vigilance” outside the Trescott house as they wait
for someone to die. Both scenes delve beneath the civilized patina of the
town to reveal its pettiness and casual cruelty. As many of Crane’s stories,
including “The Men in the Storm,” make apparent, there is always a threat
of violence simmering under the “placid bosom” of any crowd, and the
community of Whilomville is no exception. The townspeople reveal their
capability for violence as they pursue Henry with rocks, but the vicious-
ness of the gossip reveals a lingual cruelty that is itself an insidious kind of
violence.8

Kate, “shrill and excited,” shares Carrie’s morbid enthusiasm (112).
“It’s all over town now . . . Everybody knows it” stands as a sort of warrant
for her claims; like the myths that lend the boy’s lies credibility, the circula-
tion of the gossip and the sheer numbers of its reception provides Carrie and
Kate with the sanction they require. Carrie and Kate are “allied forces” in this
perpetuation, who, like other groups in Whilomville, speak in chorus: “But
Martha, everybody says so. Everybody says so” (113).
Claims of both sexism (for this portrayal of these gossiping women) and racism (primarily for the characterization of the Williams family) are frequently cited, and we have to ask if in his own language Crane is guilty of perpetuating stereotypes. But Crane’s indictment of this sort of behavior is not limited to characters of a particular gender, race, or socio-economic status. In fact, Crane implicitly condemns anyone who would attribute such behavior dismissively to another race, class, or gender. His own critical gavel falls on anyone in the town who exhibits the hypocrisy and cowardice he so disdains. The men’s suggestion that “it’s the women” who perpetuate the gossip is a smoke screen attempting to obscure their own culpability. Crane shows us that this is but another convenient fiction iterated at will. Similarly, every character in the barber shop scene, a scene of gossip, is in fact male. And it is four men who go to Trescott with the explicit request—and implicit demand—that he dispose of Henry and resume his sanctioned place within society.

But Crane’s most trenchant criticism of hypocrisy can perhaps be found in the character of Judge Hagenthorpe. A wealthy white man, and the putative voice of law and justice in the town, Judge Hagenthorpe is himself a great dissembler. In fact, he had “successfully dissembled for a quarter of a century” (85), and he is just as susceptible as the others in the community to adopting false manners and speech. In his conversation with Trescott, the judge delivers his views with “his habitual oratory,” a phrase which, as William K. Spoffard had observed, signifies inauthentic speech. The role of judge theoretically requires a particular manner: detached and objective, capable of the blind, disinterested attention that is the idealized hallmark of the judicial process. But Crane’s pointed adjective “cold” seems to mean self-interest rather than disinterest, indifference rather than staid concern. Crane also implies that the bench is merely a convenient mask for the judge to hide behind. He “retreats” there, suggesting that he is more a moral coward than a champion of justice. Judge Hagenthorpe’s condescending and insulting demeanor toward Alec Williams, then, is particularly contemptible, both in its poorly-veiled racism and in its hypocrisy.

In his meeting with Trescott, the judge insists that Nature has “given [Henry] up,” but this is yet another excuse to nullify social responsibility. Appropriating yet another familiar paradigm, the Frankenstein myth, the judge insists that Henry will be “a monster” of the doctor’s creation. Trescott retorts that “He will be what you like, judge” (86). Henry’s facelessness becomes a blank slate on which the townspeople can project their fears, prejudices, and cultural clichés. Before his dreadful accident Henry’s face “showed like a reflector” (71), and, paradoxically, this statement becomes
more true after he is rendered faceless. The town’s reaction to his face, or to what had been a face, reflects their own paltriness. Their insistence that Henry be veiled shows an unwillingness to have their own inaction reflected back to them. His one eye stares unflinchingly at the judge, like a silent indictment. This indictment lies at the heart of “The Monster.”

There are few who could escape such censure. Only Martha scoffs at the town’s univocal judgment, protesting that she doesn’t “care what everybody says” (113). She is a curious character, however, because she more than anyone else in town is a generator of gossip: indeed, “She was an engine” (104). Further, her character is hardly praise-worthy in other respects; she advocates, among other extreme measures, that all the Turks should be “pushed into the sea and drowned” (103). But because of the Napoleonic power she maintains in her role in society, she is able to deflate the preposterous rumors about Henry Johnson. She does not, however, go so far as to advocate ethical action. As Stanley Wertheim implies, Martha remains within the boundaries she has prescribed for herself.11

Carrie’s challenge to Martha, that neither she nor anyone else can “go against the whole town” (echoed word for word by Kate), is more apt than she could possibly be aware. Going against the whole town is precisely what is at stake in “The Monster,” precisely what is required to make an ethical judgment and to act upon it. Crane’s language continually explores whether acting against—or outside—not only society’s dictates but its consciousness, its standards of behavior and its unconscious appeal to certain modes of speech, is possible. Put another way, Crane’s work offers another powerful realist exploration of whether individual language and action are possible within both the social and lingual confines established, rigorously maintained, and perpetuated by a newly mechanized society.

Language breaks down again and again for those who attempt such sincerity or individuality. Perhaps more than any other scene the exchange in the barber shop is characterized by iteration, but it also evinces the difficulties of going beyond mere repetition. One of the men in the barber shop is a railway engineer, and it should be noted that Crane deems this a significant fact to tell us; again, the connection is drawn between technology and iteration, industrial circulation and gossip. The engineer suggests that Trescott should have let Henry die, and Reifsnyder immediately echoes “Let him die?” Reifsnyder questions “how can you let a man die when he has done so much for you?” and the engineer in turn echoes, “When he has done so much for you?” The barber and engineer subsequently reply in duet: “because he hasn’t got any face,” and this simultaneous expression is again iterated by another man: “Hasn’t got any face!” Some of the men in the shop iterate their own
expressions as well, as Crane explicitly tells us. One of the men “who had previously spoken, feeling that he had expressed himself well, repeated the whole thing” (95).

The scene, then, demonstrates how difficult it is for a member of this society to formulate and articulate any original expressions of speech. It reveals the struggle one faces when one attempts to move beyond or outside of prescribed phrases and tropes. Reifsnyder struggles and stutters as he attempts to fashion an original insult: “Any man vould do it. Any man that was not like you, you—old—flintheaded—fish” (94). This is hardly the most devastating of insults; it does not even make a great deal of sense. But Reifsnyder had necessarily “sought the words with painful care”—necessarily because he had to grope for a figure not already fashioned. But Reifsnyder faces an even more formidable challenge at the end of the section. He “think[s] heavily” and then “suddenly burst[s] out . . . ‘How would you like to be with no face?’” (95). This outburst can be taken quite literally: Reifsnyder is shattering the confines of both the conversation and the men’s habitual mode of speech and thought. He cannot, however, make himself clear to them. The conversation continues on a mechanical and superficial level. It dissolves into platitudes, emptying itself of both real content and compassion. Reifsnyder attempts to redirect the men’s talk to the substantial question in an effort to compel empathy; again he asks, “No, but look . . . supposing you don’t got a face!” (ibid). But the section ends here because it must: the men are incapable of understanding Reifsnyder’s terms. They cannot free themselves from the conventional reaction; cannot imagine what life is like outside of those boundaries. It is simply unreal to them.

Trescott faces a similar challenge in his conversation with the judge. Trescott’s response, “Who knows?” at once reveals the epistemological uncertainty in a morally ambiguous world and his simultaneous refusal to concede to those who purport to know, the conventional opinion of the majority, proxied in this scene by the judge:

There was in Trescott’s face at once a look of recognition, as if in this tangent of the judge he saw an old problem. He merely sighed and answered “Who knows?” The words were spoken in a deep tone that gave them an elusive kind of significance. (86)

“An elusive kind of significance” is itself an elusive, and ambiguous, phrase. Are the words elusive to the judge, to the reader, or to himself? But the question is even more complicated. The “deep tone” that Crane intends could, of course, be meant only to refer to the timbre of Trescott’s words at
that moment. But “deep” could also be placed in opposition to the other language spoken in the story by the townspeople: that is, deep as opposed to superficial, in sharp opposition to the hackneyed and depthless utterance of the crowd. In this way such deep tones would be elusive indeed: breaking conventional mores, the words would be hard to account for in the town’s system of signification.

When T rescott asks and asks again “What am I to do?” he cannot expect an answer, at least not one that will take an ethical position outside of the confines of the normalized attitudes and conduct of the town. They have never been made to confront such an incident before, but the story has established the absolute predictability of their actions and reactions. The judge’s response (which, significantly, is again both iterated and reiterated) is on one level an empty platitude, yet another mechanical response: “It is hard for a man to know what to do.” Ironically, however, the judge speaks the truth in a way of which he is unaware. It truly is hard for a man—an autonomous individual—to know what to do outside of the imposed norms. T rescott has begun to contemplate stepping out into uncharted moral territory, where he will have no social reference to guide him. Instead there seems to be only an interior, persistent voice which questions the reaction he is meant to have. T rescott’s interrogation of and implicit evaluation of society’s judgment, though, takes him beyond Huck Finn’s achievement; although Huck acts against his society’s standards, he never becomes aware of the immorality of those very authorities. T rescott, however, begins to question the supposedly infallible authority of his society, a move which proves to be the first step in his resistance.

T rescott’s ethical resistance is a process, however. He initially tries to straddle both the world of his conscience and the world of social authority by sending Henry to live with Alec Williams. With this decision the doctor can at once partially appease his conscience (he has paid for everything) without alienating himself from the community. He has done what they would have wished by removing Henry from the confines of their community and beyond the white citizens’ responsibility by placing him in the care of another black family outside of town. But when Henry escapes and T rescott is faced with a similar decision of sending him to a sanitarium or to John Twelve’s “little no-good farm,” he refuses to capitulate. Indeed, in this penultimate scene, T rescott both literally and symbolically “turn[s] his back upon” the town’s most prominent citizens, and everything they represent (116).

In *The Virtues of the Vicious*, Keith Gandal argues that “ethical behavior, for Crane, clearly involves resistance” (124). This insight leads Gandal to develop a theory of “rebel morality” that can be found in many of Crane’s
If the Easterner's declaration at the conclusion of “The Blue Hotel,” that “every sin is the result of a collaboration,” is correct, then to act ethically would be to refuse to collaborate or conspire. If, as Crane said elsewhere, the “mob has no courage,” to act courageously is to extricate oneself from the crowd. This is precisely what T rescott decides to do by the end of the story. He makes and stands by his decision because the value he places on Henry's sacrifice to save his son's life outweighs the vacuous mores of his society. The evolution of his character is crucial; the very fact that he changes stands as a sort of proof that an individual can break out of the circularity of his society. It shows that conventions need not necessarily be perpetuated.

Of course, there are consequences for such aberrant behavior. To break the conventions of society is to forfeit its approval. T rescott’s wife has been completely ostracized, and T rescott's medical practice is doomed. And, like Reifsnnyder in the barber shop scene, T rescott also appears to be disenfranchised from language itself. When he tries to explain his humane motivations to the representatives of the town, he stutters and finds it impossible to complete his sentence. The moment he turns his back on the town is characterized by a profound silence which at once sharply contrasts with the continual iteration that has thus far characterized the story and suggests the failure of true communication, of the potential for sympathetic dialogue to replace empty iteration.

In the text's final scene, the doctor seeks to comfort his distraught wife. He is left counting the empty teacups that would have served his wife's callers: “Glancing down at the cups, T rescott mechanically counted them. There were fifteen of them” (117). The teacups are symbolic vestiges of the couple's life in society, and it is significant that T rescott surveys them mechanically. T rescott tries to count them, but he is unable now to participate fully in the meaningless and mechanized conventions of the society from which he is now alienated: “T rescott found himself occasionally trying to count the cups. There were fifteen of them” (ibid).

Many critics have concluded that this ending suggests that meaningful resistance is impossible in this social domain, and that nihilism is Crane’s inevitable destination. Pushing the point even further, we might ask whether or not this ending suggests also that Crane has become a victim of the iterative machine, whether he merely represents repetition in this story or whether he himself is hopelessly implicated in the engine of convention. The final repetitive lines are, after all, delivered not by one of the unthinking townspeople, but by Crane's own omniscient narrator, and the conclusion is not the first instance in the story that Crane's own prose proves to be repetitive. As Frank Bergon has discussed, a sort of variable repetition, Crane's tendency
to bind sentences with synonyms and to create parallel and even redundant statements, is in fact characteristic of Crane’s style.\textsuperscript{13}

We might also argue for an affinity with if not direct connection between such repetition and technology within Crane’s writing. While much of what has been written on Crane’s prose focuses on his affinity with impressionism,\textsuperscript{14} another less obvious trend in Crane criticism can be traced which likens Crane’s writing to technological devices. For Frank Norris, Crane’s scenes were like flash photographs; for James Guetti, Crane’s aural rhetoric is “telegraphic.”\textsuperscript{15} With such descriptors it is worth considering whether Crane’s prose is yet another new engine on the modern American landscape.

But Crane’s language can and should be distinguished from the iterative rhetoric of his characters by its very self-consciousness. As we have seen, the citizens of Whilomville respond reflexively, seemingly unaware of the content, meaning, or consequences of their utterances. Crane, by contrast, is intensely aware of the implications of his language. Michael Davitt Bell argues that Crane was less interested in the discovery of authentic material than in the “fashioning of an authentic style, an authentic language” (134). In “The Monster,” Crane pursues this goal by way of implied contrast; that is, by revealing the inauthenticity which most often characterizes social speech. Paradoxically, Crane’s rhetoric challenges the use of clichés in its very repetition of them, precisely because the emphasis on iteration draws attention to a tendency in society that has become so pervasive and so mechanical that we might fail otherwise even to notice it.

The question as to whether or not Crane simply records society’s iteration or participates in it, then, is misleading, for Crane does more than either of these categories suggests. Rather, by recording and modeling the repercussions of endless iteration, the threat it poses not only to independent thought but to genuine human communication and compassion, Crane makes an ethical point. He exposes the dangers of a conformist language and advocates the courage it would take to find a voice that could challenge it.

Given the tenacious hold mechanized convention has on this society, however, Crane is not optimistic about the chances of others finding such courage. Concluding the story with another deliberately chosen iteration seems to imply that while Trescott has chosen to act against the engine of convention, it presses on ceaselessly. But, significantly, that fact does not render Trescott’s efforts any less valuable or meaningful, and this is why in the end the story of “The Monster” is an ethical one. While the ending of the tale may be bleak, it is not nihilistic. Ultimately the reader is left at least with the consolation that one man—and perhaps one author—did attempt to break with mechanized habit and respond in a genuinely human way. To refuse to do so for the sake of the engine of mere convention would have been truly monstrous.
If Stephen Crane’s belief in the power of the individual voice to challenge deeply ingrained social conventions was tentative, Charles W. Chesnutt’s seemed, at one time in his life, far more assured. Even before beginning his career as a writer, Chesnutt had developed a belief in the role that language could play in effecting positive social change, specifically in the improvement of race relations. Indeed, he saw in literature the power to change the consciousness—and therefore the social and political realities—of America. “It is the province of literature to open the way” to “recognition and equality,” he declared in an 1880 journal entry, “to accustom the public mind to the idea; to lead people out.” He therefore decided he “must write a book,” and committed himself to write for a “purpose, a high holy purpose:”

The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites,—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism—I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people: and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. (Chesnutt, *Journals*, 139)

But Chesnutt’s determined crusade was not, initially, to take a direct course of action. What Chesnutt called the “subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the negro, which is common to most Americans” could not, he decided, “be stormed and taken by assault” (*Journals* 140). Rather,
Chesnutt would need to work “imperceptibly” at “enlarging the boundaries of the sympathies” of his white readership (ibid).

Chesnutt’s first attempts to reach this goal are to be found in his conjure tales, later to be collected in the 1899 volume *The Conjure Woman*. In this work, we are introduced to John, a white Northern narrator who plans to relocate from Ohio to North Carolina, both for the benefit of his wife’s health and for his business prospects in the grape-growing industry. Upon arriving at the dilapidated plantation he wishes to buy, John meets Uncle Julius McAdoo, a former slave, who, upon the various promptings of John and his wife, tells tales of the magical interventions of “conjure” in life on the plantation before the war.

Chesnutt’s conjure tales began appearing in 1887 on the heels of the remarkable success of another avuncular tale teller, Joel Chandler Harris’ “Uncle Remus.” The unprecedented popularity the Remus tales had achieved by the 1880s ensured that this was a genre with which people were not only familiar but eminently comfortable. But given that plantation-dialect fiction had been steeped in such racist ideology, we might question the suitability of this generic vehicle for attempts at battling entrenched racism. And yet, even while using the popularity of the form to gain a readership,1 Chesnutt’s work undermines its fundamental assumptions, seeking to directly counter some of the most widespread—and damaging—myths of his culture. While Remus has “nothing but happy memories of the discipline of slavery” (qtd. in Hemenway 8), Chesnutt’s characters reveal the institution in all of its brutality. As Robert Bone has put it, *The Conjure Woman* is a “devastating parody of Southern pastoral” (75).

But Chesnutt’s tales should be distinguished from their counterparts in the genre, not only in their content—a significant departure which does indeed prove to dispel the myth of the “happy slave”—but also in the very manner in which they are told. Although the framing of the tales is taken directly from Harris, Chesnutt manipulates his frame and framer in importantly different ways. And while Harris was considered a master of dialect, Chesnutt’s tales can be distinguished in the attention he pays not only to Julius’ dialectal speech but to John’s standard English. Indeed, Chesnutt grants John as narrator more attention than Harris ever devoted to the narrator of the Uncle Remus tales. Paradoxically, this greater attention to John’s language results in a text that continually undermines its assumed legitimacy and superiority.

John’s narrative position—as the framer and teller of Julius’ story—seems initially to grant him a position of ascendancy, an implied position of both priority and superiority in the narrative hierarchy. As the framer of the
tales, reiterating Julius’ stories rather than allowing Julius to speak for himself, John seems to claim a paternalistic position of control. Further, John’s speech marks him as intelligent, genteel, and highly educated—a respectable Victorian gentleman and a reliable narrator. His words give voice to the industrial ambitions of the day; indeed, John’s initial description of his new home in the work’s opening pages focuses on its economic assets, the “market house in the public square,” “two or three hotels . . . stores, offices, and all the appurtenances of a county seat and a commercial emporium” (3). At the same time, his speech pays homage to the Enlightenment virtues of reason and rationality, and is characterized by a skeptical utilitarianism.

Julius’ tales, in contrast to the consistently reasoned and reasonable speech of John’s narration, are not only spoken in uneducated Negro dialect but are characterized by the irrational—by transformations, dreams, the supernatural. In contrast with John’s respectable and rational language, Julius’ language is likely to seem at first ignorant and impoverished—a source of consumer entertainment but not a voice of authority capable of challenging John. Indeed, Chesnutt’s initial presentation of Julius in some ways ensures this reading: self-deprecating and respectful, Julius might appear to keep his place in both the social and narrative hierarchies. As Eric Sundquist has observed, Chesnutt himself “skirts dangerous stereotypes” with this characterization (363). But Sundquist sees Julius’ adoption of the obsequious manner of the stereotyped former slave as a deliberate tactic, “to conjure John into a stereotypical interpretation of Julius’ motives” (ibid). If I may further expand on the point, it is by behaving in a stereotypical manner and appropriating the stereotypical speech John expects that Julius unthreateningly gains John’s attention: “Ef you en young miss dere doan’ min’ lis’nin to a ole nigger run on a minute er two w’ile you er restin’,” Julius self-effacingly introduces his first story, “I kin ‘splain how it all happen’” (12). Julius’ task is then to spin tales that will erupt the very stereotypes he has suggested to win his audience; “to lead people on,” as Chesnutt himself had stated years before, “imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling” (qtd. in H. Chesnutt 21).

We could just as readily employ this description for Chesnutt’s own project. In his own version of “conjure,” Chesnutt establishes a normative, unobjectionable narrator in a familiar narrative frame, and presents a stereotypical “darkey” in the mold of a beloved popular figure who does not seem to subvert the power hierarchy. By giving Julius both an expected manner and expected speech, Chesnutt is able, “imperceptibly,” to win over his own audience, his own readership. Luring his audience into the narrative by these familiar linguistic and generic clues, Chesnutt can then attempt the sneak-attack he had
planned in his journal years before, seeking to disrupt their assumptions and trying, as Julius does, to expand their sympathetic understanding of both past and present racial struggle.

The success of this enterprise depends on Chesnutt’s careful arrangement of these disparate voices, disparate languages. As John F. Callahan has it, “the voices of Chesnutt’s narrators . . . contend dynamically on the field of narrative” (40). John’s and Julius’ implied conflict is in fact a conflict of languages, not only between a Northern, educated, proper speech and its Southern, uneducated, dialectical counterpart, but between a rationalized speech closed to new connections and an “open” speech given to a metaphorical understanding of the world. Juxtaposing John’s and Julius’ respective languages ultimately works to challenge the assumed hierarchical arrangement of their voices. While John’s character is established in a position of narrative, lingual, and social authority, the juxtaposition of his language with its foil continually brings his authority into question and demonstrates the limitations of such a language—limitations that posed formidable obstacles in the progress of race relations in his time.

Chesnutt established these contending voices from a unique and perhaps somewhat unexpected personal position. Indeed, Chesnutt’s early journals suggest that his own attitude toward language was a conflicted matter. Richard H. Broadhead contends that Chesnutt’s relation to language was indeed a pivotal point in establishing his identity (12), but it is to the language of the Enlightenment—a language much more closely aligned with John’s speech than with Julius’—to which Broadhead refers. Brodhead discusses Chesnutt’s anomalous position in his community; as an educated black man he felt “estranged from the black community by the superiority of his education.” In a very real sense, it was precisely his “relation to language” that distanced him from his black peers (12). In fact, Chesnutt’s early work as a teacher in the south “was based on the systematic devaluation and even suppression of [the] vernacular” (22); it was founded on the assumption that “his task is both to reeducate others in the proper use of English and to remake their characters” (14).

Chesnutt’s own appreciation of black vernacular and the “conjuring” power it could wield came only slowly and progressively. At the same time, Chesnutt was painfully discovering not only that his speech and education would fail to gain him admittance to “the company of the equally educated and cultivated whites” of his town (Brodhead 25), but, indeed, that it was precisely such language that perpetuated many of the myths that kept him and others like him disenfranchised. While he may have begun his career as a young teacher with “the elevation of the colored people” in mind, his early
career as a writer, as *The Conjure Woman* shows, is aimed more directly at “the elevation of the whites”—an elevation to be accomplished by bringing into question the supposed superiority of the dominant white lingual and social practices of the time.6

While it is true, then, that Chesnutt, much like Twain, sought to reclaim plantation dialect fiction, to pen an anti-pastoral that would counter the idealized view of antebellum plantation life, *The Conjure Woman* also works against an opposing tradition issuing out of the scientific and intellectual communities that was complicit in the racism of the day. Indeed, Chesnutt complicates our understanding of the sources of stereotypes and clichés by going beyond boys’ stories, Sunday school, sentimental romances, and even the collective power of town gossip. *The Conjure Woman* points a finger squarely at the putatively enlightened and elevated realms of science and scholarship. The language of this ideology, a rhetoric of reason, appealed not to the romantic conceptions of the Old South, but to what could in many ways be considered its foil—the scientific rationalism more closely aligned with the North.

The years in which the conjure tales appeared in the *Atlantic* were characterized by a maelstrom of new polemics on the so-called “race problem” or “race question.” What has only retrospectively been titled “scientific racism,” using the statistical methodology of science to arrive at biological arguments intended to prove the inferiority of the black race, had gained both popularity and credibility by this time.7 Cathy Boeckmann contends that “many saw the emerging natural sciences as a likely source for solutions to the so-named [race] problem,” precisely because the social scientists “commented on racial issues confidently while others expressed bewilderment” (16).

The danger of perpetuating racism and limiting the rights and inclusion of African Americans in post-reconstruction America, then, could not only be attributed to such overtly racist tracts produced by the Plantation School. Just as dangerous were articles appearing side by side with Chesnutt’s own work in journals such as *The North American Review*. In the years preceding the publication of Chesnutt’s first conjure tale, the most highly respected and ostensibly intellectual of periodicals were publishing articles such as “Race Progress in the U.S.,” “The African Problem,” “Race Education,” and “Thoughts on the Negro Problem.”8 Penned by professors, medical doctors, scientists, and researchers—esteemed intellectuals of every stripe—these articles share not only similar sentiments but a common language, a factual style characterized by a vocabulary that continuously appeals to rational certainty. Despite the marked bias and specious conclusions that characterize these studies, the language in which they are argued—the language of a dominant educated
class, bolstered with appeals to science and reason—provide them with what Boeckmann calls “the authority of the plain language of facts” (17).

Indeed, this language of facts was used strategically as part of a racist program; by juxtaposing this language of rationality with the “gross superstition” that supposedly characterized black culture and speech, writers were able to suggest the inferiority of the race rhetorically as well as substantively. Professor James Bryce, for example, claimed reason for his side of the debate and argued that blacks were dangerous precisely because of their irrationality, their ostensibly tendency to be “swayed by passion rather than reason.” Bryce appealed directly to science for proof that “social and moral advancement is an extremely slow process,” a process that had thus far left those of African descent behind, and used such modifiers as “undeniable” to describe his supposedly scientific claims. E.W. Gilliam argued in 1884 not only that the “social fusion” of blacks and whites was “forbidden by natural laws,” but that “white repugnance” to blacks “has a scientific and permanent basis.” And the influential 1892 article, “The Race Problem in the South,” by biologist Joseph LeConte, similarly argued that “race prejudice or race repulsion . . . is itself not a wholly irrational feeling. It is probably an instinct necessary to preserve the blood purity of the higher race” (qtd. in Boeckmann 14). Here LeConte directly seeks to reclaim rationality for the racist side of the debate (white repulsion toward blacks, he argues, is not irrational), but he also uses the rhetoric of biological science, a field ostensibly ruled by reason, to bolster his claim.

In 1896, the same year as Plessy v. Ferguson and only three years before Chesnutt’s stories would be published as the collection *The Conjure Woman*, German writer Frederick Hoffman compiled his findings in the compendious *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro.* Hoffman’s breathtakingly racist claims are cloaked, obscured, and, more frighteningly, affirmed by the educated scientific rhetoric in which they are inscribed. We need not read further than the introduction for examples of this phenomenon. On the first page of the preface Hoffman declares that he “was confronted with the absence of any extensive collection of data free from the taint of prejudice or sentimentality” and claims that “being of foreign birth . . . [he] was fortunately free from a personal bias which might have made an impartial treatment of the subject difficult” (v). And yet by the end of the preface Hoffman makes this astonishing declaration about the value of his work:

If the work accomplishes its purpose and leads to a more searching investigation into the underlying causes of race progress and regression; if it leads to more scientific attention to the relations between
the superior and inferior races . . . it will not have been written in vain. (viii)

What follows is a litany of comparative evaluations of the disease and mortality rates of the white and negro populations. Hoffman writes in the language of rational certainty, declaring with tiresome frequency the indisputability of his “facts” in such statements as these: “for it is a fact which can and will be demonstrated by indisputable evidence” and “These conclusions [are] based, not on chance observation or opinion but on registration data.” Hoffman uses such language to argue the indisputable “certainty” of such claims as the inability of blacks to live in cold temperatures and the smaller size of the negro lung. Hoffman also repeatedly appeals to the “foremost medical authorities of the time,” and maintains “this consensus of northern and southern authorities is fully supported by all the available data,” to further the likelihood that his writings will be read as fact (38).

Hoffman’s language blinds him not only to the contradictions of his beliefs but the assumptions he has made before even beginning his putatively scientific, unbiased inquiry. He has already assumed that there are inferior and superior races—the most fundamental and formidable bias he could have. But Hoffman goes further. Not only does he take for granted the inferiority of the black race, he posits a theory that the retrogression of that supposedly frail and inferior race will bring ruin on the superior white race morally, socially, and, more pointedly, economically: “Race deterioration once in progress is very difficult to check, and races once on the downward grade, thus far at least in human history, have invariably become useless if not dangerous factors in the social as well as political economy of nations” (ibid). Gilliam’s claim, meanwhile, that “the whites, and not least the Southern whites, have good wishes for the negro” because “he has been a necessary and efficient laborer, and has added immensely to the country’s wealth,” summarizes this essentially market-based assessment of race relations.

These writers therefore demonstrate a particular breed of scientific racism, the ultimate point of which, if we follow the train of argument to its inevitable conclusion, is aimed at maintaining economic power. There is nothing disinterested, then, in Hoffman’s “scientific” claims. His brand of reason binds science with economic interest, or, more precisely put, uses the language of science to both further and conceal an economic agenda.

The most shocking thing about Hoffman’s work and the work of these other like-minded scientists, however, is not their outrageous claims, but rather the language which, in its elevated rhetoric and continual appeal to the authorities of enlightened society, masks the virulent racism implicit in
them. This insidious brand of racism is all the more dangerous because the information it relays would be regarded not as subjective bias but as objective information, precisely the way in which the rhetoric of science is typically received.

One way of attacking such a resistant cultural ideology would be to seek to disprove it using logic itself; in other words, to expose what is indeed inherently illogical subsumed within the language of what seems logical, to attack directly the “scientific” views on issues such as the size of the negro lung or the race’s moral and intellectual evolution. But there is another means for countering this cultural logic, an approach consistent with Chesnutt’s strategic decision to storm the “garrison” of racism by way of stealth: to show that society’s elevation of logic and rationality, of market-based sense and utilitarian ethos, as the exclusive means of understanding the world is itself flawed; that the relentlessly pragmatic mind misses crucial truths only discernible through a different use and understanding of language, a new ethics of telling and listening. Chesnutt’s early work in the conjure tales seems to suggest that only a mind open to this new ethics of language could move beyond the popularized racism of the day, that a new conception of race and race relations would depend on a use of language divorced from claustrophobic nineteenth-century standards and open to the broadening possibilities of metaphor and imagination.

The Conjure Woman, then, can be seen not only as a deflationary corrective aimed at the myths of romantic plantation fiction, but also at the anti-romantic “scientific” myths that were even more stubbornly entrenched in the public consciousness, cloaked as they were in the esteemed values of industry, utility, and reason. Chesnutt’s chosen narrator, who shares with these scientific racists an educated speech, who establishes from the first “coolness of judgment” (4) as a virtue and appeals continually to reason, and who, not coincidentally, displays a distinct utilitarianism for the purpose of economic gain, provides an ideal vehicle for demonstrating the limitations and dangers of such a language. John’s language, like Hoffman’s, is misleading. Its seeming sophistication is belied by its epistemological limitations. Indeed, John’s epistemological narrowness can be attributed to his rigidly controlled rhetoric, his elevation of an exclusive means of understanding and voicing the world. Julius’ counter-language, by contrast, opens up a way of thinking about the world, of voicing the world, that could fundamentally change the ways in which race and race relations are conceived.

The first time John and Julius speak in “The Goophered Grapevine,” it is made obvious that John is a foreigner, a stranger not only to the location of the plantation but also to its speech. From the first he cannot understand
Julius’ language. When Julius states that “dis yer ole vimya’d is goophered,” John’s reaction is telling: “Is what?” he asks, admitting that he was not “grasping the meaning of this unfamiliar word” (11). Julius repeats the “unfamiliar word,” but also immediately modifies it: “is goophered—conj’ed, bewitch” (ibid). Julius’ iteration, then, unlike John’s, is from the first characterized by flexibility and variations. He gives his reader options by stating in succession three synonyms, displaying lingual flexibility and granting his listeners a range of interpretive options. Julius makes every attempt to initiate John into this alternative language, but John’s stubborn and arrogant literalism, based on the supposed superiority of the rational view and his social and economic dominance, precludes any change in his own language or viewpoint.

Chesnutt first takes aim at the totalizing economic interest that stifles John’s receptivity to and understanding of this new language in “The Gophered Grapevine.” In this first tale, Julius tells the story of Mars Dugal, who pays a conjure woman to “goopher” his plantation to prevent the slaves from eating his grapes and reducing his profit. When a new slave, Henry, is goophered before the other slaves can warn him, Aunt Peggy is able to save him only by literalizing a connection between him and the grapevines: when the grape vines flourish in the spring, Henry becomes robust and virile; when they wither in winter, he, too, loses his vitality.

The emphasis on man’s correspondence with and dependence on nature, so evident in this and the other conjure tales to follow it, is inherited from African traditions, but it operates in Chesnutt’s work to establish the dichotomy between the world of the conjurers, in which nature is a collaborative force to be respected, and the market world which, by seeing value only in monetary terms, is willing to destroy both man (in slavery) and nature (in industrial development). Mars McAdoo’s reaction to the goophered Henry is immediately driven by profit-motive: “w’en he see how Henry git oung in de spring and ole in de fall, he ‘lowed ter hisse’f ez how he could make mo’ money out’n Henry dan by wukkin’ him in de cotton-fiel” (24)—by selling him at high cost in the spring and buying him back for a pittance each fall. Not content even with the outrageous profit he makes from this scheme each year, Mars Dugal hires a Yankee interloper, who, in his efforts to make the plantation even more productive (or to appear, as part of his con, his own money-making scheme, to work towards productivity) kills the grapevines and Henry. The cycle of economically-fueled destruction in this tale is complete, as man and land are both destroyed by dual versions of greed: southern slave-holding and northern-based industrial interference.

Julius’ tale clearly impugns the economic greed of these characters. But, by way of analogy, it also reflects on John, not only in his parallels with the
interloping Yankee, but in the ways in which his own totalizing economic interest aligns him with Mars Dugal himself. From the first it is evident that John’s mind and language focus almost exclusively on “transact[ing] business.” John’s initial description of the assets of North Carolina, that “labor was cheap, and land could be bought for a mere song” (2–3), reveals much about his priorities and his tendency to reduce the world about him to simply a means of profit. The fact that John ends his re-telling of Julius’ first tale by reminding us that “our income from grapes packed and shipped to the Northern markets is quite considerable” (34) and boasting that his vineyard is “often referred to by the local press as a striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries” (ibid), furthers this impression.

But, more disturbingly, John shows a marked tendency to speak of Julius in these same utilitarian terms. His assessment of Julius’ value is based solely on Julius’ usefulness (indeed, “useful” is a word that appears with conspicuous regularity in John’s lexicon): he “had a thorough knowledge of the neighborhood, was familiar with the roads and watercourses, knew the qualities of the various soils and what they would produce” (64). John’s declaration that Julius is “a marvelous hand in the management of dogs and horses, with whose mental processes he manifested a greater familiarity” underscores his utilitarian sensibility (not to mention covert racism) and the ways in which it will limit and impair his interactions with Julius and his tales (64).

Because the catalyst for many of the tales is a new scheme John proposes in each chapter’s frame narrative to make more money, John’s interchange in language is not fueled by a receptive willingness to listen or learn, but rather by his economic concerns. “The Goophered Grapevine” is precipitated by John’s intention to buy the plantation; “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt” is told in response to John’s desire to clear the land by the swamp (and his subsequent question as to how much such an enterprise would cost); in “Po’ Sandy” John intends to “save expense” by using the wood from the old schoolhouse to build his wife’s new kitchen. This last example is perhaps the most telling. Whereas Julius recollects the damage done during slavery by the mill with a “lugubrious” countenance, John finds the “loud whir” of the “machinery of the mill” a “rhythmic cadence” that was “not unpleasing” (39)—a metaphor for the ways in which John’s totalizing interest in business and industry prevents him from hearing the suffering around him, the suffering encoded in Julius’ symbolic tales.

Indeed, it prevents John from understanding even the motives behind Julius’ storytelling. Projecting his own motivations onto Julius, John insists on interpreting Julius’ motives on the basis of pecuniary interest alone.12 When
John discovers Julius’ cabin at the conclusion of “The Goophered Grapevine” he concludes that Julius “derived a respectable revenue from the product of the neglected grapevines, and states that “This, doubtless, accounted for his advice to me not to buy the vineyard” (35). John continues to reduce Julius’ interest in the land by smugly assuming that “the wages [he] paid him for his service as a coachman . . . were more than an equivalent for anything lost by the sale of the vineyard” (ibid). The modifier “doubtless” reveals not only the narrowness of John’s interpretations but his arrogant confidence in them. The language of rational certainty prevents him from conceiving of possible alternatives.

Annie’s question at the conclusion of the tale, “Is that story true?” points to the limiting emphasis on reason and rationality that works in conjunction with John’s totalizing economic interest to reduce and dismiss the deeper value of Julius’ tales. “Truth” is to be understood in a literal and empirical sense only. Annie, as we shall see, later demonstrates an ability to broaden her perspective, to interpret truth in ways beyond this shallow empiricism. But John’s hermeneutical capabilities, dominated and restricted by an overly literal language, are unable to move beyond his prescribed allegiance to reason.

From this first story, John has already begun to dismiss Julius’ tales as mere fancy. They issue, John tells us, from Julius’ “memory—or imagination”—a telling revision indicative of John’s belief that Julius has invented these tales. Invention, in John’s mind, as the antithesis to reason and evidence, is instantly discredited, not to be taken seriously. Though he is content to be entertained by Julius’ tales, John continually impugns what the scientific racists would have called the “gross superstition” that characterize them. Indeed, John labels the stories “ridiculous nonsense” on more than one occasion, and it is this lingual label that perpetuates his attitude. When John terms one of Julius’ stories a “very ingenious fairy tale” (159), it is at best a back-handed compliment that only poorly camouflages the true condescension of the remark. “Fairy tales,” after all, are for children. John impugns Julius’ tales, then, not only as nonsense, but childish nonsense, precisely at a time when a cornerstone of racist ideology was to depict blacks as childlike as justification for denying them full and equal civil rights. John’s characterization of Julius’ speech also pits Julius’ tales directly against the rational paradigm John has established with his language, the rational paradigm respected and appealed to by nineteenth-century standards. It is therefore a means of dismissing everything Julius has conveyed.

Such an attitude is manifest when John seeks to place Julius’ lucky rabbit’s foot in historical context at the beginning of “Sis Becky’s Pickaninny:” “This was at a time before the curious superstition had attained its present jocular popularity among white people, and while I had heard of it before,
it had not yet outgrown the charm of novelty” (134). John’s inflated speech here is both paternalistic and condescending: at worst, he concludes, Julius’ rabbit foot represents a puerile superstition; at best, it is a quaint novelty. Julius earnestly maintains that the foot is his lucky charm, an assertion which John and Annie label “absurd” and “ridiculous” (135). But it is John’s next statement to Julius that reveals not only the depth of his bigotry but the language that both masks and justifies it, language which shares a vocabulary and emphasis with the arguments of the scientific racists of the day:

Your people will never rise in the world until they throw off these child-
ish superstitions and learn to live by the light of reason and common
sense. How absurd to imagine that the fore-foot of a poor dead rabbit,
with which he timorously felt his way along through a life surrounded
by snares and pitfalls, beset by enemies on every hand, can promote
happiness or success, or ward off misfortune! (135)

John’s racism is not only authorized by his putative devotion to “reason and
common sense,” but it is also masked by that very language. Speaking both in the language of the rational and in defense of it, John’s judgments seem above reproach. Like those represented in articles of scientific racism, John’s assumptions about value, about credibility, and about race, will not be read as subjective, but instead will bear the weight of fact.

Julius does not directly argue against John’s characterization of his
beliefs as absurd superstition. But his rhetorically adept response serves to
demonstrate the limitations and inadequacies of John’s relentlessly literal-
minded emphasis on “the light of reason and common sense.” When John and Annie assert Julius’ belief to be ridiculous, Julius deliberately misun-
derstands their point. Rather than responding to the logic of the argument, Julius seizes on an ancillary but, taken literally, perfectly valid point—that it is the fore-foot that would make the practice absurd: “Dat’s w’at I tells de nig-
gers roun’ heah . . . De fo’foot ain’ got no power. It has to be the hin’foot,
suh” (135). As if that is not enough to exasperate John, Julius continues to heap upon his language increasingly outrageous claims: “de lef’ hin’ foot we a grabeya’d rabbit, killt by a cross-eyed nigger on a da’k night in de full er de moon” (ibid).

When John vents his sarcasm, stating “They must be very rare and
valuable,” Julius again claims the rhetorical upper hand by pretending not to
understand the irony and responding to John as literally as possible, agree-
ing that “dey is kinder ska’ce, suh” and then continuing, “ain’ no ‘mount of
money could buy mine, suh. I mought len’ it ter anybody I sot sto’ by, but
I would n’ sell it, no indeed, suh, I would n’” (135–6). Not only does this declaration foreshadow a central moral point in the tale he will tell (Becky, valued, like Henry before her, only in monetary terms as a commodity, is traded for a prized race horse), but it cleverly reflects on John’s system of ethics. Julius’ frustratingly literal response to John’s ironic comments mocks John’s own typically (and equally frustrating) literal responses to Julius’ symbolic tales. And just as Julius suggested an analogous connection between Mars Dugal and John, here he draws an implicit connection between Kunnel Pen’leton and John, once again basing the analogy in their shared ethics of profit. Although we can never be certain of Julius’ own motivations, his insistence that he would only share his prized rabbit’s foot (an act motivated by affection), rather than sell it (an act motivated solely by greed), suggests that he may be above the strictly mercenary intentions John assumes. Julius’ language, then, which appears at first unsophisticated and simplistic, actually cuts more than one way. Syntactically simpler, putatively inferior in terms of dialect, Julius’ language actually claims rhetorical superiority in these battles with John.

John, of course, is never able to realize this. Not only is he unable to appreciate the symbolic resonance of the rabbit’s foot, he is equally unable to perceive the ways in which Julius’ tales reflect both the horror of slavery and the dangers of his own ethical system. His unaltering belief in the profit motive causes him to project economic interest onto Julius, while his rigidly literal and rationalized language prevents him from making the analogous connections necessary to understand Julius’ criticism of such motives.

John’s language is restricted to an empirical and therefore highly literal way of reading the world. But both Julius’ language, and the structure of his tales, relies on analogous connections. John tellingly objects to Julius contention that he “ain’ had no bad luck sence [he] had” the rabbit’s foot, by exclaiming “But that doesn’t prove anything!” (136). Julius maintains that “you doan hafter prove ‘bout de rabbit foot!”—a contention John would never accept. He therefore offers the tale of Sis Becky’s Pickaninny as a means of proof. But Julius’ tales do not operate in the ways that John’s empiricism requires. The tale does offer not only an explanation but a crucial moral lesson, but John is unable to discern either because he is incapable of hearing Julius’ language in the symbolic and metaphorical ways in which it is intended. It is an inadequacy that bears profound ramifications. A mind that misses analogous connections is a mind incapable of empathy, and a language that does not allow for metaphorical connections is a language incapable of moving beyond strict and limiting conventions.
At the beginning of this tale, John tells us that he has “implicit confidence” in the family doctor—not surprising, because the language of medicine and science fall within the rational bounds to which he gives credence. But John is completely unable to surmise why his wife’s health might “take a turn for the worse,” demonstrating the limits of his capacity for sympathy or identification with another human being, even the one closest to him. To John, Annie’s “unsettled melancholy” is utterly mysterious, because he is unable to enter into her experience. Though John is able to admit (with very limited insight) that the scenery surrounding their new home is “somewhat monotonous,” he is not able to imagine that his wife’s life may also be monotonous because he is unable to extrapolate from his empirical experience to make analogous connections.

And yet Julius, practiced in his storyteller’s art at imaginative connections, immediately perceives Annie’s heartache. He then tells a tale that demonstrates not only the capacity for but the healing power of those very connections. “Sis Becky’s Pickaninny” details the tragic story of Becky, who, having first lost her husband when the slaves on the neighboring plantation were sold, then suffers separation from her young son Mose when her ostensibly “kin’ hea’ted” master, Kunnel Pen’leton, decides to indulge his penchant for the races by seeking ownership of a prized race horse. Although he prefers not to separate slave mothers from their young children, Pennelton’s desire to own the horse outweighs his ethical commitment to maintaining familial bonds, and he agrees to trade Becky for the horse. When the horse’s owner, who “doan wanter be both’rin wid no nigger babies,” refuses to take Becky’s child in the bargain, Becky and Mose are irrevocably parted. Aunt Nancy then seeks the help of Aunt Peggy, the conjure woman, who first intervenes by transforming Mose into a hummingbird who flies to his mother’s new plantation for a symbolic but poignant reunion:

He seed his mammy wukkin’ roun’ de ya’d, en he could tell fum lookin’ at her dat she wuz trouble’ in her min’ ‘bout sump’n, en feelin’ kin’er po’ly. Sis Becky heared sump’n hummin’ roun’ en roun’ her, sweet en low. Fus’ she ‘lowed it wuz a hummin’bird; Den she thought it sounded lack her little Mose croonin’ on her breas’ way back yander on de ole plantation. En she des ‘magine’ it wuz her little Mose, en it made her feel bettah, en she went on ‘bout her work pearter ’n she’d done sence she’d be’n down here. (147)

Becky’s thought processes here reveal the sort of lateral, imaginative movement which the tales call for, the very movement of which John proves incapable.
Becky first identifies the sound she hears in rational and natural terms as a hummingbird. But the sound is evocative for her; it exists on more than one plane and she is able to connect it to another sound in memory. Significantly, she does this by way of a literary trope, by way of simile: “den she thought it sounded lack her little Moses croonin.” Not inhibited by rational prohibitions that would declare such a thought “nonsense,” Becky allows herself the imaginative play her figurative language has made possible, and “magine’ it was her little Mose.”

Becky’s imaginative connection is taken one step further, into a dream world: “she dremp all dat night dat she wus holdin’her pickaninny in her arms, en kissin’ him, en nussin’ him, des lack she useter do back on de ole plantation whar he wuz bawn” (147–8). That which transpires in the dreamworld has ramifications in the waking world; the boundaries between these states are permeable. Therefore when Beckyimaginatively spends time with her baby in her dream, her spirits improve for days; when she dreams he has died, she “wuz moanin’ and groanin’ all day” (155). The two worlds are so intertwined in conjure as to render the distinction negligible. These tales, then, which take seriously the implications of such rationally untenable constructs as dreams, present a more complete version of human experience. They take into consideration not only the fully conscious and deliberate rational mind, but the subconscious mind and the powerful forces harnessed therein. In so doing they advocate an alternative language for conceiving of reality; the symbolic language of dreams.

The conjure woman, understanding how to reach a human being on this non-rational level, again conjures Mose, this time into a mocking bird which can comfort his grieving mother by singing:

So little Mose sot on a tree in de ya’d en sung, en sung, en sung, des fit-tin’ ter split his th’oat. Fus’ Sis’ Becky did n’ notice ‘im much, but dis mawkin’- bird kep’ stayin’ around de house all day, en bimeby Sis’ Becky des ‘magine’ dat mawkin’-bird wuz her little Mose crowin’ and crowin’, des lack he useter do we’n his mammy would come home at night fum de cotton-fiel.’ (149)

And again, “Sis’ Becky felt mo’ better ‘n she had sence se had heard dat hummin’bird a week er so pas.’ En dat night she dremp ‘bout ole times ag’in, des lack she did befo” (ibid). This imaginative process, a form of conjure within her own mind and language, is healing for Becky, just as Julius’ imaginative conjure tales prove to be healing for Annie. Indeed, it is precisely when Annie is able to make a metaphorical leap, to move from
her own experience into sympathetic identification with Becky, that she begins to heal.

All of these incidents could readily be dismissed as mere figments of imagination. The extent to which Julius’ rabbit foot helps to cure Annie of her depression could likewise be attributed to the placebo effect. But whether or not they are true in John’s rational sense they have undeniable resonance emotionally and spiritually. Annie is able to heal because she is able to make metaphorical connections that empower her sympathy; because she is able to read both the gift of Julius’ rabbit’s foot—and of the new language of his tales—symbolically.

When John, in his typical rational, skeptical form, dismisses Julius’ tale, Annie reacts to his reduction with anger, and defends Julius’ tale by proclaiming “the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did” (159). Annie is able to look beyond the “ornamental details” to get to what is “essential” (ibid). She has altered not only her viewpoint but her language, or, more accurately, has altered her viewpoint because she is able to change her language. Annie has redefined and reconceptualized “truth,” distinguishing it from her use of the term in “The Goophered Grapevine.” Whether the story is considered true now depends not on literal veracity but on the tale being “true to nature,” revelatory of some essential meaning conveyed in whatever symbols will speak to the heart. While John’s incredulity hinges on the literal unbelievability of supernatural elements of the story, Annie understands that the substantive moral reveals the inhuman cruelty of separating mothers from their children, a tragedy that “Might have happened, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war” (159). Pursuing his academic point that Julius’ story did not prove what it ostensibly set out to prove, John again demonstrates that he does not possess the imagination required to accurately conceive of those horrid days, or to see the horror that continues to exist around him.

John’s language in fact limits and stifles such imagination. Though he nominally agrees with Annie’s declaration that “there is no worse sin and no more disgraceful thing than cruelty,” he does not appear to understand the notion of cruelty on any more than an intellectual or genteel level. His language operates as a sort of filter that keeps him distanced from the “essential” truths to which Annie obliquely refers, and hinders him from feeling the true impact of cruelty. The ways in which he should object to it as a matter of heart, and not of custom, are lost on John. The most he is able to concede is that some of the stories are “quite interesting,” an utterly detached and intellectualized judgment.

The extent to which John’s rationalized language distances him from suffering is made evident in the language he employs in describing Julius’
history in “Mars Jeems’ Nightmare,” language that is unremittingly cold and distanced:

He had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this relation was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master’s death and the dispersion of the family, he had been unable to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime, but had attached himself to the old plantation, of which he seemed to consider himself an appurtenance. We found him useful in ways and entertaining in others, and my wife and I took quite a fancy to him. (65)

Any suffering this might have entailed is lost in a series of embedded clauses, in an academic lexicon, and in a rational description that relies heavily on assumptions about the race, not sympathetic identification with Julius himself. This purely rational speech empties the description of emotion. Just as the Plantation School’s romantic conceptions of slavery falsified emotion as a way of distorting the truth and maintaining distance from brutal realities, the overly rationalized view, despite its pretensions to objective truth, likewise distances and obscures to create a sanitized version of reality emptied of emotion and suffering. Because it denies lateral movement and connections, such a view effectively nullifies the possibility of change, of developing the metaphors and analogies necessary to sympathize with suffering. In other words, without a language that allows for metaphorical connections between oneself and an other, sympathetic connection is impossible, and without sympathetic connection a reduction of subjects to objects is inevitable.

John’s summative remarks—that he found Julius “useful in ways and entertaining in others,” not only objectify Julius in this way but do so in the available clichés of the time. They exist as a sort of summation of the only two ways African Americans were thought to be valuable: for their use value, effective “hands” in various service capacities, and for their entertainment value, epitomized in minstrelsy. John sees Julius’ stories as entertainment, as distraction rather than edification. “We might as well put in time listening to Julius as in any other way,” John states as he waits for work cleaning the spring to be completed (70).

But John needs these tales more than he knows. While he routinely uses Julius’ tales to allay the boredom of his and his wife’s lives, John does not recognize either the pervasiveness of this boredom (their vapid lifestyle is in fact a recurrent theme in *The Conjure Woman*) or its causes. In “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” John actually admits that they were “apt to find it a little dull” (103); Annie also declares circumstances “awfully dull” in “The Gray
Wolf’s Haunt.” While this might be attributed to their nineteenth-century genteel lifestyle, it can also be traced to their limiting language, a language which allows neither for imaginative free play nor identification with others, an identification that could bring them into community. In “The Gray Wolf’s Haunt,” we clearly see language’s culpability, when John agrees to read to Annie from the book he has been perusing to assuage her boredom and melancholy. The book, a treatise of philosophy and just the kind of tract we would expect the hyper-rational John to choose, is characterized by language so rarified and abstract as to be rejected as “nonsense” by Annie. Importantly, “nonsense” is precisely what Julius’ supernatural tales have often been termed throughout the narrative. Here Chesnutt turns the lingual tables by implying that it is the speech of rational philosophy, and not Julius’ magical and metaphorical tales, which can rightly be understood as “nonsense,” especially insofar as it precludes sympathetic connection to others. Such “nonsense,” as we have seen, bears dangerous repercussions. There is something impoverishing, even depressing, in its limitations, as Annie’s own condition suggests. Narrow to the point of suffocation, there is a quality of claustrophobia to the frame narratives until Julius’ counter-language opens the narrative in such a way that dynamic movement again seems possible.

This is a significant point in Chesnutt’s chess game of contending narrative forces. Like Julius, Chesnutt embeds lessons in his metaphorical tales, lessons he hopes will work on his readership “unconsciously” to change their language and attitudes. Through allegory, Chesnutt implies what needs to occur socially and politically: to reclaim political dialogue from the narrow confines of clichés both romantic and scientific, to cast away the “nonsense” that protects and obscures entrenched racism and open metaphorical understandings that could allow for sympathetic communication and genuine dialogue. Relief from the language that suffocates both individual and national vitality comes not from seeking others for amusement and entertainment, but by broadening one’s language to be able to sympathize with others, to make imaginative connections, to liberate oneself and one’s community from inhibiting and confining stereotypes and limitations, to move beyond the rationalized conventions of the past.

The Conjure Woman therefore provides stories about connections that encourage readers to recognize and forge connections. But Chesnutt clearly understood that if his white readership were to see themselves in the black characters he created, they would have to connect beyond their stereotypical view of the race. The tales of The Conjure Woman therefore continually attempt to humanize African Americans beyond these clichés, to show them in their full dimensionality, revealing that blacks no less than whites had real
lives, real sorrows—indeed, both lasting sorrows and lasting fidelity. The stories show that African Americans experience the full range of human emotion, from generosity to vindictiveness. In his portrayal of Uncle Jube and his diabolical scheme of revenge in “The Grey Wolf’s Ha’nt,” Chesnutt also avoids falling into the trap of sentimentality, refusing to romanticize or idealize African Americans. They, too, the tale reveals, are capable of cruelty. On the other hand, many of the tales emphasize the power of love-bonds within the slave community, between husbands and wives, parents and children. But the conclusion drawn when the conjure man’s son is killed, “bein’ ez it wuz a free nigger . . . de wa’n’t no w’ite folks ‘speshly int’rusted,” suggests a correspondence with America’s attitudes in the post-reconstruction era that is all too clear.

Chesnutt continues the allegory of his contemporary moment in “Mars Jeems’ Nightmare.” When Julius seeks employment for his grandson, John is unimpressed, perceiving Tom to be “very trifling,” and becoming “much annoyed by his laziness, his carelessness, and his apparent lack of any sense of responsibility” (66). Here John’s language again aligns itself with the dominant racist views of the day. And when he declares that he had “hardened his heart” against Tom, refusing to give him another chance at employment, John again demonstrates the stubborn literalism of thought and language that precludes sympathetic understanding and inhibits positive changes in race relations. Though he is not a cruel or malicious man, John’s heart is hardened, cut off by his narrow language from his own capacity for sympathy. John’s reaction catalyzes the tale Julius’ then spins about a severe slave master of hardened-heart, who, through the power of the conjure woman’s goopher, is transformed into a slave. Made to endure the suffering and humiliation at the hands of the sadistic overseer, Old Nick, in his own employ, Mars Jeems learns how to identify and sympathize with his slaves’ plight.

When Old Nick asks the “new nigger,” really Mars Jeems goophered to look like a slave, “W’at’s yo’ name, Sambo?” Mars Jeems balks, replying “My name ain’ Sambo” (81). But neither is “Sambo,” an aggregate of popularized racist stereotypes by Chesnutt’s time, likely to be a real black man’s name. In this scene, Mars Jeems experiences what many African Americans experienced long after slavery: an obliteration of their individuality and individual rights within a language that has codified them under a stereotypical label. The story suggests that this devastating experience “had made a noo man of ‘im enti’ely” (98). But Mars Jeems’ transformation is incomplete. Julius’s tale invites John to complete it by extending not only kindness but opportunity and equality to the “new negro,” Tom—a challenge that he not only fails but completely fails to notice. Instead John resorts back to language
that reduces Julius’ entire tale to inconsequential child’s play when he smugly interrupts “And they lived happy ever after” (99). Appropriating once again the language of fairy tales, John implicitly affirms his own normative, rationalized language, the very same language that will keep his society trapped in rigid and outdated conceptions of race and render progress for young African Americans like Tom virtually impossible.

Indeed, when John confesses that he “did not share [his] wife’s rose-colored hopes in regard to Tom,” (102) the implication is that by extension there are no rose-colored hopes of liberating young African Americans like Tom from the standard clichés and the rhetoric of reason that both obscures and justifies them. It is not benevolence that persuades John to allow Tom to stay on; rather, his motive is that he “did not wish the servants to think there was any conflict of authority in the household” (102). But, Chesnutt implies, conflict of authority in a country painfully divided over “the race question” was exactly what was at stake. John’s desire to maintain authority, and to ensure that those he views in subservient roles recognize that authority, is representative of the power that millions like him wished to retain in Chesnutt’s contemporary moment.

Ultimately, John learns nothing from “Mars Jeems Nightmare.” The story is about the abuse of power, and yet John ends the tale by displaying his obsession with maintaining his own power and authority. Though he dismisses the motive for the story (ironically, John’s complaint is that the moral is too obvious), John refuses to validate Julius’ moral point that “w’ite folks w’at is so ha’d en stric,’ en doan make no ‘lowance fer po’ ign’ant niggers w’at ain’ had no chanst ter l’arn, is l’ible ter hab bad dreams” (100). If the nation could learn to be “kin’ en good ter po’ people” it would be “sho’ ter prosper en git l’ong in de worl’”(ibid), but without such understanding, it would be doomed to repeat its “bad dreams,” the ongoing nightmare of racial division.

_The Conjure Woman_ seems to suggest that Chesnutt’s call for a metaphorical language might heal the country of its nightmare. Indeed, Chesnutt, perhaps demonstrating a personally enlarged world view since his early days teaching, seems to offer a supple literary intellect, as contrasted with the scientific and business intelligences which seemed to claim dominance during his time, as the model for the new democratic mind. That is, the mind that is adept at understanding symbolism, interpreting metaphors, and reading in a sensitive, nuanced way; a mind which will allow sympathetic response to imaginative experience, is most likely to forge a path beyond the tacitly understood conventions of society upon which racism is based.

But given the trajectory of Chesnutt’s literary career, we must question the degree to which he himself lost faith in the power of metaphor to effect
the changes he championed in race relations. After *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt abandoned his subtle strategy in favor of the more direct, more didactic, more overtly political writing to be found in novels such as *The Marrow of Tradition*. Perhaps more troubling, Chesnutt participated in the types of lingual interchanges he brings into question in *The Conjure Woman*. In his 1900 series of articles for the *Boston Evening Transcript*, for example, Chesnutt himself appealed to the language of science, arguing that “scientific research has swept away many hoary anthropological fallacies. It has been demonstrated that the size of the head has little to do with the civilization or average intelligence of the race” (qtd. in Boeckmann 155). No longer would he battle scientific racism with metaphor and imagination; he would decide instead to meet the rigid language of nineteenth-century rationalism on its own terms.

Perhaps Chesnutt turned back toward the rational speech of his own education because that is what he was most comfortable with after all. Or perhaps the decision was a sign of despair in the language he had hoped for or in the society he observed, a society whose racism had become so entrenched and mechanical in a certain type of privileged speech as to seem to make dynamic movement seem impossible. Even *The Conjure Woman* itself registers this suspicion: John never shows signs of improvement or change; both his attitudes, and the language in which they are inscribed, remain constant from beginning to end. And Annie, despite her greater sympathetic capacity, is still limited to a sort of domestic language and understanding not great enough to brook convention. As Paul Petrie has perceptively argued, Annie’s sympathy is limited to the stories that connect with her own experience, while tales that ask her to make too large of an imaginative leap, stories that involve the black community exclusively such as “The Conjurer’s Revenge,” leave her unsatisfied and unmoved.14

Contemporary readers now have the opportunity to read these tales with all their subversive intent, but Chesnutt’s contemporaries, conditioned in a language which would obscure—even in its appeal to the light of reason—their own deeply ingrained biases, might never have been able to see in the work John’s limitations, and therefore their own. Metaphor only works as metaphor when one is receptive, when one can be conjured. But for Charles Chesnutt, such a conjuring in America was to remain where he left it in his magical tales—deep within the province of dreams.
Chapter Four

“On the Brink of Eloquence:” Circulation, Silence, and “The Fitting Word” in *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*

Charles W. Chesnutt’s ultimate destination of uncertainty about the power of his own use of language—and about the potential of finding or forming a new language capable of breaking the destructive, iterative, and closed patterns of the past—was one he shared not only with Mark Twain and Stephen Crane, but also with Edith Wharton. Each of these authors made ardent attempts to find and present such a language of authenticity, attempts that were often belied by a despairing resignation about the impossibility of ever doing so. Wharton’s work, in particular, is often consumed with the failures of language to break with mere iteration and to enable genuine communication. *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome* seem at first to represent polar extremes in this exploration: in the respective worlds of bustling New York and sleepy New England, Wharton traces opposing uses and misuses of language that equally prevent the authentic and sympathetic communication she seeks. While *The House of Mirth* is characterized by the endless circulation of language in a space galvanized by modernity, *Ethan Frome* is marked by silence. Yet failures of communication lie at the heart of both novels. Neither the manic machine of speech in *The House of Mirth* nor the lingual impotence of *Ethan Frome* is capable of fulfilling its ethical obligations—to move from the brink of eloquence into authentic communication—and the result in each case is tragedy.

Although *The House of Mirth* is most often associated with an old-world (and old-money) social code, the novel immediately roots itself in a newly modernized world. Opening, significantly, with Lily pictured in
Grand Central Station between trains, a trope of limitless circulation that will feature prominently in the novel, *The House of Mirth* proffers a world that is defined not only in terms of technological innovation but also ceaseless motion. Life in *The House of Mirth* “whizze[s] on with a deafening rattle and roar;” indeed, it registers the “rattle” of everything from the production of newspapers, magazines, and photography to electric light and motion picture cameras. Though its “machinery is . . . carefully concealed” (HM 319),¹ this world is nonetheless what Stephen Crane would have termed “an engine.” But it is not only the content of *The House of Mirth* that reflects this trend. Stylistically, many critics have termed the seemingly detached and objective voice of the narrator “scientific,” and, as Claire Preston and others have observed, the novel features a lexicon that is conspicuously Darwinian, including repeated references to “species” and “organisms” and “extinction.”²

But while *The House of Mirth* reflects a modernized world informed by scientific principle and mobilized by technological innovation, Wharton, like Chesnutt and Crane, also acutely registers the dangers of such a world. As Nancy Bentley puts it in “Wharton, Travel, and Modernity,” *The House of Mirth* reflects both “mechanical glamour” and the “potential for mechanical havoc” (155).³ While Carol Singley argues that Wharton was “unable . . . to live with a purely mechanistic view of the universe” (212), Bentley suggests that “the erosion of traditional social orders and the rise of mass culture threatened to damage beyond repair the kind of rich interior life [Wharton] prized most” (148). Both critics light on the ethical content of Wharton’s objections to an increasingly mechanical world, objections that she would indeed pursue by tracing the causes of Lily Bart’s destruction in *The House of Mirth*.

Bentley perceptively points out that Wharton makes use of “tropes of disaster and speed” (153) throughout the novel, tying the dangers of a mechanized world to Lily’s tragedy. But the “potential for mechanical havoc” pertains not only to the continual circulation of objects in this social space, not only to “the Panhard motor car and the Lusitania ocean liner,” not only to the telegraphs and trains, but to society’s very modes and means of expression. Both the objects associated with transportation and the speech associated with communication “scarcely slacken speed” in the social space Wharton presents. Indeed, the relentless rapidity of the circulation of speech leads to Lily’s successive “disasters.” The hostility posed by her modern environment, then, is largely a *lingual* phenomenon.

As early as the second chapter we are initiated into the potential dangers of this world of circulating speech, when Simon Rosedale spies Lily as she indecorously steps out of Selden’s building. It is significant that the first
threat that arises in the novel is a lingual threat: Simon Rosedale might talk. Lily’s own speech responds to this perceived threat with a lie; she attempts to preclude Rosedale’s tale-telling by inventing one of her own. But Lily’s story lacks believability, and she compounds the problem by refusing to ride with Rosedale, one of the first of many instances in which Wharton links industrial mobility (Rosedale offers to drive her to the train) with lingual circulation and its dangers:

That stupid story about her dress-maker was bad enough—it would have been so simple to tell Rosedale that she had been taking tea with Selden! The mere statement of the fact would have rendered it innocuous. But, after having let herself be surprised in a falsehood, it was doubly stupid to snub the witness of her discomfiture. If she had had the presence of mind to let Rosedale drive her to the station, the concession might have purchased his silence. (HOM 14)

Lily’s mistakes, as well as any potential means of remedying them, all center on controlling the circulation of language in her social sphere. Wharton’s work provides us with a character not only aware of the danger language poses to her position in society, but one who actively attempts to control and contain it. Indeed, Lily must calculate what needs to be done to purchase someone’s silence, to halt the relentless movement of speech. Lily “knew all this—knew how easy it would have been to silence him on the spot, and how difficult it might be to do so afterward”—after, that is, the generator of gossip had gained steam (HOM 14). She “knows” all of this as an immutable law of her mechanically-predictable world. Because “Mr. Simon Rosedale was a man who made it his business to know everything about everyone” (HOM 14–15), not as an idle voyeur but for the express purpose of disseminating that information to the society with which he hoped to gain favor, “Lily was sure that within twenty-four hours the story of her visiting her dress-maker at the Benedict would be in active circulation” (HOM 15). Gossip in The House of Mirth operates with modern efficiency.

Our first introduction to Judy Trenor demonstrates the almost manic nature of the “active circulation” of gossip. Mrs. Trenor’s monologue pauses only “to enjoy the spectacle of Miss Bart’s efforts to unravel her tangled correspondence” (HOM 42). A perusal of this paragraph reveals the pervasiveness of verbs involving speech; nearly every sentence refers in some way or another to the circulation of language: “She says her sister . . . I asked a lot of people . . . Gwen Van Osburgh will go back and tell her mother . . . I didn’t mean to ask the Weatheralls . . . she said the only way to get a penny
out of Fisher was to divorce him . . . It’s really absurd of Alice to make such a fuss . . . Some one said the other day that there was a divorce . . . I’d pay to keep her in a good humor, so I can’t complain, after all” (HOM 41–2, emphases mine). For Mrs. Trenor, it is not so important that others understand or respond to what she says, but merely that they are audience to the information. This is speech intended for mere circulation, not communication.

Each of the other characters in this social circle is described in similar ways and displays similar concerns. The Welly Brys do not act until there is “much debate, and anxious counsel with their newly acquired friends” (HOM 137). Mrs. Peniston “boast[s] an unequaled familiarity with the secret chronicles of society” and is not “without purveyors of information ready to supplement her deficiencies” (HOM 127) even while she maintains “the innocence of a schoolgirl who regards wickedness as a part of ‘history,’ and to whom it never occurs that the scandals she reads of in lesson-hours may be repeating themselves in the next street” (HOM 129). In fact, we can be assured that they are repeating themselves, as the novel will bear out. Grace Stepney, Mrs. Peniston’s boarder, has a mind “like a kind of moral fly-paper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of an inexorable memory” (HOM 127). Her heart, rather than a seat of sentiment, is described scientifically as “a precise register of facts as manifested in their relation to herself” (HOM 128), a register she will mechanically deploy in her efforts to gain position and power in her social circle.

Indeed, the power one can claim in this society is the power of information; one gains position precisely by putting a “buzzing item” into “active circulation.” This is a world where rumors are “carefully disseminated,” and, swept up in the social machine, are perpetuated with unprecedented speed and force. As the novel opens, Wharton indicates that Lily has already been implicated in this machine, and that her security is therefore precarious. Even before her dramatic societal descent, she is aware that she has “the reputation of being on the hunt for a rich husband” (HOM 46). The mere fact that Lily has a “reputation” puts her in danger; it suggests that the wheels of gossip are already turning. Lily’s position in Grand Central Station, then, prefigures her fate as the subject of endless circulation.

Grace Stepney seizes upon this weakness as she sets about to ruin Lily through careful—though deliberately vague—insinuations. In truth, Grace’s insinuations do not need to be either specific or substantive. It is enough that people talk of Lily; enough that she has made herself “conspicuous” enough to generate such talk. “People always say unpleasant things,” Grace begins, in her scheme of deliberate incrimination (HOM 130). The plural forms of these
terms give them greater interest and potency: “people” suggests that the talk has already made the rounds; “always” emphasizes that the field is saturated with the “talk.” Mrs. Peniston’s reaction illustrates the point: “She bends forward, lowering her voice to mitigate the horror” (ibid). Then she asks, “What sorts of things do they say?” (ibid). Grace’s strategy is described in military terms: she “rall[ies] her scattered forces” and “is on the spot in an instant” (ibid). She knows precisely how to attack, and words are her weapons. Again and again she returns to the same arsenal, iterative phrases reminiscent of the malicious gossip represented in the work of Stephen Crane: “. . . people say she isn’t wasting her time! Every one knows . . .” (HOM 130).

Obscuring her intentions behind a facade of false concern for both Mrs. Peniston and Lily, Grace maintains that she “thought [Mrs. Peniston] ought to know what’s being said of her” (HOM 131). When she brings the issue of Lily’s gambling debts into the conversation, again she repeats her refrain “Everybody knows . . .” (HOM 132). And though Grace seemingly belies her own message by stating “I’m sure there is no truth in the horrid things people say,” the very fact that this very statement reiterates that people are talking strengthens her case against Lily. To ensure the effectiveness of this strategy, Grace immediately returns, in the same breath, to “she told me” and “people say” (ibid).

Many critics have detailed the ways in which Lily functions as a visual artifact, a fact which the tableaux vivants literalizes. But it is when the visual becomes lingual that Lily is most at risk, when what is on display visually is put into circulation verbally. After the tableaux the “individual comments on her success” expand into a “circulation [that] became general” (HOM 143). Lily responds in kind in palpable ways to the power of language exerted over her; her beauty “expand[s] like a flower in sunlight” in the hospitable environment of “collective applause” to the “murmur greeting her appearance,” the “precise note of approval”—all lingual phenomenon (ibid). Conversely, it is when Lily is verbally attacked that she recoils; when she becomes aware of the words that threaten her she shrinks back.

Nowhere is this more evident than in her encounter with Gus Trenor after the tableaux vivants. Here Lily finds herself in very real danger; Trenor, intent on exacting “payment” for his loan to Lily, poses the threat of rape. But it is when she realizes that “this is the way men talked of her” that Lily feels most “weak and defenceless” (HOM 152). And the most threatening danger she perceives is also the threat of lingual danger:

She stood silent, frozen to her place. The words—the words were worse than the touch! Her heart was beating all over her body—in her throat,
her limbs, her helpless useless hands. Her eyes traveled despairingly about the room—they lit on the bell, and she remembered that help was in call. Yes, but scandal with it—a hideous mustering of tongues. No, she must fight her way out alone. It was enough that the servants knew her to be in the house with Trenor—there must be nothing to excite conjecture in her way of leaving it. (HOM 154)

Indeed, “an insistent voice warned her that she must leave the house openly” to disarm that “hideous mustering of tongues” (ibid). In a moment of fight or flight anxiety, it is not only her actions but her speech that Lily must guard in order to survive: “there was a throb of self-pity in her throat. But all the while another self was sharpening her to vigilance, whispering the terrified warning that every word and gesture must be measured” (HOM 152–3). As Lily inwardly debates how best to protect herself, a “secret voice” instructs her: “Indignation quivered on her lip, but it was quelled by the secret voice which warned her that she must not quarrel with him. He knew too much about her . . .” (HOM 187). In other words, the movement of her lips would catalyze the movement of his—a dangerous reaction that would again activate the generator of speech, the ramifications of which would be as unstoppable as they are destructive. The physical danger will pass, but the lingual danger Trenor poses will continue in perpetuity: this is the very nature of speech’s insidious circulation. Like the steps around her room at the chapter’s end, Lily’s speech must therefore take on the rigors of “mechanical precision” (HOM 189). Acutely aware that “her whole future might hinge on her way of answering him,” Lily takes great care with her speech as a matter of survival (HOM 187).

Each of these threats and attacks, increasing in magnitude and malicious intent, are compounded by the greater threat of mechanically aided publicity, as Stephen Crane had earlier made evident in his work. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell observes, The House of Mirth “represents a leisure class in the process of rapid expansion, and anxiously foresees how its opportunities for display will be many times magnified by the instruments of modern publicity” (721). The dangers to Lily Bart, that is, increase with increasing mechanization; the insidious power of gossip grows exponentially with the unprecedented potential for circulation made possible by modern advances. The newspaper Town Talk, a symbol of a literal and widespread circulation of language, is “full of [Lily]” (HOM 166). And we know that the town’s talk is indeed “full of” Lily. But Wharton depicts not only the means of circulation but circulation in action by showing how the news is received and how it continues to be disseminated. Ned Van Alstyne agrees that it
was “lively reading” though he’s “heard the stories before” (ibid). And Mrs. Fisher’s rejoinder—“I hear even Rosedale has been scared by the talk lately” (ibid)—suggests the complex layering of lingual circulation, its dizzying infinite regress: Mrs. Fisher’s talk, catalyzed by talk printed in the newspaper pointedly titled Town Talk, indicates that she herself has heard “talk” that Rosedale has been frightened away by the threatening force of even more “talk.” This danger reaches its highest pitch after Bertha’s rebuff in Monte Carlo: it is the presence of the journalist Mr. Dabham and his “watchful pen” which threatens to expand exponentially the literal circulation of Lily’s scandal, that casts Lily into real danger after Bertha’s attack. Dabham’s pen might be used as a weapon, but the circulation he will soon command in print could deal a mortal blow.

Lily’s social acquaintances are clearly controlled by circulating language, but the most insidious dangers in The House of Mirth are the ways in which such people become representations of that circulation, resembling the mechanical devices which have come to dominate their moral lives. When Rosedale appears again towards the end of the novel, he is ever aware of the “complications” that might arise from speaking with Lily: “Though he had not seen her he had heard of her; he knew of the connection with Mrs. Hatch and of the talk resulting from it” (HOM 307). Lily can predict this response as surely as the programmed response of any machine: “she felt sure that he had heard what had been said of her. But what was there that Rosedale did not hear?” (ibid). The scene brings the novel full circle, beginning and ending with the certainty of Rosedale’s participation in the endless and unstoppable transmission of “talk.” But more disturbingly, Rosedale is described like a technological apparatus, the “fitting person to receive and transmit her version of the facts” (HOM 309).

The impossibility of extricating oneself from this manic machine of language proves to be a major factor in the novel’s tragic outcome. Well-meaning but innocent Gerty sees only one way for Lily to liberate herself from the trap in which language has snared her: “The important thing,” she declares to Lily, “is that you should clear yourself—should tell your friends the whole truth” (HOM 237). For Gerty, the truth is an expression of language that, with the power of its very candor, will halt the wheels of the gossip machine in its tracks.

But Lily has come to understand the role of language in her society on its own terms. “The whole truth? . . . What is truth?” she asks. “Where a woman is concerned, it’s the story that’s easiest to believe” (HOM 237). And the story that is easiest to believe is that story which has been iterated most often, gained the widest circulation.
Gerty persists: “But what is your story, Lily? I don’t believe anyone knows it yet” (HOM 237). Lily’s reply—“I don’t believe I know it myself”—leads her to declare an important thesis of the novel: “the truth about any girl is that once she’s talked about she’s done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks” (HOM 238). Being “talked about” is tantamount to social death. Endless iteration literally destroys, consumes its subject—particularly if that subject is a “girl.” While men face—and fear—the societal machine (clearly all of Lily’s potential suitors, including Lawrence Selden, are afraid of the talk, afraid of what it will do to their own standing), women are most vulnerable to it. Subjected to systematic lingual deconstruction without access to other resources, women can be utterly consumed.6

Lily, who maintains that “the more she explains her case the worse it looks,” seems to intuit that one cannot combat manic circulation merely by adding to it. We are told that “The Dorsets, the Stepneys, the Brys—all the actors and witnesses in the miserable drama—had preceded her with their version of the case; and, even had she seen the last chance of gaining a hearing for her own, some obscure disdain and reluctance would have restrained her. She knew it was not by explanations and counter-charges that she could ever hope to recover her lost standing” (HOM 239). But this realization is also symptomatic of a trend in Lily’s actions as the novel progresses: a growing refusal to participate in her society’s practices, and a corresponding commitment to remove herself from their lingual behavior. Attempting to write to Rosedale, she means “to tell him to come to her, but the words refused to shape themselves” (HOM 189). It is a scene which marks the beginning of the lingual resistance which culminates in the burning of Bertha Dorset’s incriminating letters, literally destroying the words that would have generated scandal. As she moves in this direction, Lily distances herself both literally and figuratively from the mechanical world, from the technological apparatuses on which her society is dependant and from the societal apparatus of mechanical speech. As Carol Singley observes, “As the novel progresses, Lily rides less and walks more” (75). But, significantly, she also talks less, ultimately willing her own social destruction rather than “riding” the machine of savage gossip that, paradoxically and perversely, could have vindicated her.

Though Lily has never favored solitude, by the end of the novel it is almost “a welcome escape from the empty noises of her life” (HOM 254). Increasingly isolated from her social world, Lily also becomes isolated from speech. Toward the novel’s end Lily is pictured in a café “shut out in a little circle of silence” while “a hum of shrill voices reverberated against the low ceilings” (HOM 320)—a fitting image in that the reverberation of shrill
voices throughout social space is precisely that which has alienated Lily, cast-
ing her into her liminal, silent, self-enclosed circle.

But the quietude Lily longs for is of a very rare and specific breed, described quite beautifully by Wharton as a “silence which is not solitude, but compassion holding its breath” (HOM 156). The silence she endures, by contrast, is a punishment, not a reprieve. It is born from cowardice, not compassion; from incompetence, not purposefulness. Above all it demonstrates the difficulty, even in this world of constant chatter, of speaking in any authentic way. Her social set know merely how to repeat, how to react to and mechanically perpetuate familiar language. But when ethical courage—and originality of expression—is required of them, they know neither what to say nor how to say it.

Rosedale, who attempts, in his own way, to show kindness to Lily at the novel’s end, is limited by the “inarticulate struggle with his emotions.” And Wharton censures the men’s “mute wretchedness” (HOM 229) in the wake of Bertha’s cruelty. Accustomed to automatic iteration, these men prove incapable of the thoughtful articulation which could help Lily Bart. But with her call for a compassionate silence Wharton seems to be searching for an alternative, for a language that neither falls prey to the iterative machine nor abandons one to utter solitude. The only potential alternative posited in the novel is Lawrence Selden’s “republic of the spirit.”

Critical of this shallow, mechanically iterative society and its attendant cruelties, Selden also purportedly understands that “names can alter the colour of beliefs” (HOM 73). Yet despite his supposed disdain for the workings of high society, he is no less a part of its iterative machine. Indeed, Selden proves to be highly susceptible to its “empty maxims,” highly controlled by what it generates. When we are told on the novel’s first page that “There was nothing new about Lily Bart,” we are given information from Selden’s perspective. There is nothing new about Lily to Selden because he, too, is part of societal circulation, and has, like Ned Van Alstyne, “heard the stories before.” But if Selden is blameworthy it is not merely because he has listened to these stories, but rather that he has too readily believed them. Selden implicitly and continually gives his assent to the “town talk,” again and again revealing his susceptibility to the rumors he hears about Lily. If Selden believes in an alternative republic, it proffers him little prophylactic against the iterative talk he encounters.

At the same time Selden exhibits an unrealistic refusal to recognize the role of language in determining Lily’s societal constraints, a fact which impairs his sympathy for her. Lily insists that she “never had any choice” because there was no language to initiate her into an alternative version of
society, into his “republic” (HOM 70). “There was no one, I mean, to tell me about the republic of the spirit,” she states (ibid, emphasis mine). Selden dismisses her insight, replying that “There never is—it’s a country one has to find the way to one’s self” (ibid). But Lily remains insistent that one needs a language to make things real: “But I should never have found my way there if you hadn’t told me” (ibid, emphasis mine).

Lawrence’s response, that “there are sign-posts—but one has to know how to read them” (ibid), validates rather than challenges Lily’s implicit point. Without the right language, without knowing how to read the world and its signs, choice is limited. In point of fact, Selden’s sign-posts are as illusory as his pseudo-Platonic republic. Selden hides behind his language, as Lily perceptively suggests. “For all your fine phrases,” she tells him, “you’re really as great a coward as I am” (HOM 75). Selden’s cowardice resides precisely in his paradoxical relationship with speech: like the worst sort of philosopher, he is quick to speak in fine phraseology, to pay homage through his words to his idealized “republic of spirit,” yet he refuses to speak the substantive truth that will matter, not in the airy and fanciful world of spirit but in the brutally pragmatic social world of which they are truly a part. When Lily needs Selden’s help, his words dry up; when it matters most, his republic vanishes. Selden’s truly is a republic of spirit—it exists only preternaturally and is therefore ghostly, as insubstantial as it is ineffectual in the real world they must both inhabit.

Wharton suggests this crucial point through her own language and choice of setting. The scene in which Selden espouses the virtue of his “republic,” takes place “in a zone of lingering summer” where “the path wound across a meadow with scattered trees” and “a lane plumed with asters and purpling sprays of bramble, whence, through the light quiver of ash-leaves, the country unrolled itself in pastoral distances” (HOM 65)—a scene distinctly and decidedly removed from the urban world of frenzied circulation. Wharton’s description continues for another full paragraph. It highlights a natural space purposefully juxtaposed with the mechanical landscape; a “hushed” realm contrasted with a world relentlessly characterized by compulsive chatter. Lily is herself pictured in a position of speaking, with “her lips parted,” but she is silent. Selden, seated in the grass and feeling peaceful in the idyllic pastoral, “had no wish to make her talk; her quick-breathing silence seemed a part of the general hush and harmony of things” (HOM 66). And indeed it is. Here, linked with a telling conjunction and heightened by alliterative euphony, “hush” and “harmony” are practically synonymous. It is a welcome respite from the constant, even obsessive, chatter that characterizes their urban world. This landscape allows them to “s[il]ent, while
something throbbed between them in the wide quiet of the air . . . it was one of those moments when neither seemed to speak deliberately, when an indwelling voice in each called to the other across unsounded depths of feeling” (HOM 74). It therefore seems initially to offer a possibility of some fundamental communication, an alternative way of perceiving and engaging in communication outside of their society’s “hideous mustering of tongues.”

But this seemingly utopian scene is not unproblematic. The first phrase of description, the “zone of lingering summer” presents us with a vital key to reading the scene vis à vis Wharton’s standard lexicon. “Lingering summer” is always associated with “hush and harmony,” but it is, at best, an ephemeral experience for her; at worst, it is a false, inauthentic one. These scenes begin to reveal the airy undependability of this landscape, of what prove to be only spectral signposts to Selden’s “republic of the spirit.” Indeed, even the scene’s physical location attests to its literal airiness. Significantly, Lily and Selden stand “silent . . . smiling at each other like adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discover a new world” (HOM 76). Lily feels a “lightness,” a “glow of freedom,” but the scene is cloaked in “haze;” it is “veiled.” Dreamy, indistinct, and ephemeral, the supposed virtues of the republic of the spirit will do her no good in the actual world. Unless these things are spoken into life, committed to in word and deed even after the descent back down into the social world, they will evaporate into thin air. The feelings between Lily and Selden, then, are “unsounded” in more than one way: they have not plumbed their depths, but they have also not given them sound, given them voice in their actual world, in real auditory space. At the end of the chapter, the “actual world at their feet” therefore “veil[s] itself in dimness” (ibid, emphasis mine).

After the tableaux vivants, Selden and Lily once again step out of the urban world of bustling speech and activity and into an Edenic garden space—this time into a conservatory. Once again the scene is characterized by “dimness;” once again it resembles a “midsummer’s night” so acutely that “it would not have surprised them to feel a summer’s breeze” (HOM 144). Wharton again describes the “fragrant hush of a garden;” the peaceable silence of “the magic place” where “there was no sound but the plash of the water on the lily-pads, and a distant drift of music that might have been blown across a sleeping lake” (ibid). Selden gives Lily “his arm without speaking” as he leads her into this dream, and “still without speaking they seat[themselves] on a bench beside the fountain” (HOM 144).

The first thing Lily does say draws attention to the very act of speaking, the very nature of the communication between her and Selden. “You never speak to me,” she begins (ibid). Sitting beside the romantic trope of
the fountain, Lily confesses these things to Selden “as though the words were drawn from her unwillingly” (ibid). When Selden replies, “The only way I can help you is by loving you,” Lily herself lapses into the temptation to linger in fantasy rather than facing the actual world. She exclaims, “Ah, love me, love me—but don’t tell me so!” (HOM 144–5, emphasis mine). In other words, because language has consequences, the confession of love makes it all too real. It would demand action that, at this moment, frightens Lily, and which Selden later proves to be unwilling to take.

Wharton makes the existence of the “actual world” abundantly clear, as Lily disappears into the throng after the conservatory scene. Even more pointedly, the “actual world” is also represented by technology in the earlier scene when Lily’s and Selden’s outdoor summer reverie is interrupted by a “black object” which “rushe[s] across their vision” (HOM 76). Wharton does double duty with the phrase. On the literal level, a black motorcar has sped past, which they cannot help but see. But on another level this intrusion of technology, this “motor,” has interrupted their vision in the Whartonian sense, their imaginative reverie. Now the rhapsodic pastoral and its attendant hush are no longer possible. Lily’s concerns immediately return to the society of which the “motor” is representative. She “start[s] from her attitude of absorption; her smile fade[s] and she beg[ins] to move toward the lane” (ibid). But her speech betrays her true concerns; immediately she begins to worry that there will be punitive consequences in the social, motorized world. First Lily exclaims “Let us go down!” (HOM 76). Selden, at chapter’s end, repeats those exact words, emphasizing both the return to a more mechanized speech and the marked deixis of the scene: the social world and its chatter, represented by the “motor” that passes them, is below them, while Selden’s republic of spirit, in which Lily feels as though she can fly, exists above, or, as Lily’s stationery would suggest, beyond that plane.

Both garden scenes’ promise, though, is illusory; the gardens represent failed alternatives to the mechanically iterative world. At the crucial moments, Selden fails to “find the fitting word,” to actualize the tenets of his republic. Selden’s failure to find such a word, or, to translate his ideals into sympathetic speech that could effect change in the actual world, is a primary fault in his character. His silence does not offer aid or compassion; it is a “miserable silence” (HOM 231), indistinguishable from the other men’s “mute wretchedness” in Monte Carlo. Rather than functioning as a sympathetic alternative to the incessant and destructive talk that has wounded Lily, Selden’s silence is complicit with those very forces. By staying silent, Selden “forfeit[s] all chance of helping her” (ibid). A chief ethical failure at the heart of The House of Mirth is indeed a failure of language.
The possibility for redemption, then, must also be achieved through language. Wharton has it that, ultimately, “the situation between [Selden and Lily] was one which could have been cleared up only by a sudden explosion of feeling, and their whole training and habit of mind were against the chance of such an explosion” (HOM 294). In other words, they have been trained not to give voice to their true feelings; inculcated into a world that speaks in abundant but empty phrases, they are more comfortable with a mustering of tongues than true communication. The novel’s final chapter gives us one last hope for redemption, a redemption possible only through speech, the “word” that must be spoken:

He only knew that he must see Lily Bart at once; he had found the word he meant to say to her, and it could not wait another moment. It was strange that it had not come to his lips sooner, that he had let her pass from him the evening before without being able to speak it. But what did that matter, now that a new day had come? It was not a word for twilight, but for the morning. (HOM 344–5)

But Selden arrives too late; he has waited too long to voice “the word.” The tragedy seems to be that Lily’s death has precluded Selden’s speech, has rendered any communication between the lovers impossible, has nullified the chance for a happy ending that would have dispelled misunderstandings and liberated Lily from the prison that social language had created around her. But more troubling is Wharton’s suggestion that such an ending was not possible even if Lily had lived. Language may provide a chance for redemption, but it also continues to pose a threat; even after Lily’s death she is not safe from the devastating potential of the manic machine of language.

Yet again, words shake Selden’s tenuous faith. When he finds the letter bearing “Gus Trenor’s name . . . Temptation leapt on him like the stab of the knife” (HOM 347). As he asks himself why Lily could have been writing to Trenor, “the thought unhallowed the memory of that last hour, made a mock of the word he had come to speak, and defiled even the reconciling silence upon which it fell. He felt himself flung back on all the ugly uncertainties from which he had thought he cast loose forever” (HOM 348). Selden is never able to cast loose the ugly uncertainties, the uncertainties deliberately generated by the “hideous mustering of tongues.” In truth, Lily’s letter to Trenor is not only innocent but honorable, and it is therefore Selden’s language, not Lily’s, that makes a mock of the word he had come to speak. “Gradually,” we are told, “his troubled vision cleared, old hints and rumours came back to him, and out of the very insinuations he had feared
to probe he constructed an explanation of the mystery” (HOM 349). But because Lily is permanently silenced, “That was all he knew, all he could hope to unravel of the story. The mute lips on the pillow refused him more than this . . .” (ibid).

The novel’s poignant last lines once again underscore the significance of language in *The House of Mirth*, and allude to the alternative communication Wharton seems to advocate: “He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear” (HOM 350). And yet we have good reason to be skeptical of these last lines. It is a hollow victory at best for Lily that the significant word should be “spoken” after her death. In Wharton’s staunchly realistic world, we must read this ending as both an ethical and lingual failure. While Selden may have approached the brink of eloquence when he made the decision to speak the all-important word to Lily, the failure to move past that brink, to be tempted, even at that moment, by the same suspicions iterative talk had programmed into him, suggests an ethical weakness and a lingual cowardice, and, ultimately, a triumph for the manic machine of language which destroyed the woman he was supposed to love.

* * *

*Ethan Frome* seems initially a novel far removed in both the style and intent from the concerns of *The House of Mirth*. The bustling society novel contrasts sharply with the lean, spare novella set in rural New England; the hyperactive speech that characterizes New York is the antithesis to the relentless silence of *Frome* and the minimalist style of its telling.8 The two novels, then, appear to exist at the two poles of Wharton’s continuum of language; while one displays the dangerous excess of the circulation of language the other explores the destructive ramifications of the suppression of that very circulation.

And yet *Ethan Frome*, likely begun in 1906 or 1907, only a year or two after the publication of *The House of Mirth*, and later emended to include a 1904 newspaper article about a sledding accident, can be seen as emerging from the same world. Most significantly, the narrator Wharton created to tell this tale of stunted lingual capacity is a figure straight out of *The House of Mirth*’s bustling urban society. Significantly, he is an engineer, “sent up on a job connected with the big Power house” (EF 7), whose personal interaction with Frome is catalyzed when he requires a means to reach his train. This nameless narrator is characterized by such connections to technology; he is associated with “the degenerate day of trolley, bicycle, and rural delivery” (EF
—images which not only root him in a modern, industrialized world but which speak specifically to active circulation, both physical and lingual. In his time “communication was easy,” he tells us, “between the scattered mountain villages, and the bigger towns in the valleys . . . had libraries, theaters, and YMCA halls” (EF 6)—a world almost tangible to us after reading The House of Mirth. But the fictional and fittingly-named Starkfield, remote and sparse, is pointedly characterized by a “sluggish pulse,” in which circulation is “retarded,” if not impossible. Wharton creates a space and time, then, that allows her to imagine a sort of pre-modern landscape. And for Wharton, this pre-modern landscape is also very much a pre-communicative landscape. By framing the tale with such a narrator Wharton creates a world by contrast; told through the eyes of an urban engineer accustomed to both the physical and lingual circulation made possible by modernity, the limitations of Starkfield stand out in bas relief.

Fittingly, the narrator first encounters Frome at the post office, notices the newspaper he receives, the “visible effort to take the few steps from his buggy to the post office window,” and the “silent nod” he gives to the post master (EF 4)—observations which link Frome’s physical handicaps and his lingual impotence. The narrator’s curiosity is piqued by the maimed, taciturn Frome, a curiosity that is roused further by Harmon Gow’s suggestive allusions to Frome’s “smash-up” some twenty-four years earlier. Indeed, this man of industry, this man accustomed to both technical and lingual circulation, expresses an immediate interest in divining the story of Ethan Frome.

Initially, the narrator’s craving for lingual circulation is satisfied by the free-flowing tales of his landlady, Mrs. Hale. Again linking modern technologies with the free circulation of speech, the narrator plays audience to Mrs. Hale’s nightly stories as he sits, significantly, “by the gurgling Carcel lamp:” “I listened every evening to another and more delicately shaded version of the Starkfield chronicle” he tells us with enthusiasm, clearly delighting in the fact that “any question about her acquaintances brought forth a volume of detail” (EF 8). The narrator therefore has “great hopes of getting from her the missing facts of Ethan Frome’s story, or rather such a key to his character as should co-ordinate the facts I knew,” but is disappointed when he finds her “unexpectedly reticent” (ibid).

Indeed, the inaccessibility of information is a source of vexation for the narrator from the novel’s first lines: “I had the story bit by bit from various people,” he tells us in the novel’s opening line, “. . . and each time it was a different story” (EF 3). Clearly, Starkfield’s language does not operate as efficiently as New York’s. The narrator can only ascertain Frome’s story “bit by bit,” a phrase which implies at least two points of contrast between
language in this work and its counterpart in *The House of Mirth*: Starkfield is characterized by a dearth of lingual offerings, mere “bits” of information as opposed to the profusion of speech in New York society; and it can only offer a fractured language that does not reveal all but must be put together. Continually frustrated that “no one gave [him] an explanation of the look in [Ethan Frome’s] face” (EF 9), the narrator “put[s] the case anew to [his] village oracle, Harmon Gow,” but again is thwarted with “an uncomprehending grunt” (EF 9).

But the characteristic silence of the town only fuels the narrator’s desire to create a story, as though he hopes to fill the vacuum of their silence with his speech, his tale. “I might have contended myself with the story pieced together from these hints,” he tells us, “had it not been for the provocation of Mrs. Hale’s silence” (ibid). Since Harmon Gow can only “develop the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted,” there are “perceptible gaps between his facts”—gaps which the narrator hopes to fill. If this is a world where the bits of speech must be put together, it poses an apt challenge for the engineer-narrator, who has a sense that “the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps” (EF 6).

In her author’s introduction, Wharton declares that her narrator should in fact “act as the sympathizing intermediary between his rudimentary characters and the more complicated minds to whom he is trying to present them” (xxi). The parallels between her own sensibility and that of her fictional creation should not be overlooked. While the narrator is an engineer who has come by train to remote, rural Starkfield, Wharton routinely traveled by motorcar through the villages of Western Massachusetts: “*Ethan Frome* and *Summer* were the result of explorations among villages bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence,” she tells us in her autobiography, “and sad slow-speaking people living in conditions hardly changed since their forbears held those villages against the Indians” (BG 153–4). The narrator’s freedom of movement and of speech—related phenomenon in this novel—stand in marked contrast to Ethan’s social, emotional, and lingual imprisonment, just as Wharton’s inveterate traveling and facility with language contrasted with that of her rural neighbors when she lived at the Mount. While the people of the villages struggled in isolation and poverty, she spent days motoring with such literary friends as Henry James and Walter Berry. While they were completely removed from technological innovation, she was having her home wired for the new electric lamp. And yet Wharton felt like she needed to tell the story of the “slow-speaking people;” with her “artist’s implements” a story that would otherwise remain in the shadow of silence could be revealed. And in some ways she seems to project these intentions on her first-person
narrator, the only narrator of the kind she would ever employ in her fiction. He, like Wharton, tells the story because he must: no one else in Starkfield can tell the tale himself.

Unlike the narrator of Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*, who uses the language of science to distance himself from the tales he relays, Wharton's narrator seeks to use science to elicit Ethan Frome's story, to “bridge” the distance between them. He assumes there to be a “contrast . . . between [Ethan’s] outer situation and his inner needs” (EF 11). And while the “bridge” he seeks to build between them is a lingual bridge (he hopes that “the chance of giving expression to the latter might at least unseal his lips”) the means of building are technical. “Once or twice was the distance between us bridged for a moment” (EF 11) the narrator declares, and both times the connection he seeks to forge is based on a shared experience of technology. On one occasion the narrator “happen[s] to speak of an engineering job” (EF 11)—a topic of conversation that contrasts with Ethan's situation in several conspicuous ways. Located in Florida and symbolic of both an industrial world of free circulation and a warmer, vital world more hospitable to such mobility, the memory of that world actually does induce Frome unexpectedly to speak before his “relapse into silence” (EF 12).

When Ethan peruses a copy of *Popular Science* that the narrator has inadvertently left behind as he boards his train, the narrator perceives another opportunity to use science and technology to cure Ethan's lingual reticence. Significantly, Ethan employs lingual terminology in expressing his ignorance: “There are things in that book that I didn’t know the first word about” (EF 12, emphasis mine). But by offering to loan the book to Ethan, the narrator attempts to overcome his ignorance of words, to initiate him into the modernized world of “some recent discoveries” (EF 12), of new technology, of *popular science*, and, in so doing, to “unseal his lips” (EF 13). Through the media of language and science, (that is, language about science), the narrator hopes that “this incident might set up some more direct communication between [them]” (EF 13).

But unsealing Ethan’s lips proves not to be as easy as it first appears. “As we turned into Corbury road the snow began to fall again,” the narrator tells us, “cutting off our last glimpse of the house; and Frome's silence fell with it, letting down between us the old veil of reticence” (EF 16). One cannot help but fall into silence in this world, the text suggests: silence, like snow, is something that falls over Ethan, something done to him rather than something he creates and controls. Indeed, Wharton takes care to establish and continually reaffirm a direct connection between the landscape and the speech of its inhabitants, an intention she makes explicit from the first. In her
author’s introduction, the first and only such introduction she ever provided for one of her novels, Wharton calls her characters “my granite outcroppings; but half emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate” (xx). Just as the speech of the characters in *The House of Mirth* takes on the characteristics of the mechanical environment in which it exists, here too Wharton literalizes the connection between landscape and speech. In this case it is “the mute melancholy landscape” that is the hallmark of the text, and Ethan appears to be its very personification, “the incarnation of its frozen woe” (EF 11).

The narrator begins to experience these realities in small but significant ways as both his hopes for communication and transportation are thwarted by the smothering effect of Starkfield. He first finds himself trapped in this pre-communicative rural world for the winter, and then undergoes a succession of incidents which further isolate him. When Denis Eady’s horses fall ill, “for a day or two [he] was put to it to find a means of transport” (EF 9–10). Frome steps in to ferry him each morning to the train depot, but the pace seems agonizingly slow. Finally, “the railroad is blocked by a freight train that got stuck in a drift below the Flats” (EF 14), which strands him completely at Frome’s farmhouse. The narrator’s inability to get to his train parallels his inability to get to the story. Wharton again creates a deliberate connection between the two forces: the train and the town’s speech are equally blocked by a smothering force. Starkfield is in every way “sealed,” inaccessible. Any hope for mobility is cut off, a reality which begins to make clear why Gow mused that “the smart ones get away.” Indeed, the narrator states that “before [his] time there was up [he] had learned to know what that meant” (EF 6).

Most instructive for the narrator is the ways in which Starkfield affects his own speech. Ultimately, not even he is immune to the language-smothering landscape; even the narrator’s facility with words is checked by his first encounter with Ethan’s home: “in the distress and oppression of the scene,” he tells us, “I did not know what to answer” (EF 15).

But it is precisely this imposed silence—and the “empty noises” of Frome’s life—that seem to provide the narrator with the vital “clue” to Frome’s story. Standing at the threshold of this other world, the narrator does hear sound—“a woman’s voice droning querulously”—but, instead of real language, it is an inarticulate and unreadable noise that denies the possibility of true communication. These are the only clues the narrator has in his possession when he begins “to put together this vision of [Ethan Frome’s] story” (EF 19). As many critics have correctly observed, the bulk of the narrative to follow is not Ethan’s tale. Rather, it is the narrator’s construction, an elaborate “vision” of what might have occurred, what might explain the facts available to him: the two women before him, one old and the other maimed,
the penury in which they live, but above all the lingual reticence he finds so disturbing. Ensuring that this fact cannot be missed by her readers, Wharton marks the transition from reality to vision with some fifty-seven ellipses dots before beginning Chapter 1. Because the narrator’s remarks occur in an untitled section before Chapter 1 they appear as an introduction; that is, they stand precisely where an author’s words would stand in an introduction. In another contrast with the narrator Chesnutt chose to frame his conjure tales, Wharton’s chosen narrator is also an author, seeking not merely to repeat tales told to him but to create a story from the few facts available to him. Such a task requires an attempt to go beyond the language of science; it requires an imaginative leap and an attempt at a sympathetic connection to a man who is all but a stranger to him. In creating Ethan Frome’s story the narrator imagines the interior depths of a man who is utterly inaccessible to him. He plunges himself imaginatively into a landscape that has denied him access. He substitutes his own imaginative creation for the reality that has been denied him by the town’s refusal to speak.

Yet the success of this imaginative venture is always in question. Whether the narrator actually connects with Frome’s experience, or merely re-makes him in his own image, is a continual problem with the narrative. The narrator’s biases—most particularly his assumptions about the benefits of science and technology and his fears of the isolating and lingually deadening effects of a world bereft of technological innovation and increased circulation—are repeatedly manifest. Indeed, the author’s vision begins by imagining his hero to have once been a man of language, and, tellingly linking the two forces yet again, a man of science as well. His story begins noting that “four or five years earlier [Ethan] had taken a year’s course at a technological college at Worcester, and dabbled in the laboratory with a friendly professor of physics (EF 21). He describes the sky as a “metallic dome” and, in a pointedly technological metaphor, imagines Ethan to feel like “an exhausted receiver” (EF 21). “He had always wanted to be an engineer,” the narrator tells us, “and to live in towns, where there were lecturers and big libraries and ‘fellows doing things’” (EF 53). Ethan’s dreams as put forth in this description are suggestive of his hunger for language: he yearns for lectures (access to speech) and libraries (access to the written word). And even his reference to fellows “doing things,” while suggesting the importance of action and mobility, is also a reference to the circulation of language: its position in quotation marks makes clear that this is something Ethan has heard about.

When Ethan is called back to the farm as a young man, the narrator imagines, he tries to keep words about him:
he nailed up shelves for his books . . . laid out his papers on a kitchen table, hung on the rough plaster wall an engraving of Abraham Lincoln and a calendar with “Thoughts from the Poets,” and tried, with these meager properties, to produce some likeness of a minister who had been kind to him and lent him books when he was at Worcester. (EF 95)

But if a girl is done for once she’s talked about in *The House of Mirth*, here one is done for when the world *stops* talking; for Ethan, a slow death begins when he is cast back into the stifled, silent landscape of Starkfield. “The silence had deepened about him year by year,” the narrator concludes in a phrase which not only links the silence again with the smothering snow but with the earth beneath it: as the silence deepens, so does both Ethan’s gravity, and his grave. The farmhouse is repeatedly described as “mute and cold as a grave-stone” (EF 37); Ethan is himself described as “by nature grave and inarticulate” (EF 51), leaving no question that the pun on “grave” is intentional. Inarticulateness is indeed inexorably linked not only with being grave but with being *in* the grave. Existing on the periphery of a cemetery where the gravestones quite literally “bear his name,” claiming him with the written word just as they claimed the Ethan Fromes who came before him, Ethan’s fate is all too clear.

The threat at the center of the narrator’s vision, then, far from the manic power of ceaselessly circulating language, is in fact a threat of deadening silence. His narrative also subtly suggests that changes in the country’s industry and technology might have offered a means of escape for Ethan’s family, his mother in particular. When a new line of rail is built through Western Massachusetts, it extends a possibility for mobility, growth, and freedom to the residents of the “mute, melancholy” landscape. But this possibility is denied to the residents of Starkfield, and, indeed, it is precisely when the train moves through and abandons Ethan’s mother to a greater isolation that she turns “queer.” Ethan’s mother, we are told, “had been a talker in her day,” but after this “trouble” “the sound of her voice was seldom heard” (EF 51). “After the trains begun running nobody ever come by here to speak of,” Ethan explains, “and mother could never get it through her head what had happened, and it preyed on her right along till she died” (EF 16). Excluded from the transition to mechanization and modernity, abandoned to the static and isolated world of pre-modern Starkfield, Ethan’s mother’s language—and sanity—breaks down. “Trouble,” then, does not *cause* silence in *Ethan Frome*; silence *is* the trouble at the heart of this narrative. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff puts it, “silence is but one step away from pathology” (155). The equation is clear: the death of language is the death of the self.
It follows, then, that the narrator concludes that Ethan's marriage to Zeena is a direct result of his terror of silence. Zeena reintroduces “human speech” again in his house, the “sound of a new voice” that Ethan desperately needs “to steady him” (EF 52). The alternative represented by silence is insanity and death: it is the “mortal silence of his long imprisonment” that Ethan sought to escape; after such a fate, “Zeena’s volubility was music to his ears” (EF 52). It is a particularly cruel—if inevitable—turn, then, that “she, too, fell silent” (EF 53). Zeena’s volubility turns to silent recrimination; her “music” bitters to droning. Now Zeena “hardly ever says anything” (EF 37). Wharton’s narrator relentlessly emphasizes the silence of the Frome household: Zeena’s “fault finding was of the silent kind” and she is characterized by “obstinate silence” (EF 45). She lives in “long intervals of secretive silence” punctured only by “abrupt explosions of speech” that are always punitive and recriminatory, never conversational or sympathetic (EF 28).

This characterization of Zeena confirms the seeming impossibility of true communication. At times “her silence seemed deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess” (EF 54). Indeed, Zeena remains mysterious even to the reader, precisely because of her inability to express her deepest thoughts and emotions. Some of this may be attributable to a lack of inclination on Zeena’s part, to be sure, but the text also reveals the limitations and inadequacies of the language available to her. Just as Zeena does not know how to work the new electric battery she has purchased, she does not seem to have access to lingual skills and reverts in the few instances she does speak to habitual iteration: “She and Ethan looked at each other in silence; then she said, as she had the night before” (EF 79); “it was the consecrated formula, and [Ethan] expected it to be followed, as usual, by her rising and going down to supper” (EF 80). Speaking only in consecrated formulas denies the possibility of true communication as surely as does silence; reverting to iterated phrases does not puncture silence but paradoxically reinforces it.

Further challenging the possibility of real communication, the characters’ capacity to listen to each other proves to be as feeble as their ability to express themselves. When characters do attempt to speak, they are simply not heard. Zeena and Ethan seem equally guilty of this fault. When Zeena speaks, “her husband hardly heard what she was saying” (EF 47). We are in fact told that he “never listened,” that “he had first formed the habit of not answering her, and finally of thinking of other things while she talked” (EF 54). Likewise, when Ethan attempts communication, “Zeena made no reply: she did not seem to hear what he had said” (EF 49).
More than anything else, then, the narrator’s vision of Ethan is a man longing for communication, a hunger which has seemed to deepen as the silence deepens about him through the years. While the need for a human voice motivated Ethan’s decision to marry Zeena, a need for a more substantial communication seems to motivate much of his romantic interest in Mattie. In his fantasies Ethan imagines he could “show her things and tell her things” (emphasis mine), and sees her “as a creature to whom he could say” all of the things which his very lingual limitations and isolation prevent him from saying to anyone. When Mattie seems to exhibit, simplistic as it may be, some aesthetic appreciation, exclaiming of a woodland scene “it looks just as if it was painted!” Ethan feels that “words had at last been found to utter his secret soul” (EF 26).

While the practical circumstances doom Mattie and Ethan from the start, Ethan’s fantasies of deep communication with Mattie are equally doomed from their earliest encounters, precisely because of Ethan's lingual impotence. In the first scene we are given in the narrator’s vision, as Ethan waits for and jealously watches Mattie after the dance, he chooses to stand “there in silence instead of making his presence known to her” (EF 32)—an image that is representative of Ethan's action—and inaction—throughout the rest of the narrative. Again and again the narrative exposes the limitations of Ethan's lingual abilities. After spying on Mattie, and feeling like he had “done something arch and ingenious,” he tries “to prolong the effect” by “grop[ing] for a dazzling phrase” (EF 34). Instead he only manages, “in a growl of rapture, ‘Come along’” (ibid). Wharton underscores the point yet again in a related—and repetitive—passage: “Again he struggled for the all-expressive word, and found only a deep ‘Come along’” (EF 35). Routinely, Ethan “forg[ets] what else he had to say” (EF 38) and “beg[ins], without knowing what he meant to say” (EF 39). He seems continually reduced to prosaic expressions: “At last, after casting about for an effective opening, he took a long gulp of tea, cleared his throat, and said: ‘Looks as if there’d be more snow’” (EF 62). And during one brief but pregnant moment in their scene of domestic comfort while Zeena is away, “Ethan . . . felt himself on the brink of eloquence, but the mention of Zeena had paralysed him” (EF 61).

For her part, Mattie speaks most often in “stifled” and “tremulous” “whispers.” And her attempts at sympathetic communication with Ethan fall into the same iterative pattern as Ethan's interaction with Zeena (“Don’t trouble, Ethan;” “I don’t want you should trouble, either;” “No, Ethan, I ain’t going to trouble”) (EF 101). Mattie and Ethan look “at each other in silence,” and then Mattie says, “as she had the night before, ‘I guess it’s about time for supper’” (EF 79). Nor is Mattie immune to the failure to listen
effectively. In one significant example, when Ethan offers to mend the dish she has symbolically broken, “she did not seem to hear him” (EF 77).

Ethan’s dreams of a communicable bond with Mattie, then, for the “words to utter his secret soul,” are just that—dreams. In the narrator’s vision, Ethan lives forever on the brink of eloquence; unable to voice his desires or to actualize them, Ethan is driven into his imagination. Ethan “let[s] his vision possess him . . . he was never so happy with [Mattie] as when he abandons himself to these dreams” (EF 50). The language here emphasizes Ethan’s passivity: he is not the creator of his visions; they possess him, as he abandons himself to their power. Ethan is delighted that “the scene was just as he had dreamed of it that morning” (EF 65). Only when Ethan and Mattie are alone in the comfortable domesticity of the house in the evening are they able to “talk easily and simply” (EF 66). But even this scene, the only scene in the text which allows for easy speech, is illusory. Ethan neither speaks the truth nor plans on actualizing any of his desires. Once again he lives in fantasy, in “the illusion of long-established intimacy”: he “set[s] his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so . . .” (EF 67).

Like Lily and Selden, Mattie and Ethan also have their garden scenes, their time in “lingering summer.” After the dance, “they walk on as if they were floating on a summer stream” (EF 38), and the changes in Mattie’s face as they speak in their single domestic scene together seems to Ethan “like a wheat-field under a summer breeze” (EF 67). We are told that Ethan had planted geraniums “in the summer to ‘make a garden’ for Mattie” (EF 50). But sitting near the stove with Mattie, Ethan has “a confused sense of being in another word, where all was warmth and harmony and time could bring no change,” (EF 65) and he exists in a “rosy haze” when recollecting his time with her (EF 40). Here Wharton makes use of the same diction she employed in The House of Mirth, both in her use of summer imagery to describe the utopian possibilities of “hush” and “harmony,” and in her use of images of “haze” and “confusion” to deflate the very promise of those possibilities. They are, in the end, unreal, undependable, untenable.

In Ethan Frome, the point is demonstrated in the most brutal of ways, by casting the very location of Mattie and Ethan’s reverie as the sight of their horrifying attempted suicide. On the day of the accident Ethan and Mattie return to the site of their church picnic, “which, on a long afternoon of the preceding summer had filled the retired place with merry-making” (EF 113). Ethan sees Mattie as “bright as a blackberry,” and remembers with nostalgic pride how they “sat for a few minutes on the fallen log by the pond,” and how it was he who spied her missing gold locket on the moss (EF 113).
“That was all,” the narrator tells us, “but all their intercourse had been made up of just such inarticulate flashes” (ibid). But this is precisely the problem. Like the garden scenes in *The House of Mirth*, the seemingly utopian hush and harmony of these scenes amounts to nothing in Starkfield, precisely because Ethan, like Selden before him, fails to make the word clear: “There were things he had to say to her before they parted, but he could not say them in that place of summer memories, and he turned and followed her in silence to the sleigh” (EF 114). Ethan writes letters he cannot deliver, formulates thoughts he cannot express, teeters on the brink of eloquence only to fall back into habitual—and ineffectual—silence. Wharton underscores the point by employing metaphors that involve words rising to the lips only to be stifled, swallowed, or, in her own language, “killed.” “Words of resistance rushed to Ethan’s lips and died there,” she tells us; “twice he opened his lips to speak to Mattie and found no breath” (EF 108).

In substantial ways, then, Wharton’s characters are maimed well before the climactic sledding scene. The sledding scene and the resulting injuries merely literalize Ethan’s internal damage and inadequacies, making manifest his lingual paralysis and impotence. Mattie’s fate can be read in the horrifying trajectory of her speech, moving from stifled whispers to the inarticulate and unreadable “cheep” of pain at the accident site to the querulous droning that effectively transforms her into another version of Zeena.13

*Ethan Frome*, as told by the engineer-narrator, however, seems to suggest that access to a larger urban world, where speech circulates as freely as trolleys and bicycles, could have saved Ethan—and possibly Mattie—from this cruel fate. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff has it, “Speech is the bridge that might carry Ethan Frome to a world beyond Starkfield, the necessary passport to wider activities and larger horizons . . . A more fully developed capacity to express himself might open avenues of escape (170, 171). As Ethan considers leaving Zeena to run away with Mattie, “his eye [falls] upon an old copy of the *Bettsbridge Eagle*. The advertising sheet was folded uppermost, and he read the seductive words: ‘Trips to the West: Reduced Rates’” (EF 98). The circulating world of language represented by the newspaper and the mobility that has helped “the smart ones get away” to the West are both represented in this description, seeming to offer an avenue to escape and fulfillment that, for Ethan, is blocked by the “inexorable facts” of his existence in Starkfield.

Ethan’s temptation here is yet another fantasy of “lighting out” for the territory, a romantic cliché which should arouse our suspicions. But even more significantly, circulation and mobility, as precisely the forces that entrapped the protagonist in *The House of Mirth*, are even more suspect. *The House of Mirth* is, as we have seen, a novel which in fact seems to espouse a
precisely opposite message; that is, that the hyper-circulation of speech in the urban sphere is itself a fate that can be cruel to endure, presenting its own set of “inexorable facts” which proffers no hope of escape. We therefore must question whether the faith in the world of free circulation is based on the narrator’s assumptions about the superiority of mechanized society; whether he, an engineer, is promulgating yet another myth, a communitarian thesis that offered technology as the source for salvation. A movement from the backhills of Starkfield into a space of circulating language would necessarily be a movement from nature to modernity, from the challenges of a natural world to the inexorable mechanization of urban space and urban speech, but such a maturation does not imply liberation, a fact which Wharton more than adequately demonstrated in her earlier work.

To understand what Wharton might wish for the characters, then, it is not sufficient to look to circulating speech. Instead, Wharton seems to suggest some intermediary between the two destructive poles of language, between manic iteration and suffocating silence, in the nearly synonymous phrases she employs repeatedly in *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*, and, indeed throughout her other work: “the fitting word,” “the word which made all clear,” the “all expressive word,” “the words to utter the secret soul.” Somewhere between the stunted world of Starkfield and the aggressive circulation of New York is a capacity for an ethical use of language that would give public voice to inner truth; that would fulfill the promise that the characters in these works never manage to actualize. Wharton is looking for a linguistic specificity and authenticity that would fall prey neither to the mechanical utterance of an increasingly scientific and industrial society nor to the illusory promises of garden-side romanticism; that would abandon false tropes and clichés and rise to the level of honesty and truth.

Indeed, in her own writing Wharton demonstrates a continual anxiety about presenting the truth, about getting the story right. In her introduction to *Ethan Frome*, she defends her spare style by stating that “any attempt to elaborate and complicate their sentiments would have necessarily falsified the whole tale” (xx). And one of Wharton’s expressed intentions in writing Frome was precisely to provide a corrective to the other fictions of New England, which, in what she perceived as unrealistic presentations of New England life, falsified experience and perpetuated the sorts of fantasies to which Wharton objected. In her author’s introduction to *Ethan Frome*, Wharton declares: “I had an uneasy sense that the New England of fiction bore little—except a vague botanical and dialectical—resemblance to the harsh and beautiful land as I had seen it” (xix). Specifically, she felt that “the outcropping granite had been overlooked” in the “abundant enumeration of sweet fern,
asters, and mountain laurel”—in other words, that the mute, stolid harshness of the land had been ignored in favor of a softer, more hospitable depiction. The metaphor can also be applied generically, pitting the hard, flinty edge of American realism against the more feminized traits of sentimentalism. Wharton was more direct when she declared in her autobiography A Backward Glance that “life as it really was in the derelict mountains villages of New England was utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett” (qtd. in Wolff vi). Again, Wharton makes clear that her aesthetic goal—and perhaps even her ethical goal—was verisimilitude: she objects that these regional fictions did not present *life as it really was*. *Ethan Frome* seems to stand, then, in all its stark and unrelenting pessimism, as a corrective.

Strange, then, that the author concerned with *life as it really was* should give us a narrative frame that leaves us so uncertain about what really is, which gives us instead a “vision,” a completely constructed and imagined version not of life as it really was but life only as it *might have been*, and which brings into question the motivations and assumptions of its narrator—and therefore its very authenticity. Wharton’s inability—or unwillingness—to give us a straightforward portrait of “life as it really was” despite her outright declaration that she would do so in her introduction parallels the vagaries of her prose when she advocates her ideal language: her “fitting word,” “the word which made all clear,” the words to “utter the secret soul” are all abstract and enigmatic phrases that resist full and specific disclosure of either their content or intent. Never does Wharton declare what exactly she means by such a word, such a language; never do we see concrete examples of what such a language would look like, how it would function, whether it would fulfill its promise of sincere and forthright communication. It is as though Wharton believed that such abstractions, suggestions rather than declarations, were as close as her language could ever come to authentic utterance; as though, by saying more, she would risk destroying the very truth and authenticity she most sought to reveal, either by reverting to the sentimentalism she sought so assiduously to avoid or by lapsing herself into the senseless iteration she disdained. For Wharton, the full meaning of any story would therefore necessarily remain “in the gaps;” never quite able to actualize “the fitting word,” Edith Wharton would live out her writing career one step removed from the language she most passionately sought, poised on the very brink of the fullest expression of her eloquence.
Chapter Five

Telling the Tale Over Again: Reclaiming Repetition in *Winesburg, Ohio* and “Death in the Woods”

In his pseudo-autobiography *A Story Teller’s Story*, Sherwood Anderson attempted to explain the aesthetic and ethical goals of his writing: “My aim,” he declared, “is to be true to the essence of things.” Such a statement hints at the reasons why Anderson has been classified as everything from a primitivist to an expressionist; anything, it turns out, but a realist.

And yet when we look at Anderson’s thoughts about language, we find striking affinities with some of his realist predecessors, affinities that have seldom been noted or explored. Although Anderson’s desire for writing that could express the “essence of things” sounds very much like a Romantic conceit, it also, perhaps paradoxically, reminds us of Edith Wharton’s hope for the “word that made all clear,” the language capable of “utter[ing] the secret soul.” Furthermore, the forces that, for Wharton, imperiled such an authentic language—an increasingly mechanized modern world that had proffered an increasingly iterative language on the one hand, and the danger of sentimentality on the other—are of major concern in Anderson’s work. For him, returning to the “asinine sentimental nonsense” of the previous century was not an option, but forging ahead in favor of an ethical language that could convey the deeper meaning he sought was equally problematic.

In “Godliness,” the longest of the tales that comprise *Winesburg, Ohio*, we find a clear exposition of the phenomena that had, for Anderson, problematized language:

> In the last fifty years a vast change has taken place in the lives of our people. A revolution has in fact taken place. The coming of industrialism,
attended by all the roar and rattle of affairs, the shrill cries of millions of new voices that have come among us from overseas, the going and coming of trains, the growth of cities, the building of the interurban car lines that weave in and out of towns and past farm houses, and now in these later days the coming of the automobiles has worked a tremendous change in the lives and in the habits of the people of Mid-America. (56)¹

This passage, of course, offers an eloquent summary of the central forces and motifs of post Civil-War America, pointing most especially to the rise of technologies that changed forever the infrastructure of America through the phenomenon of increased circulation. Like Edith Wharton, Anderson figures these changes in auditory and kinetic terminology (“the roar and rattle of affairs,” “the shrill cries of millions”), and emphasizes verbs of motion—“going and coming,” “weaving in and out and past,” “the coming of automobiles”—a pairing which implicitly forges a connection between the two. Making this connection even more clear, Anderson turns explicitly to the circulation of language in the lines immediately following:

Books, badly imagined and written though they may be in the hurry of our times, are in every household, magazines circulate by the millions of copies, newspapers are everywhere. In our day a farmer standing by the stove in a store in his village has his mind filled to overflowing with the words of other men. The newspapers and magazines have pumped him full. (56)

This “overflowing” of words clearly impugns the hyper-circulation of language characteristic of the period. But this, for Anderson, was not the only danger. On a trip to Washington D.C. to interview then commerce secretary Herbert Hoover, Anderson reflected on the impact of technology on individualism:

All of this industrialism and standardization growing up in my day. I had seen it grow and grow. A whole nation riding in the same kind of cars, smoking the same kind of cigars, wearing the same kind of clothes, thinking the same thoughts. Individualism, among the masses of people, gradually dying. (453)²

Anderson’s own language, as well as the conspicuous repetition and parallel structure he employs, emphasize the point. The legacy of industry and technology is endless repetition, the continuous production and reproduction
of everything from cars, to thoughts, to language. In “Notes on Standardiza-
tion,” we find a similar sentiment:

In one city the attempt is being made to channel the minds of all men
into one iron groove while in the other idiosyncrasies of individuals and
groups are given breathing space and many channels of expression. The
impulse has its roots in the somewhat strange notion, that has for a long
time been becoming more and more prevalent among us, a notion that
to conform to type is man’s highest mission. (141)³

The pun on “type,” referring both to categorization and to the print found
in what Anderson called “the standardized newspaper opinion of the age,”
surely is intentional.

And yet Anderson was in the business of circulating words—in more
than one sense. Working, pointedly, as a copy writer during the period in
which the stories that would comprise Winesburg, Ohio were produced,
Anderson would also later serve as the president of a mail order company
and the editor, concurrently, of two newspapers. Clearly he understood
better than most the phenomena of increased circulation and iteration, an
understanding—and anxiety—which would profoundly affect his career as a
writer of fiction.

Like his realist predecessors, Anderson in fact explores the ramifications
of these forces, particularly in Winesburg, Ohio and “Death in the Woods.”
He delves into the insoluble difficulties of communication in the lives of
his isolated characters, but even more significantly, he explores what these
problems mean for himself as a writer, whose very ability and means to tell
authentic tales, to get to “the essence” of things, is radically brought into
question. As Lionel Trilling puts it, “the ‘vague thoughts’ of the truth [are] a
precious secret essence . . . society, and more particularly industrial society,
threatens these essences . . . the old good values of life have been destroyed
by the industrial dispensation . . . people have been cut off from each
other and even from themselves” (qtd. in Papinchack 6). Anderson’s work is
an effort to reclaim language from senseless standardization and iteration, to
find the means through an authentic, original tale-telling style to convey the
deeper meaning of things to the man who has been “pumped full” with the
mechanical speech of his society.

This very search became, in fact, the central theme of Anderson’s writ-
ing of this period. His stories are not so much about their putative subject
matter as they are about the fraught potential of authentic tale-telling itself.
In Winesburg, Ohio, we find a text consumed with language’s limitations and
the implications of its use and misuse. While “Godliness” overtly refers to the problems of mechanization and standardization and their consequences to language, the concern haunts the entire work. Again and again Anderson reveals the failures of language, the painful difficulty of communication, and the loneliness and dysfunction that such breakdowns in communication leave in their wake.

As in the urban world of Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, language in small-town Winesburg poses a threat; it arouses fear of the damaging potential of “talk.” Conspicuously, the talk most often takes the form of circulating “whispers,” of town gossip; while the presence of the newspaper and its circulation increases these fears. When Doctor Parcival, the eponymous character of “The Philosopher” (himself once a reporter whom people feared), refuses to come out of his office when a child is accidentally killed in the street below, it is the talk of the town that frightens him: “Word of my refusal will be whispered about. Presently men will get together in groups and talk of it. They will come here. We will quarrel and there will be talk of hanging” (42). Seth Richmond’s father Clarence is killed in a fight with a newspaper editor after his name “coupled with that of a woman school teacher” in a Toledo paper (122). And the “whispered tales” concerning Louise Trunion “that had gone about the town” make George feel both “confidence” that he will be able to use her for his own sexual motives and a sort of tacit permission to do so. This sort of “talk,” which has clearly dehumanized Louise, is largely responsible for why “in his heart, there was no sympathy for her” (46).

Idle talk, then, inhibits rather than generates sympathy, something which the most sensitive characters in Winesburg seem to intuitively understand. “Everyone talks and talks,” Seth Richmond observes in a tellingly repetitive phrase; elsewhere he feels “a wave of resentment directed against . . . the men of the town who were, he thought, perpetually talking of nothing” (136, 129). Helen White entertains similar thoughts: “It seemed to her that the world was full of meaningless people saying words” (244). But the standard “talk” of the town is damaging in another way; it denies its inhabitants the outlet for the deeper expression for which they long. Indeed, the central frustration in *Winesburg, Ohio* is the thwarted desire for connection and communication, a communication that demands a departure from the standard town talk.

As a short-story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio* offers tales that are interrelated: Kate Swift, George Willard’s instructor in “The Teacher,” is the same woman on whom Rev. Hartman in “The Strength of God” spies; Helen White, who inspires Seth Richmond’s inarticulate and ill-fated affection in “The Thinker” is the same woman with whom George Willard spends time in
“Sophistication,” Doctor Reefy in “Paper Pills” appears again as the friend of George Willard’s mother in “Death.” And yet, with the important exception of George Willard, the citizens of Winesburg rarely interact directly. Characters whisper about each other but rarely speak to each other. Anderson demonstrates the devastating reality of isolation, then, in both the content and the structure of the tales, and again and again he traces this isolation to the lingual limitations of his characters.

Nearly all of the tales center on characters who cannot speak in the environment in which they live, from Wing Biddlebaum (“the silent”) in “Hands” to Rev. Hartman (“by his nature very silent and reticent”) in “The Strength of God” to Enoch (“inclined to silence”) in “Loneliness” to Seth Richmond’s “habitual silence” in “The Thinker.” Many of the silent characters resent their lingual limitations, but are figured alternatively as victims of the world of circulating speech and victims of their inability to participate in it, to make themselves heard. Elmer Cowley, the central character of the pointedly titled “Queer,” explains the phenomenon most directly: “I go to the post office or the depot to see the train come in,” he confesses, “and no one says anything to me. Everyone stands around and laughs and they talk but they say nothing to me. Then I feel so queer I can’t talk either. I go away. I don’t say anything. I can’t” (198). In “Loneliness,” Anderson offers another example in Enoch Robinson, who, amidst the company of his art club feels the same inability to voice his true thoughts and feelings:

Enoch wanted to talk too but he didn’t know how. He was too excited to talk coherently . . . He knew what he wanted to say, but he knew also that he could never by any possibility say it. When a picture he had painted was under discussion, he wanted to burst out something like this: ‘You don’t get the point,’ he wanted to explain, ‘the picture you see doesn’t consist of things you see and say words about . . . There is something else, something you don’t see at all, something you aren’t intended to see.’ (167–8)

As Robert Morss Lovett puts it, a recurring theme in Anderson’s work is “the effort of the character to break down the wall which confines the individual in isolation” (101). But in both tales Anderson denies even the potential of conveying one’s innermost thoughts, emphasizing that Elmer can’t bring himself to speak and that Enoch could never by any possibility say what he intended and yearned to say. Elmer’s and Enoch’s situations demonstrate the central problem of the text. It is not merely that these characters cannot express themselves. It is that the type of expression they long for seems
completely out of reach in a society that merely “says words.” They long for expression but are caught between an iterative, empty social speech and complete speechlessness. In other words, Anderson’s characters display in poignant relief the difficulty writers from Twain to Wharton grappled with all along, the problem of how to convey one’s depths in a language which, in its increasing affinity with mechanization, was becoming progressively less capable of allowing for such individual expression.

Anderson, however, represents his characters in even greater extremity than did the writers who preceded him. Most of the tales document a critical moment in the desperation of these people to communicate; some erupt in futile violence. Interestingly, it is during such crises that characters who long to transcend town talk most compulsively revert to iteration. Alice Hindman of “Adventure,” for example, trapped in a hell of private iteration in which the words of her lover “echoed and re-echoed through [her] mind,” repeats “I am waiting . . . over and over” before running naked out into a storm (107).

But perhaps the most potent example of compulsive iteration and its connection to industry and technology is once again to be found in “Queer.” Elmer Cowley, intent on confronting George Willard and “challeng[ing] all of Winesburg through him,” orchestrates a showdown, significantly, at the Winesburg depot. Standing on the platform beside “the train that had begun to groan and get under way,” Elmer “lost control of his tongue” (202). Instead of the inner truth he desperately wishes to convey to George, essentially that he is worthy of attention and affection and has been unjustly ostracized by the townspeople, Elmer uncontrollably lapses into the mindless iteration of a turn of phrase: “I’ll be washed and ironed. I’ll be washed and ironed and starched” (ibid). Here Elmer essentially becomes another mechanized force, unable to control even his own expression, as Anderson’s description reveals: he “danced with fury beside the groaning train in the darkness on the station platform. Lights leaped into the air and bobbed up and down before his eyes” (ibid). And in this way Anderson draws another parallel between compulsive iteration and its connection to the incursion of industry and technology. Elmer’s only recourse seems to be violence, when, with “a snarl of rage” he hits George Willard, blow after blow, leaving the young reporter half-unconscious on the platform, as he “spring[s] aboard the passing train and run[s] over the tops of cars” (202). The final words of the story again relapse into iteration, as Elmer Cowley ironically repeats: “I guess I showed him. I ain’t so queer. I guess I showed him I ain’t so queer” (ibid). It is as though there is no alternative for characters such as Elmer Cowley to speak, no possibility of expression, and the extremity of their frustration and desperation to escape from the language in which they are caught and the isolation it
has produced drives them sometimes to violent eruptions, sometimes to the brink of sanity.

And yet the central figure of \textit{Winesburg, Ohio}, the one figure that unites tales otherwise as disparate and disconnected as the denizens of the town themselves, is George Willard, the newspaper reporter for the \textit{Winesburg Eagle}. Indeed, George is the one character who recurs throughout the cycle of tales, and in most cases his presence in each story has everything to do with his own ability to \textit{tell} stories. “The idea that George would someday become a writer” is the factor that “had given him a place of distinction in Winesburg” (138), a distinction which posits both menace and promise. In the single character of George Willard, Anderson manages to suggest both the threatening and heartening potentialities of language, of the power to construct stories. By establishing the central character as a reporter and by making the real story of all the tales the desire to \textit{tell} stories, Anderson foregrounds his concern with language and provides himself with an opportunity to explore the fraught potential of language in his time.

On one hand, certain characters harbor suspicions about George precisely because of his affiliation with a newspaper (indeed, since George is the only reporter, he serves as a sort of symbol for it); because he is a reporter in the business of news, George is associated with the dangerous—and meaningless—propensities of manic iteration, by which many characters feel oppressed. In the collection’s first tale, Wing Biddlebaum criticizes George on the basis of his attempts to imitate talk, to become merely another cog in the iterative machine: “You want to be like others in town here. You hear them talk and you try to imitate them” (12). Elmer Cowley’s entire perception of George in “Queer,” as we have seen, is based on his standing as a reporter: “Did he not represent public opinion and had not the public opinion of Winesburg condemned the Cowleys to queerness?” (195). And in George’s company, Seth Richmond finds himself asking, “why does he never tire of his eternal talking?” (130). The resentment these characters feel is also indicative of their awareness that idle talk has claimed power in the modern world. The “talkers” will always win out over those relegated to silence, a realization that leads Seth Richmond to conclude that “when it comes to loving someone, it won’t never be me. It’ll be someone else—some fool—someone who talks a lot—someone like that George Willard” (137).

On the other hand, language in \textit{Winesburg, Ohio}, specifically the language of story telling, lingers in the minds of the inhabitants as a possible means of salvation, the only means of liberating them from their loneliness. The citizens of Winesburg therefore turn time and again to George Willard because they presuppose that he, as a writer, possesses a certain facility with
language that eludes them. George’s talents as a writer offer the possibility of connection, a proffering of a language that will at last allow his lingually-stunted neighbors to be heard, perhaps understood, and, in due course, for their stories to be told in a manner that others may understand. This explains the urgency with which George is typically encountered throughout the volume of tales, from the intensity of Joe Welling’s demand, “You carry a little pad of paper in your pocket, don’t you?” and his desperate instructions to “get this down” (96–7) as he spouts his ideas, to Dr. Parcival’s imperative: “You must pay attention to me . . . If something happens perhaps you will be able to write the book that I may never get written” (42). The unspoken but nonetheless pervasive chord that ties these characters together is precisely this hope and this longing, that George can somehow transform the meaningless and the incomprehensible into something that can be heard and known, something that will matter. In a very real way the denizens of Winesburg require the same of George Willard as Anderson’s aesthetic principles required of himself or any writer: these characters do not offer their stories to be objectified by senseless town talk, but rather in the hopes that a real writer can get to the “essence” of not only what they say but what they mean.

In his better moments, George seems capable of reading some truth, of glimpsing this “essence” in the reticent and inarticulate townsfolk; in his best moments, that understanding elicits compassion. Such a reaction transcends mere iteration, and offers some hope that the desperate loneliness of these characters can be mollified. Sitting in Enoch Robinson’s room in “Loneliness,” George is inspired to such compassion: “he wanted to put his arms about the little old man. In the half-darkness the man talked and the boy listened, filled with sadness” (174). An even more potent example occurs in “Respectability,” a story centering on Wash Williams, the town’s telegraph operator, who, not coincidentally, is described as “the ugliest thing in town” (113). George sees something worth his attention even in the grotesque Wash Williams: “Something he saw lurking in the starry eyes told him that the man who had nothing to say to others had nevertheless something to say to him” (116). At the conclusion of this story, George is able to hear the beauty of a genuine story even as it issues from a detestable man who has made himself loathsome through the strength of his own hate: “there was something almost beautiful in the voice of Wash Williams, the hideous, telling his story of hate. The telegraph operator of Winesburg, sitting on the railroad ties, had become a poet” (117).

Here Anderson summarizes the necessary conversion of language, from sheer circulation and mechanization represented by the telegraph and railroad ties, to a tale which reveals some private and painful truth. Juxtaposing
the industrial and mechanical scene with a language that can elicit compassion, Anderson offers the possibility of a new language, a “poetry,” which can transcend senseless “talk.”

But Edwin Fussel’s point, that Anderson demonstrates a “refusal to sentimentalize the figure of the writer,” is important to bear in mind (43). George Willard is by no means an unimpeachable character, nor does he necessarily or effortlessly offer either the understanding or the expression for which his neighbors long. In fact, the tales more frequently demonstrate the difficulty of eliciting the true meaning of a story one is told. Dr. Parcival may see George as the proper inheritor of his tales, but the story of “The Philosopher” itself reveals George’s pained attempts to grapple with what has been related to him: “The tales that Doctor Parcival told George Willard began nowhere and ended nowhere. Sometimes the boy thought they must all be inventions, a pack of lies. And then again he was convinced that they contained the essence of truth” (36–7). In “The Teacher,” George cannot comprehend anything that Kate Swift intends by her talk, despite the ironic fact that she is the one person in town who most believes in his ability to transcend common iteration and become a real writer: “For the fourth or fifth time the woman had talked to him with great eagerness and he could not make out what she meant by her talk” (155). It is significant that Kate has tried to repeat herself numerous times. In seeking to make herself understood, Kate resorts to repetition. And it is somewhere in the repetition of her speech that George must ferret out the essence of what she hopes to convey, a metaphor for the larger task facing George Willard or any tale-teller hoping to find meaningful stories within iterative language. But George cannot get beyond a realization that he “had missed something . . . something Kate Swift was trying to tell” him (164). The nature and substance of that “something” eludes him; the “essence” of the teacher is lost in incomprehensible language.

George’s position vis à vis language and storytelling, then, is always precarious; both whether he will prove capable of interpreting the tales he is told and how he will use the stories that have been entrusted to him are repeatedly brought into question. If the Winesburg tales chart George Willard’s coming of age, it is most significantly his instruction in language on which Anderson focuses. The “Awakening” he experiences in the story of the same name is in large part an awakening into language; George Willard begins to feel the overwhelming desire to “say words”: “He said words without meaning, rolling them over on his tongue and saying them because they were brave words, full of meaning” (185). But the crucial question at the heart of his maturation as a writer is whether or not he will stagnate as
this level of merely saying words, or rise to the distinction Kate Swift, who
thinks he “might possess a talent for the understanding of life” imagines for
him—to “understand the import of life, to learn to interpret it truly and
honestly” and to convey that interpretation in genuine tales (161).

Wing Biddlebaum’s admonition, that he must “shut [his] ears to the
roaring of the voices” (13), and Kate Swift’s imperative that he must learn
“to know what people are thinking about, not what they say,” (161) both
emphasize a similar, albeit paradoxical point—that for George Willard or
any writer to become a teller of tales capable of speaking the truth, he must
not heed the lingual rules of his own society. That is, he must accomplish
what Mark Twain had hoped for Huck Finn: he must transcend mere “talk,”
must go beyond senseless iteration, and reach for something deeper. “Talk”
is language which conceals rather than revealing, which smothers sympa-
thetic identification and understanding rather than catalyzing it. When Kate
admonishes George that he “must not become a mere peddler of words,” (to
peddle meaning to sell, but also meaning to circulate), she is warning him
away mechanical iteration, from betraying the deeper expression he as a tale
teller must pursue (161).

The last brief tale of the collection, “Departure,” which again makes
use of the industrial trope of the train, features George as he prepares to leave
Winesburg for life in big-city Chicago. Some critics have read this tale as a
rather unproblematic and paradigmatic coming of age scene, but there is cer-
tainly nothing blithely hopeful in Anderson’s representation. The possibility
that George Willard will become a key component of the iterative machine
himself is very real. In other words, Anderson implies a very credible risk that
the tales with which George has been entrusted will be merely reiterated, if
they are remembered at all; that George will fail to raise them above the level
of widely-circulated gossip and thereby deny his town’s residents the deeper
expression for which they most yearned.

Many critics have conflated the George Willard character with the
voice of the narrator. But George does not narrate the tales; in some ways,
in fact, Anderson suggests that he cannot yet do so, that he has not matured
enough as a writer to do so. The narrative voice of Winesburg, Ohio, a sensi-
bility completely distinct from George Willard, demonstrates what and who
George Willard may be if he finds a way to respond to Kate Swift’s call, if
he can try to transcend the dangers and difficulties of iterative speech. The
metanarrative of the work is really about this authorial voice, how this writer
composing and organizing the tales which George has merely heard grapples
with the very issues the tales raise about the difficulties of communication.
It exposes the ways in which Anderson himself, as the author of the tales,
goes about attempting to forge an authentic language, authentic expression. He seems, after all, to be at least partially successful: though the characters are not always able to reveal themselves to George Willard, we as readers nonetheless learn something about their inner selves from reading Anderson’s stories about them, stories which do seem to transcend mere iteration and evoke a sympathetic response. Anderson argues in his introductory sketch to the volume that even his grotesques are still “understandable and lovable” but really it is the tales he tells that reveal them to be so.4

But how does Anderson accomplish this? As a writer, Anderson believed that the artist’s task was to tear the “heavy iron lid” away so that “a kind of release takes place” (qtd. in Stouck 28). He once explained that he heard his characters say to him, “You must do me right now . . . there is a certain morality involved . . .” (qtd. in Papinchak 61). But “mere trickery,” as he often termed it, would not suffice. In fact, recourse to aesthetic “trickery” could lead a writer to that generic outland of sentimentalism: “It I do tricks with [the character] in the imaginative world, sell him out, I become merely a romance” (93). In this sense, Anderson faced the same dilemma as his realist predecessors: how to write in favor of ethical response without reverting to romance; how to write in a world saturated with words in a way that would transform rather than merely adding to the iteration that characterized the times.

Anderson admitted that his “stories were written by someone who obviously did not know the answers:"

I could not give the answers, and so a long time when my stories began to appear . . . I was almost universally condemned by the critics. My stories, it seemed, had no definite ends. They were not conclusive and did not give the answers, and so I was called vague. ‘Groping’ was a favorite term. It seems I could not get a formula and stick to it. I could not be smart about life. (qtd. in Papinchak 69)

But instead of trying to obscure this point, deny it as a defect, Anderson embraces and showcases it in his work. Anderson’s stories, in other words, are deliberately inconclusive, not only demonstrating the difficulty of language ever reaching full disclosure but establishing it as a central and recurring theme in his work. In his view, denying this reality was inauthentic. “Our writers, our storytellers,” Anderson maintained, “by wrapping life up into neat little packages were only betraying life” (ibid). Grounding himself in modernism, Anderson seems to suggest that sincere language can no longer sustain itself in a whole, complete, self-enclosed form. As W.B. Yeats would have it in 1921, “the centre cannot hold.”5
For Anderson, authenticity was not to be found in “neat little packages,”
definite, whole, and transparent, but in the few carefully chosen details
of life, suggestive, if handled correctly, of a larger reality. As Anderson stated
in *A Story Teller’s Story*, he believed that “the true history of life is but a his-
tory of moments,” and therefore approached his writing with intense con-
centration on select moments, select fragments. The ability to discover a
significant scrap of life, the part that would suggest the whole, was key to
conveying the deeper meaning he sought, the “essence of things.” As David
D. Anderson observes, Anderson’s “concern was for the spirit rather than
the facts of what he had learned in his search . . . through his art and his
craft the facts would then be transmitted into something a great deal more
meaningful than they were in their natural, limited settings” (129). Such
vital images would “distill mere facts” into something more meaningful,
something that would delve beyond the one-dimensional utterance of mere
talk. “I’m trying again,” Anderson confided in a letter, describing his process,
“A man has to begin over and over—to try to think and feel only in a very
limited field, the house on the street, the man at the corner drug store” (qtd.
in Papinchack 49).

Such fragments taken from this “very limited field” would therefore
become the raw materials of Anderson’s prose. The way in which they were
handled, however, is the true key to Anderson’s work. Much has been written
on Anderson’s unique prose style, its direct, declarative statements, its rejec-
tion of subordination, its affinity for short, Anglo-Saxon words to replace
Latinate diction. Many critics, while acknowledging its influence on writers
such as Ernest Hemingway, see this style as “simple” or “naive,” an attempt to
give us the world with direct immediacy. But, as we have seen, Anderson was
highly dubious as to language’s ability ever to offer up reality in any simple,
direct way. In fact, *Winesburg, Ohio* is a work which continuously exposes
the difficulties language creates, the schisms between one’s reality and the
means of expression available. Language, more often than not, fails to reflect
truth. The work demonstrates this schism not only on the level of content
with characters driven to desperation by their inability to communicate, but
also in its metanarrative about an author struggling to create a volume of
stories which hope to reveal something about these characters that their own
language failed to reveal.

This struggling authorial voice is made apparent to the reader in
repeated intrusions and interruptions, interruptions that belie the supposed
artlessness, directness, and simplicity of Anderson’s prose. These self-reflexive
moves not only expose the construction—and constructedness—of the tales,
but also reveal the fallibility and imperfection of that construction. Anderson
makes no attempt to disguise it, to disappear into unobtrusive omniscience, but rather exposes the working revisions of a writer grappling with his own language.

Anderson repeatedly interrupts the narrative to correct descriptions and revise metaphors, for example. In “A Man of Ideas,” Anderson not only revises the metaphor he employs to describe Joe Welling, but conspicuously points to his revision: “He was like a tiny little volcano that lies silent for days and then suddenly spouts fire. No—he wasn’t like that—he was like a man who is subject to fits” (93). In “Respectability,” the interruptive voice criticizes his own temptation to rush the story, and the inaccuracy of description that results: “Everything about [Wash Williams] was unclean. Even the whites of his eyes looked soiled. I go too fast. Not everything about Wash was unclean. He took care of his hands” (127). In “Adventure,” Anderson pauses to muse on an ancillary character, Alice’s step-father, whose story is not chosen for exploration in Winesburg, Ohio, but could have been: “His story is an odd one. It will be worth telling some day” (103). And in “Loneliness,” Anderson interrupts in an attempt to ensure the understanding of the reader:

The room in which young Robinson lived in New York faced Washing-
ton Square and was long and narrow like a hallway. It is important to get that fixed in your mind. The story of Enoch is in fact the story of a room almost more than the story of a man. (169)

At times Anderson becomes completely dissatisfied with his own rendering, and seems to lose faith in his ability to revise sufficiently or make himself sufficiently clear to his reader. At these moments, Anderson invokes what he terms the “poet.”

The story of Wing Biddlebaum’s hands is worth a book in itself. Sympathetically set forth it would tap many strange, beautiful qualities in obscure men. It is a job for a poet. (11)

Within the next two pages, Anderson interrupts his story again: “Let us look briefly into the story of the hands. Perhaps our talking of them will arouse the poet who will tell the hidden wonder story of the influence for which the hands were but fluttering pennants of promise” (13). Two short paragraphs later, Anderson interrupts himself yet again: “And yet that is but crudely stated. It needs the poet there” (14).

The conditional tense in the first example makes Anderson’s point clear. If someone capable of such rendering could “sympathetically set forth”
the story of Wing Biddlebaum’s hands, it *would* tap many strange, beautiful qualities, evoking and conveying a powerful message. But such a condition is also an implicit admission that Anderson is not capable of doing so himself with the language he is able to wield. It takes a “poet” for such a job, one more capable with language than he. The poet is the writer who can reveal “the hidden wonder story,” who can go beyond surface realities to reveal something deeper. Anderson exhibits some hope that his language will be transformed in such a way, from mere “talking” to a “hidden wonder story,” but the “perhaps” that begins his thought makes his tentative uncertainty clear. For Anderson, his own writing is rightly deemed “crude.” Direct declarative statement is in fact “crude;” Anderson strives instead for greater subtlety, a subtlety that somehow transcends our common means of speech.

Clearly, Anderson writes on behalf of a would-be language that always exceeds what he—or perhaps any writer—is able to produce. The language of the “poet” comes to represent the impossible dream for writers: a language capable of complete revelation, which could convey all and evoke total and transparent understanding of another’s experience. In invoking the poet, though, Anderson does not regress to a romantic viewpoint. On the contrary, he reminds us of the impossibility of his longing ever reaching actualization; he continually underscores the inadequacy and incompetence of language ever to reach its ideal form.

And yet, Anderson still attempts to approach that ideal, to try to forge such a poetry. Clearly, it was not enough merely to describe certain key fragments of life. For maximum impact, Anderson hoped to somehow galvanize such fragments with vitality and resonance. But he approaches his goal with indirection, adopting a methodology that is layered, nuanced; a methodology that seeks, through gradual accretion, to charge prosaic details with significance, to convert image into symbol. And to do so Anderson turns in an unlikely direction—back toward the very repetition the realist movement had brought into question.

For a writer so acutely aware of the dangers and ramifications of iteration, and for a thinker staunchly opposed to the deadening habituality mechanized language had left in its wake, the deliberate adoption of repetition in Anderson’s prose might seem puzzling. But there is nothing automatic, nothing thoughtlessly mechanical about Anderson’s use of repetition. On the contrary, what we find in Anderson, more radically than in the works of Stephen Crane, is a deliberate strategy to appropriate repetition from the greater social world, to reclaim it for his own purposes, to convert it from a damaging social reflex to a deliberately employed aesthetic strategy. Such a strategy would enable Anderson to create a sort of prose cubism—repeating
and refracting significant images in ways which excite and complicate our reading of the scenes he represents.9

What Anderson’s work offers is therefore not the opposite of iteration but a different use of iteration to forge a new ethics of storytelling. In other words, his prose incorporates—not merely repudiates—the effects of technology. As F. Richard Thomas has it, “for Anderson the crucial problem was how to make the machine a tool rather than a dictator,” (67)10 and in his attempts to do so he creates a unique, deliberately structured repetition which proliferates slowly and thoughtfully, contrasting sharply with the manic and mechanical repetition of his time. Whereas iteration commonly flattens its subject, emptying it further of significance each time it is repeated, Anderson’s repetition functions as a sort of palimpsest, in which meaning is layered and gradually accrues. Multiple viewpoints on the same subject are provided within the confines of a single story, much like the simultaneous visions of a single object on a cubist canvas. Whereas repetition typically dulls the capacity for individual thought and feeling, Anderson hopes to employ his cubist use of repetition in the service of greater emotive and ethical response.

Winesburg, Ohio offers many instances of this strategy. “Paper Pills,” the second tale in the collection, provides a salient example. The first paragraph offers what seems to be typical exposition. We are told that the doctor married “a girl who had money” and that the girl “was quiet, tall, and dark” (18). The following paragraph begins with an image of Doctor Reefy’s hands: “The knuckles of he doctor’s hands were extraordinarily large. When the hands were closed they looked like clusters of unpainted wooden balls as large as walnuts fastened together with steel rods” (ibid); and two paragraphs later Anderson arrives at the trope that has given the tale its title, the doctor’s curious habit of continually stuffing his pockets with scraps of paper that become “little hard round balls,” or, “paper pills” (19).

In the next paragraph, Anderson begins: “The story of Doctor Reefy and his courtship of the tall dark girl who became his wife and left her money to him is a very curious story” (19). Not only does this opening reveal once again the self-reflexive nature of Anderson’s prose, it makes use of conspicuous—and perhaps, it initially seems, superfluous—repetition. Circling back to the original exposition, it seems to offer us little in the way of additional information or understanding.

But as the paragraph develops, Anderson’s methodology gradually becomes clearer. In this paragraph Anderson begins to forge an extended metaphor, in which he initially compares the “twisted little apples that grow in the orchards of Winesburg” to the “curious story” of Dr. Reefy:
In the fall one walks in the orchards and the ground is hard with frost underfoot. The apples have been taken from the trees by the pickers. They have been put in barrels and shipped to the cities where they will be eaten in apartments that are filled with books, magazines, furniture, and people. On the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. They look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy’s hands. One knibbles at them and they are delicious. Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all of its sweetness. One runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground picking the gnarled, twisted apples and filling his pockets with them. Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples. (19–20)

In this single passage, Anderson refers to “twisted little apples,” a “few gnarled apples;” “gnarled twisted apples;” and finally simply “twisted apples.” Selecting a minimal number of lexical items, “apples” modified only by “gnarled” and “twisted,” Anderson combines them in varying ways that are repetitive yet offer a slightly different resonance each time, creating a unique brand of repetition with variation, and subtly complicating our reading and understanding. In fact, our perspectives on the story of Dr. Reefy begin to multiply, and it is in this multiplication of viewpoints that Anderson’s prose gains its power.

After the twisted apples digression, Anderson returns to Doctor Reefy and his “paper pills:” “already he had begun the practice of filling his pockets with the scraps of paper that became hard balls and were thrown away” (20). Once again, the narrator repeats information with which the reader is already familiar; again he circles back to exposition already given two paragraphs earlier. And yet, our perception of the details has been subtly altered by the interjection that divides these two iterations of Reefy’s curious practice. Rereading the material after the paragraph devoted to the “twisted apples,” we begin to make connections we had not made the first time through. It is as though Dr. Reefy has appeared again on another imaginative plane; Anderson has offered the same information, but has nonetheless altered our perspective. The repetition of the images helps to forge implicit connections between them, connections which expand and deepen our understanding. Reefy’s knuckles (“they looked like clusters of unpainted wooden balls as large as walnuts fastened together by steel rods”), the hard round balls of paper, and the twisted apples all share common aspects of description. The ground, the apples, and the balls of paper are all “hard;” both the twisted apples and the ideas on the scraps of paper are things rejected; the apples, the balls of paper, and Doctor Reefy’s knuckles are all round; one fills one’s pockets with the
apples just as Dr. Reefy fills his pocket with the scraps of paper that become hard round balls. Rather than dulling our capacity to be moved, Anderson's use of repetition multiplies and expands associations, increasing the possible connections with the true “essence” of the thing represented.

But most significant in this extraordinary handling of repetition is the way in which the images become representative of the deeper psychological reality of the characters. We learn something about Dr. Reefy that is never explicitly or directly stated. The repetition of “twisted” and “gnarled,” the association of these adjectives with Reefy's own hands, the emphasis on apples that are both twisted and sweet and their connection to the scraps of Reefy's private thoughts on the scraps of paper that fill his pockets—all of these iterated details begin to create an understanding of the character that exceeds the sum of its parts. The suggestiveness of the prose, which relies on the accumulation of metaphor possible only through repetition, creates the power of Anderson's portrait.

In Anderson's prose, then, the significant and carefully chosen fragments of life become symbols through the aggregate power of repetition. Such symbols convey a greater intensity of meaning and significance, and therefore help Anderson to approach his goal of a new prose “poetry,” of a type of language in which hidden essence gains expression. And yet the very fact that Anderson's prose turns toward metaphor and symbolism is a tacit admission once again of language's limitations. A symbol, after all, represents something beyond, something in absence; it points to that which is not there, cannot be otherwise articulated. In that sense symbolism is a tool of ineffability. Anderson's prose is driven to images of heightened suggestiveness precisely because language denies him the direct and total revelation he seeks. As Frank Gado explains, “In Anderson, the hidden knowledge remains hidden . . . because its ramifications and implications lie beyond language’s power of containment” (108).

If we were to examine Winesburg, Ohio as a whole, we would find that this is precisely how the entire volume functions. Repetition occurs on a macrocosmic level, linking entire tales together to form a cohesive volume. The word “hands,” occurring multiple times in Wing Biddlebaum's tale, is figured throughout in striking images: Kate Swift's “sharp little fists” beating George Willard; Rev. Hartman's bloody fist, smashed through the church window; Dr. Reefy's knuckles. Each individual example helps to form a composite portrait. Hands themselves become symbols of the characters' isolation and desperate need for expression, and that loneliness and need for communication become in turn the thematic repetition that binds the tales together. Winesburg, Ohio, perhaps initially—and deceptively—simple and
straightforward in its appearance, therefore leaves us with what Robert Allen Papinchak has called “a kind of accumulated wisdom” (20); strategic and subtle repetition with variation effectively conveys something of the essence of these pained characters.

But Anderson was never entirely satisfied with his results. He was known to rewrite completely certain stories dozens of times, sometimes over a span of years. In his entire oeuvre, the story most emblematic of this dissatisfaction and revision is his masterpiece, “Death in the Woods,” a tale that took well over a decade to get right. The brief five-part tale tells the story of Mrs. Grimes, stooped and prematurely old at forty, and her attempts to go to town to retrieve meat for the bevy of animals she must feed, including her husband and son. Frail, starving, and sickly, she dies on a snowy moonlit evening in a clearing in the woods.

But it is also the tale of a writer who, in his youth, witnessed the dead body of the woman and who, ever since, has been attempting to structure the experience into a tale that both grants dignity to a woman denied it during her lifetime and conveys the deeper meanings and implications of her experience to an audience in a sympathetic way. The dangers, once again, are sentimentalizing the tale or rendering it just another iterative piece of gossip. Not coincidentally for a story so long in the making, “Death in the Woods” most acutely registers Anderson’s concerns about the very difficulty of tale-telling.

The first-person narrative voice seeking to assemble and structure the tale is itself a sort of character in the tale, and his voice, like the narrative voice in *Winesburg, Ohio*, interrupts the story to muse and speculate, sometimes in parenthetical interjections: “(I wonder how I know all this. It must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy)” (433). Here Anderson not only points to his own story as a story, but points to its derivation—as something heard from other tales that circulated around the town. With such an admission Anderson places himself and his tale in danger of the very reflexive iteration to which he and his realist predecessors so vehemently objected. But this is precisely the point, precisely the challenge which Anderson directly takes on in this tale. Here more than anywhere else in his work Anderson wants to test the George Willard thesis, wants to discover if he can transcend mere iteration to forge an authentic tale. To do so he must go beyond what was “whispered about” in town about the woman and her husband (411). By alluding to such “whisperings” Anderson establishes the nature of his own tale by contrast. It is not, as we have seen, that his writing is divorced artificially from such iteration, but rather that the ways in which he seeks to reclaim repetition, to convert it from thoughtless to thoughtful,
habitual to deliberate, allows him to use it for his own ends—ends which hope to counter rather than perpetuate mindlessness; ends which seek to inspire rather than deaden sympathy.

In fact, to establish the intended contrast, Anderson once again includes the presence of “news” in the figure of his brother, the “newsboy” of the town who is in the act of delivery papers when he is interrupted by the tale of the body in the woods, and who returns to delivering the news after the incident. The brother first tells the story to the narrator’s family, and it is his telling of it that has left the narrator unsatisfied:

I went with my brother to distribute the rest of his papers and when we got home it was my brother who told the story. I kept silent and went to bed early. It may have been I was not satisfied with the way he told it. (422)

Although he does not say so explicitly, the dissatisfaction the narrator feels, a dissatisfaction not with the content of the tale but in the manner of its telling, could have everything to do with his brother’s news-like delivery that, in its blind iteration of the events, does not convey the deeper meaning of the tale. This dissatisfaction with the manner of telling the tale, of handling and circulating language, “impel[s]” the narrator to “try to tell the simple tale over again” (424).

And yet the tale of the old woman, who somehow “got into” the storyteller’s “thoughts” as more than just news, poses a problem similar to that which Anderson encountered in telling the tales of Winesburg, Ohio—how to reveal the inner life of this woman know one knew or cared to know. Like many of the Winesburg characters, the woman was someone unheard in her life, someone consistently isolated and repeatedly rendered voiceless. Anderson makes abundantly clear in the tale’s first section that the woman is considered “nothing special,” that she is “one of the nameless ones that hardly anyone knows” (411). As a young “bound” girl on the farm, the woman is nearly raped on several occasions, but the farmer “told the girl he would kill her if she told.” “What could she do?” the narrator asks. (413). As an adult, enduring a cruel and unfaithful husband and the brunt of poverty, “no one ever talked to her in town” (415). Utilizing a mechanical metaphor for the unthinking tendencies of the town, Anderson tells us that “people drive right down a road and never notice an old woman like that” (411). The woman has been disenfranchised not only from a community but from language itself; the woman is capable neither of speaking up for herself, nor of making herself heard had she tried.
Anderson's construction of the tale, intended both to reclaim it from the iteration of his newsboy-brother and the whisperings of the town and to reveal something of the harshness of the life of a woman no one ever noticed, once again hinges on the narrator's recovery of and use of significant fragments. In trying to recollect how he came to assemble his version of the story, the narrator uses this terminology himself: “Later, in town, I must have heard other fragments of the old woman's story” (422); “The fragments . . . had to be picked up slowly, long afterwards” (423). By isolating key details and working them over and over, Anderson attempts to transcend the level of common iteration and move into the realm of suggestive symbolism. And to do so, Anderson once again employs strategic repetition.

The story in fact begins with Anderson's signature repetition with variation, as he utilizes phrases such as “she was an old woman;” “all country people have seen such old women;” “such an old woman” over and over on a single page. As the story progresses, key elements and themes are handled with similarly repetitive prose, emphasizing in particular the woman's role as “one destined to feed animal life” (423). Feeding is the recurring theme here; or, more precisely, the woman’s value only as one expected to be the feeder of others, itself an act demanding lifelong repetition. In the story’s first section, Anderson describes the woman’s role on the farm of her youth: “she fed them and fed the cows in the barn, fed the pigs, the horses and the chickens. Every moment of every day, as a young girl, was spent feeding something” (414). The next paragraph begins, “Then she married Jake Grimes and he had to be fed” (ibid). Three paragraphs later, Anderson returns to the refrain again: “She had to scheme all her life about getting things fed, getting the pigs fed . . .” (ibid), and then rejoins again after only one brief paragraph digression, “How was she going to get everything fed?” (415). Towards the end of the section, when the butcher, angry at the maltreatment of the old woman, indicates he’d rather see the husband and son starve before they ate the meat from his shop, the woman returns to her mantra: “Well, things had to be fed. Men had to be fed, and the horses . . . and the poor thin cow. . . .” (416).

Anderson concludes the section with a mere fragment, a catalogue of previously iterated words removed from the context of their sentences, distilled to their most potent form: “horses, cows, pigs, dogs, men” (ibid). But, rather than stripping the terms of their meaning, the repetition of the terms actually gives them their resonance and impact in this concluding fragment. They have weight because they were repeated throughout the story, because we have come to understand what would otherwise have been the most prosaic of nouns in a new, suggestive, and ultimately tragic, light. It is as though,
after fracturing and multiplying the view of feeding, Anderson is then able to reduce it down to its barest elements, elements that are only charged with meaning because of the multi-faceted view we developed through his repetitive prose. The repeated words not only underscore the woman’s dismal fate as the one destined to feed each of these creatures, but, by ending the succession of “feeders” with men, change our conception of how we see our fellow man. Here, he is not just another animal, but, placed last in the list of brutes, is represented as perhaps the lowest and least noble of the creatures feeding off the woman in the story. Repetition used in this way evokes an ethical response; dynamic rather than static, it moves the reader toward greater awareness—toward, as Anderson hoped, compassionate understanding.

But while the theme of feeding emphasizes the tragic reality of the woman’s experience, the trope of the circling dogs most directly points to the narrator’s experience. Anderson first turns to this image as he describes the woman on the brink of death; the dogs satiate their immediate hunger with rabbits they have hunted in the woods, then begin a sort of ritual on which Anderson focuses with particular attention:

They began to play, running in circles in the clearing. Round and round they ran, each dog’s nose at the tail of the next dog. In the clearing, under the snow-laden trees and under the wintry moon they made a strange picture, running thus silently, in a circle their running had beaten in the soft snow. The dogs made no sound. They ran around and around in the circle. (418)

The first sentence of this passage tells us that the dogs were “running in circles” and that it took place “in the clearing.” The second line restates that the dogs were running “round,” already made clear by the “circle” of the previous line, a repetition which is redoubled by the repetitive phrase “round and round.” The next sentence repeats that all of this occurred “in the clearing,” under the trees and under the moon, and repeats yet again that the dogs ran in circles. Though this sentence emphasizes that the dogs’ motion is silent in the soft snow, the next sentence nonetheless reiterates that “the dogs made no sound.” Finally, Anderson concludes the paragraph by telling the reader for the fourth time that the dogs ran in circles, then increases the weight of the iteration by adding another repetitive phrase, “around and around.”

Clearly, this is an extraordinarily repetitive passage which has, in the end, a sort of layering effect on the consciousness of the reader, converting the image of dogs running into an almost mystic symbol of heightened significance. Anderson has limited our vision, targeted it on a specific moment,
a specific trope, as a painter would do within the finite space of a canvas. He circles over that canvas again and again, and each repetition provides a slightly different view on the scene. But although the passage does function to create a clearer sense of the scene Anderson wishes to create, providing the sort of accumulated wisdom of the Winesburg tales and underscoring the significance of this particular “moment” in life, the repetition of this passage functions in other significant ways as well. In some ways, its impact is similar to the impact of Anderson’s authorial intrusions; that is, both pull back the veil of the story to reveal the literary construction behind the scenes. It is as though the paragraph contains miniature drafts; phrases are worked and re-worked as the author struggles to get the scene precisely right. And this works in the larger scheme of the story as a whole, a story which is more about an author’s pained attempts to tell a story than it is about the old woman herself. In fact, Anderson did write and re-write the story for some twelve years before arriving at this version. But rather than effacing these multiple attempts, Anderson in some way includes them, or at least alludes to the reality of re-writing; it is repetition as means for revision. The trope of the circling dogs, then, is particularly germane. Anderson himself has circled, round and round, this same territory internally for years. He continues to circle, to revisit, to revise, in attempts at fidelity to an experience that defies language, a position made even more clear by the other significant clusters of repetition towards the story’s end:

I had seen everything, had seen the oval in the snow, like a miniature race track, where the dogs had run, had seen how the men were mystified, had seen the white bare young-looking shoulders, had heard the whispered comments of the men. (422)

The repetition here is more subtle but still potently in evidence. Again, Anderson makes use of parallel structure; he “had seen everything, had seen the oval . . . had seen . . . the men . . . had seen the . . . shoulders.” Not coincidentally, the first variation in this succession highlights the auditory component of the event—he had heard the whispered comments. On the following page, Anderson revisits this passage, repeating again with variation: “I remember only the picture there in the forest, the men standing about, the naked, girlish-looking figure . . . the tracks made by the running dogs . . .” (423). While in the first description the woman is described as “bare, young-looking,” here Anderson employs the synonyms “naked, girlish-looking.” The “mystified” men, a description which implies bewildered stasis and paralysis, now are featured “standing about.” And while the first description
draws attention to the oval in the snow, “like a miniature race track,” this passage rephrases while still maintaining the important word “tracks” by highlighting the “tracks made by the running dogs.”

It is as though Anderson modifies with subtle variations in language each time his mind—and pen—circle the scene. “The scene in the forest had become for me, without my knowing it, the foundation of the real story I am now trying to tell,” (423) he tells us. It is such a significant point of departure that he continually returns to it to try to perfect his description of it. But the “real story he is trying to tell” is precisely a tale about the very difficulty—perhaps impossibility—of such an endeavor, of telling the story at all.

This difficulty haunted Anderson for a significant portion of his writing life, compelling him to tell the story over—and over—again. The narrator explains that “The whole thing, the story of the old woman’s death, was to me as I grew older like music heard from far off,” evocative but elusive. “The notes had to be picked up slowly one at a time,” he continues, explaining indirectly his own methodology. Then he adds this imperative: “Something had to be understood.” (423). Such a phrase offers as close a summary of Anderson’s literary ambitions as one can find in his work. His use of repetition and revision, of authorial intrusion, of metaphors and images he works and reworks to forge suggestive symbols, all come into play in his efforts to make that ineffable “something” understood (423).

The woman who died was one destined to feed animal life. Anyway, that is all she ever did. She was feeding animal life before she was born, as a child, as a young woman working on the farm of the German, after she married, when she grew old and when she died. She fed animal life in cows, in chickens, in pigs, in horses, in men. Her daughter had died in childhood and with her one son she had no articulate relations. On the night when she died she was hurrying homeward, bearing on her body food for animal life. She died in the clearing in the wood and even after her death continued feeding animal life.

This summation at the story’s end, which again succinctly relays all the pertinent information about the woman’s life, actually reveals the inadequacy of summary, very much like the inadequacy of paraphrase in attempting to convey the spirit of a poem. It is the type of summary the narrator’s brother might give; precisely the type of telling with which the narrator is unsatisfied. And yet, occurring as it does after the long series of pertinent repetitions, within the context of a gradual accumulation of meaning and significance, the reader understands these words in a way that would not have been
possible had the single paragraph existed on its own. We also understand the efforts of the narrator to relay these same facts over and over again, recycling the story in his mind like the dogs in their tracks, searching for a way to convey the spirit of the tale.12

The narrator’s concluding paragraph, then, in which he states that he “shall not try to emphasize the point,” is somewhat ironic. Emphasizing the point is exactly what he does throughout the tale and all his tales, “explaining why [he] was dissatisfied then and ha[s] been ever since . . . speak[ing] of that only that [we] may understand why [he] has been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again” (424).

Perhaps this is why, in a 1919 review, H.L. Mencken declared that Anderson “belonged to a “small group that has somehow emancipated itself from the prevailing imitativeness and banality of the national letters” (qtd. in Crowley 17). The substance of this quotation—that Anderson had freed himself from imitation—should not be overlooked. During this period of manic circulation, Anderson seemed to be working in accord with what would become the modernist credo—make it new. For Anderson, “compulsion towards repetition”13 was, paradoxically, a way to liberate himself from the roar and rattle of affairs, a means to show a sympathetic view to those who had been “pumped full’ of meaningless words by the technological explosion in their society. It was in this way that he hoped to create a new language, a new poetry, that would move with symbolic significance from machine to metaphor.
Conclusion

In his lecture on “A Writer’s Conception of Realism,” Sherwood Anderson maintained that realism as it is often understood is “bad art—although it may possibly be very good journalism.” But when he states, as he did in his 1924 “A Note on Realism,” that “all the so-called great realist writers were not realists at all and never intended on being,” it is another way of saying that the best of the realists had all along practiced something rather different than the “realism” that has come to be a generic truism in literary study. I conclude my study with Anderson’s sentiment—that the great “realist” writers may not be realists at all as we have conventionally understood the term. Their works implicitly question their genre’s assumed complicity with the monolithic forces of science and technology by demonstrating the dangerous potential of endless and unthinking iteration. In these texts we witness these writers’ struggle to form a new ethics of language in American realism; to become the ethical voices, as it were, in a society “pumped full” with the vacuous words of other men. In their earnest attempts to underscore the incomparable power of language to control personal and social behavior, each author ultimately foregrounds language to an extent that challenges the conception of writing itself as a simple mimetic tool, a transparent window onto their world. To do so is also to challenge their generic classification.

Most critics have radically separated realism as a genre from modernism, establishing the two movements as antagonistic if not antithetical. While the considerations of modernism might seem distant from American literary realism of the fin de siècle era, I would nevertheless argue for a new awareness of realism as precisely the genre to cull for the roots of modern concerns and methodologies. Symbols, metaphors, fragmented planes trying, even in their brokenness, to offer something that will move us to sympathetic response, are understandable destinations for realist writers striving to perfect a fully “authentic” and ethically responsible language they never could achieve.
“Mere realism”—the modifier is crucial here—is “bad art,” and always was, because it attempts to deny the language in which it is inarguably inscribed and therefore to blind us to the formidable power of language to determine reality. Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Charles W. Chesnutt and Edith Wharton each knew that. Each were intensely aware of the medium in which they worked; each were intensely sensitive, especially in an age in which language itself seemed to be complicit in blurring the distinction between man and machine, to the fraught potential of language, and to the consequences of those dangerous potentials to their own writing. What each of these writers was after was not a facile realism that attempted to deny the realities of their medium, but rather a conscious realism struggling honorably with the power and limitations of the language in which they worked. Where they arrived was in an era of modernism; and who they became were the modern artists themselves, ever more conscious of the nature of their work, precisely because of the dilemmas the realists themselves had raised.
NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. Between 1860 and 1890 “as many as 440,000 patents were issued for new inventions” (17). See especially chapter 1 of Sean Dennis Cashman’s *America in the Gilded Age*.

2. These words are attributed to an Englishman writing about his visit to the U.S. in 1900. Qtd. in Steven J. Diner’s *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* p. 3.

3. As Michael McGerr puts it, “A revolution in transportation literally moved people who were stuck in one place. A revolution in communication figuratively allowed them to transcend the here and now” (226). See *A Fierce Discontent*.

4. See especially Cashman, Diner, and Pursell for further information on industrial and technological development during the period.

5. For further discussion of the communitarians, see Jean B. Quandt’s *From the Small Town to the Great Community*.

6. Cecilia Tichi’s *Shifting Gears* offers an excellent discussion of this phenomenon. American magazines like *Cosmopolitan, Harper’s Weekly,* and *The Saturday Evening Post* “brought images of technological values and accomplishments into middle class living rooms” (19). “Americans were systematically taught that technology was no longer confined to the factory grounds;” in fact, the concept of home as factory had claimed wide and unquestioning acceptance (19), showing the “deep incursions of technology into the domestic sphere” (20).

7. See Louis Budd’s “American Background” in Donald Pizer, ed., *Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*.

8. Donald Pizer details Howells’ familiarity with articles by Hippolyte Taine and his personal acquaintance with evolutionary thinkers John Fiske and Thomas Sergeant Perry. See *Realism and Naturalism*.

9. Again, Pizer traces the influence of evolutionary thinkers on literary criticism of the period and the emergence of realist fiction: thinkers such as
Taine, Fiske, Herbert Spencer and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, who explicitly stated in 1886 that he intended to “explain literary development by scientific principles” (qtd. in Pizer 39). See Realism and Naturalism.

10. Both of the quotations Pizer makes use of here are from T.S. Perry’s article on William Dean Howells. See Realism and Naturalism.

11. As thoroughly explored by Michael Davitt Bell and others, “realism” is of course a dubious term. Bell traces Howells’ denial of the “literary quality of literary works” (2) to gender anxieties. While I wish to highlight “realist” writers who foreground language and therefore depart from this Howellsian concern, Bell’s discussion of the realist aversion to the “effeminate” is still helpful in understanding these writers’ aversion to sentimentalism. See The Problem of American Realism.

12. Indeed, engineers were often figured as central characters in stories of the day, though most often pictured in heroic roles.

13. While Tichi’s book is an invaluable contribution to the field and I am in agreement with most of its observations, I disagree with the assumption that mechanical tropes had become “natural” to writers of the period and that they used them unknowingly.

14. Even this, though, is a complex matter, because while Adams was wary of the “dynamo,” he celebrated other evidence of technological prowess, like many other thinkers of the day.

15. Popular films of the day included Pickaninnies, Nigger in the Woodpile, and Dancing Nig. See Michael McGerr’s A Fierce Discontent, p. 246.


18. From W.B. Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming.”

19. From Mid-American Chants.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. The commentary on this topic is too voluminous to detail. For a solid introduction, see Peaches Henry’s “The Struggle for Tolerance” in Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn.

2. My reading of the novel implicitly connects Twain with the early sociolinguists, beginning with Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir and continuing through such figures as Basil Bernstein (and, indeed, through structuralist and even poststructuralist theory), insofar as they were the first to “postulate a close relationship between language and the shaping of experience” (Dittmar 6).

3. All quotations from Adventures of Huckleberry Finn are taken from the 1985 University of California at Berkeley edition.
4. Twain’s own lifelong relationship with Christianity could often be as vexatious as it was complex, and a more complete study would be needed to detail it. My intention here is to look specifically at the power the church yields through storytelling and language.

5. See The Best Short Stories of Mark Twain.

6. See From Fact to Fiction. Fishkin rightly observes that “a common human failing that would become a central concern in [Twain’s] fiction [is] literalness, or the tendency to accept without question the surface meaning of a text” (59).

7. An early example (May 1870) of Twain’s ironic use of the word “natural” occurs in an essay for Galaxy, “Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy,” in which Twain sardonically writes of a white boy who attacks a Chinese immigrant: “what could have been more natural than for this sunny-hearted boy, tripping along to Sunday school . . . to say to himself . . . God will not love me if I do not stone him?” The affinities with Huckleberry Finn, particularly the emphasis on going to Sunday school and the cruel perversions of its message through a literalized language, are clear.


11. Louis Budd is credited with first observing the correspondence between the novel and the contemporary moment in which Twain was living. David L. Smith continues the argument by focusing in particular on Pap as representative of southern mentality during post-Reconstruction: “Pap’s indignation at the Negro’s right to vote is precisely analogous to the southern backlash against the enfranchisement of Afro-Americans during Reconstruction” (107). Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Eric Sundquist, and many others have also explored the correlations between Twain’s antebellum narrative and his contemporary moment.

12. Arthur Pettit finds Twain’s 1882 boat trip down the Mississippi, his first trip back to his native South in many years and a negative experience which revealed the “moral bankruptcy of the postbellum South,” to be extremely influential Twain’s philosophical outlook at the time.

13. Because an extant manuscript of the speech is not available, the quotations in this section are taken from Twain’s own description of the speech and its reception in the late Autobiographical Dictations (September 4, 1907) in the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California at Berkeley. Twain also details the “scoffs” and “jeers” with which his speech was met, and
suggests that the substance of the speech would later become the basis for—and a chapter in—What is Man?

14. This idea is fully developed in a passage in A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court: “Training—training is everything; training is all there is to a person . . . there is no such thing as nature; what we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training. We have no thoughts of our own, no opinions of our own, they are transmitted to us, trained into us.” The thesis also recurs in Pudd’nhead Wilson and other Twain writings.

15. This quotation is taken from T.H. Watkins’ brief but illuminating article “Twain: The Patent Poet.” American Heritage 29.4 (June 1978). Clearly, even the title of this article underscores the point.

16. The faulty business investment in this contraption was largely responsible for Twain’s eventual bankruptcy. Scholars are agreed that as zealous as Sam Clemens may have been about new inventions, he was a hopeless business man.

17. In the Autobiographical dictations in the Twain Papers at UC Berkeley (Feb. 1, 1907). Twain was referring to a letter that had moved him, written by a barely literate cowboy to the blind woman who had inspired him. Twain maintained that despite the defects in spelling, grammar, and other literary conventions, the cowboy’s sentiment was so sincere that he considered the letter true literature.

18. From Albert Bigelow Paine’s Mark Twain’s Notebooks, p. 346 (1898).

19. Again, such critics are too numerous to detail. See especially Leo Marx’s well known essay “Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn,” in which the author criticizes what he sees as Twain’s lapse of “moral vision” and his “inability to acknowledge the truth his novel contained.”


21. See “Literature” in Mark Twain’s Speeches, p. 207 (May 4, 1900).

22. See R. Kent Rasmussen’s The Quotable Mark Twain.

23. Twain wrote a letter to the president on behalf of his friend Frederick Douglass; he put the young aspiring black lawyer Warner McGuinn through law school at Yale, and supported a young black artist abroad. Twain’s progress from racist to civil rights advocate is not completely unproblematic, however. His devotion to speaking out was inconsistent: he was very vocal about imperialistic abuses of other races in such acidic essays as “King Leopold’s Soliloquy,” but was completely silent on other issues, such as the court ruling of 1883. Other scholars have also written about Twain’s continuing delight in minstrelsy. Most attribute Twain’s interest to nostalgia for his boyhood rather than a continuing racism, but nostalgia for his slave-owning boyhood is itself problematic.

24. See Great Short Works of Mark Twain, p. 196.
NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

3. See Thomas J. Schlereth’s *Victorian America* and Carroll Pursell’s *The Machine in America*.
4. Hearst deliberately stirred public sentiment over Cuba, which ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the Spanish-American war. Reaction to the story resulted in a “clamour for action” that was “appalling” (Brogan 452). In its extreme version, then, falsely iterated truths not only appear during war but can in fact cause war.

   This is precisely the case in “Death and the Child.” Crane explores the utter absurdity of the fabrication of war in this pointed passage:

   Peza was proud and ashamed that he was not of them—these stupid peasants who, throughout the world, hold potentates on their thrones, makes statesmen illustrious, provide generals with lasting victories, all with ignorance, indifference, or half-witted hatred, moving the world with the strength of their arms, and getting their heads knocked together in the name of God, the king, or the stock exchange—immortal, dreaming, hopeless asses who surrender their reason to a shining puppet, and persuade some toy to carry their lives in his purse” (350).

5. Austin McC. Fox compares Crane’s brand of journalism to World War I correspondent Ernie Pyle, who also demonstrated an interest in the common soldier, an eye for detail, and perhaps most significantly, an unusual “sincerity and honesty” (ix).

6. Struck by the bicycle sports mania that had transformed New York’s streets, Crane penned a piece on “New York’s Bicycle Speedway” in 1896. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1898, just as Crane was working on “The Monster,” W.J. McGee suggested that the bicycle “is the leader of other machines in shaping the mind and its rider into a single thing.” Crane’s representation of the bicycle in “The Monster” seems to pick up on the inadvertently ominous overtones of McGee’s statement.

7. Bill Brown argues in *The Material Unconscious* that this scene in particular, in which Henry stands on a box while the “weird[ly] fascinate[d]” crowd of children try to muster the courage to move closer, suggests Henry is a
representative of the participants in freak shows, which became popular during Crane’s time.

8. Several critics have read this as a scene of lynching. Both Price McMurray and Elaine Marshall, seeking to establish the origins of Crane’s story, discuss the lynching of Robert Lewis, which occurred in Crane’s hometown of Port Jervis, New Jersey.

9. Obviously, the characterization of Henry Johnson himself can also be rightly read as racist. As critics such as Chester Wolford have observed, Crane was certainly not immune to the racist sentiments of his own time. My concern in this chapter, however, is two-fold: that the story makes clear that Crane was at least aware of the tropes of his time, and that his criticism does not discriminate: he finds fault with both races, both genders.


12. What Gandal does not adequately pursue, however, are the causes behind an individual’s ability and willingness to resist, to become rebellious and act morally. For Gandal, characters in Crane act not because of moral volition but rather out of “emotional compulsion,” and the emotion that he sees as inciting each private rebellion is anger. Of course, this begs the question: what causes the anger? It also leads one to wonder how and why such an emotion can be stronger than the plethora of opposing forces.


14. For discussions of Crane’s affinity with impressionism, see Stallman, Perosa, Rodgers, and Nagel.

15. See James Guetti’s Word Music: The Aesthetic Aspect of Narrative Fiction. Frank Norris’ “Stephen Crane’s Stories of Life in the Slums,” originally published in Wave in July 1896 can be found in Donald Pizer’s The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. Indeed, Chesnutt intended to use the popularity of plantation fiction in the north to gain financial success, as well as for the more social, political, and ethical ends he hoped his writing would achieve. He was convinced of the potential success of such fiction in northern markers in large part by the reception of Albion Tourgée’s A Fool’s Errand. See The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt, and Richard H. Brodhead’s excellent introduction to that volume, especially p. 21.


3. For instance, Julius begins his narrative in “The Goophered Grapevine” with a stereotypical rendition of the inordinate fondness of the black
population for certain types of food: “Now, ef dey’s an’thing a nigger lub, nex ter ‘possum, en chick’n, en watermillyuns, it’s scuppernon” (13).

4. Further, as Brodhead explains, “the Enlightenment ethos attached to literacy in Chesnutt’s schooling disparaged folk science and folk religion”—in other words, disparaged “conjure.” (22). At one frustrated point in an early journal entry, Chesnutt impugns the speech and behavior of the uneducated, proclaiming that “uneeducated people are the most bigoted, superstitious, hardest headed people in the world!” and decries their “belief in ghosts, luck, horse shoes, cloud signs, and all other kings of nonsense” (ibid). This language—and attitude—is practically synonymous with John’s speech and world-view.

5. A first sign of this shift occurs in an 1880 journal entry, when Chesnutt admits that while (black) “songs are not of much merit as literary compositions, they have certain elements of originality which make them interesting” and that one could find more substance in them than “in the more correct production of a cultivated mind” (23).

6. In the same 1880 journal entry quoted at the beginning of the chapter, Chesnutt went on to write: “The object of my writing would not be so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and ostracism—I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people” (Journals 140).

7. Indeed, Chesnutt would directly take on the scientific racists in his novel The House Behind the Cedars. Cathy Boeckmann discusses that novel in her useful book A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction (see especially p.158), but, interestingly, neither Boeckmann nor any other critics have addressed The Conjure Woman in light of Chesnutt’s relationship with the scientific racism of his day.


9. This volume had its origins in Hoffman’s 1892 article in Arena, “Vital Statistics of the American Negro.”

10. Writers and thinkers who attempted this did exist, including Senator Blair from New Hampshire. Most opponents countered the scientific racists’ emphasis on (a fallacious view of) evolution with arguments detailing the environmental factors that contributed to the higher disease and mortality rates among the black population. Hoffman refers to these opponents directly in his work, and makes every effort to discredit them.
11. John F. Callahan and others attribute this to the tradition of African oral culture. Julius speaks from a “fluid, improvisatory tradition,” which stands in contrast to John’s rigidly defined codes of speech.

12. A surprising number of critics seem to make this same mistake. They read uncritically John’s assessment of Julius’ motives, and therefore conclude that Julius is indeed motivated by self-interested profit. The pervasiveness of this view helps to prove the point: that John’s language earns him tremendous credibility.

13. Many critics see the 1898 riots in Chesnutt’s own North Carolina as a turning point for him emotionally and artistically, catalyzing a more pessimistic view of the reality of race relations, and, perhaps, generating a more confrontational method of addressing it.


NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR


2. Clair Preston’s Edith Wharton’s Social Register explores the Darwinism in The House of Mirth in detail, including tracing its origins to Wharton’s substantial reading on the subject. While Robert C. Bannister’s Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Thought does not deal with Wharton explicitly, the work provides a very useful overview of the significant impact of Darwinism on the social thought of Wharton’s day. While The House of Mirth reflects this trend, however, I would argue that the novel is ultimately anti-Darwinian: the fittest—in the ethical sense that mattered to Wharton—are precisely those who do not survive.

3. A paradox that reflects Wharton’s own complicated relationship with the rise of science and technology. Like Mark Twain, Wharton exhibited a passion for technological innovation that matched her ardor for words. While Twain was the first to install a telephone in a private residence, Wharton was the first to install a hydraulic lift. In her autobiography, A Backward Glance, Wharton excitedly details some of her experiences with new technologies, including her first experience with a motorcar in 1903, declaring “motoring an unmixed joy” (137). And yet, also like Twain, Wharton’s work also suggests a level of discomfort with the potential ramifications of science and technology.

4. Of course there is a very real and very significant economic dynamic to power in The House of Mirth, and many critics have read the novel in economic terms. See especially Ruth Bernard Yeazell’s “The Conspicuous
Wasting of Lily Bart,” which utilizes Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* as its critical touchstone, and Wai Chee Dimock’s “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*” which focuses on the marketplace and the “ethics” of an “exchange system that dissolves the language of morality into its own harsh, brassy parlance” (135). I would emphasize that even the wealthiest of the novel’s characters still employ language to jockey for position; it is not a foregone conclusion. Bertha Dorset, for example, uses a lingual rebuff to sacrifice Lily and maintain her power.

5. Many critics focus on the visual element of the novel, on Lily as an object on display. Amy Kaplan discusses the importance of the spectator public to the upper classes in *The Social Construction of American Realism*; Judith Montgomery’s feminist “The American Galatea” sees Lily as “literally fulfilling the Pygmalion myth as an objet d’art” in the tableaux. Clearly, Lily is regarded as an art object, both before and after the very significant tableaux scene. My argument is meant to expand, not contradict, the idea: Lily is visually regarded as an object, then *talked* about as if she were an object as well. The latter phenomenon does more damage in the novel.

6. Again, feminist criticism on the novel is abundant; see especially Susan Gubar’s “The Blank Page,’ and Issues of Female Creativity,” and Elizabeth Ammon’s *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America*.

7. Wharton often makes use of garden imagery to express a fanciful or imaginative space, and “lingering summer” often represents idealized memories. Certainly the novel *Summer*, with its bleak imagery and realism counters this reading, but so do the other texts I deal with here. In other words, Wharton uses the tropes of summer and gardens ironically. They represent illusions; at times dangerous illusions that keep her characters from actualizing change in the real world.

8. Virtually no criticism exists whatsoever that pairs *The House of Mirth* with *Ethan Frome*, presumably because they have been received as so different as to warrant no comparison. Only Blake Nevius, in *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*, finds a connection in that both are novels of social failure; I would add, of course, that it is a particular kind of social failure that Wharton examines—the failure of language in the social sphere.

9. See the description of these events in *A Backward Glance*. Significantly, Wharton also includes details of the vexing undependability of the new technology, including an anecdote in which she and Henry James are stranded roadside when the motorcar breaks down in Western Massachusetts.

10. See especially Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s “Cold Ethan, Hot Ethan.” Wolff correctly emphasizes the vital role the narrator plays in the novel, and chastises the critics who have overlooked the significant fact that it is the narrator’s vision, not a true-life tale. Wolff is highly critical of the narrator, however, claiming that we as readers are exposed to the “appalling recesses” of his imagination (161). But does the narrator represent perverse
design or sympathetic identification with subjects who have indeed endured an appalling fate? Wharton, I would argue, leaves the matter deliberately ambiguous.

11. Many have pointed out that Zeena may be perceived as a victim of the isolated life she is made to endure.

12. In her biography of Wharton, Cynthia Griffin Wolff traces this “hunger” to incidents in Wharton’s own life, examining the occurrences which lead to what she calls Wharton’s “fear of muteness.” Wolff pays special attention to Wharton’s childhood experiences with her mother, who, cold and detached, made Wharton hungry for attention and communication. Indeed, Wolff argues that hunger imagery is important when examining Wharton’s language: “Wharton construes . . . nourishment as words, communication” (144). Wolff also discusses Wharton’s pivotal relationship with Morton Fullerton, who “had understood her thoughts, her needs . . . with Fullerton, the long soul-silence could finally be broken” (144). In her own autobiography, Wharton describes her reaction upon spying Fullerton at the theater: “I felt for the first time that indescribable current of communication flowing between myself and some one else—felt it, I mean, uninterruptedly, securely, so that it penetrated every sense and every thought,” an experience that seemed to inform her sense of true communication as it is posited in both The House of Mirth and Ethan Frome (145).

13. Elizabeth Ammons, in her study of Ethan Frome as fairy-tale, explores the similarities between Zeena and Mattie; both become witch-figures by novel’s end. See Edith Wharton’s Argument with America.

14. Thorstein Veblen would famously argue for engineering as the new bastion of democracy. See also Jean B. Quandt’s From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Individuals for a full discussion of the Communitarians and their utopian views of the communications revolution.

15. Wharton’s relationship with sentimentalism and to these writers in particular was complex. See especially Hildegard Hoeller’s Edith Wharton’s Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction, which argues, among other points, that the reason Wharton could not make “the word clear” was because she was afraid of being labeled a sentimentalist.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE


2. From a journalistic piece called “In Washington,” in which Anderson traveled to Washington, D.C. to interview then commerce secretary Herbert Hoover. See The Portable Sherwood Anderson, Horace Gregory, Ed. All other
Anderson quotations, excluding those from *Winesburg, Ohio*, are taken from this volume unless otherwise noted.

3. This essay can be found in *The Sherwood Anderson Notebook*.

4. The original title Anderson intended for the work was in fact *The Book of the Grotesque*. A sketch by that name now serves as a sort of introduction to the volume of stories.

5. From “The Second Coming.”

6. When writing the *Winesburg* stories, in fact, Anderson referred to them as “fragments”—not to indicate that they were incomplete, but rather to suggest the methodology he employed in finding and utilizing significant detail, rather than plot, to structure his tales.

7. This line was also used as an epigraph for a Hart Crane poem about Anderson, another indication of how important Anderson’s theory of the use of “fragments” was to him.

8. Frank Bergon, among others, has discussed Crane’s use of repetition with variation. In most cases critics categorize the intent and effect of this strategy as “impressionistic;” many critics also categorize Anderson the same way, or, alternatively, as an expressionist. As I hope my argument will make clear, I see Anderson as more closely associated with cubism in both methodology and intent.

9. Of course, Sherwood Anderson’s good friend Gertrude Stein is most commonly associated with cubism, both because of her interest in and relationship with Picasso, and the particular experimental writing style she employed. I do not mean to suggest similarities between Anderson’s style and Stein’s; rather, I’m suggesting that Anderson’s prose can be seen as cubist in an entirely different way because he made use of repetition and refraction in markedly different ways.

10. This quotation appears in the context of Thomas’ discussion of the influence of Alfred Stieglitz on Anderson. See *Literary Admirers of Alfred Stieglitz*.

11. The history of the story bears repeating. The first version can be traced to an original draft probably penned in 1916; evidence shows that Anderson was still working on the story between 1920–22; another greatly revised version appeared in *American Mercury* in 1926; then another similar version was highlighted as the title story in *Death in the Woods* in 1933 (Curry 104–5).

12. William Scheick reads this as an inadvertent recreation of precisely that which the narrator hopes to transcend: “Paradoxically in striving to restructure his experience, the narrator performs that very activity he seeks to escape” and concludes that “in a sense [the narrator] is guilty of precisely the act he tries to renounce” (146, 147). But Anderson’s repetition is less a compulsion than a deliberate strategy precisely for breaking out of that which he has renounced. Although Scheick is correct to note the difficulty
of extricating oneself from the implicit trap of repetition and recycling, his exclusive focus on the psychological compulsion to reiterate misses the lingual and narrative aspects of Anderson’s endeavor.

13. Again, this is Scheick’s phrase.

NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION

1. “A Writer’s Conception of Realism” was originally given as an address at Olivet College on January 20, 1939. “A Note on Realism” was originally published in 1924 in *The Literary Review*. See *Sherwood Anderson’s Notebook*, pp.71–78.
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