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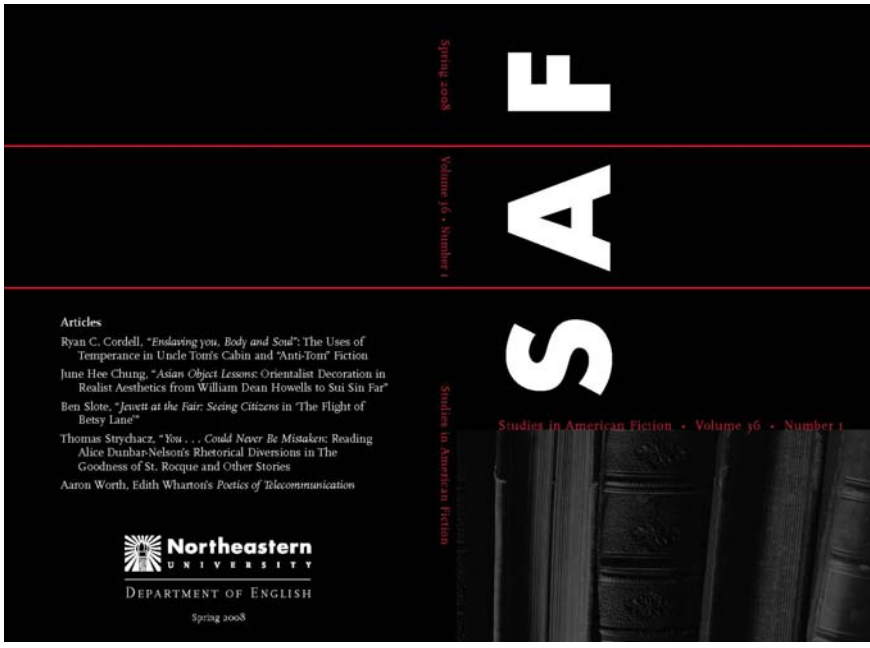

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Studies in American Fiction

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Aaron Worth, *Edith Wharton's Poetics of Telecommunication*

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EDITH WHARTON'S POETICS OF TELECOMMUNICATION

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We learn in the autobiographical *A Backward Glance* that the six-year-old Edith Jones spent a good deal of the winter of 1868 shouting into her maternal grandmother's ear-trumpet. This prosthesis, supplying the emphatic period of a catalogue of objects metonymically invoking Mary Stevens Rhinelander, seems indeed virtually to define her: she is introduced as a kind of assemblage made up of "lace cap and lappets, a bunch of gold charms dangling from her massive watch-chain . . . a rich black silk dress, and a black japanned ear-trumpet at her ear." As Wharton makes clear, the trumpet was not, from the perspective of her childhood self, merely one ornament or appendage among others. First, it supplied the old woman with a characterizing action: "for me she exists only as a motionless and gently smiling figure, whose one gesture was to lay aside her stitching for her ear-trumpet at my approach." At the same time it would serve for those months, in an experience that clearly stuck in her memory, as a privileged channel, intensely charged with affect, for Wharton's youthful exploration of language and poetry. She would "shout" Tennyson verses, more enthralled by the sound than cognizant of the sense, "for hours . . . through the trumpet of my long-suffering ancestress," even though the unreliable nature of the medium linking them, coupled with a shared incomprehension of the poet, ensure a highly ambivalent act of communication: "the rhythmic raptures tingling through me probably woke no echo in the dear old head bent to mine."[1]

It is a poignant, even emblematic, image of the future writer, for whom a powerful "striving for communication" would constitute an abiding motive force.[2] I want to focus here on the figure of the trumpet itself, as a kind of zero-degree instrument of mediation, a technological copula that both enables communication and renders it problematic, mingling it inextricably with miscommunication. It is a medium that both connects and separates, a source of distortion and frustration but also the condition of possibility for any intimacy at all (particularly as Wharton's grandmother was the only member of her family who would submit to such sessions).

Media have a similarly ambivalent status in Wharton's fiction. Technologies and networks of communication, and other figures of mediation, loom large in her work, from the notes and cards whose ritualistic circu-

lation serves as visible index of the recondite, "hieroglyphic world" of Wharton's "Society" to the postal, telegraphic, and telephonic networks that sustain or subvert that world (as well as the human relays, couriers, and go-betweens to be found there). While she may not have centered an entire work of fiction explicitly and exclusively upon a single such technology, as did her friend Henry James in his novella *In the Cage*, she certainly accorded them a prominent place in her novels and stories, where they frequently serve as occasions for, or indices of, miscommunication and distortion as well as human contact and the transfer of information.

In part, the prominence and treatment of media in Wharton's fiction reflect the times in which she lived. She was witness to a series of crucial developments in the growth of modern media technologies, as well as the penetration and integration of those technologies into the social and cultural life of the nation. She was born into a telegraphic world, and not yet a globally linked one (there had been a failed transatlantic cable-laying four years before her birth—dismissed by many as a hoax). Her life and career coincided with the worldwide expansion and consolidation of the telegraphic networks, as well as the emergence and evolution of other wired and wireless technologies: the telephone beginning in the 1870s, and the "wireless telegraph" from the early twentieth century (in her old age Wharton listened with horror to Hitler's voice on the radio). She died in 1937, one year after the BBC established its first television network (and only a few months after Alan Turing laid the foundations for the modern digital computer in an epoch-making paper).

But Wharton's fascination with these technologies transcends any mere documentary fidelity. She was impressively attuned to the symbolic potential of different media, keenly alive to what Marshall McLuhan famously called their inherent "messages." Even as a child Wharton had a fascination with the material forms of communication, as demonstrated by her interest in the various "mysterious" meanings of typefaces and printing techniques, her concern with the suitability of wrapping paper for literary inscription, and her youthful excitement at a neighbor's acquisition of a typewriter. Many of Wharton's letters are strikingly phatic, making reference not only to the act of communication but to the various media, from telephone to the Parisian *petit bleu*, she employs in maintaining her relationships, parsing the distinct shades of intimacy and urgency implied by each. Unsurprisingly, then, communications technologies are seldom interchangeably used in her fiction, but rather serve as figures suggesting precisely calibrated degrees of mediation, privacy, and importance. Their use may convey distinct levels of social status as well, in addition to varying degrees of complicity in the project of modernity, or connection to the parvenu world of business. They also function as carefully placed

historical markers, particularly in the consciously retrospective *The Age of Innocence*.

Above all, networks of communication can be understood in Wharton not only as the means by which individuals connect with each other, but as potent tropes for Society and its mutations. Modern media technologies have always been credited (or blamed) by some as agents of social transformation, harbingers of a new order; as early as 1880, *Scientific American* declared that the telephone would usher in "a new organization of society."[3] In Wharton the emergence and evolution of media are perhaps better characterized as symbols of the processes of cultural change for whose depiction she has long been celebrated. For example, there are strong parallels to be drawn between the rise of the newer communications networks, their competition with existing networks for dominance, and the displacement of established social networks by upstart new forces: the narrative constituting, of course, what Irving Howe called "Mrs. Wharton's great theme—the dispossession of the old New York aristocracy by the vulgar new rich."[4] Like the social *parvenu*, the new technologies had their own rules of propriety and tact (or tactlessness), operated according to their own principles, and frequently found themselves in conflict with existing media—though in the end they would themselves become the "natural" center of things.

Despite a rise in academic interest in Wharton's investment in science and technology generally, as well as a growing body of scholarship on the inflection of literary production by new media, the treatment of telegraphy, telephony, and other communications networks and media in Wharton's fiction has attracted as yet hardly any critical attention.[5] But these serve, I believe, as powerful lenses through which to examine key Whartonian themes like human connection, the rise of finance, and most of all, the "great theme" of social and cultural transformation in her lifetime. Specifically, her treatment of the emergence and evolution of communications technologies helps to illuminate her conception of how cultures are threatened by, and assimilate, new forces and rival social organisms; it is this (itself evolving) conception on which I focus here, through readings of three canonical novels: *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*.

In a late chapter in *The House of Mirth*, as Lily Bart approaches her tragic end, she is found, near collapse, on a bench in Bryant Park by Nettie Struther, formerly an object of her charity. The startled Nettie tells Lily that she is doing well, having recently given up a position "typewriting in a big importing firm" to marry a "motor-man."[6] Lily's own

entry into the working world has, of course, recently been chronicled: the most recent stage of her long-attenuated descent has taken her into a milliner's shop, immersing her in its "band of liberated work-women" (279). But it might just as easily, perhaps, have brought her to employment as a typewriter (as the female workers, not the machines, were once called), telephone operator, or (like the protagonist of *In the Cage*) telegraph operator, all positions that had created new opportunities for women in the workplace. Such a career move, however improbable (it is difficult to imagine Lily, "clumsy" enough with hat spangles [278], tapping out Morse code at twenty-five words per minute), would nevertheless have had a certain appropriateness. To the extent that Lily has occupied a stable position within Society and its upstart rival networks, it has been, quite literally, as an information worker: early in the novel she is called upon to serve as Judy Trenor's secretary, and at the time of her encounter with Nettie she has only very recently left a situation as secretary to Mrs. Norma Hatch. With duties ranging from epistolary labor to less well-defined tasks as a relay or conduit (she is habitually asked to serve as "a kind of courier," "an intermediary," even a sort of message, as when she is sent to Gus Trenor by his wife [37, 102]), she has helped to ensure the smooth functioning of the system, though often thereby occupying an interstitial (and frequently compromising) position within it.

Society, in the novel, largely runs on information, and its control and flows constitute important themes. Judy Trenor is depicted as the central nexus of a far-flung system of media allowing her to communicate with its margins. We are shown, again and again, the dissemination of social information both positive (as "little Dabham of the 'Riviera Notes'" is courted [210]) and negative—the text's stunningly efficient gossip networks effectively destroy Lily's prospects through their uncontested circulation of false information. (Lily, for her part, destroys by fire the information she might have used to save herself.) The trope that continuously recurs, with respect to both the social formations that vie for supremacy within the world of the novel and the "sympathetic" human bodies that seek moments of communion within these too often constraining structures, is that of a communication system. Wharton's early novel is dominated by a central metaphor of organism—both individual and social—as network, a centrally-organized system of information flows. Networks in the text, from the dominant social order, which sustains itself by an impressive armament of media, to the failing nervous system of Lily herself, are frequently depicted in crisis. The threat to the dominant social network, though, takes the form of imminent reconstitution around a new center or centers, rather than a challenge to this basic trope, as this early version of Wharton's ur-narrative of societal transformation here

preserves a metaphoric continuity. The story in fact opens within a new network center, a new terminus radiating lines of communication, as Selden catches sight of Lily Bart "In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station" (5), whose construction was begun only a year before Wharton began writing the novel; Wharton, in this early work, seems to envision social change as a like process of "recentering."

The text's most conspicuous network, whose center, again, is occupied by Judy Trenor (the nodal intelligence from which "summons" radiate, and to which information flows), is surely the apparatus facilitating the operation of Society as we encounter it early in the novel. This is a multimedia affair, whose component parts—each striking its own distinct note of formality and urgency—all play roles in the great task of the maintenance and reproduction of the social order by helping with the functions of vetting, organization, marital arrangement, and so on. Social rituals, such as those associated with Bellomont, are associated with the writing of letters and invitations, "notes and dinner-cards," such as those Judy Trenor employs Lily to write (40). For more pressing connections, the telephone is employed: when Judy Trenor seeks to fine-tune her social mix for the improvised purpose of "protecting [Lily] from Bertha [Dorset]," she cries, "I believe I'll call up Lawrence [Selden] on the telephone and tell him he simply *must* come," the alternate, or supplemental, medium itself reflecting the greater urgency, the personal nature of the appeal, as well as the compressed time-element (45). Later, when Judy Trenor invites Lily to visit her in town, she does so by written note, which she tries to cancel by telephone call. The very sending of the first message both invokes a power relation and suggests an inherent capacity for relationship-making, here by repairing an interpersonal breach, as the "summons" represents "the first time [Lily] had received a direct communication from Bellomont since the close of her last visit there. . . . [T]his characteristic command seemed to reestablish their former relations" (137). Gus Trenor intervenes in the flow of communication, withholding his wife's telephone message in order to bring Lily under his power.[7]

Particular media convey widely different degrees of individuality in the novel. The electric telegraph, for instance, is perhaps most conspicuously employed in the novel to help avert scandal in the affair of Bertha Dorset and Ned Silverton, in order to minimize any rift in the social fabric; appropriately, it is depicted as decidedly impersonal. As communications more open to public scrutiny, telegrams favor guarded, elliptical modes of expression (though there are of course other incentives to abbreviate, such as cost). Lily's wire to Selden thus represents a feat of tactical enthymeme, the presentation of just enough information to supplement information obtained in the social arena: "The message necessarily left

large gaps for conjecture; but all that he had recently heard and seen made these but too easy to fill in" (203). In contradistinction to written, particularly handwritten, communication, wired messages lack personality. While Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden radiate intimacy, transmitting a powerful sense of individual identity, these are precisely the quantities telegrams (like the terse "Assume that everything is as usual") tend to omit. "Handwriting" in the novel indeed offers a virtual smorgasbord of interpretative activity: Bertha's personality is instantly revealed through the letters' "large disjointed hand, with a flourish of masculinity which but slightly disguised its rambling weakness"—infallible indices of her true self; furthermore, in detective fashion, Lily is able to perceive the epistles' recent vintage by "the blackness of the ink" (103).

If the novel's various media—letters, telegraphy, telephony—embody different levels of mediation, its depiction of "unmediated" exchanges is instructive as well, revealing a shared metaphoric ground drawn from a contemporary vocabulary of telecommunications technology. The most "unmediated" episodes of contact between individuals in the novel, particularly at those moments in which Wharton's characters seem, however fleetingly, to elude or escape the stultifying codes of the dominant culture and its conventions, employ a sustained metaphor of body as communications network.[8] Just as Society is depicted as a sprawling network both shaped and sustained by its media, the "natural" body is repeatedly figured as a communicating system, with the nervous system a particularly conspicuous presence in the text. The movements of Lily's nerves, their "throbbing," "tremors," the messages sent and received by them—as well as their ultimate silencing under the influence of chloral—form a running motif.

Lily's least "artificial" exchanges with others are characterized by language suggesting a (sometimes radical) directness of communication between organic networks. Her scenes with Selden are, unsurprisingly, particularly pervaded by such a vocabulary: we read, for instance, of Lily's "responsive flash," the touching of "a latent chord of inclination" within Selden, and a "flow of comprehension between them" (68, 94). Later, her touch "[thrills] a vulnerable fibre in Rosedale" (248). The novel's most sympathetic characters—in the sense of deserving the reader's affections—tend to be correspondingly "sympathetic" in this sense also, more capable of such exchanges (they bear, one might say, both a metonymic and a metaphoric relationship to networks). When Selden touches Gerty, the ensuing flow of information is described in terms explicitly invoking the electric media of the day: "He laid his hand for a moment on hers, and there passed between them, on the current of the rare contact, one of those exchanges of meaning which fill the hidden reservoirs of

affection" (263). Particularly when divested of the often unreliable media associated with the social order, bodily networks exhibit great intimacy, permeability, effecting exchanges of affect and energy as well as information. As the philanthropic Gerty, who is of course most associated with a discourse of "sympathy," holds Lily in bed "she [seems] to feel her very heart's blood passing into her friend"; at Nettie Struther's touch "[a] faint glow of returning strength [seems] to pass into Lily from the pressure of the supporting arm" (261, 304). Bodies are shown, as well, to gather information by means of McLuhanesque extensions radiating from a central nexus of subjectivity: "Lily's influence [sends] out thread-like feelers," while the columnist Dabham's "little eyes [are] like tentacles thrown out to catch . . . floating intimations," both tropes continuous with the language employed for, among other things, telegraphic networks (117, 211).[9]

Lily's death, significantly, is attributed to the failure of her nervous system; specifically, it is this network's incapability of being centrally governed, the oppressive new autonomy of her nerves, which becomes intolerable: "every nerve started once more into separate wakefulness" (313). The danger of an anarchic network, whose center cannot hold, or can no longer govern, can be read into other moments in the text—as Gus Trenor's parasitism of his wife's media system, while she remains in the dark, might indicate. Interestingly, one of the text's most repeated motifs is that of the "center," particularly inasmuch as it is depicted as undergoing a process of renegotiation or replacement. The novel is full of threatened centers and the production of new nodal points throwing surrounding elements into new configurations. Lily herself occupies in succession a variety of such points: when she loses her parents she "at once [becomes] the centre of a family council"; upon giving up bridge in her husband-hunting she "[finds] herself the centre of that feminine solicitude which envelopes a young woman in the mating season" (37, 47). Later she will oscillate between the "centers" of brilliant display at public rituals ("the general stream of admiring looks of which she felt herself to be the centre") and of destructive gossip ("the fiery centre of criticism and discussion") (115, 230). Gerty, under the influence of Selden's "growing kindness," becomes "the centre of a little illumination of her own" (147); her subsequent disappointment effects a painful realignment employing the same nodal trope: "she herself seemed to be sitting in the centre of a great glare of comprehension" (153). For his part, Selden envisions "a love which should broaden and deepen till it became the central fact of life" (150). Ironically, it is the capacity to conceive of "the mass" of unfortunates on whose behalf Gerty expends her "sympathetic" energies as "innumerable separate centres of sensation" that threatens in turn to "decentralize [Lily's] life" (148), as the imaginative apprehension of new cen-

ters destabilizes an existing one. Later Lily fears "the possibility of revolving about a different centre" (255), while George Dorset is similarly threatened: "it seemed to Selden that tonight each vibration swung him farther from his centre" (211).

If established network centers are everywhere in crisis, Wharton also points to possible replacements, as for instance the social organism associated with Judy Trenor finds new rivals in the form of figures like the Gormers and Welly Brys and their own networks. A particularly robust challenge comes, of course, from Sim Rosedale, the pushy outsider (and, as a Jew, affiliated with a radically alien symbolic "network"), depicted by Wharton as precisely such an alternative center. He is the nexus of his own information network, one that seems more powerful than Judy Trenor's not only in the social register but in the crucial field of commerce; where her information system is depicted as vulnerable to interruption, misinterpretation, and abuse, his seems impregnable, almost preternaturally efficient. It is, of course, his access to financial information that makes his acquaintance desirable to men like Gus Trenor in the first place, as his "tips" lead directly to the production of wealth. (Inversely, the circulation of misinformation about Lily causes her value to plummet as a commodity within the marriage market.) But Rosedale, to the discomfiture of Lily early in the novel, does not limit his connections to Wall Street: the acquisition of social information is vital to his project of forced entry into respectable status. He is first introduced to the reader as "a man who made it his business to know everything about every one, whose idea of showing himself to be at home in society was to display an inconvenient familiarity with the habits of those with whom he wished to be thought intimate. Lily was sure that within twenty-four hours the story of her visiting her dress-maker at the Benedick would be in active circulation among Mr. Rosedale's acquaintances" (17). And this power to collect and disseminate information only increases with Rosedale's steady rise: in her penultimate meeting with him Lily "[feels] sure that he [has] heard what had been said of her. But what was there that Rosedale did not hear?" (283). And while Lily, in the earlier scene, shrank in guilty horror from Rosedale in his capacity as gossipmonger, she now considers this human medium, however briefly, as the potential source of her social rehabilitation, fantasizing about using him to disseminate her version of things: as she tells him her story with "eager communicativeness," it "suddenly [occurs] to her that Rosedale . . . was the fitting person to receive and transmit her version of the facts" (284). The trope of Rosedale as telecommunications technology is fairly explicit here. In fact, might the implicit medium to which Rosedale is being likened be the new radio, capable not only of person-to-person

communication but a wider distribution through its "broadcasts," as they would soon be known?

In *The House of Mirth* such technologies as the telegraph and the telephone, while skillfully differentiated in many respects, may serve a figure like Judy Trenor with equal loyalty. In later work Wharton would explore more deeply the possibilities of such media to serve as markers for figures, and forces, associated with, respectively, the old and the new.

About the same time that young Edith Jones was chanting half-understood lines of Tennyson into her grandmother's ear-trumpet, a teenaged Alec Bell—who had at least as urgent an investment in communicating with the deaf—was experimenting with speaking machines, membranes, a cadaver's ear; a few years later, he would cry out, in pain and vexation, near a horn-like receiver; miraculously, his yell, borne by wires, brought help from another room. Years later, when Wharton came to write her novel arguably most concerned with the human voice and its potency, the same text would depict with peculiar clarity the working of energies strikingly similar to those Bell and his rivals were discovering in their drive to transmit speech over wires.

"*The Custom of the Country*," writes Cynthia Griffin Wolff in her celebrated biography of Wharton, "is a money novel, a business novel, that is true. However, above all, it is a novel of energy, of initiative." It is also, I would add, a telephonic novel, a text pervaded as perhaps no other in the Wharton canon not only with the power of the voice but also with its mechanical transmission. *Custom* captures the telephone's rise, its infiltration into various spheres of American life, its pronounced association with modernity and the world of business, and with the emergence of new codes and mores. There are, decidedly, "telephonic" and "non-telephonic" characters, separated not only by their relationship to a technology that was coming fully into its own but also by association with the forces that set it apart from older media. While Wolff is right in pointing to the novel's "preoccupation with energy," its depiction of a "titanic transition" in the social order fueled by the "vitality" and "power" possessed in abundance by the "newcomers," it is also possible to read the representatives of the doomed "old orders" less as "enervated," denuded of a once-plentiful stock of like "energy" than as associated with fundamentally different forces, or dispositions of force, altogether, which might be seen as corresponding to the characteristic technological possessions of each social entity.[10]

Set during a decade of unprecedented telephonic expansion—with the number of American phones jumping from 285,000 in 1894 to 6.1 million

in 1907 (7.6 million by 1911)[11]—*Custom* both features the phone prominently and associates it particularly with its *parvenu* characters.[12] Wharton, indeed, more than once uses the technology to parse characters with different social loyalties or backgrounds on the basis of their telephonic competence. Significantly, while the "newcomers" are perfectly at home with the medium, Wharton takes pains to establish the difficulties such paragons of the residual as Harriet Ray experience in trying to express themselves telephonically. Harriet cannot "make herself understood" on the instrument, while correspondingly Mrs. Marvell cannot accurately decipher its signals.[13] When Ralph presses her for details about "a telephone message she didn't understand" she can only produce a "confused and inaccurate" account: "She didn't actually know who had telephoned: the voice hadn't sounded like Mrs. Spragg's. . . . A woman's voice; yes—oh, not a lady's! And there was certainly something about a steamer . . . but he knew how the telephone bewildered her . . . and she was sure she was getting a little deaf" (272). (It is possible to wonder whether the distinction between "woman" and "lady" is adduced *a priori* rather than empirically—in other words, would a real lady be using the telephone at all, in Mrs. Marvell's judgment?) The phone thus seems a kind of technological shibboleth, marking the unregenerate "aborigines" as exterior to the pushing new order. (Ralph, who has a fatal attraction to the modern, has no problem with the technology, unlike his contemporary Harriet.) But if the novel's "tribal" patricians are uncomfortable or inept with the phone, the "invaders" are most at home on it—using it habitually and "naturally" for both social and business purposes. Indeed, the phone seems at times to offer the Spraggs of the world a greater degree of comfort than unmediated, face-to-face contact, as when the startled Undine first encounters Elmer at the opera: after (characteristically) paling, she generates a noise suggestive of the telephonic—"a faint click in her throat"—and the uncomfortable conversation ends with the promise of more successful discourse, through the medium of the phone, as Elmer says: "Call me up in the morning at the Driscoll building. Seven-O-nine—got it?" (65).

As this division might indicate, many of the predominant associations of the telephone at this moment in its history are reflected in *Custom*—in particular its connections with the business world, with modernity, and with the New World as opposed to the Old. Beyond simply registering these associations in her fiction, however, Wharton goes further, employing an extended, metaphoric opposition between untrammeled, wave-like forces and older code-systems that can be seen to correspond to the irruption of the new medium into the social and financial world of the early twentieth century.

Bell's first telephone patent, in 1876, had modestly announced an

"Improvement in Telegraphy," a mere modification of the older technology, but the technical description it contained pointed to a fundamental innovation in its method of transmission: "My present invention consists in the employment of a vibratory or undulatory current of electricity in contradistinction to a merely intermittent or pulsatory current . . . ."[14] We would now characterize this, of course, as the difference between "analog" and "digital," rather than "undulatory" and "intermittent"; but though the terms were unknown in this sense, the processes involved were not. As telecommunications historian Laszlo Solymar notes, nineteenth-century engineers would have found the task of analog-digital conversion impossible, but this is not to say that the concepts themselves were unintelligible, merely expressed in different language.[15] (Indeed, such a theoretical distinction was at the heart of the telephone's development.) The digitalization of formerly analog media such as the telephone—a process theoretically possible after 1938, one year before Wharton's death, but not practically realized for many years—is, of course, one of the crucial developments in recent telecommunications history. In the wake of the later-twentieth-century rise of the digital, the very language used to parse the distinction between discrete, numerable signals and continuous, measurable ones has entered into the popular vocabulary, as "digital" and "analog" have ceased to be the recondite province of technicians, being now "freely bandied around in everyday conversation."[16] Less remarked today is the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tilt towards analog media in the first place (as well as its impact upon art and culture), the emergence of technologies like the telephone and radio whose "voices," before their recapture within binary code in our own time, literally eluded the discrete systems associated with, for instance, the telegraph.

In *Custom* there is a strong sense of the emergence or irruption of such powerful "analog" energies, associated particularly with the resistless forces of the modern—forces, perhaps, to be best represented, modeled, and transmitted by media like the phone, a technology premised upon the iconic mimicry of a fluctuating real, rather than its attempted capture within the clumsy categories of an artificial code.[17] In short, Wharton's most telephonic novel is shot through with variable, destabilizing, "undulatory" forces, from the unstable flows of market speculation to the erotic power of the putatively uncoded body, all of which threaten to overwhelm the tidy binaries and stable codes of the archaic order.

If the phone above all signifies modernity, this is undoubtedly a modernity of a particularly American stamp. When Mr. Spragg inwardly adduces "the absence of the room-to-room telephone" as further evidence of European backwardness (239), he is exhibiting, no doubt, a certain nationalistic arrogance—but Wharton is also capturing the technology's

real geographical origins, associations, and usage patterns. Unlike the telegraph, to which England's Wheatstone and Cooke had at least as good a claim as inventors as Morse (to say nothing of contemporaneous pioneers elsewhere), the telephone was unequivocally an American invention, and American it would largely remain for many years in distribution and popularity. To Europeans, the phone was a "Yankee import, and it was greeted with much uncertainty and ambivalence."[18] By the first decade of the twentieth century, approximately the setting of *Custom*, one in sixty Americans had a phone (almost seven per cent of Manhattanites by 1904); in France, where the provincial Spragg *père* first lands, it was one in 1,216 (even by 1922, the capital "was said to be spurning the telephone").[19]

An equally strong tie bound the phone to the world of commerce. As I have already suggested, there is an aptness to the fact that this text is both undeniably a "business novel" in Wolff's words and a markedly "telephonic" novel as well; there was in fact an enduring association from the beginning between telephony and the (American) business world. In his history of media, Brian Winston goes so far as to suggest that without the latter, there might have been little or no social demand for the development of the former: "there was no clearly defined need for such a thing [as the phone] in any sphere," although this changed with "the legal creation of the modern corporation."[20] In its early decades business uses dominated over social ones, while also leading to the blurring of the boundaries between the two domains.[21] Among the first telephonic customers were New York stockbrokers, and the affinity of the technology with market speculation is clearly embodied in the figures of Spragg, Moffat, and their (native) New York competitors. *The Custom of the Country* is set well within "the first 50 years" of telephonic growth, during which period, according to J. Carey and M. L. Moss, the phone was still "primarily a business tool."[22]

Among the media technologies—the typewriter and stenography, for instance—used by Wharton to invoke the spaces and rhythms of business in the novel, the telephone is the most conspicuous: when Ralph visits Elmer's refurbished office for news of his investment (his hopes of riding a "booming" market are about to be dashed—in keeping with the overarching metaphor of the market as an ocean, Moffatt informs him that they are "high and dry"), we hear "the spasmodic buzzing of the telephone" (289). Wharton's treatment of the phone's affiliations with capitalism and the business world is thus firmly grounded in the technology's early history: there was an intimate and reciprocal relationship between "the banking and stock exchange systems" and the telephone.[23] In the text, furthermore, the phone is not only apparently an

indispensable instrument of business, but a channel linking business and home, facilitating habitual communion between the two spaces and effacing the dividing line between them.

The phone was also associated with a specific, radically fluid and potentially dangerous, metaphoric conception of the market, as the technology helped to enable large, rapid fluctuations in the world of commerce. The phone had a radical impact on "the operation of the financial markets," being not only associated with "economic expansion" generally but specifically with "the liquidity of securities," as well as with vast, sudden flows, the magical production of wealth, particularly in the time period (and the New York) of Wharton's novel. John Brooks notes that "telephone communication . . . made possible the rapid raising of huge pools of capital in times of crisis," and suggests that the phone (in the hands of J. P. Morgan and George W. Perkins) played a key role in "heading off the financial panic of 1907."[24] The treatment of capital in *Custom* is very much in keeping with such a conceptualization; there is a sense of violent fluctuation, a vocabulary of the undulatory, a wealth of aqueous, especially oceanic, tropes. Capitalism's energies are in their essence wavelike—to be harnessed by the market's conquerors, suffered by its victims: "[Undine] had given up hoping that her father might make another hit in Wall Street. Mrs Spragg's letters gave the impression that the days of big strokes were over for her husband, that he had *gone down* in the conflict with forces beyond his measure. If he had remained in Apex the *tide* of its new prosperity might have carried him to wealth; but New York's huge *waves* of success had *submerged* instead of *floating* him" (352, my emphasis). The elemental force of capital is measurable rather than countable: a matter of degree rather than kind. While an Apex-sized wave might "float," a New York-sized one will annihilate.

Besides its links with the market and its fluctuations, another strong association existed in the public—and particularly the privileged—mind between Bell's invasive medium and the breakdown or erosion of existing social codes. The phone first of all did not seem to respect the boundaries separating different kinds of space, as we have already seen—Bell envisioned, in his words, a "universal network reaching into homes, offices and workplaces," and the domestic "intrusion," as Asa Briggs terms it, in particular was not universally popular.[25] There was, too, a widely-held sense that the phone had bad manners, or no manners at all. George Bernard Shaw, who actually worked for the phone company in Britain, complained of the "stentorian efficiency" of Edison's receiving apparatus, which, he sniffed, lacked "discretion"—it "bellowed" rather than "whispered." Telephone historian John Brooks cites such a want of etiquette as one reason, among others, for British resistance to the technology.[26] Tele-

phonic users were often tempted to their own lapses of propriety, as the phone became associated with rudeness, incivility (even swearing), and unwanted intimacy—as well as the uncontrollable linking by wire of the socially unequal. In time, new social codes emerged for use within the new networks, new sets of mores and manners.

In addition to its perceived weakening of mere codes of politeness and decorum, a not inconsiderable number of commentators saw in the medium a larger threat to the social order itself, as early resistance by the "conservative" and "patrician" to the merely novel—the phone was "something vulgarly new"—gave way to deeper anxieties.[27] Many, Brian Winston notes, feared the telephone as something fraught with "radical potential," a "destroyer of social norms," a bringer of "social threats to the established order," associated not only with the breakdown of "the rules of propriety in conversation" but perhaps, it was to be feared, more dangerous leveling forces.[28]

There are compelling parallels to be drawn between contemporary, particularly patrician, views of the technology—invasive, pushy, tending to erode class distinctions, destructive or ignorant of established codes and harbingers of new, laxer ones—and the representation of the phone-using *parvenu* figures in Wharton's novel. (As a seemingly unstoppable, ever-expanding network—McLuhan calls it "an irresistible intruder"—the phone is particularly well suited to a novel centrally concerned with the theme of invasion.[29]) Furthermore, the text's social upstarts are repeatedly associated not only with the telephone but with the power—and, often, volume and intrusiveness—of the human voice. It is surely no accident that the Spraggs take up residence in the "Stentorian," a space shot through with telephonic wires (recall, too, the Shavian critique of the newer telephones' "stentorian" aggressiveness). Elmer Moffatt, the text's most impressive paragon of the new energies, and a relentless deconstructor of the old codes, has his powers perhaps most characteristically expressed through his voice. It is his raw and untrained, but formidable, ability as a rhetor that spurs his emergence from obscurity in Apex, as his speech successively "stirs," "convulses," and "dazzles" his hearers, finally "drawing tears" from them (344–45). And the sound of his voice will retain, years later, its power to generate palpable effects in Undine's physical state: "Since the days when he had poured out to her his great fortune-building projects she had never heard him make so long a speech; and her heart, as she listened, beat with a new joy and terror" (359). The voice, like capital a fluctuating quantity, seems an index of power itself, perhaps of the particularly modern form that makes an Elmer Moffatt a force to be reckoned with: "Moffatt's voice," reflects Undine, "had always a detaining power. Even now that she knew him to be defeated and negligible the

power asserted itself" (156). At another point she experiences a powerful "longing to hear his voice" (249).

The voice's natural medium is, of course, the telephone; it is hardly surprising that Elmer seeks telephonic contact with Undine after their first, uncomfortable, encounter, or that when, near the end of the novel, she finds herself thinking of him, it is the phone she reaches for: "Elmer Moffatt was still in Paris—he was in reach, within telephone-call," thinks Undine, almost idly, and in short order this casually-made telephonic circuit is followed by their (re)marriage (348). The telephone, then, seems both to model and enable a more casual conception of matrimonial ceremony; it is, surely, with its promise of effortless yet intimate contact, an appropriate metaphor for the text's sequence of marriages and divorces, for marital circuits made and unmade with relative ease. (There is, as well, a long-standing perception of the telephone as an inherently intimate, even sexualized, medium—Paul Levinson calls it "a highly sexually charged instrument."[30]) Wharton once more contrasts in a nuanced fashion the relative levels of intimacy associated with different media in the novel. By contrast with the phone, the telegraph is the medium by which Undine keeps her son at arm's length:

> Paul never knew where [Undine and Elmer] were except when a telegram announced they were going somewhere else. He did not even know that there was any method of communication between mothers and sons less laconic than that of the electric wire; and once, when a boy at school asked him if his mother often wrote, he had answered in all sincerity: "Oh yes—I got a telegram last week." (362)

For Elmer, the instant, effortless intimacy of the phone call, both promise of and prelude to Undine's body; for Paul, the characteristically "laconic" language of cablese, expressed impersonally in typewritten language, through an inherently distancing medium meant to represent an "unnatural" maternal relation, and to be contrasted with the handwritten letters received by his schoolfellows.

By contrast with the ethos of fluid social bonds mentioned above, the world into which Undine seeks entry is characterized, of course, indeed virtually defined, as an exceptionally rigid code system. This is in fact the term (with the accompanying suggestion of radical inflexibility) repeatedly used within the novel itself: Ralph, "want[ing] to be 'modern,'" chafes "against the restrictions and exclusions of the old code" (48). Later, going to Mr. Spragg for counsel, he mentally appreciates his capacity for "an elasticity of judgment not allowed for in the Dagonet code" (163). In terms of the opposition I am exploring here, this code-system would fall, surely, under the aegis of the "discrete." In their explicitly ethnographical

aspect such codes recall the diagrams of a structural anthropologist, premised upon series of binary oppositions, systems of absolute "either-ors," strict rules governing behavior, licit and illicit relationships, hierarchies, and so on. In this context, two of Harriet Ray's traits, linked serially—her encyclopedic knowledge of kinship systems and her inability to "make herself understood on the telephone"—suggest a deeper relationship: she is master of the older code, lost within the new medium of continuous, variable flows.)

It is no wonder that Undine, despite her best efforts, cannot smoothly be integrated into such a system, representing, as she surely does, one of the novel's great "analog" forces. Wharton's telephonic novel is centered upon a woman *named* "Undine," a figure who is, moreover, consistently associated with the wavelike flow of energies. As Stephen Orgel points out, Undine's name is "relentlessly deconstructed" within the novel: where Ralph, abundantly possessed of cultural capital, thinks of Montaigne, her parents had intended a reference to a hair-crimping product.[31] But the name's transcendently "analog" nature, its suggestion of sinusoidal fluctuations, also surely resonates with the other forces I have been discussing here. Her body is frequently depicted as both a kind of receiver of impulses and as itself a signifying mechanism, one whose meanings are to be measured as continuous intensities rather than discrete signals. This is particularly clear in her exchanges with Elmer, whose speech and appearance cause, inevitably, the involuntary acceleration of her heartbeat (56, 65, 67). Throughout the novel her body produces a host of "undulatory" responses: her face constantly "blushes," "reddens," "pales," "burns," "colors"; her body "quivers" and "trembles"; and her pulse rate seems in a constant state of flux, at least at emotionally charged moments when her heart, and more strikingly at one point her "blood," beats more rapidly (357).

Ralph Dagonet's destruction by Undine is, suggestively, depicted as an inability to master the power of wavelike forces. Earlier, in the heady aftermath of marriage to Undine, Ralph had delighted in what might be termed the pleasures of the undulatory—the exhilarating sense of being swept up in a near-mystic experience, liberating his creative energies and inducing a sense of ecstasy: he describes the "mergings of the personal with the general life," so "that one felt one's self a mere wave on the wild stream of being" (moments later, he tells the "exquisite" Undine, "You look as cool as a wave") (88). In the moments before his suicide, however, the overwhelming nature of wavelike energies is cast in quite different terms, taking the form of a (William-)Jamesian stream, or rather torrent, of thought (surely it is no coincidence that James developed his incomparably influential metaphor for human cognition in an emergent

"analog" age). Ralph's "vision" of Undine "was swept away by another wave of hurrying thoughts. He felt it was intensely important that he should keep the thread of every one of them, that they all represented things to be said or done, or guarded against" (296). The task of parsing the vast, continuous "wave" into manageable units (Ralph is, of course, a writer, committed to an art of the discrete) proves impossible, however, and soon after he commits suicide.

If *The House of Mirth* is a novel fundamentally concerned with social "recentering," *The Custom of the Country* is more about destruction by unstanchable flows. At its core is the figure of the overwhelming wave, the danger of undulatory forces which, like the medium that harnesses them, do not respect the fixed, the discrete. On such waves the Elmer Moffatts of the world are able to ride to prominence, while those clinging to the old codes are relegated to the status of ethnographic curiosity (in this world, it would seem, there are few things more outmoded, more hopelessly *passé*, than the digital). As *Custom*'s more retrospective sequel seems to suggest, however, the rise of the *parvenu*, though affiliated once more with the history of the telephone, may be accomplished by a less violent, though no less enduring, process of assimilation.

Twice in the course of the 1870s portion of *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton's characters have recourse to the still-nascent language of scientific romance in attempting to imagine the possibilities inherent in such emergent technologies as the telephone. In the first such episode, at Skuytercliff, Beaufort introduces the subject as a means of both hiding and displaying his annoyance. (Dreaming aloud of a working telephone is marvelously passive-aggressive, as he is really wishing for distance from Ellen and Archer.) He "grumbl[ingly]" muses, "If only this new dodge for talking along a wire had been a little bit nearer perfection I might have told you all this from town," and Ellen uses this "opening" as a means to defuse the tension,

> twist[ing] the talk away to the fantastic possibility that they might one day actually converse with each other from street to street, or even—incredible dream!—from one town to another. This struck from all three allusions to Edgar Poe and Jules Verne, and such platitudes as naturally rise to the lips of the most intelligent when they are talking against time, and dealing with a new invention in which it would seem ingenuous to believe too soon; and the question of the telephone carried them safely back to the big house.[32]

The note of proleptic irony struck here—most aggressively by the narra-

tive interjection of "incredible dream!"—might alone signal to a perceptive reader that this is a retrospective novel, written from the perspective of a future time. The novel's concluding chapter, set a quarter of a century later, removes all doubt on this score—a chapter, significantly, that prominently features a conversation between Archer and Dallas over a working telephone. Just as the *idea* of the telephone had served in the earlier episode as catalyst for science-fiction-tinged speculation about the future, its real presence now serves as spur for openly nostalgic reflection:

> The telephone clicked, and Archer, turning from the photographs, unhooked the transmitter at his elbow. How far they were from the days when the legs of the brass-buttoned messenger boy had been New York's only means of quick communication! (275)

This structured play of prolepsis and analepsis is meant in the first place to invoke the passage of time within the text, like the implied contrast between the "electric lamps" in Archer's library and the gaslight of a vanished age. The telegram—signifying, in Undine's hands, cold indifference in *Custom*—has become here a nostalgic marker of the irretrievably lost world of Old New York. Within the pages of Wharton's retrospective novel, we have moved, past an irrecoverable dividing line, from a telegraphic to a telephonic age, and the "new invention" which Archer, Ellen, and Beaufort had hardly dared believe in, has become a dominant, "natural" medium.

Appropriately, it is the vulgar Beaufort who broaches the subject of the telephone here, as he, and the forces he represents, will in time benefit from a parallel process of assimilation and integration; the novel's ending comes, of course, within a world in which Dallas Archer can marry the daughter of Fanny Ring/Beaufort. The topos of the science-fiction technology—from Bell's rumored invention to, more fantastically still, the "communication without wires" (231)invoked later—serves as a sign of the impossible become not only possible but eventually accepted, natural, normal: a shift in which, in the register of societal transformation, Wharton is keenly concerned, and which, in this novel, she invites us to view through the figurative lens of media history. At the same time, the novel capitalizes on the paradoxical promise of new media to provide less "mediated" forms of contact in elaborating its themes of freedom and escape from oppressive and arbitrary networks of social control.

As with her earlier fiction, the explicitly historical *Age* makes chronologically precise and symbolically resonant use of media technology, situating them along with other literary and historical references in the text—the rumors beginning to circulate about the coming construction of the Met, the package from London carrying to the eager Archer "a new volume of

Herbert Spencer, another collection of the prolific Alphonse Daudet's brilliant tales, and a novel called 'Middlemarch,' as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews" (123). The telegraph, accordingly, is a prominent presence in the "Old New York" portions of the novel, where it serves as an important tool of the dominant social networks. I have already touched upon the "anthropological" aspect of Wharton's fiction, particularly conspicuous in this late depiction of New York society as a "tribal" collection of "clans" characterized by allegiance to ancient rituals and taboos.[33] Given the frequency and explicitness with which the ways of old New York are likened to those of "Primitive Man," then, it is interesting to note that one of the defining cultural possessions of that society is the telegraph—an invention which was, only a few decades before, considered as wildly, unthinkably futuristic a device as Archer, Ellen, and Beaufort think the "new dodge for talking along a wire."[34] How such cultural, as well as technological, shifts are effected is one of the novel's core concerns.

But there is a particular aptness to the relationship between Society and the wire in *The Age of Innocence*. Memorably, the social milieu of the novel is termed, in a narrative characterization filtered by Archer's consciousness, "a kind of hieroglyphic world" made up of "a set of arbitrary signs" (47)—a description that lends force to Pamela Knights's discussion of Archer's "firm insertion," indeed inescapable enmeshment, within a Lacanian "symbolic order."[35] As we have already seen, from her earliest work Wharton invited connections between social formations and the media systems associated with them; in *Age*, the telegraphic network in particular seems conspicuously allied to the old, 1870s order: it, too, for instance, employs a set of arcane-looking symbols whose very principles of construction (for instance, its basis in reckonings of alphabetic frequency) foreground the arbitrary nature of language. The wires serving old New York run alongside the elaborately branched kinship structures it seeks to maintain, as parallel systems within the same social body or as though the one might function as a modeling system for the other. For a social world much concerned with surveillance and the enforcement of rules of propriety, the telegraph is an especially appropriate medium. The association of the telegraph with surveillance was one of long standing, as the wire had from its earliest days performed a quite literal, and well-publicized, police function: its capture of the murderer John Tawell in 1845 was a public relations coup for the new technology; a few years later, the "gimlet-eyed old gentleman" in the railroad episode from Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* would celebrate its power to detect and punish wrongdoers. The merely socially culpable had reason to fear the wire as well: Henry James's telegraphic novella is pre-

mised upon the dangers inherent in a system reliant on several layers of human as well as mechanical mediation; it plays particularly upon upper-class fears ("The class," as he puts it, "that wired everything") by depicting a hermeneutically gifted operator who begins to penetrate the code the text's two illicit lovers have constructed in order to communicate by the parlous, quasi-public wire.

In Wharton's novel, the wire tends to be an ally to those seeking to facilitate the construction of alliances judged to be "licit" within that order, while seeking to prevent the formation of "illicit" unions—those that are as it were inexpressible within its "language" or quasi-linguistic system ("there's no *us* in that sense!", as Ellen somewhat belatedly expresses it). The wire is invariably hostile to the relationship between Archer and Ellen, even as it helps to enact and maintain the marriage of May and Archer. Indeed, the same cable, or rather pair of cables, that render official—by rendering public—the engagement of the soon-to-be Newland Archers also, and at the same instant, separates the newly-confessed lovers Archer and Ellen, splicing and sundering in the same speech act. The very placement of this telegraphic message—it literally divides the text in half—as well as its importance to the plot, is perhaps further indication of the significance of the technology within the text.[36] Certainly, its effect upon Newland is impressive:

> It [the first cable] was dated from St. Augustine, and addressed to the Countess Olenska. In it he read: "Granny's telegram successful. Papa and Mamma agree marriage after Easter. Am telegraphing Newland. Am too happy for words and love you dearly. Your grateful May."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Half an hour later, when Archer unlocked his own front-door, he found a similar envelope on the hall-table on top of his pile of notes and letters. The message inside the envelope was also from May Welland, and ran as follows: "Parents consent wedding Tuesday after Easter at twelve Grace Church eight bridesmaids please see Rector so happy love May."
>
> Archer crumpled up the yellow sheet as if the gesture could annihilate the news it contained. . . . [C]ramming the telegram into his pocket he mounted the stairs. (148)

The very language of the wire, which in *Custom* had been used to suggest impersonality, contributes here to the impression of a powerful, unified social formation behind it. Characteristic of "cablese," the personal pronoun is elided throughout, but more generally these messages seem to be collective productions—one cannot help but feel the palpable presence

of May's parents in both, of "Granny" in the first, and perhaps too of "Rector" and even "bridesmaids" (all figures of propriety, ritual, conformity) in the second. One might discern as well, in the telegraphic stripping-down of language, a certain laying bare, as it were, of the sinews of social power to be found within the hierarchic "pyramid" of the novel, as the remorselessly abbreviative wire produces unexpected transitives: the near-violence of "Parents consent wedding" seems singularly eloquent as an emblem of social pressure. Notable, too, is the predominance of the phatic: that is, the pronounced attention to the *channel* of communication, as opposed to the message itself. The first telegram encloses, in a kind of widening gyre of reference, both past and future acts of telegraphy ("Granny's telegram successful. . . . Am telegraphing Newland"), foregrounding the public nature of the communication—as opposed to, say, a sealed letter.

This nature is made still clearer in a later episode, when Archer is sent to telegraph Ellen with news of Mrs. Mingott's stroke (which, interestingly, causes her to speak in "fragmentary phrases" reminiscent of telegraphic language). The scene begins, significantly, with the inability of the information worker to render "Olenska" intelligible to the system of which she (the operator) forms the first relay—Ellen's surname being as resistant to assimilation by the telegraphic network as she herself has been to inclusion within the social network:

> "Ol—Ol—Howjer spell it, anyhow?" asked the tart young lady to whom Archer had pushed his wife's telegram across the brass ledge of the Western Union office.
>
> "Olenska—O-len-ska," he repeated, drawing back the message in order to print out the foreign syllables above May's rambling script.
>
> "It's an unlikely name for a New York telegraph office; at least in this quarter," an unexpected voice observed; and turning around Archer saw Lawrence Lefferts at his elbow, pulling an imperturbable moustache and affecting not to glance at the message. (225)

Affectations of delicacy notwithstanding, the dominant impression one receives from this scene is of a network with no "outside," no space that is not potentially open to surveillance and comment. Once more the telegraphic message being sent is a kind of collective production—even before Archer makes an actual palimpsest of the text he submits to the operator by adding his own supplemental "print" to "May's rambling script" (it is first called "his wife's telegram," then, mere moments later, "his telegram"), it is the product of a household rather than a private individual ("Shall I write the telegram for you, Auntie?" May asks Mrs. Lovell Mingott [234–35]). There is indeed a sense in which Archer could *only*

telegraph to Ellen in concert with, or on behalf of, other people; particularly given the cable's apparent hostility to their relationship.[37]

It is, of course, precisely the rigid strictures of this world against which Archer chafes. He dreams of forms of communication that would elude or escape social surveillance and control, and that would permit communion without interference. The possibility of a technology or technique for unmediated communication is one of the novel's most insistent motifs, appearing in a surprising variety of places. In its most extreme form, it can be found in the doctrines of Dr. Agathon Carver of the Valley of Love Community: the Marchioness Manson speaks ecstatically of his "illuminating discovery of the Direct Contact" (138). We have already seen how, as a nascent technology in the 1870s, an idea rather than a reality to the characters in the novel (it is nowhere "[near] perfection"—indeed, its very existence is as yet hardly to be credited), the telephone serves as a kind of blank canvas, productive of speculation. It inspires in turn literary reference ("allusions to Edgar Poe and Jules Verne"), flights of fancy (if, again, these are subdued by the ironic lens of retrospection), and the spouting of "platitudes" (perhaps, one imagines, centering upon themes of universal human unification, probably not dissimilar in formulation from those which accompanied the laying of the first transatlantic telegraph cable in 1858, or for that matter the extension of the World Wide Web in our own time). One of the promises of the telephone has always been, of course, its offer of "direct contact" between its users, the eradication of the clumsy degrees of mediation associated with, say, the telegraph. This is, initially at least, doubtless the appeal of the phone for Archer, whose later inward musing upon the "Arabian Night marvels" promised by a scientific "brotherhood of visionaries" includes within its catalog the possibility of "telephonic communication without wires" (230–31)—surely the ultimate vision, from the perspective of the 1870s, of an unmediated form of communication.

As if in a technological Rorschach test, then, Archer seems to see in the rumored new media (the phone in which Beaufort had seen welcome distance, and perhaps even the amazing possibility of wireless communication) the promise of an unexampled degree of freedom, a new kind of communion. But when the new world of the telephone does come into being, Archer is, it would seem, far from comfortable with it—even if he is not, like Harriet Ray, utterly confounded by it:

> Dallas seemed to be speaking in the room: the voice was as near by and natural as if he had been lounging in his favourite arm-chair by the fire. The fact would not ordinarily have surprised Archer, for long-distance telephoning had become as much a matter of course as electric lighting and five-day Atlantic voyages. But the laugh did

> startle him; it still seemed wonderful that across all those miles and miles of country—forest, river, mountain, prairie, roaring cities and busy indifferent millions—Dallas's laugh should be able to say: "Of course, whatever happens, I must get back on the first, because Fanny Beaufort and I are to be married on the fifth." (276)

The passage begins with a commonplace in the early days of long-distance telephony (first realized in the New York–Chicago line depicted here): describing the distant voice as "nearby and natural" was virtually *de rigeur* in contemporary accounts. But while the telephone, as Archer's wandering consciousness concedes, produces a superlatively "natural" effect, he manifestly cannot *naturalize* its operation. Indeed, its very naturalness seems vaguely unnatural to him, and he cannot quite put out of his head the "wonderful" distance his son's voice must travel in order to reach him, in all its geographical particularity—he cannot "automatize" the channel, as the Russian Formalists might put it; it remains strange to him.[38]

But while there is a lingering resistance to the technology (perhaps to be expected from this creature of the old hieroglyphs), it has nonetheless become a "natural" way for Archer to talk with his son, just as Dallas's coming union with Beaufort's daughter has come to seem (as it were) strangely natural. The treatment of the long-distance telephone, then, here invites the reader to reflect on parallel narratives of assimilation—by which a fantastical contraption springing from the pages of a Jules Verne novel has become the channel for a discussion of an alliance that might once have seemed equally *outré*, equally beyond the bounds of the possible.

In Wharton's treatment of media there are striking continuities. Communications technologies are persistently, and intimately, woven throughout her representations of social change, frequently serving as markers differentiating old from new, dominant from emergent. Above all, new media, and the paradigms of connectivity they suggest, frequently hold out the promise of escape from an established network of rigid and arbitrary codes. But hers is an evolving vision as well. *The House of Mirth* is able to imagine the secret and immediate, if fitful and transitory, exchange of sympathetic energies patterned after electrical networks, while *The Custom of the Country* depicts an irruption of wavelike forces, modeled by the growing power of the telephone and threatening to dissolve the established order entirely. By *The Age of Innocence* the dream of "direct" communion is revealed as hopelessly quixotic, as the promise of "wireless" freedom gives way to the telephonic reinscription of a pushing new order. In tracing such an arc, Wharton's fiction might indeed be said to

mirror the archetypal trajectory of cultural responses to new media themselves, from entities fraught with exciting possibility to the unremarked yet indispensable prostheses of our culture. More fundamentally, her work suggests that, while the relationship between networks of technological and symbolic mediation may be fluid, evolving, and often contentious, the profound inflection of human relationships by such networks is an ineluctable fact of social existence.

Notes

[1] Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, in *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings*, ed. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York: Library of America, 1990), 812.

[2] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 14.

[3] Quoted in Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 144.

[4] Irving Howe, ed. *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 122.

[5] An exception is Jean Blackall's insightful but brief 1991 essay, which considers letters and telegrams as an "intrusive voice" in Wharton's fiction. Blackall's premise is that cables and letters essentially "[function] similarly," though the former is more "emphatic," and that both "at times take the place of the arrival of persons." She does not discuss the telephone, a medium which unlike both letters and telegrams actually does convey the human voice. Jean Franz Blackall, "The Intrusive Voice: Telegrams in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*," *Women's Studies* 20 (1991), 163–68.

[6] Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, ed. Martha Banta (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 305–6; hereafter cited parenthetically.

[7] Here as so often in Wharton, technology is a precisely placed historical marker. While the telephone is used freely by the cosmopolitan, conspicuously consuming rich as early as the world of Lily's childhood—she has early memories of her mother's "cabling to Paris for an extra dress or two, and telephoning to the jeweler that he might, after all, send home the turquoise bracelet" (31)—Gerty Farish's use of the technology the morning after Lily's flight to her modest flat indicates that it was by no means exclusively the province of the wealthy any longer.

[8] On metaphoric networks, see Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2001).

[9] The language of a centrally controlled communication system, used as metaphor for both individual and social "organism," can be found with great clarity in the work of Herbert Spencer, an influence on Wharton.

[10] Wolff, 225, 232.

[11] Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 202.

[12] Interestingly, one spur for this telephonic explosion was the rise of the "independent" telephone networks that proliferated with the expiration of the Bell patent. These sprang up in the American Midwest—Indiana (home of the first such network, and name of Undine's neighbor), Nebraska, Texas, Kansas, Iowa—nearly any of which might have contained the fictional Apex City. Beginning in the last years of the nineteenth century, and continuing into the twentieth, these "independents" "gained confidence," and "began to make frontal assaults" on the Northeast. John Brooks, *Telephone: The First Hundred Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 103–4. Might this narrative of threatened reverse colonization by Midwestern networks suggest parallels with the Eastward migration of Wharton's "invaders"?

[13] Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 50; hereafter cited parenthetically.

[14] Quoted in Brian Winston, *Media Technology and Society: A History From the Telegraph to the Internet* (London: Routledge, 1998), 46.

[15] Laszlo Solymar, *Getting the Message: A History of Communications* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 125.

[16] Solymar, 124.

[17] As Bell's immortal factotum (or, perhaps, co-inventor) Watson would later write, "the essence of [Bell's] great idea" was based upon the contrivance of "a mechanism which will make a current of electricity vary in its intensity, as air varies in intensity when a sound is passing through it." Quoted in Winston, 39.

[18] Starr, 198.

[19] Briggs and Burke, 150–51. Seeking to characterize the "gulf" separating the America of her old age from that of her childhood, Wharton allows that the most conspicuous differences are technological—producing a catalog of inventions bookended by the telephone and the radio—while insisting that the more fundamental change lies in the nation's rejection of an Old World heritage (*A Backward Glance*, 780). But doubtless the two are closely related.

[20] Winston, 51.

[21] "The first telephone wire was erected in April 1877 by Charles Williams Jr to connect his home in Somerville to his factory in Boston." Winston, 53.

[22] Quoted in Winston, 53.

[23] Briggs and Burke, 150.

[24] Brooks, 115.

[25] Briggs and Burke, 146, 150.

[26] Brooks, 92.

[27] Brooks, 64.

[28] Winston, 59.

[29] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 238.

[30] Paul Levinson, *The Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 67.

[31] Stephen Orgel, Introduction, *The Custom of the Country* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), xvi–xvii.

[32] Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, ed. Carol J. Singley (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 121; hereafter cited parenthetically.

[33] For a recent discussion see Nancy Bentley, "Edith Wharton and the Science of Manners," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

[34] Perhaps, though, the contradiction suggested by a wired tribe, the joining of the technological and the primitive, is only superficial: McLuhan, for one, wondered about the possibilities of a process of "retribalization" set in motion by the advent of telegraphy. And of course, from the retrospective position of the novel's last chapter, to say nothing of the period of the text's composition, the telegraph was a "residual" technology in Raymond Williams's sense, well on its way to becoming archaic—and accordingly a fitting emblem of the social order whose decline Wharton wistfully chronicles.

[35] Pamela Knights, "The Social Subject in *The Age of Innocence*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 22.

[36] Blackall writes that "Wharton's fictional deployment of letters and telegrams is associated, at least in part, with one of her most characteristic narrative strategies, with her device of emphatic interruption, which is essentially a dramatic device." Blackall, 164.

[37] Besides the mid-novel wire from May discussed above, there is also the telegram that "call[s] away" Ellen from Portsmouth, just when Archer comes to the Blenkers

in search of her (of course, this indirectly brings them into more intimate contact, as he follows her to Boston—but this is, significantly, done in secret).

[38] Archer seems constitutionally to resist the elision of technological process that, as Walter Benjamin suggests, produces the illusion of "reality" that modern technologies of representation seem to demand. As he famously writes: "The equipment-free aspect of reality . . . has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 233.