CHAPTER 1

Sympathy and the Spiriting of Information *In the Cage*

If there was one note sounded most frequently in nineteenth-century discussions of the electric telegraph, it was ebullience at its promise of far-flung community. A popular history of the electric telegraph compares the marvel of connectivity of our own age. The "Victorian Internet" was, as its contemporaries put it, a network of "human sympathies" encircling the earth and making it "palpitat[e] with human thoughts and emotions."[1] The language of the meeting of minds and hearts, which turned up repeatedly at this time, implies something unexpected caught in this first Web: its achievement was conveying not just information but something more ineffable—actual human inwardness. This attitude may indeed help to explain why the telegraph often became spiritualized (and spirits became telegraphic) within the intertwining discourses of occultism and technological speculation. Though the telegraph especially inspired claims of a dawning age of unity, other Victorian-born communication machines could also seem

1. Quoted in Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers* (New York: Walker, 1998), 163, 82. On the telegraphic news press as a lauded instrument of sympathetic national unity following the shooting of an American president, see Richard Menke, "Media in America, 1881: Garfield, Guiteau, Bell, Whitman," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 638–64. On the joys as well as dangers of the intimacy seemingly created by technological as well as occult communications, see Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

to lend themselves to ethereal connections—as when, in a ghost story by Algernon Blackwood, the telephone permits the last desperate reach of feeling and personality of a drowned husband making a postmortem call to his wife.[2] Such phantasmal musings suggest a faith in communication technologies' ability to clutch and transfer the soul.

Yet these sanguine perspectives tell only part of the tale. Victorian communication technologies, along with movements like spiritualism, helped to inaugurate a modern notion of "communication" itself, with its strivings for a kind of dialogue wherein individuals transmit their interiority to each other. Yet this fantasy soon faltered, as people struggled with gaps between self and other and with means for negotiating them—with language, bodies, bureaucracies, and machines that facilitated mutual understanding but also, ironically, got in the way of it.[3] In other words, there was a problem with media, those intervening agents that paradoxically enabled and impeded communication. It is worth underscoring that many media were, or were operated by, human beings, such as séance mediums and telephonists. My aim is to spotlight the nineteenth-century gendering of human mediation, explicating it as a strategy for addressing the type of communicative concerns at issue here. If media potentially annoyed by their in-betweenness, *female* media mitigated that annoyance by seeming to offer special virtues that aided interpersonal contact. The feminization of mediation is, precisely, a response to that annoyance: it attempts to maximize the connecting powers of the apparatus while, conversely, minimizing its existence as a hindrance.

In what follows I address the first of these two benefits of feminization, examining notions of women's affectively sensitive bodies as these seemed to underlie conversational networks. This benefit had its limitations, though, as I begin to reveal in my reading of Henry James's *In the Cage* (1898). The trope of the mediating woman was one that literary works brought into focus but sometimes, as in the case of James, imagined only to amend or interrogate. In its coyly double-edged representation of mediated messaging, *In the Cage* attests to James's literary attraction to psychical research. But above all, as a realist piece, it emphasizes its telegrapher-heroine's painful awareness of her socioeconomic circumstances, which makes fulfilling the comforting vocational stereotype I describe an impossibility or, more exactly, necessitates that

2. Algernon Blackwood, "You *May* Telephone from Here," in *Ten Minute Stories,* 170–78 (1914; Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1969).

3. John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Thus, Peters's dazzling argument continues, communication as a goal ultimately flourished alongside fears of communication breakdown and solipsism, generating the obsession over failed connections that figures so prominently in Modernist writings.

she effectively refashion it for her own problematic ends. What is even more problematic, her actions clarify a pitfall of the stereotype itself for an ideal of relayed knowledge exchange. While some writers sought to legitimate the medium's work, James as well as others accentuated the dangers she brought to the vocation or the vocation brought to her. Making our way through this complex terrain demands beginning with the most foundational narratives, about women's feeling contributions to communication networks.

Imagining the Sympathetic Relay

> The humblest hello-girl along ten thousand miles of wire could teach gentleness, patience, modesty, manners, to the highest duchess in Arthur's land.
>
> —Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

In 1870, sometime journalist Justin McCarthy published a story in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* reflecting on a technology that had proven a boon to journalism, the electric telegraph. Judging by this fiction, though, what captured McCarthy's imagination was not telegraphy's journalistic applications but rather the women so often employed to mediate it. "Along the Wires" tells the story of Annette Langley, a young woman working as an operator in "one of the great Atlantic cities."[4] Though unremarkable physically, she has other charms, most notably an ability to imagine what others feel, an intuitiveness that allows her to spin tales about them, to "throw herself into the lives and joys and sufferings of others, and thus put away her own petty vexations for the hour" (416). The plot turns on Annette's sympathetic imagination, especially as stimulated by her work: "Every one who came with a message to the office was compelled, quite unknown to himself, to tell her his story—or at least the story which his face, his expression, his voice, his message, and *her* fancy all combined to tell for him. . . . No doubt she guessed truly in many cases, for she was a quick, sharp, sympathetic girl" (416). This story-making about others' lives serves primarily to brighten and spice up her own; but there is also something sincere and touching about her sympathy, enough for one of her customers, a doctor named Childers, to take notice. Childers is surprised to find this trait in a woman, but we are

4. "Along the Wires," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 40 (1870): 416. All further page references to "Along the Wires" are parenthetical within the text. Thomas Jepsen pinpoints the story as McCarthy's in *My Sisters Telegraphic: Women in the Telegraph Office, 1846–1950* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 119.

given to understand that his surprise stems from his narrow conceptions of the emotions, the product of studying them "too much with the eyes of an intellectual anatomist" (417). Nonetheless, he rightly appreciates Annette's sensitivity, and the gist of the tale concerns his tests of it as he dispatches romantic-sounding telegraphs just to watch the play of emotions on her face while she processes them. "Good Heavens," he concludes, "what a sympathetic heart this poor girl has! And what tenderness and thoughtfulness one may see in her eyes!" (418).

Tender Annette Langley resembles a professional type that would come on the scene in the next decade, the female telephone operator. But this type took a few years to emerge, because when American switchboards were first getting underway around 1880, managers hired boys to operate them. That decision was soon regretted; the boys were rowdy as well as rude to callers, cursing at them and even threatening them with violence, so managers replaced them with young women. A similar pattern of employment trial and error occurred in the United Kingdom, such that on both sides of the Atlantic, all daytime telephone operating had been reserved for women by the late 1880s.[5] Apparently, what gave women the edge over the boys was not just their efficiency but also their kindly bent toward others. In 1938, one chronicler of the telephone industry summed up employment trends by observing, "the work of successful telephone operating demanded just that particular dexterity, patience and forbearance possessed by the average woman, in a degree superior to that of the opposite sex."[6]

Good switchboard conduct enjoined more than just "patience and forbearance"; in some instances, it involved operators in acts of extreme self-sacrifice. Another early history of the switchboard recalls Mrs. Mildred Lothrop, who in 1920 became the first recipient of AT&T's Noteworthy Public Service award for having braved floodwaters to inform local citizens of their danger. Faced with that same situation back in 1908, Mrs. Sarah J. Rooke had been less fortunate: after warning her subscribers, she herself was swept away and drowned. AT&T did not establish their public service award until 1920; yet, we learn, "the spirit of devotion for which [operators] were awarded was by no means new": "Human needs existed, then as now. Then, as now, human hearts and hands responded to them."[7]

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5. On American employment, see R.T. Barrett, "The Changing Years as Seen from the Switchboard," *Bell Telephone Quarterly* 14 (1935): 52; on British employment, see F.G.C. Baldwin, *The History of the Telephone in the United Kingdom* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1938), 269.

6. Baldwin, *History of the Telephone,* 269.

7. Barrett, "Changing Years," 292. For more on the notions of women's submissiveness, patience, and altruism surrounding switchboard work, see Michèle Martin, who argues that the notion that

The operator's full heart and outreached hands embodied the premium quality she brought to her work: sensitivity or sympathy, gendered feminine by the early twentieth century, and marking out the operator as one of a larger class of mediating women.[8] The National Telephone Company in Britain viewed the operator's almost preternatural sensitivity to others as an imperative: a recruitment leaflet specified that applicants should have "insight into knowing what people mean to say when they cannot say what they mean to say."[9] Likewise, a feminine ethic of personal care was crucial to the image the Bell System sought to cultivate in its operators in the early decades of the telephone industry. In a policy that was simultaneously gender-, class-, and race-based, managers hired only white, genteel, and virtuous young women who would be attentive to callers' preferences and moods. As Venus Green explains, disappointing a caller's expectations required the operator's careful emotional response; when she had to report a line was busy, "it would be with a sympathetic tone to convey 'I am *sorry,* Mr. Smith, but I cannot give you what you want.'"[10] Social and moral attributes as a basis for personally attuned service, not simply managerial aims of minimizing wages or labor unrest, accounted for the feminization of the Bell switchboard.[11]

The gently patient "hello-girl" in Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* occupied the same ranks as telegrapher Annette Langley, as did eventually the woman at the typewriter. "A girl, such as I have in mind," affirmed one writer on the subject of typists in 1890, "has her eyes about her, she is full of sympathy, constantly on the alert for unpleasant things which she may avert or turn to good account. She anticipates the wishes of her employer and gratifies them almost before he has them."[12] Within a burgeoning turn-of-the-century

operating was a moral "labour of love" for women contributed to its feminization by seeming to frame them as easily disciplinable; *"Hello, Central?": Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 60. Also on feminine stereotypes in operating, see Kenneth Lipartito, "When Women Were Switches: Technology, Work, and Gender in the Telephone Industry, 1890–1920," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 1075–1111.

8. Peters likens the telephone operator to the spirit medium and to Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," concluding that all exhibit a "passive, neutral or feminine gender identity"; and he describes her, as someone who sends communications "across the chasm," as a representative of eros or desire for another (*Speaking into the Air,* 196). But the gender identity of the operator was far from neutral, as I underscore, along with the particularly Victorian-defined sympathy that seemed to underlie her work.

9. Quoted in Christopher Browne, *Getting the Message: The Story of the British Post Office* (Dover, NH: Alan Sutton, 1993), 128.

10. Venus Green, *Race on the Line: Gender, Labor, and Technology in the Bell System, 1880–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 68.

11. Ibid., 57–59.

12. Quoted in Carole Srole, "'A Blessing to Mankind, and Especially to Womankind': The Typewriter and the Feminization of Clerical Work, Boston, 1860–1920," in *Women, Work, and Technology:*

corporate ethos of community and subordination, women's fabled sympathy and good-heartedness could make them seem valuable workers in general. In the secretarial field specifically, female workers were sometimes described as more sensitively mannered and more governed by emotion than male ones. While some deprecated this higher affective investment as a workplace frailty, it seems significant, on the other hand, that what might be called an extreme of sympathetic identification soon became a staple of the job: popular and professional discourse regularly depicted the private secretary as someone who took on the boss's identity, becoming his "alter ego." Private secretaries were at the same time expected to craft their own work, which was, along with interpersonal abilities, what eventually raised them above the strictly typist and stenographic ranks. Thus secretaries faced paradoxical demands, being expected to demonstrate both worker self-erasure and worker independence.[13] Another way to put this paradox is to note that even as employers called for the skill of personal ingenuity, they also harbored an ideal of the secretary's mind as devoid of personal consciousness, because a perfect replica of the boss's. It is the latter kind of situation, incidentally, that makes feminine sympathy theoretically compatible with feminine automatism.[14]

Whether averting a disaster (a flood, a missed appointment) or intuiting her boss's needs, the operator or secretary worked best by working responsively and feelingly. This was a task well suited for women, as women had been described by that paragon of Victorian womanhood, Sarah Stickney Ellis. Ellis writes of the female creature,

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Transformations, ed. Barbara Drygulski Wright et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 95.

13. On secretaries in the turn-of-the-century corporate world, see Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), esp. 55–60. The cachet of secretarial work as opposed to mere typing and stenography was not immediate; in the last decades of the nineteenth century, typist-stenographers executed the same work later associated with secretaries, with a main difference being the size of the offices where they worked. The status hierarchy emerged in the early twentieth century as typing and stenographic jobs became more standardized and as women of families of lower social class began adopting them (Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business,* 65–66).

14. Intriguingly, in a 1909 essay, the mind of the private secretary is described as a phonograph: "As nearly as he can be described, he is a man who has lost his own personality and found his chief's in its stead. His brain is a plastic fac-simile of his chief's; indeed, like a piece of wax that has been molded to another form, it is so shaped as to think exactly as the chief thinks . . . he is, in other words, a sort of mental phonograph that never plays its own tune, that never originates but copies perfectly, that furnishes the chief with another extra brain" (quoted in Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business,* 60; her ellipsis). This image of the optimal private secretary—here designated by a masculine pronoun but increasingly female—strikingly resembles phonographic accounts of the unconscious mesmeric subject; see my chap. 3. The similarity attests to the conceptual links at this time between different forms of automatized (and feminized) communications.

> *She* enters, with a perception as delicate as might be supposed to belong to a ministering angel, into the peculiar feelings and tones of character influencing those around her, applying the magical key of sympathy to all they suffer or enjoy, to all they fear or hope, until she becomes identified as it were with their very being, blends her own existence with theirs, and makes her society essential to their highest earthly enjoyment.[15]

As Ellis conceives it, sympathy has a specific direction; it draws a woman outward, until her own self "blends" with other selves. It is this move outward that made women so appropriate for communication systems: their other-directed presence was a linking force, creating bridges to users and, with herself as a nexus, between them. A principal component of the secretary's job, like that of the operator's, was to make connections: she needed to become her boss's alter ego so that she could accurately communicate him to others, whether through typing or other means. At the least, positioning women at crucial medial points facilitated smooth business relations. At the most, it bettered the chances of realizing fantasies that communication technologies could indeed generate a network of "human sympathies."

Such visions of breachless communication benefited by the presence of wires and other connective devices like those found in electrical networks; the rhetoric of sympathy surrounding the secretarial worker, which emerged latest, was possibly an analogical elaboration of that already in place to describe operators in these networks. At the other end of the timeline was that early and most spectacular species of Victorian communication medium, the spirit medium. In Ellis's work, the depiction of women as "ministering angels" whose sympathy pushes to the limit others' "earthly enjoyment" indicates the easy conceptual leap from the Victorian true woman to the spirit medium. Ellis's understanding of sympathy as a "magical key" is also telling. The concept of sympathy had long figured in discussions of magical or occult intercommunications, beginning with the rise of mesmerism in the late eighteenth century.[16] Women especially were said to enter readily into a sympathetic rapport with their mesmerists, and by the peak of modern spiritualism, a similar aptitude was being used to explain their receptivity to the spirits' will. Central to spiritualistic pursuits was the séance medium or "sensitive,"

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15. Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (London: Fisher, [1839]), 203.

16. Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 61–63, 73–74, 226–27.

a term implying important presumptions about the minds and bodies of the women who were mediumship's usual practitioners. The medium was a passive instrument, well attuned to the subtle cues, sometimes described as vibrations, by which the spirits expressed themselves. These perceptive responses were supposed to originate in fine nerves, which the Victorians believed characterized women's constitutions more than men's; therefore successful occult communication—spiritualistic as well as mesmeric/hypnotic and telepathic—resided in the idiosyncrasies of female neural biology.[17] In the absence of wires, women's impressionable nerves supplied the apparatus essential to here-to-hereafter communications.

McCarthy's "Along the Wires" implies the fluid associations in this period between the sympathetic spirit medium, with her nervous accouterments, and the sympathetic operator. According to Dr. Childers, it is sympathy that lies behind reported occult phenomena: "Not one man in twenty thousand can take into his sympathies what another man feels. . . . There is hardly any limit to the insight of a fine, sensitive, sympathetic, and at the same time scientific nature, which can at once feel with the feelings of others and see with the eyes of itself. I have no doubt all your sorceries, witchcrafts, second-sights, spiritualisms, mesmerism, and so on are to be explained in this way" (417). A skeptic, Childers nonetheless ironically approximates a chief tenet of modern spiritualists: that strange and wordless communications are explicable in material terms as the workings of sensitive constitutions. He thinks it exceptional for someone to enjoy this degree of sensitivity—or rather for a "man" to do so; significantly, his reference to the generic individual shifts once he imagines someone actually being that sensitive: "Some rarely endowed man *or woman* has the faculty of opening and using eyes and heart together, and dull people, who can not believe in any body seeing naturally what they themselves can not see, straightway invent supernaturalisms to explain what is simple nature unspoiled" (417; emphasis added). The shift in diction insinuates McCarthy's view—not Childers's yet—that sympathy is a feminine attribute, besides adumbrating the doctor's eye-opening acquaintance with the woman who relays his messages.

Annette has the talent for occulted perception that Childers has theorized, and it may well derive from her sensitive nerves. After she has missed work

17. Roger Luckhurst discusses the nervously sensitive occult woman in *The Invention of Telepathy: 1870–1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 215–19. See also Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 83, and R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 106, 121.

for a number of days, Childers discovers her at home "prostrate with a severe nervous attack of a nature which he hardly understood." All he can make out is that she has "a highly nervous organization, and that 'something was on her mind.'" This "something" comes down, we might say, to a surfeit of sympathy: Annette has finally fallen in love with Dr. Childers and her emotions now overwhelm her. He, a tad behind as always, suspects the root of her nervous attack but not himself as its cause: "I tell you . . . she's in love. . . . That's her secret—that's her ailment. She has an exceptionally sensitive and delicate organization—and she's in love with some fool or other" (420).

The story ends conventionally enough: Annette and Childers marry. Yet the blithe segue from sympathy to love should not distract us from what "Along the Wires" has to teach about popular perceptions of women media. Even Childers's comic over-intellectualizations give us insight into Victorian pseudo-scientific notions of telecommunication. Before realizing that he loves Annette, and hence puzzled by his intense interest in her affairs, Childers concludes that she must be emitting some kind of electromagnetic energy: "certain sympathetic organizations affect each other by the evolution of electric currents. He was not quite clear whether the brain, the heart, or the spinal marrow was to be regarded as the battery which set the currents in motion" (419). On one level, this explanation subtly compares what occurs in the telegraph office to spiritualistic communications. As believers asserted, those communications only seemed immaterial because they resulted from invisible electromagnetic currents extending from the medium's séance to the spirit realm. On another level, Childers tacitly likens Annette's "sympathetic organization"—rooted figuratively in her heart, literally in the nerves connecting her brain and spinal marrow—to the organization or network within which she mediates. Both types of organization function as electrified conduits of communication, such that Annette's nervous body becomes a miniature version or perhaps coextension of the telegraphic system.

Seeing her body in this way would have been reasonable at a time when people often spoke of telecommunication networks in terms of neural networks. For many, the nerves' swift conveyance of information appeared to be an apt model for the transmission of telegraphic messages; not only did nerves, like telegrams, communicate ideas and sensations quickly to remote points, they were now being said to do so by means of electrical signals.[18] Thus the nervous system became a preferred figure for the nineteenth-century

18. Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

electric telegraph.[19] Even after Marconi had done away with its wires, it still reminded people of nervous relays; in 1899, John Trowbridge remarked that thanks to the wireless telegraph, the "nerves of the whole world are, so to speak, being bound together, so that a touch in one country is transmitted instantly to a far-distant one."[20] Similar claims occasionally hovered around the telephone. Bell's invention had transformed the industrialized city into a living web of communication pathways: "From the great ganglion familiarly hailed as 'Central' radiate the myriad nerves along which speed the impulses directing the world's industry."[21]

These neural metaphors affirm a desire to see the electrified world in utopian terms: as one body, united by common intents and sensations. The trope of the mediating woman underwrote this desire; installing neurally sensitive women at the "great ganglion" of the "Central" switchboard or telegraph office mounted a defense against the potential discomforts of an increasingly technological landscape. The altruistic intermediary sustained the hope that, far from dividing and isolating (as we sometimes still fear they do today), modern technologies would forge connections, no matter the separations created by distance or situation, including—in spiritualism—death itself. Thus, too, an apparent obstruction to person-to-person contact, the medium's necessary interposition, was made less of one, if not indeed a positive factor toward human intimacy.

Genteel Affinities: Etherealizing the Message in James

In McCarthy's story, Annette's sympathy rewards itself, winning her a husband and pulling her out of the life in which it has been put to so much use. Not that that life has been entirely without diversions, for sympathy is what powers her active imagination:

> If some of the utterly commonplace people who went in with their absolutely uninteresting and prosaic messages could only have known what striking central figures of romantic story she made out of them they would have been a good deal surprised, and many of them, probably,

19. James W. Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," *Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies* 8 (1983): 314.

20. John Trowbridge, "Wireless Telegraphy," *Appleton's Popular Science Monthly* 56 (1899): 72.

21. "Behind the Scenes at 'Central,'" *Booklovers Magazine* 2 (1903): 391.

> would be very angry. No doubt she guessed truly in many cases, for she was a quick, sharp, sympathetic girl; and many sad stories are hinted clearly enough even in the briefest telegram. (416)

Eventually the narrator draws back to the crux of the tale, Annette's sympathy, but not before the first part of the passage has stuck in one's head. Even that quick moment raises certain questions. Why would Annette's sympathy surprise her customers? Why would it anger them? McCarthy does not pursue these questions; he is mostly committed to painting Annette in a rosy light. Yet the logical response here is that there is something intrusive about her interest in others' lives, especially given that her sympathy is always accompanied by a knack for keen observation: "Annette looked at [Dr. Childers]. She always looked at every body" (417). The romances she constructs about her customers are, says the narrator, just "harmless fictions" (416). But to what degree are they really harmless, or even fictions, when she has based them on accurate inferences from telegrams? In short, where does sympathy end and eavesdropping begin?

If McCarthy is not inclined to take this up, another writer dealing with similar material is. Like "Along the Wires," Henry James's novella *In the Cage* (1898) concerns a young "sympathetic" telegrapher who passes the time by creating stories about her patrons and who begins to focus on the telegrams of one attractive gentleman in particular.[22] But ultimately these superficial resemblances only bring out McCarthy's and James's diverging investments in the same story, ones to some degree based on differences of genre and tone. James rewrites McCarthy's slight romantic tale in a realist mode, significantly building on what are only bare intimations in McCarthy's narrative of the medium as, in Childers's terms, a "good, true girl" (418). *In the Cage* accentuates that that narrative veils the probable inadequacies, even ugliness, of the telegrapher's existence. It is not that James's heroine does not try to be a good, true girl, but rather that her efforts in that line continually run up against the material and moral shortcomings in her way of life. What results is a rendering of female mediation in which the medium's sympathy is fully exposed as a gilding of her troublesome curiosity about others' life stories, a curiosity fueled by her deep-seated repudiation of her class status.

Much of the emotional difficulty faced by *In the Cage*'s heroine has to do with the embarrassed social position of the turn-of-the-century female telegrapher. Although social gradations ultimately arose between, say,

22. Jepsen also notes the similarity between the two works (*My Sisters Telegraphic,* 138).

private secretaries and mere typist-stenographers, generally speaking, the new technological forms of communication mediation—telephone operating, telegraph operating, and typing—reserved for women some measure of white-collar prestige, because they occurred indoors, were cleaner than factory labor, and required some education and a learned skill.[23] Some employers clearly sought to amplify this prestige by fashioning a workplace as simulacrum of the bourgeois woman's domestic environment. Bell Telephone, for instance, styled itself as a familial unit and exerted a strict parental discipline over its switchboard operators. These young women worked under the supervision of "matrons" who advised them in matters of hygiene and dress and oversaw finely decorated retiring rooms, where operators could retreat during breaks to read a magazine or play the piano.[24] As we can conclude, motherly supervisors and opportunities for leisure safeguarded the gentility of women workers by camouflaging a public workspace as a private bastion of middle-class life. Equally useful for creating this illusion was the insularity of the switchboard: lunchrooms first came into being so that women would have the option of remaining within the exchange, avoiding the ignominy of encountering men on the street.[25] The Chicago Telephone Company put the matter baldly when, in a pamphlet about its operating school that included photographs of rooftop gardens and of "recreation rooms" furnished with "comfortable chairs, couches, reading tables," and a circulating library, it boasted "that such environment attracts and keeps the better type" and that telephone operating as a whole was "free from direct and sometimes unpleasant association with the public . . . since here the employees are shielded from direct personal contact."[26]

Conversely, for women in telegraphy, the status of their work could be compromised by a condition particular to many of their jobs: their frequent

23. On class considerations, see, e.g., Meta Zimmeck, "Jobs for the Girls: The Expansion of Clerical Work for Women, 1850–1914," in *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800–1918,* ed. Angela V. John (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 155, 158; Gregory Anderson, ed., *The White-Blouse Revolution: Female Office Workers since 1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 10, 42–43; Stephen Norwood, *Labor's Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878–1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 28, 45–48; and Edwin Gabler, *The American Telegrapher: A Social History, 1860–1900* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 57–58, 85–91.

24. Norwood reads these cozy workplaces as Bell Telephone's attempt to stave off unionization and collective protests by increasingly Taylorized employees (*Labor's Flaming Youth,* 48–52). If this was Bell's motivation, it is still worth noting how much it catered to class-based standards of femininity.

25. Brenda Maddox, "Women and the Switchboard," *The Social Impact of the Telephone,* ed. Ithiel de Sola Pool (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 268.

26. Chicago Telephone Company, *Operators' School: First Lessons in Telephone Operating* (Chicago: Chicago Telephone Company, 1910), 15, 11.

interaction with strangers—and strange men specifically—at the public telegraph office. As the telephone companies' secluded workplaces remind us, "the better type" of young woman of this era was marked not just by certain economic practices but also by premarital sexual integrity. In questions of social respectability, then, the usually unwed female telegrapher faced a moral criterion largely irrelevant to her male colleagues. The fact of her publicized body made it easier to view her along a continuum with the prostitute, effectively debasing her to a lower class position than her profession in and of itself should have earned her.[27]

"Here, indeed," declared an 1883 contributor to the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the subject of switchboard operating, "is an occupation to which no 'heavy father' could object; and the result is that a higher class of young women can be obtained for the secluded career of a telephonist as compared with that which follows the more barmaid-like occupation of a telegraph clerk."[28] As if in direct response to this association with the wanton mingling of the tavern worker, the narrator of *In the Cage* states of the telegrapher-heroine that "she believed in herself . . . if there was a thing in the world no one could charge her with it was being the kind of low barmaid person who rinsed tumblers and bandied slang."[29] This statement, which appears in a discussion of the heroine's attraction to Captain Everard, sheds valuable light on her self-estimation: though realizing "the picture of servitude and promiscuity" she presents at Cocker's, "so boxed up with her young men" (194), she retains a sense of honorable difference from the working-class woman and that figure's putative sexual easiness.

Several critics have observed the telegrapher's potential alignment with the prostitute, especially in her dealings with Captain Everard.[30] My argument starts by underscoring her deliberate rejection of this identification. Rather than countenance selling her body, she attempts to shift in her own mind the

27. On the possible confusion between the public urban woman worker and the prostitute, see Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), chap. 6. On female telegraphers' extraordinary publicity and stories about their sexual openness, see Katherine Stubbs, "Telegraphy's Corporeal Fictions," in *New Media, 1740–1915,* ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 98. Gabler records other factors militating against American female operators' claims to gentility, among them working-class backgrounds and poor living conditions (*American Telegrapher,* 128–29).

28. Quoted in Peter Young, *Person to Person: The International Impact of the Telephone* (Cambridge: Granta, 1991), 27.

29. Henry James, *In the Cage,* in *In the Cage and Other Tales,* ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), 204. All further page references to *In the Cage* are parenthetical within the text.

30. See for example Eric Savoy, "'In the Cage' and the Queer Effects of Gay History," *Novel* 28 (1995): 284–307.

dimensions of her relations to the aristocracy from a worldly to non-worldly, or other-worldly, plane of connection. Like McCarthy's, James's tale subtly gestures toward analogies between telegraphic and occult communications. *In the Cage* appropriates but also meaningfully reorients spiritualistic and other magical imagery to delineate the tormented class consciousness of the telegrapher and her longings to rise above her degraded social position.

Appreciating these ideas demands recognizing how and how much James's works were influenced by late nineteenth-century occultism.[31] James became familiar with psychical research through, among other avenues, his brother William, who was pivotal in establishing the American branch of the Society for Psychical Research. This exposure, Martha Banta suggests, deepened Henry's authorial interests in the occult, in ways that sometimes had less to do with identifiable occurrences than with understated manipulations of occult themes as a means of exploring human relations and perceptions. He was drawn, for example, to depictions of feminine sympathy, orienting his stories around the "divulgence of concealed information by psychically sensitive women able to see and thus to know and to reveal all."[32] With *In the Cage,* I propose, James twists this favorite motif to ironic ends, portraying a woman who only imagines herself a psychic sensitive and in a position to know and reveal all.

In the first pages of *In the Cage* when Lady Bradeen drops in to Cocker's grocery, the narrator states of her that the "apparition was very young, but certainly married" (181). The word *apparition* crops up again later in the context of the floral arranger Mrs. Jordan's vaunting discussion of her clientele, in which the telegrapher feigns only partial interest: "There was something in our young lady that could still stay her from asking for a personal

31. It is a testament to *In the Cage*'s weird suggestiveness that several critics have written on its occult elements. However, none has offered a sustained analysis of the story's magical and especially spiritualistic themes. Within an argument about choice and ethics, Janet Gabler-Hover classifies the novella among James's ghost stories on the basis of its use of *apparitions* to describe affluent characters. But she is more interested in reading the telegrapher as a mental vampire, someone who unconsciously preys on others to broaden her own scope of existence, than on exploring the story's ghostliness; "The Ethics of Determinism in Henry James's 'In the Cage,'" *Henry James Review* 13 (1992): 265–68. For T. J. Lustig in *Henry James and the Ghostly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), the telegrapher's message mediation and subjective expansion form part of the story's uncanny themes (191–93). In a provocative juxtaposition, Pamela Thurschwell suggests that the interclass intimacy the telegrapher enjoys doubles that experienced by James's typist Theodora Bosanquet, who was interested in psychical research and purportedly channeled her employer after his death (*Literature, Technology,* chap. 4). But while noting the telegrapher's implicitly telepathic sympathy, Thurschwell otherwise leaves strangely out of account the novella's occult imagery.

32. Martha Banta, *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 159. Also on the female sensitive in Henry James's writings, see Luckhurst, *Invention of Telepathy,* 234–51.

description of these apparitions; that showed too starved a state" (193). On both these occasions, *apparition* denotes people of the highest class of society, the aristocrats, inhabitants of "homes of luxury" who can afford to lavish money on copious flowers and copious telegrams (192). As aristocrats, Mrs. Jordan's customers, along with Lady Bradeen, embody a relation to history precisely encapsulated in the idiom *apparition*. Like ghosts, they symbolize a past that asserts itself in the present: they are visible reminders of centuries-old principles of class and community inherited by late Victorian London. Thus the telegrapher, when she first serves Lady Bradeen, sees in her face an entire legacy—"her birth, her father and mother, her cousins and all her ancestors" (180). If this woman is a phantasmal emblem of persons now departed, *In the Cage*'s modern setting registers both the departure and what is progressively replacing it: the capitalist economy of the city, as figured in the grocer Mr. Mudge. Lady Bradeen's face presents to the telegrapher a wraith of eminence dwindling away amid the countless throngs and transactions of the fin de siècle metropolis.

But Lady Bradeen ghosts more than just the history of British culture. She also hearkens back in her gentility to the telegrapher's own particular family history. Although James leaves uncertain how prestigious a class the telegrapher once belonged to, he does make clear her descent from some higher stratum and her perception of herself as a lady *manquée*. The narrator tells of the era in the heroine's life when she, her mother, and her sister found themselves, "conscious and incredulous ladies, suddenly bereft, betrayed, overwhelmed," then "slipped faster and faster down the steep slope at the bottom of which she alone had rebounded" (176). Together with Mrs. Jordan, an acquaintance "handed down from their early twilight of gentility and also the victim of reverses" (177), the telegrapher has suffered disgraces only appeased by a sense of ingrained nobility: "It had been a questionable help, at that time, to ladies submerged, floundering, panting, swimming for their lives, that they *were* ladies; but such an advantage could come up again in proportion as others vanished, and it had grown very great by the time it was the only ghost of one they possessed" (191). The story's "apparitions" personify for the telegrapher just this sort of ghostly remembrance of the higher opinion she once commanded.

Neither she nor Mrs. Jordan entertains lasting illusions of their formal gentility. Nevertheless, a principal subplot of the story involves the two women's jockeying for a greater sense of proximity to the upper class, a proximity that they can sometimes suppose exceeds their impersonal service positions and passes over into a more rarefied realm of intimate knowledge in which their patrons appreciate, despite the women's distressed circumstances,

their enduring dignity. This dream is fundamentally a dream of transcending material differences, and fittingly James conveys it through images of spiritual or psychical connections.

Early in the story, there is an anticipatory playfulness in the narrator's comparison of the telegrapher's communication mediation to that of a sporadically summoned oracle: "there were long stretches in which inspiration, divination and interest quite dropped" (178). Her interest is not truly piqued until she encounters Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard. After a brief exchange of business with them, she imagines that they still hover around her, like displaced spirits, throughout her tedious workday:

> They remained all day; their presence continued and abode with her, was in everything she did till nightfall, in the thousands of other words she counted, she transmitted, in all the stamps she detached and the letters she weighed and the change she gave, equally unconscious and unerring in each of these particulars, and not, as the run on the little office thickened with the afternoon hours, looking up at a single ugly face in the long sequence, nor really hearing the stupid questions that she patiently and perfectly answered. (183)

The telegrapher's preoccupation with her favorite aristocrats, coupled with her "unconscious" yet "perfect" completion of her work, suggests her ability to revert to automatism, of the sort practiced by automatic writers at séances, in which an intervening "presence" takes priority over the conscious self. Like a medium's, her mind has been given over to her "apparitions," and gradually, we learn, her "divinations work faster and stretch farther." Her station in the cage allows her what the narrator describes as a "queer extension of her experience" or "double life": a feeling of closeness to a formally remote (class) stratum (186). When Lady Bradeen visits Cocker's again, her features seem to glow with thoughts, probably of Everard, that give the telegrapher "the sharpest impression she had yet received of the uplifted, the unattainable plains of heaven, and yet at the same time caused her to thrill with a sense of the high company she did somehow keep" (211).

Somewhat incongruously, this mystical extension is enabled by a crude voyeurism and by her ha'penny novels, whose sentimental plots intimate the possibility of her own social rise through rescue by Everard.[33] Yet crucially,

33. Nicola Nixon analyzes the delusiveness of the telegrapher's romantic novels, arguing that she ultimately experiences a realist awakening; "The Reading Gaol of Henry James's *In the Cage*," *ELH* 66 (1999): 179–201. For other arguments on the telegrapher's relation to realism, see Patricia

her outlook is not purely idealistic: her fantasy is complicated throughout the story by her painful understanding of her actual life conditions. Even her emotions for Everard are never wholly idyllic. James keeps the contradictions she embodies—naiveté and awareness, a desire to save and a tendency to condemn—in constant tension, and yet these are unified by the idiom of occult sensitivity.

The telegrapher comes to believe she is channeling Everard's thoughts immediately, without the burden of verbalization, and this is part of her romance: the reverie of psychical communication seems based in her hopes that he implicitly recognizes her inner nobility. Importantly, it evolves from the meeting with Captain Everard in the Park that she has angled for as a "miraculous" occasion for the display of her honor: "All our humble friend's native distinction, her refinement of personal grain, of heredity, of pride, took refuge in this small throbbing spot" (210). But that very optimism bespeaks her more troubling mindfulness of what Everard might otherwise think. It is remarkable how often the unspoken relays that take place during this meeting confirm the fact that she is not a woman who would prostitute herself. The encounter begins with an exchange that immediately cuts short what she fears to be his perception of her streetwalking: "Are you taking a walk?" "Ah I don't take walks at night! I'm going home after my work" (217). The exchange is an oblique one, and in fact, the narrator implies it may only be silently "smiled out" (217). The obliquity and silence are key, because the telegrapher prefers their not having to utter "anything vulgarly articulate" on the subject of her honor: "She had an intense desire he should know the type she really conformed to without her doing anything so low as to tell him" (217, 219). What seems in the first place "vulgar" about explanatory speech is the initial horrid misapprehension of her character that it would presume. The idea that Everard can intuit that she is not a prostitute magically elevates their relationship above the most conspicuous material determinant of her low-class status, her provocatively exposed body, which, coupled with the other material determinant, her poverty, would seem to give the impression of availability for the right price.

It is not that prostitution does not arise during their meeting as a tacit possibility but rather that that possibility is, again tacitly, denied. After she announces that she has not yet eaten, she seems overjoyed that he does not offer

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Walton, *The Disruption of the Feminine in Henry James* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 91–100, and Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), chap. 6, the latter of which incisively reflects on the telegrapher's mediating position.

her a meal: "she at once felt sure she had made the great difference plain. He looked at her with the kindest eyes and still without saying what she had known he wouldn't. She had known he wouldn't say 'Then sup with *me*!' but the proof of it made her feel as if she had feasted" (219). The invitation to sup is a loaded element in the story. While normally it would provide an occasion for intimacy, because Everard already has a lover (Lady Bradeen), it stands for the telegrapher as a sign of merely casual and short-term physical gratification. In other words, as she earlier realizes, men of his class might take women of her class as women who do not really "count as infidelity" (218). His not asking her to sup seems, then, an indication that she has made her "great difference" from the latter group "plain."

Days later, back at her cage, she imagines that the Park meeting has established an understanding so profound, so spiritual, that the two need no longer bother to "clumsily to manoeuvre to converse . . . the intense implications of questions and answers and change, had become in the light of the personal fact, of their having had their moment, a possibility comparatively poor. It was as if they had met for all time—it exerted on their being in presence again an influence so prodigious" (236). In a pinch, this fantasy of affinity can even dispel the humiliation of evidence to the contrary: evidence of his indifference or, worse, lack of esteem for her character. Thus she declines to interpret his "putting down redundant money" as an attempt to buy her and instead supposes that, reading into his thoughts, she gleans an entire range of more flattering meanings: "He wanted to pay her because there was nothing to pay her for. He wanted to offer her things he knew she wouldn't take. He wanted to show her how much he respected her by giving her the supreme chance to show *him* she was respectable. Over the dryest transactions, at any rate, their eyes had out these questions" (242). The supposition of psychically channeled communications is vital for rescuing the telegrapher's pride, and yet this is also clearly an ambivalent narrative moment insofar as it reveals some doubt on her part, a point I will return to later.

It is crucial that her contact with him rise above not only money (a purchase price) but also verbalization, because as her profession dramatizes, language itself is caught up in worldly systems of privilege and exchange. Money and words in this novella are intertwining modes of currency, both implicated in existing social relations, as Dale M. Bauer and Andrew Lakritz remark.[34] Moreover, as James's heroine has come to know them, words rudely

34. Dale M. Bauer and Andrew Lakritz, "Language, Class, and Sexuality in Henry James's 'In the Cage,'" *New Orleans Review* 14, no. 3 (1987): 65. These critics argue that the telegrapher imagines herself in a virginal, salvational role in Everard's life above both sexual intrigues and class limitations.

confront her with a material reality that conflicts with her most hopeful estimations of her own worth, the reality of sudden penury, which now requires her to "count words as numberless as the sands of the sea" (174). Before the Park meeting, the telegrapher fancies she is communicating with Everard in an ethereal way that even when voiced defies language by defying its strict significations: "no form of intercourse so transcendent and distilled had ever been established on earth. Everything, so far as they chose to consider it so, might mean almost anything" (204–5).

If, on the one hand, the telegrapher dreams she enjoys with Everard a rapport unsullied by articulation, on the other hand, her communications with her tradesman fiancé are laughably verbose. The "daily deadly flourishy letter from Mr. Mudge" brings the telegrapher crashing back to the level of material difference, where the paths of human lives—for instance, her own desperate engagement—often submit to the direction of economic facts (178). Mudge's crass rootedness in the worldly realm manifests itself even in his diction, wherein words are weighed down by a certain heaviness—by those "present, too present, *h*'s" (175). Further, his longwinded utterances are rendered in accounting metaphors. About their vacation plans, Mudge "flooded their talk with wild waves of calculation," handling "the whole business . . . as a Syndicate handles a Chinese or other Loan" (215). On the vacation the telegrapher finds herself more tolerant of this endless chatter—including his "perpetual counting" of the people on the Bournemouth pier—because this gives her the chance to mull furtively over her own "secret conversations": "This separate commerce was with herself; and if they both practised a great thrift she had quite mastered that of merely spending words enough to keep him imperturbably and continuously going" (230–31). In the story's telegraphic logic, which equates language with money, Mudge's obsession with words is congruent with his obsession with the capitalist order, and being with him induces the telegrapher to sink earthward and brood in mundane terms of "commerce" and "spending."

Mudge's diction divulges his (botched) effort to set himself apart from the *h*-dropping laborers that constitute his family background, and by this token we gather that he is as innately allied to the working class as his fiancée is to some upper one. Now the two occupy comparable social strata, yet the telegrapher chafes that he can be "so smugly unconscious of the immensity of her difference" from him (198). Were she romantically attached to Everard, she thinks, matters would stand quite otherwise, with such "a relation

Also on the telegrapher's desire for a relation with Everard outside the financial/linguistic nexus, see Jennifer Wicke, "Henry James's Second Wave," *The Henry James Review* 10 (1989): 146–51.

supplying that affinity with her nature that Mr. Mudge, deluded creature, would never supply" (208). Indeed, the absence of affinity between her and Mudge comes out in the sheer volume of words that pass between them, as this reveals their lack of silent empathy, on which her relation with Everard subsists. Mudge has his own mediatory connection to the aristocracy, yet this mocks the telegrapher's fantasy of infiltrating the genteel psyche. Whereas she imagines an almost spiritual channeling of ideas and emotions, for him it is wealth that gets channeled from upper to lower levels of society. As he believes, the riches of the nobility nourish the general economy and indirectly become the boon of average working individuals. There is only promise and profit in his career as middleman: "the exuberance of the aristocracy was the advantage of trade, and everything was knit together in a richness of pattern that it was good to follow with one's finger-tips" (202).

By contrast with Mudge, Mrs. Jordan shares in the telegrapher's fitful dream of an ethereal link to the aristocracy. Like the telegrapher, the floral arranger has suffered setbacks that have reduced her to wage-earning, but this state of affairs has not kept her from assuming her abiding fellow feeling with genteel society. By her account, her exceptional origins have given her a rare insight into the aesthetic preferences of the aristocracy, such that in her business it is gentlemen who are "her greatest admirers; gentlemen from the City in especial" (253). Mrs. Jordan is sure that her good breeding differentiates her from other workers: "The regular dealers in [floral] decorations were all very well; but there was a peculiar magic in the play of taste of a lady who had only to remember, through whatever intervening dusk, all her own little tables, little bowls and little jars and little other arrangements, and the wonderful thing she had made of the garden of the vicarage" (190). Importantly, this "peculiar magic"—Mrs. Jordan's extraordinary facility with flowers—resembles a well-known Victorian type of magic, one associated with spirit mediums. While *In the Cage* frames the telegrapher's work as a species of automatic writing, Mrs. Jordan's profession recalls a more visually sensational high Victorian style of mediumship. Many séance leaders acquired fame for producing palpable objects out of thin air (or more precisely, as believers asserted, out of the domain of spirits). These so-called *apports* might consist of any number of articles the spirits desired to manifest, but the most common variety seems to have been flowers.[35] Mrs. Jordan's floral productions recall

35. Thus for instance in Robert Browning's "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" (1864), the sitters expect the medium will eventually "Make doubt absurd, give figures we might see, / Flowers we might touch." Robert Browning, *The Poems,* ed. John Pettigrew, vol. 1, 821–60 (London: Penguin Books, 1981), ll. 411–12.

this feat, particularly when one considers her custom of ministering her services to the invisible. As she admits to the telegrapher, while she is conjuring up her arrangements, her aristocratic patrons are "nearly always out" (193). Hence they exert a presence for her still more ghostly than that of her friend's aristocrats, who at least regularly materialize at Cocker's grocery.

At first the telegrapher cannot hear of Mrs. Jordan's business without thinking of the dead, because "her one idea about flowers was that people had them at funerals" (194–95). Mrs. Jordan's clients have yet to depart this world; nonetheless there is something weirdly mediumistic in her dealings with them, as for example when she describes her decorative preparations for their dinner parties as a medium might describe her function at a séance circle: "They simply *give* me the table—all the rest, all the other effects, come afterwards" (192). By exhibiting her work as a kind of mediumship, the narrative registers the full depth in her opinion of her intuition of aristocratic psychology. Her floral arrangements, she says, often come down to "ineffable simplicities," matters of taste that resist expression or that men like Lord Rye do not bother to detail but rather only "[throw] off—just [blow] off like cigarette-puffs—such sketches of." Here, she proudly suggests, she is in effect channeling the wishes of her gentlemen; they silently will what is to appear, and she infallibly actualizes that will. In the absence of Lord Rye's explicit wishes, Mrs. Jordan finds herself dependent on her "imagination" or, like so many channels before her, her "sympathy" (197).

Centripetal Sympathy

The persistent paradox beneath this supposed spiritual tie to the aristocracy is that Mrs. Jordan remains aware of her fixity in present material conditions, as does the telegrapher. Indeed, the pathos in James's telegrapher lies in his depiction of both sides of her "double life." *In the Cage* oscillates between what the telegrapher envisions to be her access to the genteel life and what she knows is her practical difference from it. Occasionally her remembrance of that difference evinces itself in bursts of pure antagonism: "What twisted the knife in her vitals was the way the profligate rich scattered about them, in extravagant chatter over their extravagant pleasures and sins, an amount of money that would have held the stricken household of her frightened childhood, her poor pinched mother and tormented father and lost brother and starved sister, together for a lifetime" (187).

The trope of mediumship proves revealingly agile in this regard, capable of expressing both poles of the telegrapher's ambivalence. Predictably the

telegrapher has "wonderful nerves," and she sometimes considers lending her insight to her patrons, imagining this aid as a "hazard of personal sympathy" (177, 188).[36] On the one hand, this sympathy extends the telegrapher's fantasy, in that it amounts to an ability to enter readily into the psyches of her aristocratic customers, the "cream of the 'Court Guide'" (175). On the other hand, it stems from her thoughts of her social inferiority—and here it begins to look very little like sympathy, as we conventionally perceive it, at all.

> There were impulses of various kinds, alternately soft and severe, to which she was constitutionally accessible and which were determined by the smallest accidents. . . . She had thus a play of refinement and subtlety greater, she flattered herself, than any of which she could be made the subject; and though most people were too stupid to be conscious of this it brought her endless small consolations and revenges. She recognised quite as much those of her sex whom she would have liked to help, to warn, to rescue, to see more of; and that alternative as well operated exactly through the hazard of personal sympathy, her vision for silver threads and moonbeams and her gift for keeping the clues and finding her way in the tangle. The moonbeams and silver threads presented at moments all the vision of what poor *she* might have made of happiness. (188)

What is striking about this passage is how dramatically it turns sympathy inside out. Ostensibly, as for instance Ellis describes it, a feeling directed outward toward others, sympathy becomes instead a means of satisfying the telegrapher's own needs, especially those born of her economic disadvantages. For one thing, it gratifies her need for self-respect: it is something about which she can "flatter herself," probably because it is due to her "refinement," which might allude as much to her inherent nobility as to her sensitive nerves. Further, her sensitivity encompasses both concern and its opposite: though at times it leads her to want "to help, to warn, to rescue," at other times it paves the way for "endless small consolations and revenges," with the difference dependent on how events move her. Yet both alternatives, it would seem, function "exactly through the hazard of personal sympathy"—with that "hazard" already laying the stress on sympathy's benefits and costs for herself.

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36. For Otis, James's language here associates bodily and emotional interconnections with the telegraph system's, as if the telegrapher were a neural component within the network's figurative brain (*Networking,* 169–71).

There is a persistent reflexivity in the telegrapher's sympathy. Seeing her genteel patrons, she is really picturing herself; they enable her a "vision of what poor *she* would have made of happiness," one that recalls Audrey Jaffe's claim that the Victorian sympathizer mentally exchanges the other with a spectacle, a similarly circumstanced self-representation.[37] But the telegrapher's experience pushes sympathy ironically close to a jealous antipathy. In fact, her "wonderful nerves" prime her for "sudden flickers of antipathy and sympathy" both (177); the "impulses" to which she is "constitutionally accessible" are "alternately soft and severe" (188). Then again, as her vision suggests, antipathy may only be the flipside of sympathy, and together they refer back to her own desires.[38]

Clearly James is doing something unexpected with mediumistic sensitivity. Though preserving it as an index of the vocation, he expands upon it: the telegrapher may be attuned to her customers, but that attunement does not always manifest itself straightforwardly as kindliness. There is even a hint of this versatility in "Along the Wires," as McCarthy's narrator briefly mentions one emotion accompanying, but also a far cry from, Annette's sympathy: "many . . . had her profound sympathy, or admiration, or pity, or hatred who never deserved any such sentiment on her part; and many had it who well deserved it, and never knew any thing about her feeling toward them" (416). Maybe Annette, an orphan too poor to afford a doctor when she falls ill, derives her "hatred" from the same source James's telegrapher does. But McCarthy's is essentially the tale of a good-hearted girl who gets a good-hearted ending (the well-off object of her affections treats her for free, then marries her). Contrarily, *In the Cage* rests on the idea that the worker who feels intensely may—especially given the social gulf between herself and whom she serves—feel intensely and negatively. "I hate them," the telegrapher exclaims one day to Mrs. Jordan. "They're selfish brutes. . . . They bore me to death." At Mrs. Jordan's competitive response—"Ah that's because you've no sympathy!"—the telegrapher only laughs dryly, "retorting that nobody could have any who had to count all day all the words in the dictionary" (196–97).

37. Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). Jaffe describes speculative sympathy as motivated by the fluidity of socioeconomic identity under capitalism—an anxious awareness that one could become the degraded other. In James's story, of course, it is the telegrapher herself who occupies the lowly position, such that the other becomes an object of coveted, instead of dreaded, identification.

38. Jaffe comes to comparable conclusions about the relationship between sympathy and its apparent antithesis, *ressentiment,* noting that both imaginatively dissolve social boundaries (chap. 3).

Even when she does sympathize with the upper class, as we have seen, her motive (and probably Mrs. Jordan's also) is what sympathy does or can do for her. "She would have given anything to have been able to allude to one of [Everard's] friends by name,... to one of his difficulties by the solution. She would have given almost as much for just the right chance... to show him in some sharp sweet way that she had perfectly penetrated the greatest of these last and now lived with it in a kind of heroism of sympathy" (205). The narrator radically alters the image of the mediating woman, from a locus of centrifugal altruism to one of centripetal egoism: it is Everard's *recognition* of her sympathy that most matters to her; to "show" him her concern is to turn the focus back in her direction and demonstrate to him what a hero she really is. Sympathy provides a source of self-aggrandizement and a means to ingratiate herself with Everard and his class.

Or, more ominously, to indebt them to her. During their meeting in the Park, the telegrapher magnanimously tells Everard, "I'd do anything for you. I'd do anything for you" (223). But the rest of the conversation reveals that her "particular interest" in his telegraphic affairs has motivated a vigilance that is positively worrisome (221).

> "What you *do* is rather strong!" the girl promptly returned.
>
> "What *I* do?"
>
> "Your extravagance, your selfishness, your immorality, your crimes," she pursued without heeding his expression.
>
> "I *say*!" her companion showed the queerest stare.
>
> "I like them, as I tell you—I revel in them. But we needn't go into that," she quietly went on; "for all I get out of it is the harmless pleasure of knowing. I know, I know, I know!"—she breathed it ever so gently.
>
> "Yes; that's what has been between us," he answered much more simply. (226–27)

Like the narrator of "Along the Wires," James's heroine dismisses knowledge gained through telegraphy as "harmless" and couches it in a notion of sympathy. Yet Everard recognizes that that knowledge has generated something potentially damning between them—an opportunity for blackmail.[39]

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39. In *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), Alexander Welsh suggests that James's novella showcases the possibility of eavesdropping within sophisticated communication systems like the penny post and especially the electric telegraph (55–58). On the story's relevance to the then-recent Oscar Wilde trials and an exposé of informant telegraph boys-cum-prostitutes, see Savoy, "'In the Cage' and the Queer Effects," and also Hugh Stevens, "Queer Henry *In the Cage,*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James,* ed. Jonathan Freedman, 120–38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Also on blackmail in the novella, see Thurschwell, *Literature,*

Still, and importantly, that the telegrapher would in the end really seek to profit monetarily by what she has learned through Everard's exchanges remains doubtful. Although she briefly imagines trumpeting her knowledge to him—"Come therefore; buy me!"—her imagination ends at that point, "the point of an unreadiness to name, when it came to that, the purchasing medium. It wouldn't certainly be anything so gross as money, and the matter accordingly remained rather vague, all the more that *she* was not a bad girl" (207). The telegrapher's refusal to blackmail is worth dwelling on because it again illuminates her social self-image, along with her disdainful view of the fallen world in which she is forced to operate. To extort money from Everard would not be to establish the kind of relationship she desires but instead to corroborate what those in his set are already disposed to think of her: that she is simply low-class, a "bad girl." In addition, the potential "purchasing medium" for her knowledge forms part of a material nexus that she shuns here and elsewhere as "gross": blackmail would entail succumbing to the base reality of her economic want. It would also mean resorting to a system in which money and language work in tandem—blackmail borrows the linguistic substance of the telegram, as Eric Savoy says[40]—the very kind of system that employs her but denies her its enjoyments. So, while whatever information she may have originates in language (in telegrams), she will not reverse the operation by telling or threatening to tell what she has learned.

The undercutting of the prospect of blackmail does not fully do away with the sinister aspect of her eavesdropping. What it does do is confirm the degree to which the telegrapher's sense of worth and power lies beyond language and telling, in the realm of thought and knowledge. As she sees it, her knowledge of Everard's actions provides her a covert—and dematerialized—"possession":

> There were those she liked and those she hated, her feeling for the latter of which grew to a positive possession, an instinct of observation and detection. . . . She had at moments, in private, a triumphant vicious feeling of mastery and ease, a sense of carrying their silly guilty secrets in her pocket, her small retentive brain, and thereby knowing so much more about them than they suspected or would care to think. (187)

With Everard, too, she basks in the "extraordinary possession of the elements of his life that memory and attention had at last given her" (204). Knowledge

Technology, 97–98, as well as Andrew J. Moody, "'The Harmless Pleasure of Knowing': Privacy in the Telegraph Office and Henry James's 'In the Cage,'" *The Henry James Review* 16 (1995): 53–65.

40. Savoy, "'In the Cage' and the Queer Effects," 294.

through eavesdropping—possessing—alleviates the anguish of her poverty by seeming to permit her an illicit grasp on genteel society, and thus it is continuous with her sympathy, likewise indulging her yearning to be close to the genteel mind.

Notably, the telegrapher's claims of possession are oddly in tension with the actual nature of what she claims to possess. For N. Katherine Hayles, *In the Cage*'s telegraph is part of an incipient economy of information, which differs from an economy of conservation, wherein things are necessarily had by some and kept from others. As file-sharing demonstrates in modern times, information—unlike matter and energy—is reproducible and shareable, subject only to the limitations of accurate transmission and access. Having accessed Everard's secrets, the heroine tries to help him and to carve out a relationship "beyond and above the regime of scarcity."[41] I suggest that in its potential lack of territoriality—in the sense of both possessiveness and material groundedness—this telegraphic information economy lends itself to the heroine's quasi-spiritual hope of communion with the aristocrats. And yet, that she continues to speak of information as something that can be possessed indicates her vague sense, however tamped down for now, that one's power always comes down to the things one can call one's own. It is only a matter of time and circumstance until she regains a full appreciation of the vise-like grip of the economy of haves and have-nots and of her own function within it.[42]

Possessing the Telegrapher

Beyond the reach of speech, in her own mind, the telegrapher preserves a sense of her personal value. However, in her psychical fantasy, as we have seen, she entertains the hope of successfully transferring that sense to another person, Captain Everard. For this to be realized, thought would need to be externalized between, instead of locatable within, single persons—which in fact, according to Sharon Cameron, describes how thinking works in James's fiction. Thought existing between characters, she observes in analyzing one novel, can even take the "form of communication that looks curiously like

41. N. Katherine Hayles, "Escape and Constraint: Three Fictions Dream of Moving from Energy to Information," in *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature,* ed. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 239.

42. For her part, Hayles finds the intransigence of the economy of scarcity in the telegrapher's refusal to share information with Mrs. Jordan at the end of the story.

mind reading."[43] Yet this communication begins to look less curious once we factor in James's authorial attraction to the paranormal and consider how even an apparently realist work like *In the Cage* might incorporate paranormal elements to portray characters' experience of their world. For Cameron, because thinking extends outside the individual mind, it can exert, or at least attempt to exert, a coercive force on other people; trans-subjective thought is potentially "asymmetrical" insofar as one character seeks to determine meaning for another.[44] Indeed, this is just what *In the Cage*'s telegrapher is trying to do when she imagines interchanging thoughts with Everard: the implicit purpose of the interchange is not really to strike up a harmony with him so much as to thrust upon him a recognition of her respectability. In effect, her fantasy works by dictating what she thinks she amounts to, what she means to herself, to his mind. But of course this fantasy upends her proper vocational role, which is to be dictated *to*—to be simply the conduit of others' thoughts and feelings. The reversal indicates the larger problem she represents in the story, which is that she is never sufficiently absent as a medium, instead obtruding intellectually on Everard and Lady Bradeen's communications.

However, what the telegrapher comes to realize is her inability to impose her interpretation of herself on others in any stable way. If the silent manipulation of meaning for another person turns Jamesian thinking into a political field,[45] the telegrapher's chimera starts to collapse once she perceives that this field cannot remain distinct from the politics figured through class and economic structures. With her increasing acceptance of her place in a culture where a person's value is largely established in and by a consumer economy, the asymmetry she imagines obtains psychically outside the linguistic/monetary order becomes inverted to reflect the asymmetry that obtains within it.

On the one hand, her unspoken exchanges with Everard prolong her dream that he thinks her worthy enough to give up a lady like Lady Bradeen for her if he only could. But on the other hand, these exchanges reveal the telegrapher's growing suspicion that a man of Everard's rank could only ever estimate her character and interest in him at a much lower rate. This suspicion has nagged at her all along, but it begins to become inescapable in the near-final scenes at Cocker's grocery, thoroughly adulterating her fantasy. For Everard's leering gaze begins to project just that meaning on her that she has resisted, conveying that if he desires to fulfill her longing in any way,

43. Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 96.

44. Ibid., 109.

45. Ibid., 110.

it would only be in a casual, financially negotiable relationship. Recalling their Park meeting, she begins to wonder how he has interpreted her offer to help him:

> Mixed with her dread and with her reflexion was the idea that, if he wanted her so much as he seemed to show, it might be after all simply to do for him that "anything" she had promised, the "everything" she had thought it so fine to bring out to Mr. Mudge. He might want her to help him, might have some particular appeal; though indeed his manner didn't denote that—denoted on the contrary an embarrassment, an indecision, something of a desire not so much to be helped as to be treated rather more nicely than she had treated him the other time. Yes, he considered quite probably that he had help rather to offer than to ask for. (239)

The very inarticulateness of her "anything" has kept it open for his interpretive privilege as an aristocrat of choosing what she could possibly mean in his life. His looks seem to posit, if somewhat awkwardly, a trade in her favor: if she will only treat him especially "nicely," it is he who will have "help" to offer her in return, perhaps monetary help. Thus he replaces her tacit meanings with his own: "He had taken it from her in the Park that night that she wanted him not to propose to her to sup; but he had put away the lesson by this time—he practically proposed supper every time he looked at her" (241).

These unspoken communications are confirmed in that moment when he seems to be passing her some kind of surplus compensation: "It was either the frenzy of her imagination or the disorder of his baffled passion that gave her once or twice the vision of his putting down redundant money—sovereigns not concerned with the little payments he was perpetually making—so that she might give him some sign of helping him to slip them over to her" (242). Though it is possible to read the extra sovereigns as Everard's payoff for blackmail,[46] it is likely that she at least sees them as an advance payment for prostitution. Whichever the case, in fact, the payment pegs her as a low-class woman with something immoral to sell, exactly the identity she sought to transcend. Is Everard really trying to buy her, or is this just what she envisions? The narrator's "either/or" commentary leaves the question open. If he is not, the telegrapher's anxious vision may be triggered by the

46. Moody, "'Harmless Pleasure,'" 63; Savoy, "'In the Cage' and the Queer Effects," 302.

escalating aggressiveness of her erotic fantasy. Just previous to these scenes at her cage, we see her returning to his neighborhood regularly in hopes of meeting him again, and even contemplating asking the doorman for entry to his residence (237). What she suddenly begins to read in his looks and gestures is precisely the most logical way a second encounter on these grounds would strike Everard: as an offering of herself, an impoverished telegrapher, for a type of infidelity that does not count.[47] Her change of mind is decisive: "She had passed his door every night for weeks, but nothing would have induced her to pass it now" (241). All that said, resolving what is happening with the sovereigns matters less than her perception of what is happening: that perception indicates an essential shift in her understanding—"the rush of a consciousness quite altered" (241)—of what she could really signify to a man like Everard, a man with far more leisure and money (or rather social connections to money) than she. Under such conditions, her dream that he might ultimately prefer her to a noblewoman like Lady Bradeen persists, yet becomes increasingly insecure: "how could she . . . know where a poor girl in the P.O. might really stand?" (243).

The telegrapher's awareness of her lack of control over meaning coincides with the dawning sense of her true ignorance of the aristocrats' lives. When Everard comes into Cocker's desperately hoping to retrieve a sent telegram, she can only wonder what "could be bad enough to account for the degree of his terror. There were twists and turns, there were places where the screw drew blood, that she couldn't guess" (250). The intertextual touch of the famously ambiguous *The Turn of the Screw,* published in the same year as *In the Cage,* reminds us that in both stories James uses the motif of the female medium's sensitivity to explore socioeconomic frustration, as well as the limits of interpretation.[48]

For all her confidence about knowing the secrets of the aristocrats, the telegrapher will never be nearer to them than she is now, as the caretaker of

47. We cannot assume, as Stuart Hutchinson does, that what the telegrapher fears is simply sex; "James's *In the Cage:* A New Interpretation," *Studies in Short Fiction* 19 (1982): 23–24. In fact, there are indications that the relationship she desires with Everard, though rarefied, does not necessarily exclude sex. The rarefied nature depends on transcendence not of the body in and of itself but rather of money, including the bodily encounters money can buy (and which her public vocation seems to advertise). During one of their conversations, the telegrapher fleetingly imagines herself and Everard "on a satin sofa in a boudoir"—as erotically involved, but in a high-class setting untainted by financial need—and does not balk when he reaches for her hand (223).

48. Moreover, as John Carlos Rowe points out, to the degree that she remains only a pawn in possibly nefarious aristocratic doings, the telegrapher resembles the governess in having a false sense of autonomy from the hegemonic order that employs her. *The Other Henry James* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 162.

their correspondence—the position essentially of a glorified onlooker, and with far too limited a vantage point to ever bear out her boast of "possession." This is the epiphany *In the Cage* works toward, but it is also indicated throughout the text in the discreet metaphor of the telegrapher's mediumship and more specifically in the spectral mutability of the term *possession*. In effect, it is not she who possesses the aristocrats but rather they who, as "apparitions," have always had the benefit of possessing her. In less ghostly terms, this possession amounts to a statement of her position in the capitalist order: her financial straits have obliged her to sell her services to the British Post Office, which in turn has found the readiest buyers for those services in the aristocratic community. The telegrapher only adds to their options for selfish "squanderings and graspings" (187); to them, she represents just another object for their frivolous purchase and enjoyment.

Throughout the narrator connotes the telegrapher's possessed status through light rhetorical touches. Depriving her of a name allows James to reinforce her subordinate social status twice over: she is just an anonymous face for the people she serves, and her anonymity also requires the narrator to refer to her by a nondescript usage of the possessive case: "our heroine," "our young friend," "our young lady," and so forth. This usage increases dramatically in the final scene, when Mrs. Jordan has "possessed herself" of the heroine to announce her engagement to the butler Mr. Drake (255). Mrs. Jordan's possession seems a stand-in for the aristocrats', for it is through her that the telegrapher now learns of Lord Bradeen's death, Everard's financial troubles, and his pending marriage to Lady Bradeen: all news to "our heroine" and thus an indication of her real ignorance of high-end society. These disclosures steer her on to a "vivid reflexion of her own dreams and delusions and her own return to reality" (261).

Her dreams and delusions of a mystical link to the aristocracy give way to the gravity of material reality, as she accepts that in the world's opinion, she is virtually as marketable and possessible as that figure beneath her contempt for barmaids, the prostitute, with whom indeed Everard may have conflated her. It is this prospect that has bred her fear of him and resolved her that, "should it come to that kind of tension, she must fly on the spot to Chalk Farm," the neighborhood of Mr. Mudge (239). Her decision at story's end to do just that, to hasten her wedding, signifies her complete acknowledgment of the dangerous shallowness of her actual relations to the aristocracy. Contemporary documents reveal that wifehood and women's operating all but mutually excluded each other in the late Victorian era;[49] so one can

49. Charles H. Garland, "Women as Telegraphists," *Economic Journal: The Journal of the British Economic Association* 11 (1901): 259–60; Jepsen, *My Sisters Telegraphic,* 72.

assume that with her marriage, the telegrapher will resign her work not just at Cocker's but in telegraphy altogether. Rather than be taken for the aristocrats' possession, perhaps even a commodity for their sexual pleasure, she commits herself to a far more honored scenario—to being the conjugal possession of Mr. Mudge.[50] This is an outcome Mudge himself has always been certain of, regardless of his fiancée's slights, as his manner conveys: "Mr. Mudge presently overtook her and drew her arm into his own with a quiet force that expressed the serenity of possession" (235). With her husband, clearly, the telegrapher will not have evaded her status as possession. But at least she will have gained in the transaction financial security, as well as be spared the stigma endured by publicly employed young women. Marriage will do for the telegrapher what Bell Telephone tried to do for its switchboard operators—confine her body and protect her from the social misconceptions engendered by her sexual allure.

Most of the narrative's action has seen its heroine wedged between two extremes: the shelter of complete privacy (the domestic life offered in some indefinite future by Mr. Mudge) and the peril of complete publicity (the promiscuous and commercialized life offered in the ominous example of the prostitute).[51] The telegrapher's position between these two extremes is neatly figured by the titular cage, a structure intended to enclose but also, by its latticework, to make her readily accessible to the public. When she thinks herself sought after by Everard, she decides this cage has "become her safety" (241); nonetheless, it leaves her open to his mute entreaties. Interestingly, these moral risks to herself redouble other risks to the people she serves. As the physical node through which their dialogues travel, her vulnerable body becomes an apt synecdoche for the vulnerability of their messages; both represent potentially treacherous bridgings of privacy and publicity.

James is not the only author to exploit this doubleness. At one point in Anthony Trollope's "The Telegraph Girl" (1877), the protagonist Lucy Graham, who works in the telegraph department on an upper floor at the General Post Office, is sought out at work by her friend Abraham Hall. When Mr. Hall tries to enter the department to see Lucy, he learns from the doorkeeper "that the young ladies were not allowed to receive visitors during office hours."[52]

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50. Here I agree with Bauer and Lakrtiz's description of the telegrapher's body as "sexually exchangeable" for economic comfort and their suggestion that her marriage constitutes the most socially legitimate mode of exchange ("Language, Class," 64). It is surprising in this context that they do not focus at any real length on the story's undercurrent of prostitution.

51. For Rowe, the telegrapher crosses the private-public divide in bringing motherly qualities to her telegraphic position (*Other Henry James,* 174–76).

52. Anthony Trollope, "The Telegraph Girl," in *The Complete Short Stories,* ed. Betty Jane Slemp Breyer, vol. 4 (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1982), 97.

The doorkeeper's response invests the scene with erotic interest by describing Lucy's workplace in terms redolent of a place in which a romantic tête-à-tête would occur. Like a parlor, the telegraph department houses "young ladies" who can only "receive" male visitors during specified hours. In a sense, the scene replicates the logic of the switchboard by having the operator seem to occupy a space safeguarded from male attentions—largely by eliding the fact, mentioned earlier in the story, that the eight hundred women in the telegraph department work alongside some boys and young men.[53] The elision creates factitious protective boundaries (somewhat like the bars of a cage) between Lucy within the telegraph office and the possibility of sexual overtures coming from outside of it, as represented by Mr. Hall.

But the prospect of Lucy's issuing out from the department to chat with Mr. Hall poses more than the obvious dangers of publicity. "Now it is a rule," the narrator tells us,

> that the staff of the department who are engaged in sending and receiving messages, the privacy of which may be of vital importance, should be kept during the hours of work as free as possible from communication with the public. It is not that either the girls or the young men would be prone to tell the words which they had been the means of passing on to their destination, but that it might be worth the while of some sinner to offer great temptation, and that the power of offering it should be lessened as much as possible. Therefore, when Abraham Hall pressed his request the doorkeeper told him that it was quite impossible.[54]

The narrator first summarizes the rule that indicates an official anxiety that operators are likely to "tell the words" they transmit, then, disingenuously, denies that likelihood. If the denial succeeds in exculpating the operator, it does so only partially, by shifting attention away from the teller to the "sinner" who would tempt her to tell. Though the narrator imagines both female and male operators revealing privacies, the scene itself frames a woman, Lucy, as the potential teller—and Abraham Hall as her potential tempter. The erotic trappings of his visit, coupled with Lucy's exaggerated seclusion with other young ladies

53. Trollope notes this unsavory circumstance in his essay "The Young Women at the London Telegraph Office," even as his persona, touring the office, ironically submits the women to a sexualizing gaze: "But I was very anxious to know whether they—flirted, for there are young men in the same room. I thought that had I been a young man there I might have been tempted"; *Good Words* 18 (1877): 380.

54. Trollope, "Telegraph Girl," 97.

inside the office, suggest that his request that she leave it exposes her to another "great temptation" besides the one explicitly articulated by the narrator.

Even Mr. Hall, actually an upright fellow, recognizes the illicit sexual menace some might perceive him to embody. When Lucy, at last going out to meet him, acts hesitant about accompanying him any farther, he seems to interpret her hesitation as an unwillingness to be seen with a man on the streets: "Are you ashamed to walk with me?"[55] His interpretation, while mistaken (she is only ashamed of her ratty clothes), is logical given Lucy's earlier protest that he should stop sending a coworker of hers money because his presents give the impression that he expects some satisfaction in return. Lucy's earlier reflection that Sophy's "prettiness ha[s] its dangers and temptations" when it comes to her interactions with Mr. Hall implicates him in multiple temptations by the time he stands awaiting Lucy outside the telegraph office.[56] As far as Mr. Hall feels himself to be from the type of man who would take advantage of a young woman's poverty, Trollope's tale, like James's, nonetheless acknowledges the likelihood that others will confuse the telegraph girl—to the exact extent that she makes herself publicly available to male interest—with the most notorious working girl of all.

"The Telegraph Girl," also like *In the Cage,* overlays the sin of sexual publicity with another type, the sin of publicizing others' messages. When Lucy exits the telegraph office, she sets in motion two dangers simultaneously—as if her body were inseparable from the information she transmits. In fact, I am arguing, this is precisely the correspondence these narratives imply; and these twin themes, separately or together, may have been essential to portraits of female telegraphers. Fictions by male operators of the period sometimes picture the female telegrapher as jeopardizing the privacy of transmissions, at other times as subject to physical compromise—vulnerable to attack or licentiously exposed.[57] Stories like James's and Trollope's, wherein informational and bodily availability happen concurrently, give an especially vivid sense of how thoroughly women's sensitive bodies seemed to be involved in knowledge networks and transfers.

But James's narrative is as interesting for how it reshapes prototypical images of women media as for how it conforms to them. *In the Cage*'s heroine may feel a sympathy widely reputed for these media, but her sympathy is revealed as an oddly selfish selflessness, when not transforming altogether

55. Ibid., 98.

56. Ibid., 87.

57. Stubbs, "Telegraphy's Corporeal Fictions," 98–99. In Stubbs's view, such depictions were male operators' efforts to protect their jobs by discrediting lower-paid female operators.

into hostility. By dramatizing these feelings and the economic realities behind them, the novella implies how shaded a picture of the woman telegrapher must be to truly account for her affective relations with her much more privileged clientele. The dream of psychical attunement of James's heroine never fully eclipses her feelings of class abjection or her recognition of how her patrons must see her. Hence her emotions in her interactions with Captain Everard run a confused gamut: longing, resentment, vanity, shame, hope, fear.

The Perils of Sensitivity

In bending the operator's romanticized traits closer to reality, *In the Cage* shows that the narratives favoring the feminization of mediation in the long run generated an involved and conflicted conversation about that phenomenon. For instance, if women's sensitivity seemed a boon for telegraph offices and other technological "ganglions," it could also seem a bane. By many accounts, this sensitivity basically amounted to *over*sensitivity, or a tendency to "nerve strain," with significant consequences for the kind of work women could perform. In an article on female telegraphers, British economist Charles H. Garland referred to several sources attesting to the "natural disabilities of women," including a French expert who stated that the "natural nervous organisation of women is unable to adapt itself" to periods of heavy work. This quickness to strain and fatigue meant women were only suited for the lighter wires—those conveying personal and local messages rather than market and race reports—which required less skill and earned their workers less money.[58] The practice Garland describes of restricting women to second-class wires was common in telegraphy.[59] His comments indicate that suppositions of women's neural sensitivity helped to legitimate that practice, setting aside the more remunerative jobs for men and placing a ceiling on women's own rank and pay. In discussions of telephone operating, similarly, nerve strain as a concept worked to devalue women's paid employment and, by the same move, to underscore domesticity as a priority. In a 1909 analysis of working women, Elizabeth Beardsley Butler anxiously discussed an often cited report on Canadian telephone operators, quoting one doctor's pronouncement to the Canadian labor commission that after the operators "have gone on for four or five years and served the company, and they get married or for other

58. Garland, "Women as Telegraphists," 257–58.
59. Jepsen, *My Sisters Telegraphic,* 25.

purposes leave, then they turn out badly in their future domestic relations. They break down nervously and have nervous children and it is a loss to the community." For Butler, this report offered a warning to the American telephone industry to amend switchboard working conditions so as to avoid producing similar results by repeating "the same laboratory experiments with the nerve cells of its young girls."[60]

Plainly claims of neural incapacity were being used to reinforce desired economic and cultural scenarios, which, after all, had for some time typified the response to women seeking all manner of vocations outside the home. Nineteenth-century doctors theorized close links between the workings of women's nervous systems and their reproductive organs; they also envisioned the human body's nervous energy as a finite supply, on the model of the galvanic battery's. (Recall as an early version of this idea the electromagnetic organization of Annette Langley's nervously sympathetic body.) In this context it was easy to decry women's higher education or public employment as a drain on their nerve force with frightful consequences for their childbearing and child-raising capabilities.[61] But the situation was also more complicated than this in the specific case of communications jobs, for the operators themselves reported nervous problems: this was not simply a disorder imposed upon them by authoritative medical voices. Just what travails of mediation were these women expressing through this ambiguous diagnosis? According to an open letter on female telegraphers by the Women's Trade Union League of Illinois, "nervous strain often causes a paralysis of the right hand."[62] Compare this testimony with Butler's assertion about the switchboard that

60. Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, *Women and the Trades* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1909), 289–90, 292.

61. Janet Oppenheim discusses the interlinking of the nervous and reproductive systems in doctors' cautions against women's higher education; *"Shattered Nerves": Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 187–201. John S. Haller, Jr., and Robin M. Haller recount similar concerns about women's involvement in business and other public pursuits; *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 25–34; on the British scene, compare Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 163–85. On ideas of nerve force and neurasthenia, see Oppenheim, "*Shattered Nerves,*" chap. 3; Haller and Haller, *Physician and Sexuality,* chap. 1; and Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 15–17.

62. "The Lot of the Woman Telegrapher: An Open Letter" (Chicago: The Women's Trade Union League of Illinois, [1907?]). Compare the assertion by a British Post Office committee member that the difficulties of reading from the telegraphic sounder, "coupled with the closeness of the circuits to one another, and the consequently cramped position of the writer, results in increased strain on the nervous system"; Miss Mabel Hope, "Evidence on Behalf of the Female Telegraphists in the Central Telegraph Office, Counter Clerks and Telegraphists in the Metropolitan Districts, Returners at Mount Pleasant, and Telephonists at G.P.O. South" (London: Co-operative Printing Society, 1906), 6.

"managers and operators as a rule agree . . . that [women] get 'glass arm,' a nervous inability to work, more frequently" than men.[63] Thomas Jepsen, a historian of women's telegraphy, glosses "glass arm" as what we now call carpal tunnel syndrome.[64] In that condition, a nerve in the wrist is painfully compressed due to repetitive manual movements; so mentions of "glass arm" invite us to take operators' complaints of nerve strain pretty literally. Of course carpal tunnel syndrome remains an occupational hazard for word processors today, especially professional typists, and as such offers a physical sign of these women's descent from earlier female media.

But the unionists' complaint extends further, with telegraphers' nerve strain producing not only manual paralysis but also "a complete nervous collapse, and occasionally it produces insanity." Evidently nerve strain is not fully reducible to carpal tunnel syndrome; operators also resorted to the diagnosis to convey their jobs' psychological pressures. Butler bases part of her analysis of nerve strain on one switchboard operator's statement that "you nearly go crazy with the number of calls, and the supervisor at your back and the subscribers often so mean."[65] This last effect warrants a closer look: at least part of what made the telephone operator crazy (and the telegrapher insane?)[66] was having to deal with obnoxious customers who, in a telling reversal, tried the very qualities of patient endurance for which women media were known.

Even doctors agreed that this aspect of the job contributed to nerve strain. A 1911 *Lancet* article recounted the conclusions of a medical committee that had investigated telephone employees at the British Post Office: "a sound nervous system is essential, because the telephonist is constantly using three special senses—namely, speech, hearing, and sight" and "because the telephonist . . . deals directly with the public, 'whose knowledge of the method of working,' says the report, 'is limited and whose methods, manner, and temper are always diverse and sometimes unpleasant. She is constantly smoothing out difficulties, and is often the subject of abuse and reproach, whilst it is necessary for her to be businesslike, tactful, and courteous under all conditions.'" The medical report, the *Lancet* article continues, cannot propose adequate remedies for this "factor in the induction of ill-health in the telephone

63. Butler, *Women and the Trades,* 293.

64. Jepsen, *My Sisters Telegraphic,* 36.

65. Butler, *Women and the Trades,* 291.

66. The open letter on "The Lot of the Woman Telegrapher" goes on to describe the telegrapher's irritations by her customers, which are clearly exacerbated by conflicting gender expectations: "she must therefore, send messages even when they are accompanied by familiar attentions often forced on her by the so-called 'sporting element' found at these public places" and is not allowed to "rightfully resent such acts" because "her wage is dependent on the toleration she shows."

operator, especially nerve-strain—namely, the behaviour of the public." The potential for such problems impelled the Post Office, along with American switchboards, to examine its prospective telephonists for good "nervous equilibrium," besides testing applicants' voices for courtesy and patience.[67] Thus one narrative of nervous delicacy revised another. Women maintained a gentle demeanor more easily than their male counterparts, but the intrinsic sensitivity enabling this feat could itself become a debility on the job. Or as the women themselves might declare, the imperative of continued tact with their customers was enough to drive them as much as it would men to distraction.

However diverse their opinions, fiction writers, business managers, doctors, and operators themselves agreed that communication mediation tasked the sensitive female body; spiritualists maintained the same about their mediums. At first glance, it is easy to read this period's intertwined discussions of technological and occult communications as deriving merely from a similar appearance of eerily immaterial contacts. But beneath the wonder at apparent immateriality were in fact parallel, gendered discussions of materiality—of the receptive feminine bodies in charge of making those contacts possible. Or more precisely, the presumption of women's nervous susceptibility helped to create a middle ground between the immaterial and the material—one conceptually crucial to movements like spiritualism—to the extent that the Victorians commonly used a language of the nerves to explain conditions with assumed, but as yet unspecified, somatic origins.[68] Ultimately the medium's sensitivity might prove both an advantage and a disadvantage, even a disease, with the latter possibility becoming crucial to accounts of the hypnotic mediation of alternate personalities. As I detail in chapter 4, doctors diagnosed the somnambulist's (hypnotic subject's) hysteria much as they had the telephonist's craziness, as a product of a fragile nervous system.

Within this wide-ranging conversation about female sensitivity, the idea of sympathy was liable to grim questions, like the kind implicitly posed in James, about the circumstances this fabled aptitude was obscuring. At the extreme, instead of taking *In the Cage* as a distortion of the premise of the medium's sympathy, we can see it as a fulfillment of that premise—as a logical exploration of the seeds sown in simultaneously positing women as acutely

67. "The Health of Telephone Operators," *Lancet* 2, no. 2 (1911): 1716; on American switchboard examinations, see Norwood, *Labor's Flaming Youth,* 41.

68. Oppenheim states that the term *functional nervous disorder* was used by doctors to describe diseases of the nervous system whose exact physiological foundations were unclear but were expected to be determined eventually (*"Shattered Nerves,"* 8).

receptive and then locating them at the nexus of communication pathways. With her reliance on others' telegrams to bolster her hopes of social relevance, James's heroine offers up the unsettling prospect that there is a fine line between sympathy and eavesdropping. In fact, the medium's sympathy becomes recognizable as simply eavesdropping with its sting quixotically removed: it refashions intellectual interest in vaguer, less threatening terms of emotional affinity. *In the Cage* restores the sense of threat in depicting the medium as someone with a will to interpret the messages that come her way because doing so enables her (for a time at least) to reinterpret herself socially. If one criterion of the ideal medium was that it (she) fade from consideration as a communicative channel, James's telegrapher is, by contrast, exceedingly conspicuous to Everard as well as Lady Bradeen, who is at one point shocked and frightened by her apparent memorization of details of the couple's messages. The sensitivity of the female body was not by itself sufficient to sustain the prospect of intimate human-mediated dialogue. What was also necessary was the disappearance, in effect, of the medium's inquisitive self.