

The Man Who Talked Like a Book, Wrote Like He Spoke

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Well into his writing career, at the age of fifty-three, Henry James began to write differently. In the spring of 1897, rheumatism in his right wrist worsened and writing became painful, so James hired a secretary to take dictation. From then on, his routine was to dictate fiction in the morning hours to an amanuensis and make revisions in his own hand to the typescripts in the afternoons. James admitted that adopting dictation to compose novels affected his writing. “I know,” he once told Theodora Bosanquet, the secretary of his final years, “that I’m too diffuse when I’m dictating” (Bosanquet 247). “It all seems,” he explained, “to be so much more effectively and unceasingly *pulled* out of me in speech than in writing” (248). Not only did James come to write more readily by the sound of his own voice, but eventually he required the accompaniment of the typewriter’s taps as well (his habit became so specific that the machine he used had to be a Remington—other makes, such as the Oliver which was too quiet for his taste, didn’t “work”). The scene of writing had become a place of sound.

This media shift from longhand to dictation has been remarked upon by James scholars for the fact that it occurs at the same time as, and possibly generated, changes in his style. James’s “late style” culminates in those athletically long sentences, as well as in the alliteration, paratactic prepositional phrasing, dialogic parries, and abstraction so characteristic of the writing he produced from the 1890s until the end of his life. For exemplary swathes of it, look to the pages of *The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The American Scene*. And while literary critics have mentioned the coincidence of the altered mode of composition with the evolution in style, their commentary about the link between the two is mostly tentative, vague, and sometimes confusing. Leon Edel, who gave us the epic five-volume biography of James, draws a definitive line between the dictation and style of the late novels when he observes, “After several years of consistent dictating, the ‘later manner’ of Henry James emerged” (456). Edel describes the effect as being able to hear “the spoken voice...henceforth in James’s prose, not only in the rhythm and ultimate perfection of his verbal music, but in his use of colloquialisms, and in a greater indulgence in metaphor” (456). References to “the ultimate perfection of his verbal music” can pass in the heady atmosphere of a biography, but remain critically unilluminating. And as for the assumption that speaking inclines more readily toward metaphor than writing does—any number of talkers and texts would suggest otherwise. Edel’s remarks are fairly representative of what has occurred elsewhere on the subject of James and dictation: the comments often lack specificity and simply allude to a spoken voice “behind” the writing.

It turns out there may be good reason for this, or if not “good” reason, then at least reasons enough which account in part for why such a study—of the orality within or behind James’s writing—hasn’t yet gone very far, neither in the

hands of outdated literary criticism nor in updated media and theory approaches.¹ This essay is about that recalcitrance—as something not inherent to James’s speech (which we have no “proper” record/ings of), nor to his writing, but as something which arises in the encounter of all the significant elements: the author’s method of composition, the available (or unavailable) archival evidence, and, perhaps most of all, the historic divide in Western scholarship between the oral and the written.

Conventional studies of the relationship between the oral and the literary are usually confined to situations where the activities of speaking versus writing are clear-cut (or assumed to be), or to texts that incorporate dialect or colloquial writing. The scholarship, across several disciplines, overwhelmingly implies that orality studies are for primarily oral cultures and literary studies are for the literature of literate cultures (if this sounds like a tautology, it’s because our vocabulary is ideological and firmly in place to support the scholarly apparatus). Language theory coming out of this tradition favors hierarchies and often theorizes speech and writing in terms of their firstness and secondness: depending on the theorist, one or the other (speech or writing) is often understood as primary, literally or figuratively in terms of its cultural value. Then, the other (speech or

¹ This is not to say that there is no interesting criticism that touches on the fact of James’s dictation (there is), but rather that there continue to be, as far as I have found, no direct, systematic, and convincing analyses of how the dictation may have affected the shape and sound of the sentences in the texts.

David Smit’s *The Language of a Master* (1988) sets itself the task of finding an explanation for the style of James’s late writing and does adopt a systematic approach, but the conclusions seem oddly untethered to the research. Smit uses the fact of dictation to probe for clues to James’s psychological state: knowing that James continued to write letters and journal entries longhand, while dictating the novels, he attempts to divine whether James was publicly or privately feeling something that can be detected in his style choices. Tallying up sentence lengths and various parts of speech across the range of documents James produced, Smit essentially concludes what James had admitted in the first place: his sentences were shorter when he wrote by hand, and dictation encouraged verbosity. No other insights concerning syntax and state of mind can be made, Smit says; the variety and range of the materials preclude it. Lacking any empirical psychological evidence for particular phrasings, Smit resorts to a looser, generalized psychological thesis: the late style was intended to project “a magisterial persona: the artist as an explorer of psychological depths, the artist as oracle, the artist James wanted to be” (79).

Of note among more contemporary approaches are the following: John Carlos Rowe, in a chapter of his *The Other Henry James* (1998), shows how James’s media transition informs the way communication technologies are rendered in the short story “In the Cage,” where opposing versions of modernity play off each other. More recently, other critics such as Richard Menke, Jay Clayton, and Pamela Thurschwell gravitate to this same story to apply media-historical analyses that incorporate the fact of James’s composing by dictation to a typewriter. See Clayton, “The Voice in the Machine: Hazlitt, Hardy, James” in *Language Machines*; Menke, “‘Framed and Wired’: Teaching ‘In the Cage’ at the Intersection of Literature and Media”; and Thurschwell’s chapter “On the typewriter, *In the Cage*, at the Oujia Board” in *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920*.

writing) follows as a “second”—whether as a representation or imitation of, or as subordinate to the “first” mode.² In these conventional paradigms, transcription, for example, is the written record of speech. In this sense, the written is a representation of an oral event without which the text would not exist. Speech and writing invariably get theorized in opposition to each other, as philosophies of language from Herder through Rousseau to Derrida amply show.

The case of Henry James confounds this, the persistent division made between the oral and the written. To spend any time deliberating on the speech of one of American literature’s most “literary” masters is to come up against the inadequacies of our methods. The Western critical tradition poorly accommodates a writer who was alternately said to “talk like a book” or to speak as he wrote, and who spoke *and* wrote his texts in a hybrid of performance (in front of his secretaries, in motion, always walking), dictation (with simultaneous and subsequent reference to typescript), and longhand. The fact that James composed in an interactive, coextensive blend of speech and writing means that we miss something if we treat his late writing as just *writing*. James’s work also muddies the tidy difference—or identity!—set up between an initiating speech event and its textual incarnation (the dictated text). By extension, other “givens” about speech and writing suddenly seem murkier than they had before. We could, for instance, begin to reconsider what we understand as “transcription” proper. Are James’s novels slant transcriptions of his speech? Did he (given what we know of his manner) stutter into existence the fluid, very “writerly” sentences of his fiction? What will alter in our analysis of the late texts once we attempt to hear, and not simply read, them? This is not an essay about transcription, but it is an essay about the obscured life of language which moves—and maybe only “lives”—somewhere between the mouth and the page, between the ephemeral past of sounded, “lost” utterance and the persisting record of the book.

The approach I take to James, the idea I have of how important his speech is to us who read him, is not without problems. The obvious problem is the difficulty (some would say impossibility) of hearing James’s speech. If we take his fiction as a quasi-transcript of it, can we hear the echoes of his voice? Some, like Edel, hear a voice behind those sentences. Richard Bridgman’s 1966 *The Colloquial Style in America* identified the colloquial aspects of James’s late work in its “simple words, repeated words, parallel structures, emphasis by italics, emphasis by punctuation, and discursiveness” (99). While this may ring true to many reader’s ears, it doesn’t reconcile with the fact that this same language has posed great difficulty to readers. If, as Bridgman and Edel propose, James’s writing bears the traces of a talking voice, why then do readers (both contemporary with James, and still today) have such trouble following it? Why isn’t

² David Olson’s work, for example, presents an interesting example of how this kind of thinking can simultaneously be challenged and preserved at once. His argument in “How Writing Represents Speech” concerns the history of writing and how we read the evolution of graphic symbols in relationship to speech. Olson overturns the traditional assumption that writing developed as an attempt to represent speech, proposing instead that “writing systems provide the concepts and categories for thinking about the structure of speech rather than the reverse” (2).

reading James easy in the way listening to someone talk is easy? There are several possible answers, such as the recognition that talk may be easy to hear, but harder to read. Anyone who has read a faithfully verbatim transcription of any kind knows this, knows how strange speech becomes when it is imported onto the page. Yet another answer, and the one I pursue here, may reside in the secret that is James's absent speech. Readers over the decades consistently found James difficult to read, and from what we can gather about his speaking style, he wasn't a "simple" talker either.

What kind of speaker was Henry James? In the absence of any record of his voice, strictly speaking, and in the presence of hundreds of pages of dictated stories, and a number of anecdotal recollections about his talk, I propose an unconventional approach: why couldn't we—why not—turn to hearsay, to say something about what we might have heard in James's speech, to then say something about what we might hear in his writing?

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Henry James was a stutterer.³ What was considered an incurable disorder for the boy becomes, in the author's maturity, an oral scaffolding by which, or in spite of which—we can't know—some of American literature's most intricate, astonishing, and fluent sentences are built. There are no transcripts or audio recordings of James speaking, but we have a quasi-transcript in Elizabeth Jordan's teasing imitation, which she wrote down:

'Eliminating—ah—(very slow) eliminating—ah—eliminating nine-tenths—(faster) nine-tenths—nine-tenths of—of—of—(very fast) what he claims (slower) of what he claims—(very slow) there is still—there is still—there is still (very much faster) enough—left—e—nough left (slower) to make—to—make—to—make—a remarkable record (slow) a remark—able record, (slower) a remarkable record (very slow, with every word heavily emphasized). (Jordan qtd. in Page 75)

Such evidence is no doubt caricatured, but even as a fictive transcription, it can nevertheless indicate what stood out to those who heard James. Jordan performed her parody in front of James himself and he reportedly "roared with laughter [at it] and subsequently repeated the sentences himself to show the accuracy of the imitation" (75). Many who knew James personally remarked upon his distinct speaking style—one marked by pauses, repetitions, hesitations, and groping after the right word. Edith Wharton believed that style developed out of the old stammer. She writes,

His slow way of speech, sometimes mistaken for affectation—or, more quaintly, for an artless form of Anglomania!—was really the partial victory over a stammer which in his boyhood had been thought incurable. The elaborate politeness and the involved phraseology that made off-hand

³ James apparently only stuttered in English and not when he spoke French (Shell 67).

intercourse with him so difficult to casual acquaintances probably sprang from the same defect. (qtd. in Nowell-Smith 13)

The stutterer, a Dr. S. Loew writes in 1936, thinks differently about language than those who don't stutter:

The stutterer's way of thinking about his language (and in general, we would add, the way anyone affected by defects in pronunciation thinks about his language) differs remarkably from that of a healthy person. While the latter has no interest in his speech, the stutterer accords to his own speech an extraordinary and morbid degree of attention. He prepares himself in advance for every conversation; he dreads the pronunciation of certain words. He feels obsessed by these words, by these letters, even in his dreams. (qtd. in Shell 204)

Historically and across cultures, to be a stutterer is very likely to experience the anxiety Dr. Loew describes—the obsessing over or dread of speaking in front of others. We can ultimately only conjecture about the ways that James's stutter inflected his orientation to language, and to what degree it acted, in his later life, as he dictated his books, as a bridge rather than a handicap to a new style and mode of writing.

Where the long, labyrinthian sentences of his late style attracted considerable comment and protest as to their "readability," so too his speaking style prompted remarks about the ease or difficulty of listening to it. In recollections of friends and acquaintances, James's conversational speech is consistently said to be unlike other people's, and is often described with reference to his textual voice.⁴ One reminiscence hears the "two" voices (oral and textual) as identical: "If ever there was a man that talked like a book—and one of his own books too—that man is Mr. Henry James" (Russell qtd. in Nowell-Smith 10). Another account implies that while the two voices did the same thing with words, the oral one moved along where the textual one stalled, and attributes the difference in effect to the supplementing grammar of James's presence:

I must frankly confess that, while I regard the later books with a reverent admiration for their superb fineness and the concentrated wealth of expression, they are hard work, they require unflagging patience and continuous freshness of apprehension. But his talk had none of this weighted quality...his tone, his gestures, his sympathetic alertness made instantly and abundantly clear and sparkling what on a printed page often became, at least to me, tough and coagulated. (Benson qtd. in Nowell-Smith 12)

Others characterize his talk as more textual than oral: "In fact [today] he talked as if every sentence had been carefully rehearsed; every semi-colon, every comma, was in exactly the right place, and his rounded periods dropped to the

⁴ These recollections are gathered chiefly in two places: in Nowell-Smith 10-21 and throughout Page, especially 74-75 and 111-41.

floor and bounced about like tiny rubber balls" (Atherton qtd. in Nowell-Smith 11). Similarly, A. C. Benson describes dining with James at Lamb House in 1900: "He was full of talk, though he looked weary, often passing his hand over his eyes; but he refined and defined, was intricate, magniloquent, rhetorical, humorous, not so much like a talker, but like a writer repeating his technical processes aloud..." (qtd. in Page 88). Taken together, there is finally no consensus about whether James's speech was more like his writing, or his writing was more like his speech. What the evidence seems more definitively to point to is that in his final years, he had integrated both modes to the point of no hierarchies, no subordinations, no firstness and secondness.

Although the accounts don't agree on "which came first," the talk or the texts, there is consensus about the sound of his delivery: his speech was slow and deliberate; marked by pauses, repetitions and hesitations; and punctuated by mmm's, er's, and ah's. These traits are often attributed to James's search for the *mot juste*—his pauses, repetitions, and phonemic fillers are what occurred while he mentally groped for the right word. W. L. Phelps,⁵ a Yale English Professor who met James in Connecticut in 1911, recalls:

It has been wittily said that Henry James conversed as if he were reading proof. This is really true. In desultory conversation on that day and on another occasion in England, he would stop in the middle of a sentence, feeling around in his mind for the right word; if he could not find it, he would abruptly change the subject, rather than use what he regarded as not quite the accurate or suitable word. (Qtd. in Page 137)

Others explain how James involved his listener physically and emotionally as a "fellow traveler" in his often prolonged search for the words he wanted. This resulted in a speaking style which demanded as much of the listener as it did of the speaker, as Desmond McCarthy's recollection attests:

Each talk was thus a fresh adventure, an opportunity of discovering for himself what he thought about books and human beings. His respect for his subject was only equalled, one noticed, by his respect for that delicate instrument for recording and comparing impressions, his own mind. He absolutely refused to hustle it, and his conversational manner was largely composed of reassuring and soothing gestures intended to allay, or anticipate, signs of impatience. The sensation of his hand on my shoulder in our pausing rambles together was, I felt, precisely an exhortation to patience. 'Wait,' that reassuring pressure seemed to be humorously saying, 'wait. I know, my dear fellow, you are getting fidgety; but wait—and we shall enjoy together the wild pleasure of discovering what "Henry James" thinks of this matter. For my part, I dare not hurry him!' His

⁵ Incidentally, James for his part describes Phelps as "the boring and vacuous (though so well-meaning) Yale chatterbox" (qtd. in Page 138)!

possession of this double consciousness⁶ was one of the first characteristics one noticed; and sure enough we would often seem both to be waiting, palpitating with the same curiosity, for an ultimate verdict (Qtd. in Page 129).

If James was demanding of his listeners, he was by all accounts (once he finished his own sentences) an uncommonly good listener. McCarthy recalls that women seemed particularly comfortable talking to him: “It struck me that women ran on in talk with him with a more unguarded volubility than they do with most men, as though they were sure of his complete understanding” (qtd. in Page 131). Henry James, says another, “enjoys the happy knack of putting those to whom he speaks in good conceit with themselves” (Russell qtd. in Nowell-Smith 10). Ford Maddox Ford confirms this impression:

He had such an extraordinary gift for observing minutiae—and a gift still more extraordinary for making people talk. I have heard the secretary of a golf-club, a dour silent man who never addressed five words to myself though I was one of his members, talk for twenty minutes to the Master about a new bunker that he was thinking of making at the fourteenth hole. And James had never touched a niblick in his life. It was the same with market-women, tram-conductors, shipbuilders’ labourers, auctioneers. I have stood by and heard them talk to him for hours. Indeed, I am fairly certain that he once had a murder confessed to him. (Qtd. in Page 18-19)

Ford’s memory that James the listener could draw the talk out of all types of people, that he was able, in a sense, to listen with equal attentiveness to everyone, links analogously to his secretary Bosanquet’s claim that in his late phase, he spoke in the same manner to whomever he met, and his fictional characters came likewise to speak as he did. Bosanquet says,

[B]y 1909, when the play [*The Outcry*] was written, the men and women of Henry James could talk only in the manner of their creator. His own speech, assisted by the practice of dictating, had by that time become so inveterately characteristic that his questions to a railway clerk about a ticket or to a fishmonger about a lobster, might easily be recognized as coined in the same mint as his addresses to the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature (263-64).

The typist’s remarks reaffirm that the movement between the oral and the written for James was not unidirectional: it wasn’t simply that dictation changed

⁶ This “double consciousness” in which both speaker and listener suspended together in expectation of language’s arrival, conveys something of the form of textual-listening to the seen/scene that surfaces in James’s cultural criticism in *The American Scene*. It also calls to mind that weirdly doubled character in “The Private Life,” the playwright Clare Vawdrey who literally has two selves—one who stays in his hotel room writing masterpieces, while his other body socializes, dining out, taking walks, and disappointing friends with his lackluster conversational skills.

the sentences of his novels—it may have altered his speech as well. That his characters' voices were often indistinguishable, that their voices sounded like his, that his writing voice was his speaking voice and vice versa—his use of language blurs the line between literary and non-literary uses of language as they have conventionally been associated with the written and oral, respectively. Twentieth century American poetry would seek to break down the divisions between literature and everyday language, to draw speech from “the mouths of Polish mothers” and into the poem as William Carlos Williams put it. It's possible to view James's intervention as a related one, but which approaches from the other direction, so to speak. James brought the literary into speech—into his social speech and his dictating speech, both.

Donald Wesling broaches the “trouble” with voice and/in literature, saying, “The relation of literature to the human voice offers a good deal of trouble to many current critical systems, mostly as a result of criticism's unwillingness to address adequately the dual nature of language as a medium for literature and for ordinary communications” (69). Wesling argues for “a non-nostalgic concept of voice which relies on a certain play between text and speech” (78). Literature, he feels, is defined in part precisely by this play. He says, “The practice of art does constitute human reality only through symbols. However, among those symbols, literature is differently constitutive by seeking to preserve and exaggerate the ambiguity of text and speech” (78). In his articulation, James enacted the dual nature of language as both ordinary and special; he transported language to a condition beyond or beside these categories. I'm not suggesting that James didn't believe in something called “literature”—of course he did. Rather, he came to a point where he integrated poetry into a range of language practices and saw the “literary” as the art of composing and constituting human realities—an event that could happen anywhere, anytime, with any conversant, on the page or in the air.⁷

This is the turn that James's late writing gives us. I mean here a “turn” as George Quasha theorizes it. He writes,

Oral vs. written—but that's too easy, that's the usual mistake, the simple opposition, rather than the dynamic of what Blake called “contraries,” without which “there is no progression.” If we restore to the “versus” its root meaning of “turning,” we can make a new start: the oral as contrary of the written, speech turning with writing.... [T]hat would be to grasp the

⁷ As I propose that James's practice allows for the “literary” to be an activity that can occur outside of the written text, so too I see a similar, though not analogous, expansiveness in his concept of human voice. He does not essentialize voice as a fixed medium, and emphasizes use and cultural context to define it:

I shall go so far as to say that there is no such thing as a voice pure and simple; there is only, for any business of appreciation, the voice *plus* the way it is employed; an employment determined here by a greater number of influences than we can now go into—beyond affirming at least, that when such influences, in general, have acted for a long time we think of them as having made not only the history of the voice, but positively the history of the national character, almost the history of the people. (“QOS” 51)

meaning of middle—the between zone (neither “active” nor “passive”) signaled to us by the poet Blake and revived in our time by his rightful heirs, the poets. The issue, I gather from the evidence of a new or, rather, emergent language (we will variously see it as poetry, speech, talking, and discourse), is not the choice of oral or written modalities, but the problematic of alignment within language itself. (485-86)

The “emergent language” Quasha refers to is the rise of oral poetry forms during the sixties and seventies in America, but his remarks about how we “grasp the meaning of middle” that waits for us beyond (and within) the old opposition of speech and writing are pertinent to finding a new way to read/hear the language of James’s late works. James inhabits this between-zone, and so even to name “James the writer” and “James the speaker” is to immediately complicate the categories and expectations of both discourses.

For James, once he was habitually in the practice of dictating, speaking was writing and writing was speaking. Hadn’t he told W. L. Phelps this “secret”—his hope that his writing would become oral (again) in the hands of his readers?

Drawn off into a corner of the room by Henry James, I spoke of testing a written style by reading it aloud; that I had found many passages in Browning which seemed obscure to the eye were transparently clear when I read them aloud. To my surprise, he became excited. With intense earnestness he whispered in my ear, “I have never in my life written a sentence that I did not mean to be read aloud, that I did not specifically intend to meet that test; you try it and see. Only don’t you tell.” (Qtd. in Page 137-38)

And yet James himself would tell, did tell, in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*. There, he declares that the test for “poetry” (defined in the “largest literary sense”) is writing which “lend[s] itself to *vivâ-voce* treatment” (*Literary Criticism* 1339). This is how I read James’s absent speech alongside the presence of his writing—a live voice in the quietest company, these books, one can keep.

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