Chapter 11

Touching at a Distance:
Telegaphy, Gender, and
Henry James's *In the Cage*

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The telegraph occupies a unique place in the history of technology and its relation to the senses. In a manner similar to many contemporary means of communicating at a distance, from email to text messaging, the early telegraph network was primarily visual, employing a variety of optical technologies to transmit coded signals from one location to another, but with the introduction of the galvanic battery, the development of gutta-percha cable, and the employment of Morse code for the transmission of messages by electrical means, telegraphy became increasingly haptic. Emphasizing the ear over the eye, the electrical telegraph fundamentally altered the ratio of senses that subsumed the models of subject formation that had come to characterize the Enlightenment, asserting the values of lateral connection and deep engagement more commonly associated with the feminine than the masculine self, and thus opening up a new and disturbing connection between technology and the women employed in its operation. In what follows, the social and political effects of the reorganization of the senses effected by the introduction of electrical telegraphy is explored in detail, with a particular concern for the ways in which these effects were first registered in and subsequently managed by the discourses of gender in the Victorian period.

In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, to “write at distance” was first and foremost a matter of seeing. The first such device, indeed the first to take the name “telegraph,” was devised in the early 1790s by Claude Chappe. Erected atop a turret-shaped tower, it consisted of a five-meter column supporting a horizontal beam to which were attached two indicator arms, each of which could be rotated independently in 45 degree increments. The indicators functioned much like oversized semaphore flags; operated by a complex clockwork mechanism located in the tower below, the device could produce 98 different signals capable of being read by telescope from a distance of several miles on a clear day. Amidst the egalitarian fervor of the French Revolution, the optical telegraph was greeted initially with suspicion followed by outright hostility; convinced that the rotating arms were a means of communicating with royalist supporters, local villagers stormed the tower, burning it and Chappe’s prototype to the ground. The National Convention, however, proved to be more supportive. Touting the optical telegraph
as a shining example of the ways in which the mechanical arts could contribute to the liberation of the soul of man, the revolutionary government embraced the new technology and provided Chappe with the necessary funds to construct a series of similar towers connecting Paris and Lille, some 130 miles to the North. The Paris-Lille line began its regular transmission of messages in May of 1794 and proved a popular success, sending the nation news of Napoleon’s string of military victories, and later foiling a fraud scheme by conveying the winning numbers in the national lottery. Chappe was subsequently given permission to mount devices on any tower, belfry, or battlefield of his choosing (the main Paris station was located at the Louvre), and new lines began to spread throughout France and Continental Europe. Before long, Paris was in direct contact with Toulouse to the South, Amsterdam to the North, and Venice to the East, and similar optical networks soon followed in Britain, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. As Tom Standage writes, “by the mid 1830s, lines of telegraph towers stretched across much of Western Europe, forming a sort of mechanical internet of whirring arms and blinking shutters, and passing news and official messages from one place to another” (16).

Affirming the connection between what can be known and what can be seen, the optical telegraph might be considered a quintessential technology of the Enlightenment. In his *Meditations* (1642), Descartes draws a fundamental distinction between the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, that is to say between the immaterial realm of the mind, and the material realm of the body. Composed of ontologically distinct substances, the two realms, he suggested, were mutually exclusive of one another, the mind being exempted from the dictates of nature to which the body must conform. The distinction served not only, as has been noted by Elizabeth Grosz and others, to establish an implicit hierarchy between the mind and the body, whereby the former is capable of discerning the mechanical laws governing the operations of the latter, but to introduce, as the very condition of that knowledge, a necessary distance that separates the one from the other, distinguishing between the subject that looks and the object that is to be seen. This separation is the very cornerstone of the scientific method, asserting the possibility of a space of absolute objectivity, the location from which one can observe the natural world without being implicated in it. Only by virtue of this distance that separates the one who observes from that which is observed can one know a thing as it is, in and of itself, and not as reflected through the lens of self-interest. The *camera obscura*, a device that allowed the light rays cast by an object or scene to be projected on a screen in a darkened room, thus became for many *philosophes*, including both Locke and Descartes, an apt model for the workings of the human mind, and the study of optics became an increasingly important branch of natural philosophy during the period. As Jean Starobinski has argued, “Such was the century of the Enlightenment which looked at things in the sharp clear light of the reasoning mind whose processes appear to have been closely akin to those of the seeing eye” (210). The early telegraph network was very much a result of this emphasis on the ocular, and the superiority of mind over body. It effectively abolished the *res extensa*, that is to say, the realm governed by the laws of space and time, but in such a manner as to preserve the space or gap that was constitutive of scientific knowledge. By means of its coded semaphore signals, glimpsed through the lens of a telescope, one mind was able to communicate with another without having to hear, smell, taste, or touch the other.

If the optical telegraph lifted the mind from the body, and allowed it to communicate directly with other minds, regardless of the distance that separated them, the electrical telegraph seems to have had the opposite effect. First patented in Britain in 1837 by William Cooke, a former British army medical officer and commercial entrepreneur, and Charles Wheatstone, the Chair of experimental philosophy at King’s College, Cambridge, the electrical telegraph was a dramatic improvement on the earlier optical devices. It not only allowed messages to be sent at all hours of the day or night, regardless of weather conditions, but effectively closed the interval between the sending and receipt of a communication. By means of the galvanic battery messages now effectively arrived at their destination in the same moment that they had been sent.

For many early users of the device such instantaneity produced the uncanny sensation that the sender was physically present in the same room as the receiver, the two conversing as in real time. They seemed quite literally “in touch,” less mind speaking to mind, as one body in physical contact with another, as if their nervous systems had somehow been seamlessly joined. “We may view,” runs a typical endorsement of the new system, “the vast network of wires above to be erected over our heads as a plexus of nerves answering to the ramifications of nerves which makes the skin so sensitive” (“Nervous System” 277). This sense of telegraphy as fundamentally somatic, that is to say, as a form of communication modeled on and extending the body’s own means of sending and receiving signals from one part to another, was amplified and extended in the late-nineteenth century by the increasing employment of the Morse “sounder,” a device whereby telegraphic signals were transmitted by acoustic means. Superseding Cooke and Wheatstone’s original two-needle device, in which an electrical pulse caused a pair of indicators to point to a specific letter or number stenciled on the face of the instrument, the sounder employed a code made up of combinations of short and long auditory signals, a short and a long sound for A, a long and three short for B, etc. Operators who used the ear proved to be capable of sending messages more quickly than those who used the eye, much to the surprise of many experimenters who had simply assumed the superiority of sight over sound. The sounder, moreover, improved not only the speed of the telegraph service, allowing for the transmission of as many as 600 words a minute along a single line, but also the accuracy. Trained operators of the new instrument made fewer mistakes, and hence made fewer requests for messages to be resent, dramatically improving the efficiency of the service as a whole (Kieve 234–5). The electrical age, it seemed, was to belong to the ear and not the eye, to the sensing body and not the reasoning mind.

1 On the development of the optical telegraph see Hendrick; Holzmann and Peterson; and Wilson.
The ability of the telegraph to appeal directly to the nervous system, and thereby circumvent the cognitive powers of rational thought most often associated with the visual faculty, marks this device out in the history of communications technology. "The physical impact of sound in the instrument's operation contrasts with the disembodiment often thought characteristic of the modern encounter with information," writes Jay Clayton (52). "If visual data seemed to reinforce the growing abstraction of modern life," he continues, "acoustic processing produced odd sensations that ran counter to normative trends" (53). The "oddness" of the telegraph, the way in which its acoustic properties activated the human sensorium at the level of tissues, nerves, and muscles, leads Clayton to see the literary narratives that represent the telegraph's operation in terms of their concerns for same-sex desire: the "queerness" of characters such as Lady Audley in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* or Paula Power in Hardy's *A Laodicean* is read as symptomatic of the telegraph's ambiguous place in the regime of modernity. The queerness of the telegraph, however, was registered not only in the terms of the sexual orientation of various literary figures, but in the discourses of gender in the nineteenth century more broadly, especially in so far as those discourses served to mediate a general reorganization of the senses as the necessary condition of electrical communication. In what follows, then, I will argue that the telegraph's uncanny effects were understood, first and foremost, as they troubled the categories of femininity and masculinity, asserting the possibility that the emergence of technē as the epistemological mode that will increasingly dominate the modern period may find its expression not in the disembodied form of masculine reason, but in the thoroughly embodied form of feminine sympathy. If our communications technologies presaged, as the telegraph seemed to suggest, not as an escape from the *res extensa*, but rather a return to it, might they not be, at one and the same time, a return to the matrix of the feminine? What if the future of communication, indeed of technology itself, were to be female? Such deep-set anxieties concerning the relation of technology to the senses, and how this relation was not simply figured but managed in and through the gender norms of the period, are most complexly imagined in Henry James's novella, *In the Cage* (1898), in which a young female postal employee succumbs to the sympathetic vibrations she detects in the correspondence between two members of the gentility class, and in so doing brings the founding principle of the Enlightenment, the connection of knowledge with the ability to see, into radical doubt.

In *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan identifies the development of the telegraph as a pivotal moment in the emergence of an electric culture. "We live today," he writes, "in the Age of Information and of Communication because electric media instantly and constantly create a total field of interacting events in which all men partake. Now, the world of public interaction has the same inclusive scope of integral interplay that has literally characterized only our private nervous systems" (248). The telegraph, for McLuhan, provided more than a faster and more effective means of transmitting and receiving messages. It tended to dissolve the boundaries of the individual subject as she became increasingly caught up in a continuous and instantaneous interaction with those many voices now audible across the distance. "In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action. It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner" (4). The sense of selfhood promulgated by the experience of print was that of an "I" that was first and foremost an "eye," a point of view or a characteristic perspective that defined what made one distinct from any other point of view or perspective, and was modeled in the form of the newspaper editorial or, in literature, in an author's style or narrative "voice." In the electrical age, McLuhan argues, this experience of selfhood as bounded and discrete gives way to the intense involvement that characterized the oral forms of communications of pre-print culture. As a force of tribalization, the telegraph transformed the insular domain of readers, each sitting alone and communicating with her own personal copy of the book, to a circuit of listeners, where information circulates from point to point in an instant and in so doing appears to belong to both no one and everyone simultaneously.

This sense of a deep and continuous relation between people within an electric network of affiliation was understood by Victorians in the terms they inherited from the eighteenth-century conceptions of sympathy. In this discourse, sympathy refers not simply to the capacity to feel, or to feel strongly, but more specifically to be moved by the feelings of someone else. "In its most extended sense," David Marshall explains, "sympathie implies a correspondence between people such as mutual attraction or affinity; yet even in this sense it contains both an etymology and a network of eighteenth-century associations that suggest the act of entering into the sentiments of another person" (3). One extension of this network of associations in which the term sympathy operated was that of affect, in which the sense of correspondence occurs not through the act of entering into the sentiments of another, but in which those sentiments act upon, or enter into the being of the one who feels, potentially by-passing the cognitive faculties of the mind or the moral will, and touching the subject directly at his or her emotive centre. Such affective acts of sympathy in what McLuhan calls the age of print were typically understood as a relationship between one person and another, two people whose souls were already so deeply connected to one another as to make such communication at a distance possible. The classic case is that of the "mysterious summons" that Jane receives telepathically from a wounded Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (448). "The feeling," Jane records, "was not like an electric shock; but it was quite as sharp and strange, as startling: it acted upon my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor: from which they were now summoned, and forced to wake. They rose expectant: eye and ear waited, while the flesh quivered upon my bones" (419). Jane's description accurately traces the affective nature of sympathy: Rochester's plea for help acts on her at great distance, and appeals not to her mind, but rather to her body, eye and ear rising expectant and the flesh quivering on her bones. What is more, such action is
understood as a kind of violent incursion or bodily possession, the shock "forcing" her senses to awake, and ultimately compelling her to leave the relative safety of her home to nurse his wounds. 2

The telegraph seemed to function in a very like manner to telepathy; both were forms of communication at a distance, but the electric medium dramatically extended the scope and range at which the affective force of sympathy could operate. Where the discourse of sympathy presented telepathy as a form of point-to-point communication, one person in touch with another, telegraphy was point-to-multiple points. The new technology's close relation to the daily press allowed for a kind of collective correspondence in which the feelings of a single person might be shared almost simultaneously by large numbers of people wholly unrelated and otherwise unknown to each other. Telegraphic communication did not require the metaphysical pretense of the soul, and its prior or assumed correspondence with another soul, in order to affect its action; it could, apparently, forge connections in a material way, using the mass media of daily newspapers and weekly magazines to reach the whole reading public. A case in point was the assassination of the American President James Garfield in 1881. Garfield was struck by a bullet fired from an assassin's gun, but he did not immediately die from the wound. In fact, he tenaciously clung to life for over two months, the whole world following his slow and painful passage into death through the daily and at times hourly telegraph reports from his bedside. As Scientific American reported, "the touch of the telegraph key welded human sympathy and trade possible its manifestation in a common universal, simultaneous heart throb. We have just seen the civilized world gathered as one family around a common sick bed, hope and fear alternately fluctuating in unison the world over as hopeful or alarming bulletins passed with electric pulsations over the continents and under the seas" ("Moral Influence" 240). Such was the "moral influence" of the telegraph that the magazine could confidently prophesy the day "when science shall have so blended, interwoven, and unified human thoughts and interests that the feeling of universal kinship shall be, not a spasmodic outburst of occasional emotion, but constant and controlling, the usual, everyday, abiding feeling of all men toward all men" ("Moral Influence" 240). As Richard Menke writes, "the discourse networks of 1881," a reticulum system that included not only the telegraph, but the post, and the daily newspapers, "emphasized the power of a shared, simultaneous experience to harmonize far-flung elements" and that (no doubt misleadingly) took concurrent, communal access to information as axiomatic" (639). The significance of the telegraph, then, was not so much its capacity to abolish space and time, as was commonly thought, but rather its function as a kind of universal tuning fork, the humming of its wires causing the whole of humankind to vibrate at the same sympathetic frequency of thought and feeling. 3

Conventional accounts of the development of electric communications have tended to focus on the trials and tribulations of Cooke, Wheatstone, and Morse, heroic figures that are typically depicted as striving to overcome the narrow-minded dogmatism of politicians and the indifference of a public that could not share their vision of the future. Such narratives tend to reinscribe technology within a progressivist schema that understands history as the product of "great men." Self-knowing agents whose efforts somehow occur outside of ideology or culture proper, in a realm of pure scientific experimentation and innovation, each building on the contributions of his predecessors in a gradual and sequential process of technological advancement. The result is less an understanding of the historical and cultural specificity of the new communications technologies as it is a genealogical fantasy of an absolute origin, in which we can trace the unbroken lineage of our modern technologies, like the computer and the internet, back to these founding and foundational father figures. Re-situating the development of the telegraph within the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century discourses of the senses, however, brings an altogether different figure into view, not a founding father, but an errant daughter—Florence Nightingale.

Prior to the advent of the telegraph, news traveled no faster than the trains and ships that carried the paper on which it was recorded. A typical edition of the Times in the 1840s, for example, might relay news from Cape Town that was eight weeks old, or from Rio that was six weeks old. Even news from America was at best a month old and from Berlin a week (Standage 146). By the time of the outbreak of hostilities in the Balkans in 1854, however, the telegraph network was sufficiently well developed to allow reports from the front to appear within 24 hours of their being transmitted. More than two and a half decades before the English-speaking world stood in an electric vigil at the bedside of James A. Garfield, the Crimean War was the first major conflict to be "experienced" by the newspaper-reading public contemporaneous with the events being described. In a series of dispatches in the Times that galvanized the nation, William Howard Russell provided a graphic and often scathing account of the British Army's operations, detailing the managerial ineptness of its planning and the devastation wrought within the British ranks not by enemy fire but by poor housing, bad food, and unchecked cholera epidemic. Of particular concern for Russell was the inadequate treatment of the wounded, and the truly horrific conditions of the military hospital established at Scutari. On October 12, Russell wrote:

Not only are the men kept, in some cases, for a week without the hand of a medical man coming near their wounds—not only are they left to expire in agony, unheeded and shaken off, though caught desperately at the surgeon whenever he makes his rounds through the field ship, but now [ ... ] it is found that the commonest appliances of a workhouse sick ward are wanting, and that the men must die through the medical staff of the British Army having forgotten that old rags are necessary for the dressing of wounds. ("From Our Own Correspondent") 7

Nightingale, then the Superintendent of a small hospital for sick ladies in London, professed not to have believed the accounts in the Times, but was moved

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2 On the connection between telepathy and telegraphy, see Luckhurst; Royle; Thorschelli.
3 On the outpouring of sympathy for Garfield in Great Britain, see Sewell.
life, when the amount of force is insufficient to keep all the lamps actively burning; those that are weakest go out entirely; or, as more frequently happens, burn faint and feebly—they do not expire, but give insufficient and unstable light—this,” he concludes, “is the philosophy of modern nervousness” (99). The sources of such a drain on the nervous constitution were many, including steam power, the periodical press, the democratic political process, and higher education (98), but Beard was particularly concerned with the effects of the telegraph. By means of its electrical facility, he warned, “our morning newspaper, that we read with our breakfast, has the history of the sorrows of the whole world for a day; and a nature but moderately sympathetic is robbed thereby, consciously or unconsciously, of more or less nervous strength” (134).5

Such anxieties for the affective nature of telegraphy, for its ability to circumvent the cognitive powers of the mind and touch the body directly, were of especial concern with regards to women. Following experiments in the 1850s that showed women to be “more teachable, more attentive, and quicker-eyed” than male clerks, not to mention “sooner satisfied with lower wages,” the daughters of middle-class clerks and civil servants were increasingly recruited as telegraphists (Rye 334). Between 1854 and 1868, there were some 200 women employed in the Central Telegraph Office in London. The nationalization of the service in 1870 served only to add to the number of women in the profession. By 1882, there were more than 600 employed at the Central Telegraph Office, and a further 1,000 were employed in the regional post offices that were being newly outfitted with devices for the transmission and receipt of electrical messages (“Telegraphic Progress” 153). Telegraphy was one of the few white-collar occupations that afforded women a living wage while still allowing them to retain a degree of feminine respectability and class standing, and, as a result, such positions were in considerable demand. Following his visit to the Central Telegraph Office, Anthony Trollope described the women at work there, “all looking comfortable, [ ... ] with only eight hours of work, never before eight in the morning and never after eight at night, with female superintendents, and the chance of rising to be a superintendent open to each girl?” (377–8). The work, however, was not without its rigors: the effective operation of the instruments, and in particular the use of the sounder, demanded practice and skill, and the constant vigilance over an eight-hour shift required both considerable physical stamina and mental fortitude. As Trollope noted, the ability to use the sounder could “only be acquired by those whose organs of hearing are subtle and appreciative,” but that “as there is a preference at present for those tinkling sounds by which words can be noted coming from a distance of as many thousand miles as the world is round,” the “ear-gifted girl is better off than she who is less fortunate” (381). Even so, when a false advertisement was placed in 1862...

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4 For more a detailed account of Nightingale’s decision to travel to the Crimea, see Woodham-Smith.

5 The literature concerned with “nervous exhaustion,” or what was known in the late-nineteenth century as neurasthenia, is voluminous. On its connection with telegraphy, see Cizmeci. On its medical history and cultural meaning for the Victorians, see Drinka and Showalter. On its representation in nineteenth-century British fiction, with a particular emphasis on gender, see Logan; Vrettos; and Wood.
announcing an opening at the office, over 400 women appeared in answer and police had to be called to clear the premises, such was the demand for telegraphic employment (Kieve 87).  

Trollope's description belies another important aspect of the public perception of work as a telegraphist. The limited nervous resources of women, already severely taxed by their reproductive system, together with their innate sensitivity to any form of shock, whether emotional or physical, were thought to make female employees especially vulnerable to the neurotic disorders that Beard and other medical professionals associated with the age of electrical communications. Hence female employees in the Central Telegraph Office were treated with great care and afforded every convenience, from a cook who would prepare hot meals at dinner, to the right to a leave of absence without loss of pay should they fall ill. The post office even retained a doctor on a full-time basis in order to care for its female employees, and maintained apartments in the resort towns of Hastings and Brighton in order that they might take the sea air should they be especially in need of rest and relaxation. Indeed, if proof were needed that electrical communication was a potential source of danger to women, one need only look again to Florence Nightingale, who, upon her return to Britain, took to her bed as an invalid, and was rarely to be seen outside of her bedroom for the remainder of her life. If the Lady of the Lamp was the first citizen of the global village, she was also perhaps its first casualty.

Telegraph girls, then, posed a considerable dilemma for the post office. On the one hand, there was an obligation to protect these women from the nervous strain of their work, to provide them with not only the appropriate working conditions that minimized such strain, but with adequate health care should they succumb to the hazards of their employment. On the other hand, the post office had also to consider the possible threat that their innate sensitivity—the ease with which they could be touched by the intelligence that flowed through their nervous systems—might pose to the information network itself. Women were consistently trooped in the popular press and literature of the period as potential sites of information loss; too likely to be swayed by her need for romance, or to fall under the spell of those who might profit from access to the sensitive information to which she had such ready access, the female telegraphist was seen as a danger to the security of the nation's communications. In response to such concerns, the Central Telegraph Office was sealed off from the regular traffic of the post office, and entrance was only gained by special permission of the Chief Supervisor. "Secrecy," as Trollope noted, "is essential [ . . . ] the temptation might be great if any outside sinner were able to hold free communication with that room at any time. Therefore there are no visitors" (383-4). Such careful monitoring of visitors was no less strict for employees: the architecture of the room, with its open arrangement of tables and raised central dais, followed the principles of what Foucault has called the "carceral archipelago," that is to say, "an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them" (172). Trollope thus notes approvingly the "tender" surveillance that these women were subject to and marvels at the extent to which this supervision limited such feminine tendencies as flirtation, tattiness, and, of course, gossiping (378).

If women were, indeed, more sympathetic than men, and hence more naturally attuned to the modes of communication that were to dominate the modern period, this very ability made them at the same time its greatest liability, both the solution for and the problem of an increasingly technologically-dependent society.

Henry James's In the Cage shares Trollope's concern for the ways in which woman's innate sensitivity, her capacity to be touched, might disturb the integrity of the communication network. Though she is what Trollope describes as "ear-gifted," and hence trained to use a sounder, James's nameless telegraphist does not enjoy one of the enviable positions as a telegraph girl in the Central Telegraph Office at St Martin's-Le-Grand in London. She labors in the comparative obscurity of a suburban post office, one of nearly 2,000 such facilities that the post office converted to telegraphic use in the latter quarter of the century (Kieve 177). Here she finds that her responsibilities expose her to a complex and disturbing variety of sensory stimuli:

This transparent screen fenced out or fenced in, according to the side of the narrow counter on which the human lot was cast, the dustiest corner of a shop pervaded not a little, in winter, by the poison of perpetual gas, and at all times by the presence of hams, cheese, dried fish, soap, varnish and other solids and fluids that she came to know by their smells without consenting to know them by their names. (174-5)

The permeability of this "transparent screen," the fact that it both fences in and fences out, has the effect of inscribing the female telegraphist within the regime of the visible, and in so doing exposing her to that controlling gaze that Foucault associates with the carceral function of modern institutions. But if the cage in this sense submits her to the "tender" surveillance that Trollope approves of in his description of the Central Telegraph Office, if the cage in this sense keeps her in her place, it also, and at the same time, submits her to an array of other influences, including the smell of the "hams, cheese, dried fish, soap, varnish and other solids and fluids" that draw her out of her place in the circuits of transmission and receipt, summoning her into a world in which bodily exchanges, sights, smells, and sounds, are tangled up with and often indistinguishable from the flow of electrical signs. "To Cissy, to Mary, to which ever it was," writes James, "she found her curiosity going out with a rush, a mute effusion that floated back to her, like a returning tide, the living color and splendor of the beautiful head, the light of eyes that seemed to reflect such utterly other things than the mean things actually before them" (180). This tide of sounds, of short and long dashes signifying the thoughts and feelings of people distant and near, makes her subject to "sudden flickers of antipathy and sympathy, red gleams in the grey, fitful needs to notice and to 'care,' odd caprices of curiosity" (177).
Electrical telegraphy in James's novella does not, then, subvert or undermine the cognitive faculties and sensory abilities most commonly associated with femininity; the female postal worker is not "unsexed" by her employment, as was so often thought to result from women's entrance into the white-collar work place. Rather, as in the case of Florence Nightingale, the female telegraph worker becomes more feminine, more feeling, more sensitive, and more curious, as if the electrical environment served to accentuate and encourage sexual difference. And it is here where we confront the paradox at the heart of the novella and, indeed, of the telegraph's ambiguous place within the regime of modernity. It is precisely at this point, in which the telegraph seems fully to inscribe the operator within the discursive norms of femininity, that both the operator and her instrument appear most out of place, or in Clayton's terms, most queer. Responding to the sounder's acoustic vibrations, the novella's protagonist ceases to be the passive object of the gaze, a mere instrument through which knowledge passes without loss or interference, and intrudes into the circuits of sending and receipt. Increasingly involved in the half-heard lives of the people to which her employment exposes her, she takes a particular interest in the plight of Lady Bradeen, a married woman having a clandestine affair with Captain Everard, one of those who belong to "the class that wired everything" (184). The high romance of their situation, compared to the commonplace inevitability of her own relationship with her fiancé, the aptly named Mr Mudge, excites her womanly sympathies intensely. Indeed, she invests herself so fully in their relationship that the nominal lines separating clerk from customer, and lower class from upper, seem to dissolve. "The fine soundless pulse of this game," James writes, "was in the air for our young woman while [the couple] remained in the shop. Remained in the shop? They remained all day; their presence [ ... ] was in everything she did till nightfall, in the thousands of words she counted, she transmitted, in all the stamps she detached and the letters she weighed [ ... ]" (183).

The telegraphist's seemingly complete absorption into the discourse of sympathy, her becoming woman, provides the novella with its most emphatically queer moment, in which she literally reaches out beyond her cage and touches another woman. It begins as the young woman notices a mistake that Lady Bradeen has made in her coded message and boldly offers to correct it for her, in effect disclosing that she "understands" the nature of her relationship with Captain Everard: "It was as if she had bodily leaped—clear the top of the cage and alighted on her interlocutress" (213). In supplying the correct code word, the telegraphist offers a striking example of the ways in which the haptic forecloses the distance that is the condition of visual perception, drawing the subject beyond its own proper sphere and into a deep and continuous involvement with the other. Where sight secures boundaries, making them visible and hence knowable, touch appears to efface them, permitting a kind of illicit traffic or black market in sensation that has circumvented the reasoning categories of the mind. It is, the novella indicates, just this property of the haptic, its ability to join one in an electrical circuit of sensory stimulation, that most threatens the security of the network itself, disclosing the ideological contradictions at the heart of both its operations and the gendered organization of the senses upon which it depends.

James's concern with the ways in which electrical communications amplified a woman's innate sensitivity, and thereby encouraged her to move beyond Victorian codes of femininity, is made most manifest in the scenes in which the young woman pursues Captain Everard. Having discerned the potentially scandalous nature of her customer's affair with Lady Bradeen, she delights in the power it affords her. She begins to follow him about the streets, imagining the possibility that she might in turn become the object of his desire: "She had an intense desire. James records of their one encounter beyond the confines of the post office; "she should know the type she really conformed to without her doing anything so low as to tell him, and he had surely begun to know it from the moment he didn't seize the opportunities into which a common man would promptly have blundered" (219). Alternately, she considers how thrilling it would feel to threaten him with blackmail: "It would be a scene better than many in her 'peny novels, this going to him in the dusk of evening at Park Chambers and letting him at last have it. 'I know too much about a certain person now not to put it to you [... ] that it's quite worth your while to buy me off. Come therefore: buy me!' " (207). For Alexander Welsh, this fear of being blackmailed by a postal employee is characteristic of the tears and anxieties that plague a culture in which social relations are maintained through the exchange of signs, rather than through face-to-face encounters. In an age of daily newspapers, clamouring for the latest scandal, and hence increasingly willing to test the limits between what is private and what is public, information acquires a new kind of exchange value. One's innermost secret might well be tomorrow's headline, and in such a situation the value of something may well be in withholding it rather than making it more widely known. As Welsh argues, "The information revolution was a condition for secrecy as well as for increased productivity" (44), and it is this condition that James's telegraphist threatens to take advantage of in this moment, using her place within the information network to become something more than an instrument in the service of others.

What Welsh's argument fails to identify is the degree to which James's novella recognizes that this new threat posed by the increasing dependence on symbolic exchange is also and at the same time a problem of gender; it is not simply the technologies for the transmission and receipt of knowledge that are at risk, but the women who are employed in the service of these technologies, and who, in some sense, appear to embody the very nature of these technologies. Hence the solution the novella offers is neither that postal employees should be subject to more vigorous surveillance, nor that new regulations and procedures should be introduced to assure the security of the communications network. It is rather that women must learn to forgo the pleasures of orality and come to inscribe themselves within the visual economy of knowledge that is the inheritance of

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1 On the dangers of clerical work to Victorian conceptions of respectable femininity, see Keep.
the Enlightenment. The telegraphist, in short, must introduce at the very heart of her sense of selfhood that critical distance that separates subject from object, and in so doing makes the latter something that can be known and, in being known, understood. It is this at the very culmination of her "double life" (186), when she believes that Everard is ready to reciprocate her affections, that she comes to understand the proper limits of her diffuse and unbounded sense of identity. Instead of waiting impatiently to leave the post office in order to follow Everard home, she finds herself lingering there:

"to be in the cage had suddenly become her safety, and she was literally afraid of the alternate self who might be waiting outside. [...] The most extraordinary change had taken place in her from the moment of her catching the impression he seemed to have returned on purpose to give her [...] she had seen herself approach without a scruple the porter at Park Chambers; then as the effect of the rush of a consciousness quite altered she had, on at last quitting Cocker's, gone straight home for the first time since her return from Bournemouth. (241)

James's intricate mapping of this scopic economy of looks and glances is worth noting. At the moment that Everard seemingly returns the telegraphist's desiring gaze, or more accurately, when she catches the impression of that return, the young woman suddenly is able to see herself as she ought, as an object; she observes herself approaching Park Chambers. The result is that she now sees herself as Everard does, from a place outside and distinct from her desire. Viewed from this vantage, in which each individual's immediate interests are clearly defined and distinguished, and the distance separating the one from the other assured, the true precariousness of her position, not only to Everard and his relationship to Lady Bradeen, but in fact to her own limited social position, becomes frighteningly clear. "Then it was that, above all, she felt how much she had missed in the gaps and blanks and absent answers—how much she had to dispense with: it was now black darkness save for this little wild red flare [...]. She wanted no detail, no fact, —she wanted no nearer vision of discovery or shame" (247). The telegraphist, James suggests, learns to see rather than hear, to observe rather than feel, and in so doing she re-secures the ruptured lines of communication. Forging her earlier fantasies of blackmail, she helpfully furnishes Captain Everard with a mental record of a telegraph he had earlier sent and which now threatens to expose his relationship to Lady Bradeen. Moreover, in the novella's closing pages, she voluntarily takes up her place not only in the cage of her telegraph office, but within the cage of her social position, agreeing finally to marry the ever-patient Mudge and to return to the domestic sphere.

In what remains one of the most trenchant critiques of the association of knowledge with visibility in western thought, Luce Irigaray suggests that man's progress toward truth, that is to say, toward an authentic understanding of himself, has been consistently imagined as a form of ascent, a rising up out of the dark, earthly, and utterly material realm associated with ignorance and superstition. This path to enlightenment has been, at the same time, a flight from the body, and in particular the maternal body: "Rising to a perspective that would dominate the totality, to the vantage point of greatest power, he thus cuts himself off from the bedrock, from his empirical relationship with the matrix that he claims to survey. To speculate and to speculate" (Speculum 133–4). Man only comes to know, in this sense, as he learns to see, and in learning to see, comes to forget, to put behind him the remembrance of the body as the condition of knowledge, as that which makes knowledge possible. "Surely man favors the visual," Irigaray writes, "because it marks his exit from the life in the womb?" (Selves 59). If the visual, and those technologies associated with the visual, are what lead man out of the matrix of the feminine, it is then the hapless that calls him back, that reminds him of all that he has sought to escape in pursuit of a higher ideal. "This is the sense," she writes,

that travels with us from the time of our material conception to the height of our celestial grace, lightness, or glory. We have to return to touch if we are to comprehend where touch became frozen in its passage from the most elemental to the most sophisticated part of its evolution. This will mean that we need to stay both firm and mobile in our cathexes, always faithful, that is, to the dimension of touch. (Selves 59)

Nineteenth-century discussions of electrical telegraphy, and its tendency to yield an embodied experience of communication, as of one nervous system in direct and continuous contact with another, suggest that the unexpected outcome of this flight from the maternal and the somatic may be its inevitable return. Telegraphy is at one and the same time the realization of the Enlightenment ideal of direct and unfettered communication between minds, and the end of that ideal, the means by which the model of subjectivity premised on the principles of wholeness, unity, and autonomy gives way to a sense of irrepressible connectedness and unbounded affiliation. As James's In the Cage reminds us, such radical ideals were understood in this period in and through the discourses of gender, suggesting a surprising but unmistakable affinity between the forms of knowledge that obtained within the electrical environment, and the female telegraphists who had proved most capable in operating the acoustic instruments employed in the nation's post offices. Though James's protagonist ultimately finds herself reinscribed within the scopic economy, effectively learning to understand herself as an object of visual perception, the text's insistent troping of the modern as a world in which one communicates through the reciprocity of touch suggests that it may be the future and not the past that belongs to the body.

Works Cited


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