V for Ventriloquism: Powers of Vocal Mimicry in Henry Cockton's *The Life and Adventures of Valentine Vox, the Ventriloquist*

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The opening decades of the Victorian period marked a peculiar fascination with voice and its spectral or acousmatic phenomena: new systems of phonography and shorthand attempted to capture voice in writing; authors developed well-documented practices of public reading, attempting to protect their texts from the dangers of appropriation, mimicry, and plagiarism; families read aloud; ventriloquist acts reached new heights of popularity. These concerns about voice, its sources, and its mimicries are crystallized in Henry Cockton's *The Life and Adventures of Valentine Vox, the Ventriloquist* (1839–40). The novel was a phenomenal commercial success, with sales in volume form of 483,000 copies between 1853 and 1902 when it was republished by Routledge.[1] Its critical reception was more mixed, however. Its most positive reception came from the *Age*, which reviewed each number with enthusiasm (running alongside a cooler reception for *Nicholas Nickleby*). Of the ninth number, it commented that Cockton 'is able to race it with the strongest, and we shall be much mistaken if he does not achieve a fame surpassed not even by C. Dickens'.[2] That prediction proved incorrect, but the novel exercised a considerable influence over Victorian popular culture. The name Valentine Vox was appropriated by journalists and at least two Victorian and Edwardian racehorses, and the caricature 'Valentine Vox MP' appeared in *Funny Folks* in 1886.[3] In an act of textual ventriloquism, Cockton's novel was imitated as *Valentine Vaux* (1840) by 'Timothy Portwine', and again in May 1884 when the Theatre Royal Dewsbury premiered the comedy-drama *Valentine Vox*. As the *Stage* ruefully noted, 'the play is not […] an adaptation from Cockton's popular book'.[4] Others were

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[1] Robert Halliday, 'New Light on Henry Cockton', *Notes and Queries*, 41 (1994), 349–51 (p. 349).

[2] 'Literary Notices', *Age*, 10 November 1839, p. 354.

[3] See Valentine Vox, 'Gems of Thought and Jewels of Imagination', *Age*, 3 January 1841, p. 6. The article is essentially a compendium of witty quotations, with no relation to Cockton's novel. For racehorses, see, for example, *The Times*, 28 October 1871, p. 10; 30 December 1909, p. 12; 22 October 1919, p. 6. 'Valentine Vox MP', *Funny Folks*, 14 August 1886, p. 259.

[4] Timothy Portwine [Thomas Prest], *Valentine Vaux; or, The Tricks of a Ventriloquist* (London: Lloyd, 1840); 'Valentine Vox', *Stage*, 30 May 1884, p. 15.

less impressed with Cockton's novel. In 1888 James Payn admitted having enjoyed the novel when young, but noted that 'from a literary point of view [...] [*Valentine Vox* has] no merit [...]. It has [...] however, a great deal of a low class of humour — practical jokes, which no doubt appeal to the taste of boys.'[5] The novel certainly had a reputation as vaguely transgressive school-boy reading: Thomas Archer's story 'Our "Barring Out", and What Came of It' (1869) features the head boy reading Cockton's novel by candlelight.[6] Its most significant legacy, however, was in its depiction of a corrupt system of lunatic asylums, anticipating Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863); the novel was widely credited with the passing of the 1845 Lunacy Act.[7]

Valentine Vox offers an opportunity for reconceptualizing early Victorian understandings of ventriloquism, identity, and narrative, and my analysis of the novel revolves around a triangulation of these concepts through three interconnected claims. Firstly (following analyses of ventriloquism by Steven Connor, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Patrick O'Donnell), ventriloquism challenges conceptions of identity, not solely in its ability to imitate vocal identities, but inasmuch as such imitations run the risk of emptying out the ventriloquist himself. Secondly, and somewhat paradoxically, *Valentine Vox* nonetheless relies on a notion of selfhood in which identity is guaranteed through and by teleological narrative (most obviously in biography). And thirdly, that in *Valentine Vox* ventriloquism resists the logic of teleological narrative itself. Not only does the forward motion of the novel stop whenever Valentine ventriloquizes (in a series of fragmented sketches), but the novel can only be narrated retrospectively when Valentine gives up his powers. As a result of this triangulation, I argue that *Valentine Vox* is a novel doubled against itself, especially in regard to its conservative stance on popular culture, which engages in complex ways with issues of mimicry, not least — as I discuss in my conclusion — the ways in which the novel pre-empts its own scenes of reading, setting the domestic reader the impossible challenge of mimicking the supernaturally gifted mimic. In this respect, which expands upon the terms in which Steven Connor persuasively discusses the novel, *Valentine*

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[5] James Payn, 'Our Note Book', *Illustrated London News*, 15 December 1888, p. 702.

[6] Thomas Archer, 'Our "Barring Out", and What Came of It', *Young Gentlemen's Magazine*, 1 December 1869, pp. 16–30 (p. 17).

[7] The 1845 act changed the status of those in mental asylums from social refugees to patients requiring care. Accordingly, in 1907 the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* remarked on an increase in public confidence in asylums such that 'there was no longer the belief that was entertained in the *Valentine Vox* days'. See Noel A. Humphreys, 'The Alleged Increase in Insanity', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 70 (1907), 203–41 (p. 236). See also, 'The Redemption of the Inebriate', *The Times*, 19 April 1896, p. 5, which attributes the passage of the act to Cockton's novel. The novel is also cited as part of a debate on asylums in 'Essence of Parliament', *Punch*, 6 May 1882, p. 208.

Vox, I conclude, offers a useful venue for reconsidering Victorian practices of reading aloud.

When discussing obscure novels, it is customary to give a plot summary. Despite *Valentine Vox*'s length, this is an easy task, as the novel is based around a repetitive set of episodes where Valentine, having learnt prodigious powers in imitating and throwing voices, causes comic disruption in a variety of public spaces. The first is the guildhall of his Suffolk home town, where he reduces a public election meeting to violent chaos. Fearing detection, Valentine's mother and his Uncle John send him to London to live with his guardian Grimwood Goodman. The comic episodes continue in more metropolitan settings: thus, in the British Museum Valentine casts his voice into a bust of Memnon; at a phrenological lecture, he gives voices to the skulls of criminals. Later, Valentine is paired with a credulous provincial sidekick, the Welshman Fred Llewellyn, who becomes the target of many of these practical jokes (for example, when Valentine pretends to be a man in a hole dug by Llewellyn, takes on the role of the mythical Echo supposedly in Llewellyn's pocket, or causes him to become confused at a scientific exhibition).[8] This repetitive strand is gradually accompanied by a more teleological plot in which Goodman is imprisoned in a lunatic asylum by his brother Walter and nephew Horace, who fear that Goodman will change his will in Valentine's favour. Goodman is released just over halfway through the novel, along with a fellow inmate Whiteley, but the traumatic experience causes Goodman's death. A conventional love plot takes over when Valentine becomes engaged to Llewellyn's cousin Louise, but their marriage is delayed when it is revealed that Louise's father was the man who imprisoned Whiteley. A further melodramatic twist reveals that Whiteley is Louise's real father, and the novel ends with the marriage of Valentine and Louise and the death or rehabilitation of the various villains.

Valentine Vox thus secularizes and renders comedic the concerns of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798); both novels are an inheritance of Enlightenment investigations such as Joannes Baptista de La Chapelle's *Le Ventriloque* (1772), which marked a decisive turn away from early modern conceptions of ventriloquism as divine/demonic voice, and towards ventriloquism as a rational entertainment that raised questions of identity, selfhood, and perception. John Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1830), for instance, considered ventriloquism as a crisis of observation:

> In ventriloquism we have the hearing at variance with all the other senses, and especially with the sight, which is sometimes contradicted by it in a very extraordinary and surprising

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[8] For the implications of this concealment, see Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 231.

> manner, as when the voice is made to seem to issue from an
> inanimate and motionless object.[9]

Herschel's characterization of ventriloquism as perceptual error follows Thomas Reid's discussion of aural deception and mimicry in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785). Reid attributed the effect of what he called 'gastriloquy' to a 'fallacy of the senses, proceed[ing] from ignorance of the laws of Nature'.[10] (I shall return to Reid's somewhat reactionary characterization of ventriloquism.) The novel revolves around a model of ventriloquism known as distant-voice ventriloquy popular in the early nineteenth century in the work of performers such as William Love, Alexandre Vattemare, and Charles Mathews. Such performers relied on an ability to create acoustic illusions of distance and tone, replicating a variety of voices from characters in different places. Thus, one popular ventriloquial show, Monsieur Alexandre's *The Rogueries of Nicholas* (1822), was a domestic farce played by one person whose skill in reproducing voice allowed for the interaction of a whole cast of characters. Nor was *Valentine Vox* particularly groundbreaking in its content. Its tales of a distant-voice ventriloquist causing comedic chaos echoed texts such as *Memoirs and Anecdotes of Mr Love, the Polyphonist* (1834), a semi-fictionalized biography of the famous performer.[11] (Vox, like Love, also imitates a coach passenger who falls ill, delaying the journey.) The more familiar model of dummy ventriloquism, with the performer in close relation with a single externalized persona, was first devised in the eighteenth century but fell out of fashion in the nineteenth and was not resurrected until the 1880s. A later Victorian mode of ventriloquism that utilized a number of onstage automata was more popular (especially in the US), but considered by many distant-voice ventriloquists to be a lower form of the art.[12] I make this clear from the outset to act as a corrective to critical mobilizations of the ventriloquy metaphor that depend on the ventriloquist/dummy power

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[9] John Frederick William Herschel, *A Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (London: Longman, 1830), pp. 82–83.

[10] Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: Bell, 1785), p. 298.

[11] George Smith, *Memoirs and Anecdotes of Mr Love, the Polyphonist* (London: Kenneth, 1834), pp. 11–12. Later Victorian conjuror biographies would also contain a substantial amount of ventriloquial comedy along the lines of Smith and Cockton, most notably Signor Blitz, *Fifty Years in the Magic Circle* (Hartford, CT: Belknap and Bliss, 1871).

[12] See, for instance, another example of Cockton's influence: Valentine Vox, *I Can See Your Lips Moving: The History and Art of Ventriloquism* (Kingswood: Kaye and Ward, 1981). Automaton ventriloquism tended to be more often integrated into conjuring performances, particularly by US-based performers such as Signor Blitz and John Wyman. William Love was dismissive of automaton ventriloquism, seeing distant voice as more challenging and arguing that the use of automata and other figures gave 'a primitive illusionary effect' to performances (Vox, *I Can See Your Lips Moving*, p. 68).

relation that characterizes modern ventriloquism (by, for example, Helen Davies and David Goldblatt).[13]

Ecstatic narratives

If, as Goldblatt argues, ventriloquism 'privileg[es] two voices, not one' (a doubling of identity I discuss below), then this doubling is replicated in *Valentine Vox*'s divided plot, contrasting a repetitive comic strain with a more directional narrative.[14] In his preface, Cockton offers two somewhat contradictory rationales for the novel:

> The power of an accomplished Ventriloquist is well known to be unlimited. There is no scene in life in which that power is incapable of being developed: it gives its possessor a command over the actions, the feelings, the passions of men, while its efficacy in loading with ridicule every prejudice and every project of which the tendency is pernicious cannot fail to be perceived at a glance. The design of this work although essentially humorous, is not, however, to excite peals of laughter alone: it has a far higher object in view, namely, that of removing social absurdities and abuses by means the most peculiarly attractive and pleasing.[15]

The 'absurdity' the novel wishes to remove is the reform of lunatic asylums. Yet whereas Cockton promises reform through comedy, what happens is far more divided. The novel proceeds in two distinct, jarring registers: one of light and repetitive comedy, and another of surprising violence and abuse. There are two points here. The first, as Connor has pointed out, is that while Valentine's powers as a ventriloquist are amazingly impressive, they are equally inconsequential (Connor, p. 321). None of the plot's problems are resolved by Valentine's skills. The most striking example of this is Valentine's failure to save the life of Walter, who becomes genuinely mad and throws himself off Blackfriars Bridge. Thomas Onwhyn's illustration (*Fig. 1*) shows

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[13] Hillel Schwartz notes that the reintroduction of the dummy in the later nineteenth century represents 'what the ventriloquist himself had been before, a trickster getting people into trouble, pandemoniating'. Schwartz briefly mentions *Valentine Vox* in this context, but bizarrely relocates the novel to 1904, a move that undermines his historical trajectory of the trickster role moving from ventriloquist to dummy. See Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*, rev. edn (New York: Zone Books, 2013), p. 109.
[14] David Goldblatt, *Art and Ventriloquism* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. ix.
[15] Henry Cockton, *The Life and Adventures of Valentine Vox, the Ventriloquist* (London: Tyas, 1840), p. v.
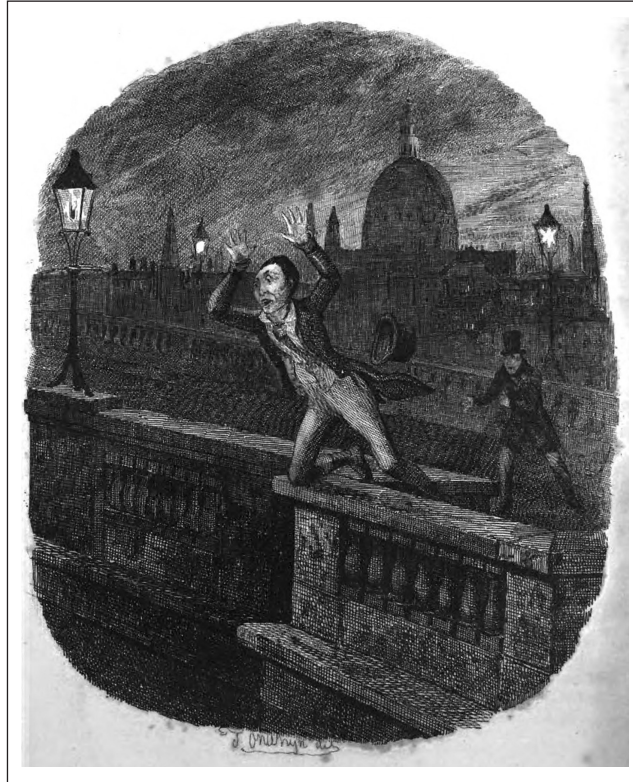
Fig. 1: 'The End of Walter', in Henry Cockton, *The Life and Adventures of Valentine Vox, the Ventriloquist* (London: Tyas, 1840), facing p. 602.

Valentine giving voice at the incident, but to no effect.[16] As Connor notes, Valentine's powers are entirely entropic: they cannot produce, but at best imitate, or at worst destroy (p. 321).

Secondly, there is a more serious structural problem with Cockton's stated aims. Here, his aim is to critique the politicized authority of the asylum and its reading of misleadingly convulsive bodies as signifiers of

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[16] There is potential for reading this image in comparison to Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. The points that Mladen Dolar makes in relation to Munch's typically modernist image are equally applicable to Onwhyn's portrayal of Valentine's open, but impotent, mouth: 'The painted scream is by definition mute, stuck in the throat; the black opening is without the voice which would mollify it, fill it, endow it with sense, hence its resonance is all the greater.' See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 69. Dolar also notes the tendency of critics to read the distorted landscape of the scene as an effect of voice, soundwaves moving outwards distorting the view. He suggests that the opposite is also valid: that the distortion of landscape is caused by the mouth dragging the scene *into* it. Onwhyn's strangely distended view of St Paul's may charitably be read in this way.

identity. But at the same time, Cockton's humour derives from a hero whose only trick is to induce temporary states of confusion in others, which can themselves serve as signifiers of madness. The novel's double bind makes itself clear in a paradigmatic scene in which government inspectors survey the asylum. Goodman looks forward to explaining his false imprisonment, but before he can do so, he is strapped to a bed and his feet tickled in order to induce a state of hilarity and exhaustion that mimics madness. The scene inverts Henri Bergson's famous argument that laughter is prompted by the perception of the mechanical in the human; here, laughter reduces the human to convulsive machine.[17] Onwhyn's illustration (*Fig. 2*) nicely captures the doubleness of the scene, and of the novel. The attendants on the left resemble Cruikshankian comedy characters, their only weapon a feather and a sheet that resembles a stage ghost; the right side, by contrast, draws on anatomical sketches in its bodily horror.[18] For Victorian readers, this scene was the most memorable: the *Age* commented that 'the description of poor Goodman being goaded with temporary madness is worthy [of] the pen of Smollett'.[19] James Payn, recalling reading *Valentine Vox* forty years previously, wrote in 1880 that 'it has one scene, where the soles of a gentleman's feet,

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[17] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1914). Bergson presents variations of this argument throughout his text. Its clearest statement is in his proposal of a law that governs comic phenomena concerning the body: '*The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine*' (p. 29, emphasis in original). Imitation and mimicry become crucial components of this model of humour, with implications for identity; for Bergson, 'we begin [...] to become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. I mean our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And as this is the very essence of the ludicrous, it is no wonder that imitation gives rise to laughter' (p. 33). Bergson believes that 'a really living life should never repeat itself', since repetition implies the influence of the mechanical (p. 34). In relation to Cockton's novel, Vox is able to play on repetitive structures of being in imitating the voices of others, but the relentless repetition of the novel itself complicates any idea that Vox might represent a principle of originality in poking fun at the automatism of others.

[18] Ventriloquial comedy was connected to anatomical study in the early nineteenth century by the fascination ventriloquists held for medical researchers. Leigh Eric Schmidt cites one Boston physician who had seen nearly thirty ventriloquial exhibits: 'Our constant devotion to anatomical pursuits has prompted us to improve every opportunity of witnessing these exhibitions, with the sole object of understanding the rationale.' *Boston Medical Intelligencer*, 31 August 1824, p. 67, cited in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 136. Schmidt also points out that La Chapelle's investigation into ventriloquism was partly an anatomical project examining both organisms of speech and hearing (p. 179).

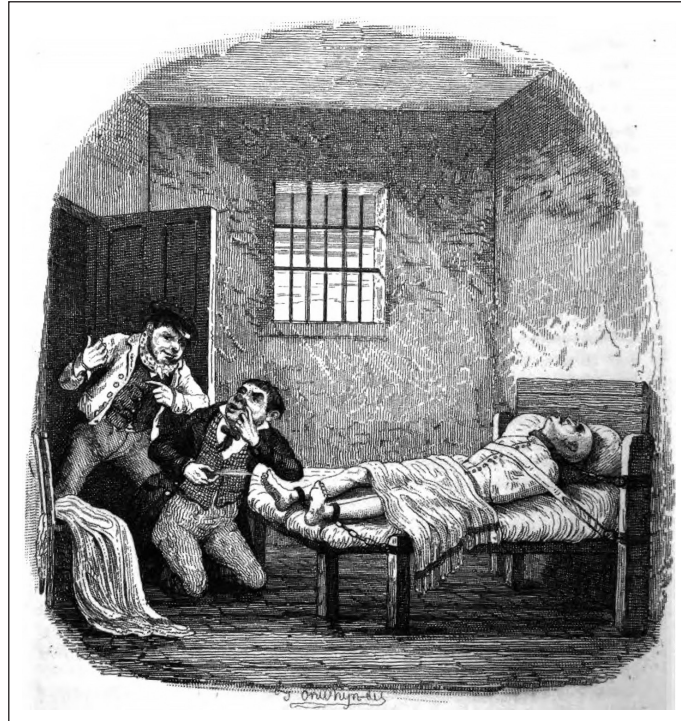[19] 'Literary Notices', *Age*, 10 November 1839, p. 354.

Fig. 2: 'Goodman Goaded to Madness', in Cockton, *The Life and Adventures of Valentine Vox*, facing p. 235.

unjustly confined in a private madhouse, are tickled to make him mad, ready for the Government inspector, which will never leave my memory' (p. 702).

      Part of the scene's resonance is no doubt due to its graphic description, but I think part of what Payn perceived is this scene's encapsulation of the novel's underlying structural problem. In the most literal terms we have a man driven to madness by laughter, the supposed aim of the novel; the men at the foot of the bed may as well be Cockton and Vox themselves. Here, I want to deploy David Goldblatt's theorization of ventriloquism in terms of '*ecstasis*, the ancient Greek word designating a being beside itself […] a stepping outside the self' (p. 389). Goldblatt refers to the way in which the ventriloquist divides himself, privileging two (or more) voices; and while Goldblatt relies on the twentieth-century ventriloquist/dummy model to explore this idea, there is also a sense in which the dummy is only incidental to Goldblatt's wider theorization. This idea of ventriloquism as an ecstatic form works equally well for distant-voice models, and has clear implications for *Valentine Vox*. Just as its comic scenes are meant to provoke ecstatic reactions, and Valentine himself gains an ecstatic pleasure from his exploits (after his first chaotic incident, at the guildhall, 'Valentine went home in ecstasies' (Cockton, p. 17)), in the asylum we see a man compelled to an ecstatic state as a kind of madness, being

driven beside himself: laughter reduces him to a convulsive body. As Mladen Dolar points out, following Descartes and Kant, laughter is both pre- and post-linguistic, a signifier of the human while simultaneously mimetic of a regression to animality.[20] But this kind of regression is exactly what Valentine does to his victims, causing uproar, chaos, and fear. Ventriloquism, rehabilitated in the later eighteenth century as the vehicle for rationalist enquiry rather than religious encounter, is returned by Vox to almost holy terror.

I titled this article 'V for Ventriloquism' not only to draw attention to Cockton's alliterative style but also to raise the anachronistic ghost of Alan Moore and John Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* since most of Valentine's pranks can be read as acts of terrorism. Indeed, the text uses the term 'terrorist', albeit in a slightly different sense as synonymous with 'alarmist' (Cockton, p. 296). One might read the dynamic of the novel as coming from the incursion of a certain kind of popular culture (ventriloquism) into spaces of political power and high culture (the Lord Chancellor's assembly, the British Museum). Valentine appears here as a figure of anarchy. Yet the novel is far from politically radical. Cockton's Toryism is evident in sketches where Valentine disrupts meetings of radical societies (the 'Equal Rightites' and the 'Anti-Legal Marriage' groups) and, in particular, on the only occasion on which Valentine's skills fail to cause a commotion, in the House of Lords, a chamber immune to the dangers of panic, as compared to the party loyalties Vox exploits in the House of Commons. The novel acts as an exploration of the qualities of voice and sound in causing panic, drawing on the immersive quality of sound (which, as Walter Ong points out, surrounds us bodily, unlike vision which places an object apart from, and in front of, the observer).[21] Valentine therefore provides us with a kind of trickster figure, and in this respect Connor is slightly inaccurate to describe Valentine as an unchanging cardboard comic principle, since Carl

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[20] Dolar (p. 29) refers to earlier explorations of the paradox of laughter in Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* (§§ 124–26) and Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (§ 54).

[21] Ong's point here is also related to the sonorous bath theorized by Didier Anzieu, the sound of the mother that surrounds the infant as primal experience. Edith Lecourt notes that Anzieu's model of the nurturing sonorous envelope omits the possibility of 'sonorous aggression — trauma, violent intrusion' and notes the audial root of 'panic': 'the myth of Pan is the most illustrative of the problematic of sonority. This "noisy" god […] was not offered a temple, but a cave. This resounded and echoed, two qualities that located it at the boundaries of interiority and exteriority […]. Pan, in his cavern, creates the sonorous illusion that produces panic in a group and a panic attack in an individual.' See Edith Lecourt, 'The Musical Envelope', in *Psychic Envelopes*, ed. by Didier Anzieu, trans. by Daphne Briggs (London: Karnac, 1990), pp. 211–35 (p. 217). As in *Valentine Vox*, to panic is first of all to be immersed in sound. While there is insufficient space to discuss it here, it should be noted that the model of immersive sound as opposed to directional sight implicit in analyses by Ong, Anzieu, and Lecourt (among others) is problematized by Jonathan Sterne as what he calls the 'audiovisual litany'. See Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 14–20.

Jung argues that many trickster narratives involve a cyclical movement from devil to saint, of self-imposed sufferings leading to redemption as a saviour.[22] This is not quite the trajectory of *Valentine Vox*, but as we will see, Valentine eventually abandons his ventriloquism, and there is a sense throughout the novel that ventriloquism is representative of immaturity or moral decadence, and that it is an art Valentine must abandon if he is to grow up. (As Dolar puts it in discussing Abbé Dinouart's *The Art of Keeping Silent* (1771), voice implies 'an ethics of self-control — to learn to be silent is to learn to restrain oneself, to learn the art of self-possession, while speech always delivers us to the powers of the other' (p. 155). Valentine never becomes silenced, but his maturity is explicitly connected to his attenuation of voice.) Indeed, in the earlier stages of the novel Cockton seems unsure of whether his hero really is heroic; the adjective most often used to describe Valentine, with a frequency edited out in subsequent editions, is 'reprehensible'.

Yet, in implying that Valentine is an early precursor of the 'comedy terrorist', this is not to say that he embodies any particular political ideology. Indeed, his cultural arguments are as inconsistent as his voice, adopting positions simply to argue with others rather than from any particular conviction. One example occurs when he and Uncle John watch the Lord Mayor's pageant: John dismisses the spectacle as ridiculous and a venue for crime, whereas Valentine (somewhat circularly) argues that as London is the centre of the enlightened world, these ceremonies must have some useful character or they would no longer exist, and that they are crucial to the dignity of the city (pp. 274–75). Valentine's position holds for as long as it takes John to become exasperated with this argument, whereupon Valentine admits that he actually agrees with John and really finds the pageant 'senseless' (p. 280).

Indeed, the novel is doubled against itself as a phenomenon of popular culture that itself disdains the unthinking consumption implied in conservative models of popular culture (in, for example, dismissals of the penny dreadful as 'penny packets of poison' sold by booksellers 'with as much indifference as though [they] were sugar or biscuits').[23]

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[22] Carl Gustav Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 159–79.

[23] James Greenwood, 'Penny Packets of Poison' [1874], in *The Penny Dreadful; or, Strange, Horrid, and Sensational Tales*, ed. by Peter Haining (London: Gollancz, 1976), pp. 357–71 (p. 359). The trope of popular genres as items to be consumed without reflection was resilient throughout the nineteenth century, in commentary such as 'The Function of Detective Stories' in the *Pall Mall Gazette*: 'Detective stories are not things to be sipped at and lingered over; they must be swallowed at one great gulp' (22 September 1888, p. 3). More contemporary with *Valentine Vox*, even reviews sympathetic to Cockton deployed this trope. One of the more memorable reviews in the *Age* featured a poem comparing the novel to patent medicine: 'We have all heard of Morrison's Pills; | That by taking *each minute* a box, | 'Tis a cure for a mountain of ills, | But what's that to Valentine Vox?'. See 'Literary Notices', *Age*, 13 September 1840, p. 290, emphasis in original.

This is evident from the outset, when the young Valentine discovers his ventriloquial skills after watching a travelling magician. The conjuror, a pseudo-Italian professor called Signor Antonio (and cynical precursor to Elizabeth Gaskell's Signor Brunoni in *Cranford* (1851–53)), colludes with the editor of the local newspaper to provide an enthusiastic review in return for a share of ticket sales. What is striking about this incident, and throughout the novel, is the way in which the selling of popular culture is seen as a deception in which a gullible audience freely takes part. Antonio's contempt for his audience is made clear when he walks around the town following the appearance of the biased review, in a passage that anticipates Goldblatt's language of *ecstasis*:

> The signor was in ecstasies when he found so many gaily-dressed persons, whose countenances seemed to indicate that their possessors were perfectly ready to be duped, walking leisurely up and down the principal streets, with their mouths wide open, ready to swallow anything. He therefore employed himself during the day in going round the town with the view of witnessing the avidity with which the placards were read, and took especial care, incog., to impress upon each group a mysterious idea of the wonderful exhibition. (Cockton, p. 6)

The members of the audience are rendered as vulnerable consumers of popular culture. Consumer is the precise word here: even their faces are something that they possess, rather than who they are. A more literal form of consumption is indicated by the emphasis on their mouths, 'ready to swallow anything', that is, to take in culture without taste or reflection. *Valentine Vox* thus starts from Cockton's assumption that popular culture is characterized by a lack of reflection, and by self-interest, fraud, and criminality. This critique is echoed later in the novel when Valentine visits Greenwich Fair, which he condemns as 'a mere nursery of immorality and crime, and as its suppression could not in the slightest degree diminish the innocent pleasures of the poor, my firm conviction is that it ought to be suppressed as a glaringly dangerous nuisance' (p. 44). This is a surprisingly moralistic speech from a character who otherwise acts as promoter of chaos, while the reference to the 'innocent' pleasures of the poor shows Cockton's Tory voice breaking through as endorsing 'suitable' forms of popular entertainment.

Ventriloquism, of course, was not considered 'suitable' popular entertainment by reactionary commentators. The early nineteenth-century suspicion of ventriloquism as morally dubious can be understood through the debate on the extent to which ventriloquism was seen not as a creative practice but as sterile mimicry; not the creation of new voices or identities, but merely the copying of already existing ones based on a conservative

opposition of creation to copying.[24] If, as Hillel Schwartz demonstrates, in the culture of the copy it is imitation that guarantees the very concept of authenticity, then late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discussions of ventriloquism tended to remain within a hierarchy of originality over replication.[25] Reid, in 1785, dismissed ventriloquism as 'imperfect imitation' and 'too coarse an imitation to bear exhibition even to the vulgar', arguing that it could only work on the inattentive, since 'an attentive ear would be able to distinguish the copy from the original' (p. 299). In 1805 the American showman William Frederick Pinchbeck characterized ventriloquism as solely defined by replication: 'All the advantage to be derived from this gift is to avail himself of becoming a mimick.'[26] Likewise, in his 1834 biography of William Love, George Smith defended ventriloquism and polyphony against charges of pure imitation levelled by figures such as the physiologist François Magendie. Magendie argued that vocal deceptions were merely skilled imitations of acoustic conditions; Smith responded that, while such effects could be achieved in this way, this was itself simply an empty imitation of the properly skilled ventriloquist, introducing the vertiginous concept of the pseudo-ventriloquist:

> Thus it will be perceived that this faculty may be imitated to a considerable extent, in the manner spoken of by M. Magendie, by many persons who have a turn for mimicry; but however this IMITATION, may, under particular circumstances, and in skilful hands be made to deceive the ear, and entertain an audience, still it would not bear comparison for a moment, if brought into juxtaposition with the genuine accomplishment. Many pseudo-ventriloquists have at different times appeared before the public, and as, fortunately for the objects they had in view, this art is less generally understood than almost any other, they have occasionally succeeded

[24] It is tempting to characterize this opposition as a reactionary version of the Romanticist opposition between author and plagiarist, but, as Robert MacFarlane notes, such conceptions were 'crystallized afterwards, notably during the late 1820s and 1830s, when Romantic doctrine on the subject of originality was simplified and mythified'. See Robert MacFarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 33. Rather than privileging an idea of creation as spontaneous generation (*creatio*) over one of creation as rearrangement or copy (*inventio*), MacFarlane demonstrates how contemporary Romanticist aesthetics saw the value of the imitation and the rewrite as a crucial component of artistry (pp. 18–49).

[25] As Schwartz puts it, 'we look to copies themselves for assurance of continuity, value, and authenticity. Anything unique is at risk of vanishing […]. An object uncopied is under perpetual siege, valued less for itself than for the struggle to prevent its being copied […]. It is within an exuberant world of copies that we arrive at our experience of originality' (p. 175).

[26] William Frederick Pinchbeck, *The Expositor; or, Many Mysteries Unravelled* (Boston: the author, 1805), p. 54.

> in causing their auditors to believe that they possessed the talent of Ventriloquism in reality. Were the hearers, however, to witness the exertions of a genuine artist immediately after the imitator, the contrast would be as obvious to their senses as the difference between a waxen model and a living form. (Smith, p. 15)

The anonymous 1834 pamphlet *Ventriloquism Explained* took the debate further by warning against the moral dangers of ventriloquial mimicry. The pamphlet emphasizes a reactionary account of ventriloquism as associated with illiteracy, arguing that

> the art has seldom been practised by any but persons of the lower classes of society, and as it does not afford any advantages to repay the time spent in acquiring it, it is likely to continue among the illiterate, if not banished from existence,

and 'the practice of ventriloquism has generally been confined to illiterate persons'. It goes on, however, to warn against

> the injurious tendency of mimicry, especially when used personally. While I would encourage them [the young] to try experiments, in hours of amusement, with their vocal organs, I would urge them never to carry these imitations so far as to diminish their own self-respect, or to lower them in the estimation of others.[27]

Playing with one's voice to excess in the imitation of others would lead to moral decay.

A more complex conception of ventriloquism, and a more sophisticated understanding of mimicry, was offered by Dugald Stewart. Stewart's broader work in *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1792–1827) argues for a productive understanding of imitation, and that mimicry is central to human social life, being a 'principle of physico-moral sympathy which [...] harmonizes different minds with each other'.[28] Imitation does not therefore depend on a Hobbesian model of comedy as superiority: for Stewart, mimicry becomes the engine of sympathy. Ventriloquism was a particular interest of Stewart's, for its potential insights into questions of perception and sympathy. Yet, in his discussion of ventriloquism, Stewart comes to a surprising conclusion: ventriloquism is less an aural phenomenon and more a visual deception; its effects are achieved by the ventriloquist visually misdirecting the attention of the audience. Such a move allows

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[27] *Ventriloquism Explained: And Juggler's Tricks, or Legerdemain Exposed, with Remarks on Vulgar Superstitions* (Amherst: Adams, 1834), pp. 197, 123, 146–47.
[28] Quoted in Connor, p. 200.

Stewart to recover ventriloquism from the status of low entertainment as a proper subject for philosophical study, arguing that the performance 'will be found, on examination, to bear a closer analogy to the nobler art of the painter'.[29] Just as the painter misdirects — but does not deceive — the eye in terms of depth and perspective, the ventriloquist must similarly misdirect his audience as to the direction of the sounds. Having started from a discussion of the uses of mimicry, therefore, Stewart excludes ventriloquism from his wider concept of sympathetic imitation, arguing that its effects are not based on the power of the ventriloquist to imitate, but rather to engage the imagination of his audience:

> The art of the ventriloquist, when he produces a deception with respect to direction, consists less in his imitative faculty, than in the address with which he manages the imaginations of his audience [...]. The imitation may not be so perfect as to produce any thing approaching to a deception; but the effect is powerfully assisted by the imagination of the spectator, who, in this, as in all other imitative arts, consults his own pleasure most effectually, when he yields himself up, without resistance, to the agreeable delusions practised on him by the artist. (p. 245)

Vocal mimicry takes a back seat to imaginative engagement. This involves a slightly different form of sympathetic imitation. As Connor points out, in Stewart's model 'the audience is made to hear the voices not from their seats but from the position of the performer, into which they are expected to have transposed themselves' (p. 303). Ventriloquism therefore implies not only an imitation of identity on the part of the performer, but a certain empathetic shift on the part of the audience.

Stewart's focus on the visual and spatial is complicated by Cockton, who takes a more Reidian line. Valentine never appears to his audience as a ventriloquist: there is an inverse relationship between Valentine's audibility and his visibility. Whenever he ventriloquizes, he becomes invisible (the only scene in which Valentine puts himself on public display, in imitating a waxwork, necessitates silence and an abandonment of ventriloquism). Likewise, his audience does not respond with passive pleasure, but with panic. Yet Cockton does dramatize the effects of visual prompts to the imagination: the crowds Valentine manipulates take their visual cues from each other, until the point where Valentine need no longer be present. In the guildhall scene, for example, the narrator notes that chaos has spread to such an extent that

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[29] Dugald Stewart, 'Observations on Ventriloquism', *Edinburgh Journal of Science*, 9 (1828), 241–52 (p. 241).

> the voice of Valentine was now no longer needed. The electors were making amply sufficient noise without his aid. He therefore mounted the rostrum [...] with a view to the full enjoyment of the scene, and then for the first time discovered that [the attendees] were levelling their blows with indiscriminate fury, regardless utterly of everything but the pleasure of conferring upon some one the honour of a hit. (p. 15)

Valentine moves from sound to vision, from voice to panoptic observation. He starts by mimicking voices, which provoke initial confusion and panic, and is then imitated by others until the point when the terrorized bodies of the crowd start replicating each other, at which point the terrorist is no longer required. Valentine becomes the author of scenes that quickly take on a self-sustaining power beyond their creator.

Ventriloquism and narrative

The fact that the hero's powers — creating convulsive bodies, causing laughter — mimic the subject of the novel's critique (the asylum) means that the novel takes on a curiously self-reflexive tone, and this is where I want to consider the relationship between ventriloquism and narrative. Certainly, the novel is aware of the problems of representing voice in writing, and it is not a coincidence that it appears at the same cultural moment as other attempts to do the same thing, most notably Isaac Pitman's *Phonography; or, Writing by Sound* (1837), and George Bradley's *Concise and Practical System of Stenography* (1842). As Schwartz notes, stenography also made voice available to a wider economy of copying centred on the figure of the notary (p. 177). On one level, this problem of writing voices becomes formulated by Cockton as a question of verisimilitude: of course, most of Valentine's vocal feats cannot actually be achieved. But rather than frame his narrative as an allegory for an early Victorian crisis of voice, Cockton includes numerous scenes in which characters reflect on the ludicrousness of events. After causing another scene of chaos, Valentine and Louise seemingly apologize for the novel:

> 'How ridiculous these things appear', observed Valentine. 'Without having actually witnessed them, should we not regard it as almost impossible for men possessing any sense at all, to be placed in positions so absurd?'
>
> 'It appears to be so natural', said Louise. 'Upon my word I am not at all astonished at its effect being to make people look so very silly.'
>
> 'They are taken by surprise, you see! Were they to reflect for a moment they would doubtless repudiate the notions which alarm them; but they are called upon to act on the instant:

they are astounded at once; they have no time for thought.'
(p. 469)

There are three things worth noting here. Firstly, and strikingly in the context of the novel's convulsed bodies, this account of Valentine's actions resembles a Freudian model of trauma, as the event which always comes too soon and cannot be directly experienced at its moment. Reid similarly characterized ventriloquial deceptions as only plausible in states of inattention:

> I apprehend it to be only such an imperfect imitation as may deceive those who are inattentive, or under a panic. For if it could be carried to perfection, a Gastriloquist would be as dangerous a man in society as was the Shepherd GIGES, who, by turning a ring upon his finger, could make himself invisible. (pp. 298–99)

As noted above, Valentine is far closer to Reid's conception of the omnipotent ventriloquist whose voice is in inverse proportionality to his visibility, than the highly visible ventriloquial voices theorized by Stewart. Secondly, the novel explains its often ludicrous events as a series of self-contained instants or sketches, moments in which Valentine's victims are called to respond without thought, rather than an unfolding teleological text, a point to which I will return below. Thirdly, the novel characterizes these instants as directly unavailable to the reader, whose potential scepticism regarding Valentine's powers is disarmed in terms of not having been present at the moment of their utterance — the novel is, in effect, six hundred pages of 'you had to be there'. But in writing a novel of moments, Cockton also renders at a structural level the novel's thematization of voice, since, as Ong argues, the rhetorical style of oral cultures is additive and accretive, rather than subordinative or consequential.[30] This leads to a curious tension in the novel between dynamism and stasis. For, on one hand, voice is dynamic, existing as movement in time: as Ong puts it, 'there is no way to stop sound and have sound [...]. If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing — only silence, no sound at all' (p. 32). Yet when the novel is most concerned with voice, the plot and narrative chronology come to a halt. As Connor notes, 'Valentine's voice-throwing pranks come to seem not merely unrelated to the plot of the novel, but inimical to narrative as such' (p. 321),

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[30] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 41. It is worth noting that these paragraphs were cut from later editions of *Valentine Vox* (they do not appear, for example, in the undated but most likely early twentieth-century Milner edition). This can hardly have been a matter of textual concision. It is more likely that the established cultural success of the novel rendered such apologies for the plot unnecessary.

as they replay the same limited story over and over again. Even when the novel's plotting is more conventional, it falters: the Goodman/asylum plot, which thematizes bodies in stasis, is resolved about halfway through the novel and, as noted above, is not connected to the ventriloquial narrative. In considering *Valentine Vox*'s tension between dynamism and stasis, Amanpal Garcha's analysis of the early Victorian sketch form is instructive. Writing on the early sketches of Thackeray, Dickens, and Gaskell, Garcha notes that the term *sketch* implied works that were 'incomplete, fragmented, and hurried, like modern time itself'.[31] But it is not simply that the sketch exemplified a speeding up of life: rather, Garcha notes that the sketch implies a more paradoxical temporality; in their sketches, authors like Dickens 'developed important techniques not only to register modernity's fragmented, hurried temporality but also to offer an alternative to such changefulness — an alternative the sketches create through description and essayistic analysis, which produce, aesthetically and ideologically, a sense of atemporal stability' (Garcha, p. 4). The appeal of the sketch over the plotted novel to readers of the 1820s and 1830s was, in Garcha's analysis, the desire for 'an explicitly *aestheticized* sense of fragmented temporality and stasis' (p. 10). Garcha goes on to read, for instance, *Sketches by Boz* as embodying a tension between the growing speed of modern capitalism and the increasing temporal demands on an emergent middle class, as opposed to the static bodies and stopped time of the working class: 'static, directionless, oblivious to time, and thus effectively without agency' (p. 130).

The influence of *Sketches by Boz* on *Valentine Vox* is palpable. Compare, for example, Cockton's reflections on the anxieties of travel:

> There are probably no feelings at all comparable with those which are experienced by a sanguine country youth, on the eve of his first departure for London. His mind is all excitement. The single idea of visiting a place of which he has heard so much, and knows so little, engenders thousands. Asleep or awake his whole soul is set upon the journey, and were it necessary for him to rise at four in the morning, though he failed to go to sleep before two, he would be just as certain to wake in time to hear the clock strike four, as if the 'warning' wire communicated with a galvanic battery sufficiently powerful to force him out of bed. (p. 21)

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[31] Amanpal Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 67 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4. There is insufficient space to consider the relationship here, but Garcha's characterization of the sketch as 'an unfinished, spontaneous work' bears comparison with Goldblatt's theorization of the artistic work in progress as a ventriloquial exchange between work and artist (Garcha, p. 138).

There is more than an echo here of the similarly unsettled passenger of Dickens's 'Early Coaches':

> You left strict orders, overnight, to be called at half-past four, and you have done nothing all night but doze for five minutes at a time, and start up suddenly from a terrific dream of a large church-clock with the small hand running round, with astonishing rapidity, to every figure on the dial-plate.[32]

Boz and Vox fulfil similar functions. As Garcha argues, 'Boz remains unaffected by the market culture's temporal demands. Boz constantly travels, but [...] he does not do so at the behest of any particular employer or to fulfil a schedule' (p. 137). Vox is similarly peripatetic, travelling at leisure around a startling panorama of metropolitan cultural venues, indulging in sketches of these places and people. One might, considering the novel's emphasis on voice, read Vox as an avatar of Boz; B is replaced with V, both labial sounds notoriously difficult for the ventriloquist. Yet I do not wish to overstate the comparison between Cockton and Dickens. If, as Garcha argues, Dickens's sketches 'habitually show London's inhabitants as controlled: either moving purposefully and teleologically, like workers on the way to their offices, or completely motionless', Cockton's Londoners are easily moved off course by vocal deceptions that inaugurate mimetic panic (Garcha, p. 120). Dickens's London becomes a kaleidoscopic opportunity for human interaction; Cockton's London presents the perpetual risk of the alarmed crowd. If Boz's constant movement raises him above the madness caused by capitalism's incessant temporal demands (which Garcha reads in *Sketches*'s references to Bedlam), 'one who can participate pleasurably in market culture's dynamism while seeming only energized — never destroyed, debilitated, or deadened — by it', then Vox himself becomes the source of that debilitating force, the acousmatic voice that causes panic (Garcha, p. 143). Likewise, whereas Dickens creates his moments of plotless stasis through extended description or speculation, Cockton does it by replaying the same sketch over and over again.

Yet if the novel deploys the sketch format, it finds itself torn between the stasis of this form and the chronological narrative of the life story (recall that this is the *Life and Adventures*). One might uncharitably dismiss this as Cockton's incompetence in constructing a story, were it not for the fact that the text explicitly equates selfhood with the ability to produce a coherent, progressive, and complete narrative. If one of *Valentine Vox*'s intertextual poles is *Sketches by Boz*, then the other is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), that cornerstone of life writing. Rousseau

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[32] Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. by Dennis Walder (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 162.

appears spectrally in *Valentine Vox* through a curious double-V echo. In *Confessions*, Rousseau falls under the influence of the musician Venture de Villeneuve, an oddly indistinct figure: shabbily dressed yet whose dishevelment appears noble, one who 'had something misshapen about his figure though no real deformity. He was, so to speak, a hunchback without a hump.'[33] Villeneuve's unprepossessing appearance is offset by his powers of voice and the capacity of speech to trigger affective states: 'directly a subject was mentioned he interrupted the conversation with some broad joke, which made everyone laugh and forget what had been said' (Rousseau, p. 123). When Villeneuve sings, Rousseau is charmed by his 'very pleasing voice. Hardly ever have I had so pleasant a surprise.' He separates voice from language, so that 'he said the coarsest things in the most elegant tone, so that they passed without objection'.[34] Venture is fond of Vox-like tricks, at one point living with a shoemaker who quarrels with his wife, 'which Venture was at some pains to prolong under the pretence of trying to make them up' (p. 131). Again, the scene is rendered in terms of vocal qualities: 'In [Venture's] cold voice and with his Provençal accent he made remarks that had the utmost effect; the scenes there were enough to make one laugh aloud' (p. 131). Though Venture never literally ventriloquizes, he is closely associated in the *Confessions* with two ventriloquial episodes. The first occurs when Venture introduces Rousseau to M. Simon, the King's Justice. Shortly afterwards, Rousseau tells the story of when Simon, sitting alone on his bed, calls for a waiting peasant to enter:

> But his cry was a little too loud, and so came out in his shrill tone. The man entered and looked round to see where this woman's voice came from and seeing a woman's mob cap and top-knot in the bed, was on the point of retiring, making profound apologies to the supposed lady. (p. 138)

The second incident, more metaphorically ventriloquial, occurs when Rousseau obtains a position as a singing master in Lausanne. Rousseau admits that his appointment is a deception: 'Here I was a singing master who could not read a tune.' His solution is ventriloquial, to adopt another's identity and voice: 'I always imitated my great model as closely as I could. He had called himself Venture de Villeneuve. So from the name Rousseau I made the anagram Vaussore, and called myself Vaussore de Villeneuve.' Another double-V: Rousseau draws attention to 'the degree to which I had, so to speak, *venturized* myself' (pp. 144–45, emphasis in original).

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[33] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. by J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1953), p. 122.

[34] Rousseau, pp. 123–24. Cockton would give a public lecture on 21 June 1843 at Greenwich on the influence of vocal music. See 'Vocal Music', *Age*, 25 June 1843, p. 7.

It is unclear how far Cockton consciously ventriloquizes Rousseau, how far Valentine Vox is an avatar of Venture de Villeneuve, or simply an uncanny echo. My wider point here is that *Valentine Vox* does, however, accept the biographical logic of *Confessions*. When Goodman is taken into the asylum and the warders attempt to convince him he is insane, his defence is to insist on selfhood as narrative progression: he protests that he can still 'remember every circumstance — can connect and review' (Cockton, pp. 111–12). As Lawrence Frank notes, a similar faith in a complete and comprehensive narrative to guarantee selfhood underwrites Rousseau's *Confessions*:

> What is at stake is not simply a well-wrought, convincing narrative. Unbridged gaps threaten inconsistencies and voids in Rousseau's story, in his unbroken consciousness, in his self [...]. The test of sincerity and authenticity becomes the coherence, thoroughness, and plausibility of the narrative.[35]

Man is ultimately a narrative being: Goodman would certainly agree. But again, *Valentine Vox* moves against itself: despite its titular promises of biography, the text itself struggles to 'connect and review'; it offers momentary sketches, fragments of laughter, and strange suspensions of plot that come to resemble madness.

Yet, if biography attempted to consolidate identity, ventriloquism fragmented it. As Leigh Eric Schmidt argues, Reid and similar commentators saw ventriloquism as 'one emblem of the perils of unhinged identity, irresponsibility, and roguish impersonation', a disappearing act in which the ventriloquist could potentially become 'a spectral being without any fixed signs of character' (p. 170). Ventriloquism, in its kaleidoscopic adoptions of new identities, challenged the idea of a unified self, a challenge made all the more potent by the voice's status (in the terms of a familiar metaphysics of presence) as a guarantor of presence and identity — though Dolar has since challenged Jacques Derrida's history of the voice as always signifying presence, arguing that he overlooks the perturbing or acousmatic voice: logocentrism does not automatically mean phonocentrism.[36] As Patrick O'Donnell puts it, 'the more successful or spectacular the act of ventriloquy, the more self-questioned is the singular identity who is the source of those voices'.[37] Goldblatt, in similar vein, reads ventriloquism

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[35] Lawrence Frank, *Dickens and the Romantic Self* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp. 8–9.
[36] Dolar, p. 170. On the acousmatic voice — that is, the voice with no visible source — see Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
[37] Patrick O'Donnell, '"A Speeches of Chaff": Ventriloquy and Expression in *Our Mutual Friend*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 19 (1990), 247–79 (p. 248).

as a practice whereby 'the self extends itself, goes beyond its singularity, vacillating in its refusal to remain fixed, identifiable and whole' (p. 175). Put another way, in the polyphonic entertainments of Love and Alexandre, the audience must both enjoy the virtuosity of the performer in creating all these voices and also overlook or question his singularity. The practice of ventriloquism inevitably leaves its performer doubled (at least); the ventriloquist divides himself into a plurality of voices.

Valentine thus presents a protean figure, able to take on a variety of identities, and although the novel ultimately insists on Valentine adopting a coherent identity, Vox himself always appears to be on the edge of dispersal. The novel's alliterative fascination with the letter 'V' anticipates the American poet Elihu Vedder's reading of his surname initial as a literally divided 'I':

> Thus I diverge on either hand.
> An I — divided, cannot stand,
> Falling apart it forms a V—
> Which I much fear resembles me.[38]

Like the novel's divergent paths — its tension between comedy and trauma, between plot and sketch — Valentine is a divided self, only provisionally guaranteed by the act of telling his story. As I now conclude, the novel ends by presenting a choice to Valentine: ventriloquial and episodic voices that divide the self, or vocal teleological storytelling that consolidates it.

Reading aloud

Previous readings of *Valentine Vox*, particularly those by Steven Connor and Helen Davies, make excellent points about the diegetic voices of the text, but they miss another crucial voice: that of actual readers. As is well documented, Victorian novel reading was not a private, silent activity but embodied vocal performance and mimicry at a number of levels, from public readings to the 'performance' of the text among groups of friends or family. Even where novels were not literally read out loud, reading nonetheless implies subvocalization, as Garrett Stewart has argued. Stewart proposes a 'phonemic reading' that pays attention to the ambiguities created by sound and the ways in which voiced reading challenges a figure/ground conception of writing in which active script stands out against passive spacing on the page. Claiming that text cannot be read without voice is not to reinstate any idea of an originary author's voice: rather, Stewart claims voice as the

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[38] Elihu Vedder, *Doubt and Other Things* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1922), p. 51. Schmidt also discusses Vedder in the wider context of voice and divinity (pp. 125–34).

destination, not the origin, of textuality.[39] So, while voice is always implicit in the text, Victorian reading practices made it explicit.

I have not yet found any accounts of vocal readings of *Valentine Vox*, but another account relating to Dickens resonates with Cockton's novel. Herman Merivale, writing in *Temple Bar* in 1888, describes a vivid scene of reading Dickens in the 1830s:

> How I envy the generation which read 'Pickwick' as it came out in numbers — and my father has told me that it was the phenomenon of the time. My grandfather's whole family of sons and daughters […] used to cluster round him, to hear him read number after number out to them. He always studied them to himself for an hour or two, in order to be able to read them aloud with decent gravity. And his apoplectic struggles and occasional shouts made them feel bad — longing for their turn.[40]

George Ford similarly draws on this description, but emphasizes the seclusion of the father in familiarizing himself with the texts, and what he refers to as the 'impatient anxiety' of the family (p. 8). This scene of reading is paradigmatic of *Valentine Vox*, recalling an early scene when Valentine's mother is disturbed by her son's strange eruptions of sound that haunt the house while he is learning ventriloquism (Cockton, p. 18), an inversion of the Freudian primal scene. What is striking is the extent to which *Valentine Vox* replicates this model of reading. Merivale describes a father who, like Goodman in the asylum, becomes secluded and must attempt to gain mastery over the involuntary convulsions of his laughing body in an apoplectic struggle (Connor, p. 231).

This scene of reading also challenges the familiar image of the Victorian family reading, centred on the father's textual authority. In this analysis, reading aloud becomes an extension of the disciplinary apparatus of the novel. The most notorious statement of such an argument is D. A. Miller's:

> The only significant attempt to transcend the individualism projected by the novel took place precisely in Victorian England as the practice of the family reading, which may be understood as an effort to mitigate the possible excesses of the

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[39] Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 3–5.

[40] Herman Merivale, 'About Two Great Novelists', *Temple Bar*, June 1888, pp. 188–204 (p. 201). See also the discussion of this passage in George Ford, *Dickens and his Readers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 8; and Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 49 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 114.

> novel written for individuals by changing the locus of reading
> from the study — or worse, the boudoir — to the hearth.[41]

Miller's characterization of vocal reading as an attempt to mitigate individualistic excesses seems somewhat disciplinary in itself, overlooking ways in which vocal reading can engender other excesses. Merivale's paterfamilias may need to master the text before he can read it to the family, but the family's reaction to his muffled shouts and cries provide an almost masochistic pleasure, noting that the pleasure of the vocal reading lies not simply in the text, but in the performance and what the performance renders excessive. Are the family laughing at Dickens, or at the father reading Dickens, his attempts at the voices? And in turn, might they be laughing at their own imitations of the father reading Dickens? Considered in this way, the disciplinary image of the family reading centred on the father's voice becomes a potential site for mimic anarchy.

Valentine Vox hints at these ideas of reading aloud through its focus not only on voice, but also on ventriloquism. As David Goldblatt notes, 'reading aloud gives the page a voice that is and isn't the writer's, is and isn't the reader's' (p. 104). But while *Valentine Vox*'s focus on voices and their mimicry invites performance, it simultaneously provides an impossible challenge for the domestic reader, who (unless an extraordinarily skilled ventriloquist) can only ever represent rather than mimic Valentine's abilities. There are, however, two instances where the scene of domestic storytelling is dramatized. The first occurs when Valentine tells his uncle about the chaos caused at the election meeting:

> Valentine [...] drew a chair near the fire, and commenced
> an explanation of all that had occurred. At first he utterly
> astounded Uncle John, by the development of his power, and
> then proceeded with the relation of its effects upon the meet-
> ing. In ten minutes Uncle John had swallowed more smoke
> than he had done during the whole thirty years he had been
> a smoker. Seven several times did the brandy and water go
> the wrong way; and as he had a perfect knowledge of almost
> every man present at the hall, his imagination entered with so
> much spirit into the scene, and he laughed at the description
> of their movements so immoderately, that at length he could
> neither drink, smoke, nor sit, but paced the room holding his
> back and chest together — at intervals ejaculating 'stop! stop!
> stop!' The more, however, Uncle John laughed, the more spirit
> did Valentine infuse into his tale, and at length in an abso-
> lute convulsion of mirth, the delighted old gentleman threw

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[41] D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 82.

himself upon the sofa, and rolled to and fro like a butt in a
groove. (p. 19)

Valentine's drawing up 'a chair near the fire' parodies early Victorian
modes of familial vocal reading. Note, also, the dialectical relationship here
between speaker and audience: John's excitement causes Valentine to infuse
more spirit into the telling. On one level, this is of course storytelling rather
than reading, yet *Valentine Vox* elides the distinction by relating Valentine's
periodic bouts of narration to the apparatus of the written novel. At another
point, for instance, '[Valentine] proceeded to explain the whole of the cir-
cumstances described in the fifth and sixth chapters of this history' (p. 42),
rehearsing the path that Cockton's actual readers would follow. Valentine's
narratorial excursions stand in a complex relation to ventriloquism. For
on one hand, they represent the opposite of how ventriloquism works in
the novel. Ventriloquism, inasmuch as it displaces identity, also displaces
authorship. As noted above, Valentine himself never steps onto a stage as a
ventriloquist, but rather presents his ability as displaced but genuine utter-
ance, an acousmatic voice. In becoming the vocal reader of his own adven-
tures, Valentine performs an action similar to that which Ivan Kreilkamp
attributes to Dickens in his public readings — an attempt to make the nar-
rative irretrievably his, safe from imitators (Kreilkamp, pp. 89–121). As the
invisible voice, Valentine always runs the risk of not being able to own his
own creations (since if he were perceived in the act, the act itself would
be lost). So, in this respect, Valentine's vocal readings of the events of the
novel are one step removed from ventriloquism. But, on the other hand,
Valentine's spoken accounts come close to the ecstatic narrative Goldblatt
sees as fundamental to ventriloquism: Valentine narrates his own actions,
but takes a step outside himself in order to do so.

Uncle John's reactions to this storytelling are likewise impor-
tant. Like Goodman in the asylum, bodily response is emphasized, and
Valentine's storytelling draws on the well-established idea of popular nar-
rative as consumption: hearing the narrative causes John to swallow more
smoke, brandy, and water than he ever has before. Further, though, laugh-
ter here performs the same deterritorializing function that Gilles Deleuze
and Félix Guattari ascribe to language: 'The mouth, tongue, and teeth
find their primitive territoriality in food. In giving themselves over to the
articulation of sounds, the mouth, tongue, and teeth deterritorialize [...].
To speak, and above all to write, is to fast.'[42] Uncle John reminds us of the
slippage in this formulation whereby sound suddenly becomes language.
The brandy and water go the wrong way because of laughter, not speech,
and John's language becomes reduced to a single repeated word. John's is

[42] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. by
Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 18–19.

a fully convulsed body, rendered not merely animalistic by laughter but abhuman. Like the scene with Goodman in the asylum discussed above, the moment inverts Bergson's argument that laughter is prompted by a perception of the repetitive in the human. Here, laughter reduces John to a machine, 'a butt in a groove'.

The novel seems to be rendering a challenge to its vocalized readers to provoke a similar reaction in its audience. Yet if the domestic reader of *Valentine Vox* despaired of ever conveying the fantastic feats of voice to his family (and in return provoking mimetic responses of delight), the final chapter offers the domestic mimic a chance:

> The life and adventures of Valentine as a ventriloquist may be said to have ended with his marriage. He did […] indulge occasionally in the development of his power; but as he found that in proportion as the strength of his assumed voice increased, that of his natural voice diminished, he on all other occasions contented himself with a relation of the various scenes which his peculiar faculty had enabled him to produce, and never failed to excite by such relation the most uproarious mirth. (p. 613)

This ending complicates Helen Davies's reading of *Valentine Vox* in the context of ventriloquism and gendered power relations, focusing on how it 'consolidate[s] the dichotomy between the active, masculine agency of voice and the feminine passivity of silence'.[43] Davies reads the relationship between Valentine and Louise as 'couched in ominously ventriloquial terms' and notes that 'we are left to speculate on the unsavoury implications of a master ventriloquist with a dumbstruck wife' (pp. 49–50). Yet Valentine's marriage marks not the consolidation of his powers of voice but their attenuation. It is not Louise who is publicly dumbstruck but Valentine. Likewise, in the effort to fit Cockton's novel into the model of masculine ventriloquist and feminine dummy, Davies overlooks later scenes where Valentine becomes the tool of Louise's desire: many of the crueller pranks played on Llewellyn are at Louise's instigation.

Returning to this quotation, however, Valentine retreats from a state of invisibility in the public sphere into a private space of domestic narration where he is visible. In short, his final imitation is to replicate the body of the reading father, and indeed the novel's frontispiece shows this chronologically final scene of Valentine with his family. Given earlier religious understandings of ventriloquism that equated it with childbirth, expelling a new identity from the body, there is the potential for Valentine to be read as a Frankensteinian figure who appropriates feminine powers of

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[43] Helen Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), p. 66.

procreation but can only do so in a destructive fashion until he finds a wife who can allow him to become a parent in a more conventional manner such that vocal mimicry gives way to bodily mimicry.[44] It is striking, too, that Valentine's 'indulgence' in the adolescent pleasures of ventriloquism are revealed to cause bodily damage. Comparing this with Merivale's image of the voice of the father reading Dickens, both scenes employ a dynamic of attenuation: Merivale implies the complex workings of repetition in this model of reading; the idea that to read a passage more than once is to defuse its power to convulse. This entropic dynamic is likewise true of *Valentine Vox*. While its non-teleological comic episodes could conceivably extend forever, in fact the novel's repeated incidents become wearing — both on Valentine's body and, I suggest, the reader — until it must finally come to an end. For Valentine, teleological storytelling conquers anarchic ventriloquism. Yet if the novel ends up opposing storytelling to ventriloquism, somewhat paradoxically it is the *ecstasis* of ventriloquism that provides the very condition that makes it possible for Cockton to write his text. The split in subjectivity involved in ventriloquism, a surrendering of the voice, allows for a similar split in Cockton: writing a popular novel which itself brutally critiques popular culture, and which has a particularly conservative agenda conducted through an anarchistic protagonist.

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[44] See, for example, Connor's discussion of the oracle at Delphi (pp. 47–74). A text dealing with genital speech closer to *Valentine Vox* is Denis Diderot's *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (1748).