

## Orality and Literacy in Transatlantic Perspective

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The publication of Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* in 1982 marked a watershed moment in literary studies.<sup>1</sup> Intended as a vade mecum for scholars interested in the nature of verbal media, the book instead coincided with a shift from one dominant paradigm, drawn from rhetoric, phenomenology, anthropology, and the nascent field of media studies, to another style of literary analysis, developed from structuralism and post-structuralism in dialogue with theories of the public sphere and the history of the book. While *Orality and Literacy* remains today a classic text within media studies, as John Hartley describes in his afterword to the thirtieth anniversary edition, it has a more muted presence in literary history and criticism. The occasion of this special issue offers an opportunity to evaluate the place of *Orality and Literacy* in a more capacious methodology embracing literary, cultural, and media studies. I begin this reconsideration by examining Ong's work in relation to theoretical and critical methods of the last three decades. I then move into a discussion of one specific form of interplay between orality and literacy, namely, the relationship between political oratory and the realist Victorian novel in Britain and the United States. Both parts of my discussion take a transatlantic perspective.<sup>2</sup>

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I would like to thank Tom Wright and James Emmott for their invitation that led to this article.

<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 30th anniversary edn (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> This article builds on my previous work, especially *Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2000); 'Literature', in *Keywords of American Cultural Studies*, ed. by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), pp. 145–48; 'American Literature and the Public Sphere', *American Literary History*, 20 (2008), 465–78; 'The Emerging Media of Early America', in *Cultural Narratives: Textuality and Performance in American Culture before 1900*, ed. by Sandra M. Gustafson and Caroline F. Sloat

### Looking back at *Orality and Literacy*

For readers coming to Ong in the wake of the post-structuralist turn, his approach can seem naive and old-fashioned. Jacques Derrida's philosophical approach to 'writing' in *Of Grammatology* (1967; trans. 1976) dramatically shifted the critical landscape, leading to some confusion about the place of actual writing in his thought, and burdening any discussion of orality or oral genres with ideological freight that is not always intrinsic to the subject matter at hand. For many years any critical analysis of oral genres risked being dismissed as unsophisticated phonocentrism, and while this burden has lightened somewhat recently, it is by no means entirely gone. This is a confused response to a major issue in literary studies, but an influential one nonetheless.

In his book Ong engaged the work of Derrida and the other theorists whom he called the 'textualists', including Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva, and he had this to say about the approach to textuality that characterized works by the rising stars of Continental theory: textualism, he wrote,

is the most text-bound of all ideologies, because it plays with the paradoxes of textuality alone and in historical isolation, as though the text were a closed system [...]. Without orality, textualism is rather opaque and playing with it can be a form of occultism, elaborate obfuscation — which can be endlessly titillating, even at those times when it is not especially informative. (pp. 169–70)

In a more sympathetic vein, he also noted important parallels with the work of Marshall McLuhan, observing that 'in breaking up what he calls phonocentrism and logocentrism, Derrida is performing a welcome service, in the same territory that Marshall McLuhan swept through with his famous dictum, "The medium is the message"' (p. 167).

One of the advantages of the approach that Ong develops in *Orality and Literacy* is its historical and comparative perspective on the relationship between forms of media, which, as a former student of McLuhan's, he explores in a broad and heterogeneous range of verbal practices and

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(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 341–65; and *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

traditions. Ong turned to anthropology, sociology, folklore, and related disciplines as he framed what he believed to be universal attributes of primary oral cultures. In addition to the works of Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and Eric Havelock on Homeric Greece, Ong drew as well on the work of scholars focused on Native American and African expressive traditions (for instance, A. L. Kroeber and Isidore Okpewho). Unlike the contemporaneous studies of oral and written societies by anthropologist Jack Goody, however, Ong's work is not tied to a developmental model that sees writing as the medium of social progress. Indeed, Ong exhibits a marked preference for oral forms as vehicles for spirituality and community, a stance that arises from his critique of secular modernity.<sup>3</sup>

More textured treatments of the interplay of oralities and literacies than Ong's typically eschew the problematic framework of primary orality and focus instead on the reciprocal formations of speech and writing.<sup>4</sup> Rhetoric is uniquely well situated to play this multivalent role, as Ong himself noted when he wrote that for centuries rhetoric had been 'the paradigm of all discourse' and concluded that 'writing from the beginning did not reduce orality but enhanced it' (p. 9). Ong's interest in the history of rhetoric developed out of his graduate work with McLuhan at Saint Louis University and his doctoral studies under Harvard's Perry Miller, the eminent scholar of Puritanism whose work shaped generations of Americanists.<sup>5</sup> Miller put Ramist rhetoric squarely at the centre of the Puritan intellectual life of colonial New England, and Ong's training as a Jesuit prepared him to explore the earlier, European phases of Ramism. Ong went on to consider the place of rhetoric in a series of influential studies including *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958), *The Presence of the Word* (1967), *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (1971), and *Interfaces of the Word* (1977). For Ong, Romanticism marks a break between an older verbal culture dominated by rhetoric and a more properly literary

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor offers a sustained re-evaluation of the secularization thesis associated with Emile Durkheim and Max Weber in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> In *Literacy in Theory and in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Brian V. Street employs ethnographic methodologies in a wide-ranging discussion of the historical interaction of oral and textual forms, breaking down the static oral–literate divide. Street's adaptation of Ong offers a helpful paradigm for discussing the interaction of media in the contact zone of British North America.

<sup>5</sup> Miller's major works include *The New England Mind* (1939) and *Errand into the Wilderness* (1952).

culture. He rightly focused on the privileging of written rhetoric in his account of Romantic-era rhetorical texts such as Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783). Moreover, Ong's chronology coincides with the maturation of the novel, which dramatically altered reading practices and concepts of the literary as it related to oral expression. Novels might be read aloud, but they were not recited or performed in the way that epics or lyrics or plays were designed to be.

Like Ong, Michael Warner addressed the shift towards a modern understanding of literature in his influential 1990 study *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. Warner brought post-structuralist theory together with the history of the book and Jürgen Habermas's history of the public sphere, and he integrated them with debates over classical republican and liberal strains in eighteenth-century political thought. Appearing just a year after the translation into English of *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*, Warner's book introduced this most historical of Habermas's works to the English-speaking academy, where it has proven tremendously generative. When Warner developed his Habermasian reading of the literary culture of colonial British North America and the early United States, his decision to recast it as a print-based public sphere (rather than the public sphere comprised of salons and coffee houses as well as the printing press that Habermas had described) had a distinctly Derridean aura while employing a history of the book methodology. Even as he distanced himself from Ong's technological determinism, Warner pursued a version of Ong's main historical claim that the Romantic period marks 'a new state of consciousness associated with the definite interiorization of print and the atrophy of the ancient rhetorical tradition' (*Orality and Literacy*, p. 162), though Warner recast this claim as a shift from a republican print public to a liberal one. Here Warner took a different approach than that of Larzer Ziff, who developed a more directly Ongian reading of early American literary culture in *Writing in the New Nation* (1991). Ziff located a decisive shift from what he characterized as the predominantly oral culture of the pre-Revolutionary period into a newly print-dominated public culture, which historian Bernard Bailyn had made prominent through his work on the political pamphlets of the American Revolution. The interplay in Warner's work of print as a medium with republicanism and liberalism as ideologies offered a suppler and less techno-determinist approach

to the era than Ziff's, but his narrative of the rise of literary culture tracks closely with the work of both Ziff and Ong.<sup>6</sup>

Warner's introduction of an ideological element into the analysis of textual media moves in a different but related direction to the one pursued by Geoffrey Galt Harpham in his important book *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (1987), which analyses the symbolic dimensions of media. Harpham persuasively argues that the phonocentrism that Derrida found at the heart of Western metaphysics has its double in graphocentrism. He recasts Western thought as a working out of what he terms 'ascetic linguistics', which involves a four-term set of oppositions: living speech is contrasted with dead letter on the one hand; demonic speech is opposed to stable text on the other. Paul's statement that 'the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life' (II Corinthians 3. 6) is matched in Christian — and more broadly Western — thought by references to disruptive, demonic voices that must be countered by stable, authoritative texts. Harpham might have been referring to Ong, though his immediate reference was to Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, when he wrote that 'to a logocentrist, speech is ontologically different, an authentic species of language'. But 'demonic speech', which is the besetting problem in the *Life of Anthony* but has no clear parallel in Ong, is 'even deader than writing'. Demons give disruptive voice to Scripture, leading the faithful astray.<sup>7</sup>

Thirteen centuries after Athanasius the demons were still causing trouble half a world away in Salem, Massachusetts. Cotton Mather's reports of the afflicted girls at Salem describe them mocking their examiners by reciting distorted versions of Scripture passages — evidence, some felt, of satanic influence. Europeans had long feared a demonic presence in the Americas. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has documented a shared demonological discourse, related to the one that Athanasius helped originate, that unites Spanish conquistadors and Puritan visible saints in their response to indigenous American cultures. Demonic voices represent one side of the ascetic linguistics of new world encounter; republican eloquence represents the other side of that linguistic formation. A widespread interest in the republican features of indigenous societies offered a counterpoint to demonology. At least since Cicero, republican thought

<sup>6</sup> I provide an extended response to Warner's print-based understanding of the public sphere in 'American Literature and the Public Sphere'.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 9. I situate Harpham vis-à-vis the development of the verbal arts in colonial British North America in *Eloquence is Power*, pp. xv–xvi.

has privileged the scene of speech. Cicero claimed that human societies originated with a 'great and wise' man who gathered scattered groups together, and 'through reason and eloquence [...] transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk'. It is this scene that Eric Cheyfitz identified as the basis of a 'poetics of imperialism', which figured indigenous Americans as savages lacking real language and thus incapable of the civility that the orator imposed through reason and eloquence.<sup>8</sup>

Yet Cheyfitz failed to account for the many instances where native eloquence was celebrated and indigenous societies were portrayed in the image of classical Greece and Rome. Sabine MacCormack has found classicizing references to native republics to be widely present in Spanish colonial writings.<sup>9</sup> Similar descriptions become prominent in British North American writings somewhat later, notably in Cadwallader Colden's *History of the Five Indian Nations* (1727, 1747). The Scottish-born Colden compares the Iroquois to the ancient 'barbarians' of Greece and Rome, characterizes their societies as 'absolute Republick(s)', and asserts against political theorist Robert Filmer that 'the present state of the Indian Nations exactly shows the most Ancient and Original Condition of almost every Nation'. Colden identifies 'the Original Form of all Government' practised by the Iroquois with government by persuasion, which he illustrates with copious extracts from speeches drawn from treaty negotiations with the colonial English government.<sup>10</sup> Colden's work influenced Benjamin Franklin, and both men published books that circulated in England as well as in its American colonies and contributed to the transatlantic vogue of the eloquent Indian. This vogue fuelled the elocutionary movement that the Irishman Thomas Sheridan launched in the 1750s, which in turn influenced patriot leaders such as the Bostonian James Otis, whose

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<sup>8</sup> Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550–1700* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). Cicero's *De Inventione* as quoted (with Latin passages removed) in Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from 'The Tempest' to 'Tarzan'*, expanded edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 113. I develop the points here and in the following paragraph in 'Between Cicero and Augustine: Religion and Republicanism in the Americas and Beyond', in *Religious Transformations in the Early Modern Americas*, ed. by Stephanie Kirk and Sarah Rivett (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Sabine MacCormack, *On the Wings of Time: Rome, the Incas, Spain, and Peru* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Cadwallader Colden, *The History of the Five Indian Nations Depending on the Province of New-York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. xx–xxi.

1761 Writs of Assistance speech was the spark that lit the Revolutionary fuse, according to John Adams, the most Ciceronian of the American founding fathers. In a republican context, ascetic linguistics takes on a new form. Living speech is the eloquence of the orator who overcomes the dead letter of existing realities to revitalize the community; the demons become demagogues who undermine community, while Scriptural authority is translated into the stabilizing power of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It is this dynamic that I theorize as the performance semiotic of speech and text in *Eloquence is Power* (2000), which traces the evolution of ascetic linguistics in the verbal practices of colonial British North America and the early United States.<sup>11</sup>

Ascetic linguistics and the semiotics of speech and text are vividly illustrated in *Moby-Dick* (1851), which can be read as Melville's extended reflection on the proposal that the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life. Ishmael and Queequeg stare blankly at one another's scripts — Queequeg uncomprehendingly counts pages and Ishmael is unable to interpret tattoos — but through speech and shared worship and labour they develop a bond, a sense of what they have in common. Melville contrasts these scenes of speech with the dangers posed by a dominating orator — Ahab the demagogue, who establishes control over the crew with his speech on the quarterdeck, and whose demonic side emerges later with the appearance of Fedallah. The sheer size of Melville's book invites a comparison between his portrayal of the bond of community based in speech and the cognitive and social effects produced in the writing and reading of this encyclopedic novel. *Moby-Dick* invites its reader to consider the cultural, social, and psychological work accomplished by literacy practices in general, and the novel in particular, in comparison to oral–aural practices. These were pressing issues for Melville and his contemporaries as they negotiated historic transformations in technology, literary culture, and civic life.

### Oratory and the novel

In the chapters following Ahab's speech on the quarterdeck, Melville uses dramatic form to depict the disintegration of the bond that Ahab has imposed on the crew, a formal choice that makes vividly apparent the ten-

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<sup>11</sup> Jay Fliegelman treats the elocutionary revolution in *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

sion between novelistic conventions and scenes of oratory. This tension is visible in subtler ways in other fictional attempts to represent oratory, such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (rev. edn 1815), Washington Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle' (1819), Lydia Maria Child's *The Rebels* (1825), and several of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels. These works serve to remind us that Ong's age of Romanticism was also the age of revolution, and that fiction and popular oratory emerged contemporaneously as mass genres and were rivals for public interest.<sup>12</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic, a skilled speaker on a major occasion could attract audiences numbering in the tens of thousands. Elocution and oratory dominated English pedagogy in its early years.<sup>13</sup> Speech anthologies shaped a transatlantic canon of political oratory in English that included such public figures as Charles James Fox, Edmund Burke, Wolfe Tone, Patrick Henry, and Daniel Webster, and a body of oratorical criticism emerged to describe their different styles and assess their relative strengths and weaknesses.<sup>14</sup>

Interest in political oratory was driven by the rise of republican and democratic politics, and the genre was shaped by specific political arrangements and cultural norms. In the United States citizens could expect to hear for themselves the deliberations that produced and interpreted the laws that governed them. Massachusetts had established open galleries in its State House in 1766, and Congress opened many of its proceedings soon after it was founded. These developments transformed the chamber floor into a unique type of stage where real-life political dramas were enacted. Major congressional debates and arguments before the Supreme Court drew large audiences of women and men, as well as extensive reportage, and foreign visitors made a pilgrimage to Capitol Hill

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<sup>12</sup> The history of the novel is beyond the scope of this article. Cathy N. Davidson considers the connections between the American Revolution and the fiction of the early United States in *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Christopher Looby offers a valuable discussion of the issues in *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Alessandro Portelli provides a wide-ranging discussion in *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking, and Democracy in American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Gerald Graff discusses the central place of oratory in early English-language pedagogy in *Professing English: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> The discussion from here through page 11 is drawn from *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic*, chapter 4.



to hear the deliberations. There was a particularly robust exchange between English observers of American deliberative speech and American observers of British parliamentary oratory. In her energetically pro-republican travel narrative of 1821, for example, Frances Wright celebrated the ‘invariably decorous and gentlemanly language’ and the ‘tone [...] worthy of the Roman senate’ used in congressional debates and contrasted it with the partisan bickering in the United Kingdom House of Commons.

Some observers thought Wright was too generous, including some Americans. Edward Everett, who is today remembered principally as the long-winded orator who preceded Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, favoured British parliamentary eloquence over its American cousin. Everett was an important contributor to the development of literary oratory, as well as a prominent educator and Whig politician who served among other capacities as the Minister to Great Britain and president of Harvard University. In an 1827 essay in the *North American Review*, Everett compared parliamentary oratory in the United States and England, with a nod as well to France.<sup>15</sup> As he evaluated the factors that might contribute to more aesthetically satisfying deliberative eloquence, Everett brought to bear a comparative perspective that crossed historical periods and national boundaries and took into account governmental institutions, social conditions, and media development. He was concerned with tracing the dynamic relationship between modern parliamentary speech and the forms of its production and dissemination, and he made the interplay of written and printed forms with oral forms a focus of the essay. Repeatedly emphasizing the connections between parliamentary deliberations and the public sentiment that they were designed to represent, he concluded that it was in the activities of ‘deliberative assemblies’ that statecraft was elevated beyond ‘the dead letter of form and official routine’ (p. 427). He attributed ‘the sudden and extraordinary growth of parliamentary eloquence’ in modern times to the rise of contemporaneous newspaper coverage, comparing its effects on deliberative speech to the invention of alphabetic writing, paper, and printing. He described the experience of attending the British Parliament and then on the following day reading the newspaper accounts of the same debates as an unrivalled ‘spectacle of intellectual, political, and mechanical power combined’ (p. 429). For Everett, the transformation of deliberative proceedings from closed-door

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<sup>15</sup> [Edward Everett], ‘Speeches of Henry Clay’, *North American Review*, October 1827, pp. 425–51.

to publicly accessible events that were further disseminated in print had brought about a revolution in popular sovereignty.

In an extended comparison of Parliament and Congress, Everett noted several major differences between the proceedings. These included representational practices that made American Congressmen more likely than their British counterparts to feel pressured to take the floor in order to 'speak to the ear of the constituent' (p. 432); differences in geography, with the city of London exerting on debates a powerful shaping force that was not matched by the raw and sparsely populated District of Columbia; the lesser role played in the United States by party discipline on one hand and wealth and rank on the other; the greater press of business in Parliament, which constrained debate; and the tendency of unsettled constitutional questions to prolong deliberations in Congress. Everett noted as well that more Congressmen were lawyers trained in public speaking, and that in the United States there was less of a gap between 'the speaking leaders and the silent mass of a party' than in Britain (p. 436). He further compared the dimensions, acoustical qualities, and furnishings of the two deliberative chambers, finding that the smaller size, superior auditory features, and absence of desks for note-taking all conspired to make the speeches in Parliament more focused and easier to hear and understand. He also noted the transformative impact of Edmund Burke, who had elevated parliamentary eloquence to a higher standard of substance and aesthetic appeal. Despite having a clear preference for British speeches, Everett refused to give them his unqualified approval, noting that in many respects the superior quality of the eloquence could be traced to political abuses that limited participation.

Frances Trollope described the deliberations of the US Congress in less flattering terms than either Wright or Everett in her travelogue *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), a work that punctured American pretensions and sparked an international brouhaha. Trollope described the House of Representatives as 'filled with men sitting in the most unseemly attitudes, a large majority with their hats on, and nearly all spitting to an excess that decency forbids me to describe'. Matters in the Senate were a bit better, for the members sat upright and took off their hats; still, they *would* spit. In principle women could attend sessions of Congress, while they were excluded from Parliament; however, few women took advantage of the opportunity while Trollope was there. She had difficulty evaluating the speeches on the floor because the acoustics were bad. What she did hear did not impress her. She described 'the rude eloquence of a thorough horse-and-alligator orator from Kentucky, who entreated the

House repeatedly to “go the whole hog”, and she concluded that every debate she heard was on a single subject, namely, ‘the entire independence of each individual state with regard to the federal government’. Trollope recalled that ‘man after man’ sprang up to decry the ‘tyranny’ of voting federal money for building roads or canals or otherwise developing his home state. She found this emphasis perverse when compared with the real tyranny of Indian removal, which was debated in Congress during her stay in Washington. Trollope attacked the hypocrisy of American republicans, noting how common it was for them to charge European governments with oppressing the weak and favouring the strong while at the same time maintaining slavery and ‘removing’ the indigenous occupants of the eastern states.<sup>16</sup>

When Trollope’s son Anthony, the popular and prolific novelist, visited Congress some thirty years later, his main impression was of a body whose power had been profoundly diminished by the exigencies of war. The military hierarchy that had transformed the District of Columbia would tolerate Congress so long as it complied with requests for funding; otherwise, as one ‘military gentleman’ said to Trollope, ‘Pack [the Congressmen] up in boxes and send them home.’<sup>17</sup> Until the Civil War, Trollope observed, Congress had worked well for the United States. Lacking the antiquity and tradition of the UK Parliament, the legislative branch had nonetheless helped make the United States one of the five major world powers in its day. Trollope described his melancholy at the sight of ‘hideous’ dragoons occupying the capital city, clattering through the streets on their horses, and transforming the arts building into a military depot. Confronted with de facto military rule, Trollope missed the respectability of even the prosiest or rowdiest floor debates. ‘I bow inwardly before a Speaker’s chair,’ he wrote, ‘and look upon the elected representatives of any nation as the choice men of the age’ (p. 336).

In his *Autobiography* (1883) Trollope described his high regard for Parliament, which he had held since his youth, when he first dreamt of becoming a member. It was, he felt, a noble calling to serve one’s country without remuneration. In 1868 he ran unsuccessfully as a Liberal candidate for the House of Commons, at the same time that he was bringing out in serial format his Palliser novel *Phineas Finn*, a tale of a callow young Irishman’s unlikely success at winning a seat in Parliament. In or-

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<sup>16</sup> Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (London: Whitaker, Treacher, 1832; repr. New York: for the booksellers, 1832), pp. 183–85, 180.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Trollope, *North America* (New York: Harper, 1862), p. 335.

der to write convincingly about Parliament, Trollope had to ask permission of the Speaker to sit in the gallery and observe the proceedings — a contrast to the open galleries that were common in the United States. Of the relationship between the novel and his unsuccessful campaign Trollope observed drily: ‘As I was debarred from expressing my opinions in the House of Commons I took this method of declaring myself.’<sup>18</sup> The novelistic portrait that he painted of Phineas Finn, and of parliamentary politics, is neither hostile nor idealistic. In his autobiography Trollope explained that he believed novels to serve an important pedagogical function, creating models of honourable public service that can counteract more grandiose or cynical images. ‘The young man in a novel who becomes a hero, perhaps a Member of Parliament, and almost a Prime Minister, by trickery, falsehood, and flash cleverness, will have many followers’, he observed (p. 191). Trollope offers Finn as a contrast to such types. He becomes an MP neither by means of trickery nor by extraordinary ability but through sheer luck, after being chosen to run on the basis of his eloquence as a college debater, his striking good looks, and his pleasant demeanour. He envisions his new role as an advance from the mere verbalism of university debates into an arena where ‘debates would lead to action’ and ‘eloquence would have power’.<sup>19</sup> Once in Parliament he starts off slowly, gradually earning some success through a mixture of hard work and strong social instincts.

Much of the first volume of the novel is taken up with Finn’s halting efforts to make his maiden speech to the House, a prospect that he inflates in his imagination, viewing it as his chance to vindicate his election and to establish himself as an up-and-coming member. Predictably, his expectations prove crippling. At the opening of the session he listens to the speech of the opposition leader Mr Daubeny, whose ‘studied bitterness had perhaps never been equaled, and yet not a word was uttered for the saying of which he could be accused of going beyond the limits of parliamentary antagonism’ (p. 57). Trollope emphasizes the agonistic dynamic of Parliament, describing Daubeny as ‘a gladiator thoroughly well trained for the arena in which he had descended to the combat. His arrows were poisoned, and his lance was barbed, and his shot was heated red’ (p. 57), yet even so he did not overstep the bounds of parliamentary propriety. It was this type of partisan violence that Benjamin Franklin had

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<sup>18</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography of Anthony Trollope* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1912), p. 274.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Finn* (London: Dent, 1997), p. 10.

in mind when he contrasted parliamentary rhetoric with the more civilized speech of American Indians in his essay ‘Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America’, and that Frances Wright was thinking of when she compared the Roman-like American Senate to parliamentary bickering.<sup>20</sup> Such conflict was widely believed to be theatrical and not to carry over into private relationships — a difference, Trollope notes, from the United States, where the party leaders truly did hate one another, rather than just sounding as if they did. And yet the violence is not ‘merely’ rhetorical, for it frames the possibilities of debate.

The Radical member Mr Turnbull provides a second major example of parliamentary eloquence for Phineas to absorb. An admirer of ‘all political movements in America’ (p. 150), Turnbull has established himself as the voice of the people. He is the quintessential public man, with no private identity, and when he speaks in a public setting he knows that his words will circulate in the press. Turnbull’s self-confidence and superficiality mark him as a demagogue rather than a ‘great orator’ (p. 150). His powerful voice, ‘self-reliance’, and thick moral skin serve in place of strong intellect, and since he is perpetually in opposition, he is never required to master facts, solve problems, or make compromises. Consequently, ‘once he had learned the art of arranging his words as he stood upon his legs, and had so mastered his own voice as to have obtained the ear of the House, the work of his life was not difficult’ (p. 151).

These older, established men occupy fixed roles. By contrast, Phineas tacks between the strenuous task of mastering the political issues of the day and learning the protocols of Parliament on one hand, and the equally strenuous, and even more absorbing, task of navigating London high society while maintaining his relationships with his middle-class Irish family and associates on the other. Trollope stresses the continuity of these efforts by noting the place of ‘eloquence’ in each. For many pages Phineas’s private eloquence is all the reader hears, though our hero frets constantly about the need to make his maiden speech. He first attempts to overcome that hurdle in the debate over the ballot, a subject on which he has ‘strong convictions’ as to its inefficacy (p. 154). He prepares exhaustively for this momentous occasion, memorizing the heads of his speech and the substance under each head. But he is thrown off by the prospect of inserting improvised responses to those who have spoken before him — this necessity makes his heart pound and the House grow dim, and so when he is invited to speak he cedes the floor to a more senior member.

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<sup>20</sup> On Franklin, see my *Imagining Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 86–87.

The diagnosis of his failure is prompt and unanimous: he has over-prepared. He decides that his next attempt shall be made extempore, with the consequence that when the moment arrives he speaks in platitudes, repeats himself, and goes on too long, all the while distracted by the constant cheering that is the customary response to a maiden speech and by his own perception that he is failing miserably. The results are far from dazzling, though his friends tell him that it was no worse than average for a first speech. He considers quitting Parliament, but instead doubles down on committee work involving the army's contract for potted peas. In his third attempt at a first speech, Phineas is incrementally more comfortable and somewhat more cogent. He 'had strayed very wide of his intended course, but he had strayed without tumbling into ditches, or falling into sunken pits' (p. 314).

With this portrait of a newly elected MP, Trollope evidently hoped to deflate the expectations of young men who aspired to be the next Cicero or Burke. Yet he does so without mocking Phineas Finn — at least not harshly — and portrays his pursuit of a political career in a manner that respects the choice but does not sugar-coat it or ignore the compromises it entails. Eventually Finn achieves some muted grandeur when he asserts his independence from his party over Irish tenant-right and must resign his seat, and the novel ends with his marriage to his Irish sweetheart. This resolution is only temporary, however, for in the later Palliser novels Finn returns to Parliament. Trollope's deflationary realism makes *Phineas Finn* a novel whose purpose is to foster respect for tradition without idealizing it, to attend to particular situations and personalities, and to embrace process and justify a qualified willingness to compromise. It is, in short, an anti-utopian novel of political moderation and incrementalism, in which the glamorous image of political oratory in a revolutionary vein serves as shorthand for an unrealistic, and, at times, dangerously ideological approach to politics.<sup>21</sup>

Trollope's sceptical attitude towards inspiration in literature as well as in oratory comes through clearly in his *Autobiography*, where he portrayed his writing practices as businesslike, even mechanical. Henry Adams read the work soon after it appeared and announced, 'after seeing how coolly and neatly a man like Trollope can destroy the last vestige of heroism in his own life, I object to allowing mine to be murdered by any-

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<sup>21</sup> In its political attitudes, Trollope's fiction shares important affinities with the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, as Amanda Claybaugh discusses in *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 45–47.

one except myself.<sup>22</sup> In *The Education of Henry Adams* he went on to create his famous third-person narrator, who takes a decidedly sceptical view of his younger, more idealistic self. Adams, who spent the Civil War in London serving as secretary to his diplomat father, is often characterized as politically conservative and an opponent of American democracy. A comparison with Trollope, however, suggests something different. Where Trollope espoused a thoroughgoing realism tied to the British empirical tradition, Adams's ironic posture developed in response to two competing forms of political idealism: Andrew Jackson's democracy, based on white manhood suffrage and political partisanship; and the alternative path offered by John Quincy Adams, Henry's grandfather who in 1828 was defeated by Jackson in his search for a second term, and whose Ciceronian vision put eloquence at the heart of republican self-government.<sup>23</sup>

In 1880 Adams published *Democracy: An American Novel*, an ironic portrait of Washington society during the Grant administration, which clearly bears the marks of Trollope's influence.<sup>24</sup> Adams's contempt for Grant and his administration are well known, forming as they do the fulcrum around which *The Education of Henry Adams* pivots. After returning from England in 1868, Adams moved to Washington and became a journalist, seeking to expose government corruption and incompetence, with a particular focus on civil service reform. He soon abandoned hopes for a career in politics and accepted a position on the history faculty at Harvard and the editorship of the *North American Review*, but he returned to Washington to write in 1877. His projects at this time included the life of

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<sup>22</sup> 'To John Hay', in *The Letters of Henry Adams*, ed. by J. C. Levenson and others, 6 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982–88), II: (1868–1885) (1982), 532 (23 January 1884).

<sup>23</sup> I discuss the alternatives presented by Jackson and John Quincy Adams in 'Histories of Democracy and Empire', *American Quarterly*, 59 (2007), 107–33; and more briefly in *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic*, pp. 3–5. I consider Henry Adams's response to the Ciceronian vision of his ancestors in 'Henry Adams, Political Reform, and the Legacy of the Republican Roman Senate', forthcoming in the *Classical Receptions Journal*.

<sup>24</sup> The essays collected by Natalie Fuehrer Taylor in *A Political Companion to Henry Adams* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010) offer a valuable range of approaches to Adams and *Democracy*. Adams's political thought is considered in relation to some elements of its historical context (though not in connection to classical historiography and classical scholar Theodor Mommsen) in Brooks D. Simpson's *The Political Education of Henry Adams* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), and in James P. Young's *Henry Adams: The Historian as Political Theorist* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001).

Albert Gallatin, who represented for Adams the finest qualities of the republican statesman; and *Democracy*, in which Grant's Washington represents the antithesis of those qualities.

Senator Silas Ratcliffe is the villain of *Democracy*. He embodies the corruption of republican and deliberative virtues, as manifested by his reputation for eloquence in the service of party, which Adams shows to be really a service of self. In somewhat the same manner that Phineas Finn learns the workings of Parliament through observation, Adams sends his heroine, Madeline Lee, and her sister Sybil to listen to speeches in the Senate. As women, lacking even the franchise, they are spectators rather than prospective members, though they exercise influence in other ways: at Madeline's salon, and through relationships with powerful men. The Senate poses a contrast with their private realm of influence. At first Sybil thinks of the Senate as 'a place where people went to recite speeches', which she assumes 'were useful and had a purpose'. 'This is a very common conception of Congress', Adams archly writes; 'many Congressmen share it.'<sup>25</sup> Madeline is more interested in the political process than her sister, as well as being more perceptive and discriminating. After immersing herself in the speeches as delivered on the floor or printed in the Congressional Record, she identifies Ratcliffe as the Senator of most substance and arranges to meet him. Seated next to him at a dinner party, she compares his recent speech favourably to Daniel Webster's oratory, a bit of flattery that instantly hooks Ratcliffe. The specific passage from Ratcliffe's speech that Madeline praises is telling of Adams's purpose: 'Our strength lies in this twisted and tangled mass of isolated principles, the hair of the half-sleeping giant of Party' (p. 19). In this semi-incoherent metaphor Ratcliffe characterizes his principles as isolated, rather than having some logical or organic relationship to one another. They are 'twisted and tangled' — not woven or braided into an orderly form — into a 'mass' — the word suggests 'the masses' — which is revealed to be the hair of a giant that is only semi-conscious. This dishevelled, drowsy monster is a political party and represents one of the main forces that Adams believed had corrupted American politics.

It is on this matter of party politics that his differences with Trollope rest. Trollope understood parties as traditional elements of British politics. In *Phineas Finn* party politics has its bathetic and bizarre elements — think of the outgoing minister delivering a tongue-lashing to his

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Adams, 'Democracy: An American Novel', in *Novels, Mont Saint Michel, The Education* (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 1–184 (pp. 11–12).



successor in Parliament while holding him in the highest private esteem — but it is a good-enough system whose incremental reforms avert the excesses of revolutionary violence. In Adams's *Democracy* parties are comparative newcomers — the second party system had taken shape around 1830, during Jackson's first presidential term — and Adams believed that they had fundamentally undermined Congress, thereby corrupting the entire system. As the Senate's most eloquent and august member, Ratcliffe reveals this truth through his bizarre metaphor of 'the half-sleeping giant'.

In the end, disabused of her illusions about American politics, Madeline Lee flees the spectacle of democratic dysfunction in the nation's capital. 'I must know whether America is right or wrong' ('Democracy', p. 39), she sighs early in the novel, and she has found her answer in Ratcliffe's brutality and self-serving hunger for power. The gap between the democratic ideal and its partisan reality infuses Adams's version of the realist political novel with irony. For Adams, the failure to achieve that ideal is rhetorical in nature and relates to the place of deliberative eloquence in the novel. With parties dominant, political oratory no longer serves the purposes that Cicero and his republican heirs in the United States had envisioned for it: to persuade; to clarify alternatives; to rouse people to resist oppression. These were the core republican values held by Adams's great-grandfather John Adams and his grandfather John Quincy Adams. In his depiction of Lee's visit to the Senate, Adams portrayed not the substance of Ratcliffe's speech, but his heroine's conversation with her companion, the Confederate veteran John Carrington, who describes the action the way a sports commentator today might call the plays:

See how he dodges all the sharp issues. What a thing it is to be a Yankee! What a genius the fellow has for leading a party! Do you see how well it is all done? The new President flattered and conciliated, the party united and given a strong lead. (p. 15)

This is rhetoric in the service of self and party, not thoughtful deliberation about the common good. The absence of substantive eloquence in the novel is a symbol of the political corruption brought on by the party system, and the only solution is to walk away — as Adams himself walked away from a place in his family political dynasty.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> As Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin have shown in *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

For Trollope, this hostility towards the unfulfilled aspirations of the modern republic is too much drama. After Phineas Finn fails as an orator, he puts his energies instead into committee work. The value of Parliament, Trollope suggests, is not in its speeches but in the efficacy of the system as a whole. Trollope puts narrative ahead of rhetoric in both a social and a formal sense when he writes, ‘no reader of these pages will desire that the speeches in the debate should be even indicated’ (*Phineas Finn*, p. 313). The aesthetic pleasures of narrative fiction, and the smooth functioning of the state, are presented as requiring a sharply limited place for oratory. At the same time, the novel’s plot revolves around the modest but still real importance of parliamentary eloquence. Even as Finn’s dreams of oratorical celebrity remain unfulfilled, parliamentary debates retain an essential place in Trollope’s depiction of the civic and cultural life of Victorian Britain.

## Conclusion

Walter Ong was right to stress the common roots of oral and literary forms in rhetoric. Rather than marking a divergence of forms, as Ong thought, the revolutionary Romantic period witnessed their extension and elaboration, as newly popular oral genres such as political oratory interacted with written and printed genres like the novel to constitute evolving systems of meaning. The emerging verbal arts were further enriched by the communications revolution that began early in the nineteenth century with the invention of the electric telegraph. That revolution included the electric light, which altered reading habits, as well as

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2000), Adams’s distrust of, and distaste for, the political realm were widely shared by his contemporaries. In chapter 4, they discuss the relatively small place granted to party politics in the popular fiction of the day. After the Civil War, parties and elections had a larger, though still mainly negative, presence in fiction (pp. 184–89).

Eloquence occupies a notable place in American literary fiction of the twentieth century, ranging from Upton Sinclair’s descriptions of radical oratory in *The Jungle* (1906), to the speech scenes in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), to the carnivalesque oratory in Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* (1968), to Joan Didion’s updating of Adams’s novel in her own version of *Democracy* (1984), where the absence of public oratory indexes the turn to covert operations by the United States government. In *Native Speaker* (1995), Chang-Rae Lee links speech instruction and urban ethnic politics at the core of immigrant identity.

the aural and visual media of the gramophone, the telephone, the radio, moving pictures, and television. Today's digital revolution is an extension and reconfiguration of earlier media forms, and it follows similar processes of emergence. The digital turn provides a welcome opportunity to recuperate valuable elements in Ong's work, incorporate key insights from Derrida, and move beyond the Ong–Derrida divide.

A focus on emerging media offers a flexible methodology and a vast archive. Already it has generated insight into the dynamic processes of culture and a rich aesthetic appreciation of specific works. The range of topics opened up by a media-focused approach to nineteenth-century American culture includes, for example, the oral 'event' of poetry recitation in periodicals; the uncovering of African American women's experiences through a focus on silence in early abolitionist serials; the dynamic nature of theatrical scripts and productions; the role of print in the development of American vernacular music; and government reports considered as 'orature'.<sup>27</sup> The articles in this issue of *19* consider the British and transatlantic contexts of media emergence and include readings of novels, short stories, and other genres of writing in which oral phenomena such as gossip and the phonograph provide central formal and thematic elements. As they show, competition, collaboration, and redefinition among media, as well as the 'remediation' of older forms in a new media landscape, were prominent features of the transatlantic cultural scene of the Victorian era. The broad and fertile field opened up by historical media studies has room for the approaches represented here, and many more as well.

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<sup>27</sup> These are some of the topics addressed in *Cultural Narratives*, ed. by Gustafson and Sloat.