

Telegraphic Literature, Artificial Subjectivity and the Challenges to Communication Technology in Ella Cheever Thayer's *Wired Love* (1889)

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ABSTRACT

American literature at the turn of the 20th century has always been responsive to progress through the recurrent trope of men and machines. Narratives on female subjectivity became quite popular as well. However, the literary production on the usage of technology and the construction of a “wired self” has received quite little attention. The objective of this study is twofold. First, to look at the complex alteration of identity through one of the first examples of communication technologies, the Telegraph, in Ella Cheever Thayer’s autofictional novel *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1889). Second, is to illustrate female subjectivity through an extremely topical narrative that anticipates the problematic relationship between women and machines in American literature. Through the lens of literature, the researcher will investigate the roots of one of the first means of communication and its ability to change the way in which women began to communicate with bodies and machines in the Nineteenth Century, thus challenging the concept of personal identity anticipating the age of computer networks and digitalization. This analysis will narrow down the scope onto the projection of the female Self through the ability of technology to challenge the traditional notion of a bounded individual. In this way, we will discuss how Thayer’s narrative offers an example of technology and the public self in a “performance of identity” torn between reality and virtuality. Thayer’s (unfortunately) little-known novel, *Wired Love*, can be considered as an example of autofiction, which portrays one of the first problematic challenges of identity through technology at the dawn of the 1900s. Telegraphist and then novelist, Ella Cheever Thayer used her own story as a telegraph operator to illustrate the challenges of communication in a romantic love affair between two telegraph operators who mistakenly intercept each other over the wire and start exchanging messages as modern online dating. In a twist of ambiguities, through “identity mixups”, the novel offers a first literary example of the complex dynamics between identity and technology.

Introduction

In our contemporary age of technologic enthusiasm much has been written and said about the relationship between men and machines. Indeed, communication technologies have always highlighted the problematic challenges to personal identity and the boundaries between human vs virtual, real vs artificial. However, the origin of the man-machine nexus and the consequent threats to personal identity have deep roots. As we shall see, since early forms of communication technology and the consequent suspension of the physical presence for what today we would define as “virtual identity”, emerges the problematic concern of a realistic Self being eventually substituted by an unrealistic or rather, an artificial one. As such, the first technologies of communication, as the Internet today well demonstrates, “provide an escape from the limits of the body” (Stubbs 2014, p. 91). As this paper aims to show, from a rather broad

perspective, technologies of communication construct what Sherry Turkle² defined as “laboratories for the construction of identity” (1997). Put simply, what she tends to affirm is the possibility to perform, mask and transcend, the Self beyond the limits of the machine.

In her seminal work on the role of communication technologies, bodies and the human- illustrating the analogies with our daily digital world- Laura Otis advises that, “Since the 1840s, electronic communication networks have changed the way we see our bodies, thus challenging the sense and the meaning of personal identity” (Otis 2001, p. 10). Drawing heavily on the interrelations between bodies and communication systems, Otis traces back the origin of the complex relationship between technology and the human self at the dawn of the “wired world”. Given this premise, one should eventually ask: What happened when thoughts, words and bodies, started to become wired? Following this line of inquiry, we can eventually consider that the massive technological advancements have always breached the boundaries between human and virtual, presence and absence. In this sense, the machine itself, or technology in its broader sense, produces a personal distraction from material contingencies, which eventually determine the creation of a distinct and abstract realm.

Having noticed the relevance of the recurrent presence of the machine contained within American narratives, Caecilia Tichi notes that literature in America became the fertile context in which technology could be represented (1987, p. 17).³ By browsing the index of American novels, at the turn of the 20th century, authors summarized the pace of change thus illustrating the metaphor of electric bodies and the creation or rather, the problematization, of identities through what we could define as a sort of Oedipal complex towards the machine. We hereby refer to the generating force of the technological medium as a source for the creation of hybrid and inhuman identities in which the body becomes the instrument of contact between technology and the human. In his enthralling poem, Walt Whitman said it best when he wrote: “I Sing the Body Electric” (1855). Through a vividly exhalating corporeal image and a praise to physicality, the body is equated or even illustrated by a sort of electrification of its component parts in a machine-like image. In a similar way, Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Man that was used Up” (1839) offers an example of a mechanical body reassembled in artificial parts which eventually result in the hybrid image of eminent general John Smith, dismembered in war and now stiffly reassembled in an almost entirely mechanical body, fully “un-manned” and “un-made” – and eventually composed of prostheses.

Overall, however, throughout the 20th century, the machine became an object of desire that gave life to new bodies and identities, as is it is well illustrated by postmodern narratives such as, for instance, by Thomas Pynchon’s futuristic scenario in *V* (1963), which offers an example of the erotic impulse for technology in a parodic image of the machine as a desirable force. From an overwhelming yet unsettling perspective, Pynchon describes the almost erotic impulse of one of his characters who fantasizes on the image of a female body, almost entirely mechanical, composed of artificial parts eventually dismembered and reassembled if needed. The image is described as follows: “Someday, please God, there would be an all-electronic woman...Any problems with her, you could look it up in the manual. [...] Remove and replace that was all” (Pynchon 1963, p. 361).

However, as centuries and technologies progressed, the boundaries between bodies and machines began to blur. The genesis of increasingly artificial identities eventually implied the creation of hybrid bodies enhanced with technology. In this way, it is therefore clear how the machine becomes a key factor in the redefinition of our identity and our bodily relation to the driving force of the century, namely, digital technology. Aligning with this

² Turkle’s study *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1997) is essential to analyze the relationship to the screen and the interaction with the machine. For further analysis see her most recent work *Alone Together: Why We Expect more from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011).

³ This is certainly true if we think of the wide varieties of texts illustrating the relationship between men and machines from the late 1800s onward. For a general overview on technology and its impact on the American imagination see Leo Marx’s seminal works: *The Machine in the Garden* and *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature and Culture in the United States* (1988).

image in a posthuman ethic, from a feminist perspective, Donna Haraway has explained how modern technologies blend together the body into the technological machine. In a technologically dominated culture, humans are destined to become machines or, as Haraway defines them, *cyborgs*, human constraints with a massive technological influence that changes the ethics of the human body. This transformation of bodies into mechanical components eventually changes our approach to progress.⁴

The recurrent refrain of bodies and machines has been repetitively used in literature to epitomize the power of progress from the second half of the 1800s portraying the ways in which technology can be understood in relation to the human, as witnessed by Mary Shelley's first literary example of physical alteration through the machine, *Frankenstein* (1818), in which an inanimate creature is assembled and brought to life via electricity. The novel unveils the power of electric technology and illustrates one of the first examples of a human body which is therefore transformed through the mesmerizing potential of progress. This notable example demonstrates how the machine becomes the complex metaphor of the symbolic pairing creator vs creature (the image par excellence of both science-fiction and the post-human age).

At this point, we should also recall Tim Armstrong's compelling study on technology in its relationship to literature, highlighting modernist writers' capacity to discuss the complex interconnections between body and technology in a moment of rapid technological changes such as those of the modernist age. The spectacularism of electrical circuits and the transformative sense of alienation produced by the human interaction with the machine, remind us of a filmic reference to the mechanical girl protagonist of the dystopic future of Fritz Lang's science fiction film, *Metropolis* (1927). The creation of an android with feminine features and a mechanical body eventually capable of replacing the human, represent the cinematographic potential of the machine in the collective imagination, affirming the myth of technology as a central theme in the future of the modern age. A little later, was the movie *The Colossus of New York* (1957), which exemplified the epitome of the mechanical body developed through the transplant of a human brain into a giant robot, re-humanizing the man through the machine.

Getting back to the focus of our analysis, namely American literature, we can see quite easily how narratives in the 19th and 20th centuries have been responsive to progress using the recurrent cliché of the machine as a dynamic trope, thus representing a new concept of identity through its relationship to technological novelties. In this sense, authors felt the need to create narratives reflecting the interconnecting liaison of men and communications systems through their interconnecting bonds.

Shifting now the attention to the second aspect at the basis of this discussion, namely personal identity in its relationship to "early" communication technologies in the 1800s, we shall now draw attention to the telegraph as the first form of technical progress which offered a valid example of self-identity challenges through technology's potential. In order to gain perspective of what lies beneath this means' technological influx, we should consider that, as Katherine Stubbs has suggested, "The telegraph did in fact raise remarkably similar issues regarding the status of the body and personal identity" (Stubbs, 2014, p. 92). Highlighting the resonance of this means of communication as Internet's 19th century precursor, in his compelling study on the importance of the electromagnetic telegraph, Tom Standage⁵ notes that,

In the nineteenth-century there were no televisions, airplanes, computers or spacecraft; nor were antibiotics, credit cards, microwave ovens, compact discs, or mobile phones. There was, however, an Internet. During the 19th century a new communication technology was developed that

⁴ In a short essay I cannot hope to provide an exhaustive debate on the relationship between bodies and machines. For more on this see Tichi, Cecilia (1987) *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature and Culture in Modernist America* and Armstrong, Tim. (1998) *Modernism, Technology and the Body*. Together with Katherine Hayles' book, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Haraway's essay is considered foundational in the theory of the posthuman.

⁵ For a broad discussion on the telegraph and its resonance in American culture see Standage, T. (1998). *The Victorian Internet*.

allowed people to communicate almost instantly across great distances, in effect striking the world faster and further than ever before. [...] Romances blossomed over the wires and a technological subculture was establishing itself. Does all this sound familiar? [...] Modern Internet users are in many ways the heirs of the telegraphic tradition. (Standage, 2014, pp. XVII-XVIII)

Drawing heavily on the telegraph's potential, stories by and about telegraphists became quite popular in the second half of the 19th century creating a new literary genre on its own, known as "Telegraphic Literature," which aimed at delineating the trivialization of identity as well as the sense of an unknown reality produced by this novelty. The new telegraph line, which dominated America's public imagination in the second half of the 1800s, altered spatial and temporal boundaries (Carey, 1983), providing a new model for thinking about bodies, identities and the relationship to communication. Yet, in the 1850s, "the telegraph offered the signs of a distant reality" (Otis, p. 9), as well as the opportunity to develop what today we would define as "second Self," played out and re-located in the wired space of the machine. In Otis's words, "This new form of communication and the possibility to send messages challenged the traditional notion of bounded individual and therefore one was defined through his connection to others" (Otis p. 10).

Scholars have taken up the effort of investigating the merging of bodies and identities thus claiming that "The telegraph has generated what has been defined as an 'Identity Masquerade', some kind of meditation in the ways communication can be used to negotiate embodiment," (as cited in Gitleman and Pingway, 2003, p. 93). We hereby refer to a real masquerade under false identities, enabling users to "engage in a covert form of masquerade, trying on a new body and a new social identity" (Stubbs, p. 92). Far further, critical theory has demonstrated how "cyberspace allows one to pick an identity, to mask, mimic and transcend bodily identities and interact with the world as somebody else" (Nayar, 2010, p. 14). This phenomenon, with which we are familiar in our digital age, determines a communication based on an invisible and hidden identity replacing a realistic physical one which, in this case, one can venture to define as "over the wire". Given the nature of this technology, we can see quite easily how telegraphic communication, also known as "Victorian Internet", evidently played with the issue of selfhood.

Therefore, narratives about telegraphy, considered as the first true precursor among modern means of communication, accomplished the difficult task to create stories reflecting the destabilizing bond between identities and machines from a psychological perspective. However, to some extent, telegraphy has developed the complex alteration of identity crystallizing it in a more socio-psychological than a post-human ethic. The emotive register produced by the telegraph and the aesthetics of communication employed by its usage, led to conflicting feelings of alienation, considering the profession even from a gendered perspective, opening new positions for American women, as it is well epitomized by Henry James's novella *In the Cage* (1898). The narrative criticizes an overall dissatisfaction with telegraphy thus offering an example of one of the first concerns about privacy and technological confinement for women, either trapped at the telegraphic office or captured by the virtual potentiality of the wire.

This new system of communication eventually produced suspended, masked and elusive identities. The repetitive strategy of using the power of the telegraph with a narrative tension, has illustrated how technology can influence subjectivity miles away with a distinct personal rhythm, which articulates relationships at distance through hidden interlocutors not knowing the presence at the other end of the wire. Novels epitomizing the tension between telegraphic communication and identities become examples of what Goble categorizes as "techno-romance" (2007, p. 399), expressing the technicalities of communication and therefore the duplicities and vertigos of personal identity. Conceived in this manner, similar fictions of this genre are: the humoristic volume of anecdotes about telegraphic communication, *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes* (1882), or even Twain's tale "The Loves of Alonzo Fritz Clarens and Rosannah Ethelton" (1878), considered as the first piece of American literature on the telephone in which the means in question serves as a vehicle for a controversial image of technology and the play of a realistic identity. Clearly, both narratives describe this world of controversial liaisons produced by the new means of communication technology.

In her autobiographical (unfortunately) little known novel, *Wired Love- A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1879), Ella Cheever Thayer used her experience as a telegraph operator to recount the deliriously mediated relationship between two telegraphists who fall in love over the wire overcoming some melodramatic identity mix-ups. Through an almost autobiographical narrative and a *mise en scène* of female subjectivity, Thayer constructs a female “I” which transcends the limits of traditional narration, constructing a delightful, original and extremely contemporary novel, easily comparable to modern examples of Internet dating. *Wired Love* revolves around the figure of Nattie Rogers, a telegraph operator, and Clem Stenwood, a mysterious man she has mistakenly intercepted over the wire. The plot unfolds with various twists, and a case of hidden identities. During their exchange of communication, an operator who discovered their secret conversation tries to claim to be “C” appearing at the office thus stealing Clem’s realistic identity. This unfortunate misinterpretation invites us to consider how the telegraph, as today’s most developed forms of digital technology, suspends the body presence for the sake of a virtual/unrealistic Self.

As the narrative unfolds, the two protagonists “virtually interact” ignoring their gender and their reciprocate names. Thayer summarizes the enigmatic nature of identity and the creation of a virtual Self, produced by telegraphic communication as follows:

Miss Natty Rogers going home to that back room of hers, found herself still pondering upon the probable sex of “C.” To her, as yet, there was a certain fascination about telegraphy. But she had a presentiment that in time the charm would give place to monotony...As she lighted the gas in the room, she thought not of these things that were so often in her mind, but of “C”, and then scolded herself for caring whether that distant individual was a man or a woman. (Thayer WL 2014, p. 17)

Evidence of the characters’ encoded identities and uncertain perception of their gender is also found in the passage where the narrator unveils the mystery behind the characters’ realistic personalities. Shortly afterwards Thayer writes: “[...] and all this time it never occurred to them that excepting ‘N’ was for Nattie, and ‘C’ was for Clem, they knew really nothing about each other, not even their real names” (WL p. 22). This is another fascinating aspect of the telegraph, which certainly contributed to challenging the self also with the usage of a simple and single initial to identify the name of the sender, masking the real identity of the user. Undoubtedly, the body is also problematized by the usage of this technology. Quite simply, this implies that Thayer uses telecommunications as metaphorical vehicles for human relations.

Indeed, in *Wired Love* it is difficult to distinguish minds and bodies from machines, they somehow perform the same functions and like the narration fully illustrates, the characters offer examples of how technological systems merge with producing multiple concerns, more prominently identity fraud and unrealistic personalities. In this sense, Nattie understands the importance of the machine, “holding in some slight contempt the possible abilities of the human portion of its machinery” (WL, p. 1).

In a broader sense, the telegraph and the new machines at the turn of the 20th century, as Thayer’s narration confirms, produce the notion of the “Other Self”, whose presence is suspended and replaced by what today we would term as “networked identity”. In this way, Nattie and Clem exchange messages under what I venture to define as a literary example of “encrypted identities” or, using its modern definition, those virtual selves we have previously mentioned, and which dominate our post-human/digital age. The story reveals the creation of virtual identities, anticipating our online world. In such an interpretative approach, the technological and telegraphic identity eventually becomes invisible, distant and almost trapped over an artificial reality, filtered by the machine.

Chapter Three entitled, “Visible and Invisible Friends,” also confirms this view. Disappointed by a person who has already introduced himself by faking the identity of the true Clem, Nattie refuses wire communication and re-starts

only after discovering the identity of the real Clem. Even though the two lovers like each other in real life, they seem quite uncomfortable in using verbal communication. Clem in fact asserts, "It is nicer talking on the wire, isn't it? ...a wire is so necessary to our happiness" (*WL*, pp. 89-90). Not surprisingly, the novel ends with the two protagonists both in the attempt to re-start telegraphing their love.

Without a doubt, the most thrilling aspect of this novel is its parallel with our present world. The loss of identity through technology and the need for communication through a technological means prefigures the scenario we are living in our present. A memorable passage foretells the modernity of this timeless story written when thoughts, selves and humans, began to become wired. Thayer prophetically announces that,

We will soon be able to do everything by electricity; who knows but some genius will invent something for the especial use of lovers? Something, for instance, to carry in their pockets, so when they are far away from each other, and pine for a sound of 'that beloved voice,' they will have only to take up this electrical apparatus, put it to their ears, and be happy. Ah blissful lovers of the future. (*WL*, pp. 27)

Following the vicissitudes of two telegraphists who first experience issues of identity through electric communication, Ella Cheever Thayer addresses concepts we are facing today such as communication difficulties and identity problems caused by technology. Indeed, the novel represents one of the very first examples of identity theft and the first challenging experience of an unrealistic cyber-Self. Indeed, technology in the novel operates at a very personal level challenging the notions of bounded individual and therefore highlighting the ambiguity of the senders' unrealistic identities.

To conclude, it would be easy to argue that Thayer's cybernetics of romance and almost autobiographical tale epitomizes the dynamics of female subjectivity, the potential of virtual communication and its power to subvert the notion of selfhood, merging bodies and machines in a technological system in which communication assumes even a form of mystery destabilizing the true nature of personhood. The power of secrecy is well epitomized by the erotic thrill of uncertain knowledge, prompted by the psychological drive of the telegraph, and for which Nattie posits another identity for Clem, whose realistic Self is hidden behind the machine.

In light of this, we can see how the aesthetics of telegraphy therefore transcended personal identity for the sake of a technological one. As the effective plot unfolds, the reader is encouraged to read the role of technology in perpetuation of a constant performance of the Self, in an ambiguous game of alterities between artificial vs realistic and consequently, human vs virtual. Without underestimating the recurrent presence of the post-human in our contemporary literature, *Wired Love* offers an insightful perspective on how the politics of identity have been eventually redefined, seduced and shaped by the first means of communication, such as the telegraph, which allowed to renegotiate the dynamics of identity in an unrealistic reality produced by one of the first examples of technological novelties.

This modern and extremely prophetic novel offers an insightful perspective to consider that the challenges produced by the web are not a new image. Indeed, the body is in connection, suspended and eventually represented in the space of the circuit which invites people to try out alternative personae.⁶ Through the power of telegraphic communication, Thayer's characters – as modern users of the Web 2.0 – re-build their identity within the artificial space of the machine, simulating an unrealistic image of themselves developing a new concept of subjectivity. As Henry James judiciously suggested, "We are all telegraphists expecting unreliable bodies and machines to inform us about the world" (as cited in Otis, p. 226).

⁶ We are familiar with this in our way of relating today through social networks.

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