

GOSSIP AND SUBVERSION IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

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Gossip and Subversion in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction

Echo's Economies

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For Risu-san

OLD JAPANESE PROVERBS

人の噂も七十五日

(Gossip only continues for seventy-five days)

人の口に戸は立てられぬ

(Gossip can never be stopped)

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Preface and Acknowledgements: The Crisis of Credit

Although there is no way of determining this with certainty (the traditional *entrée* of gossip and gossips), as a reader of literature and books about it, I have the distinct feeling that the acknowledgements page has been a growth area of late. It would seem that as the critical text has increasingly become a commodified 'project', a number of productive hands – heretofore unacknowledged – have come to demand their (occasionally imaginary) share of authorship. Research students, typists, the Dean who sponsored a research application, proofreaders, wives (who have sometimes become ex-wives by the publication date), parents who encouraged learning at an early age, the enthusiasm of an ageing thesis director – all are elevated to become part of a 'family' of near collective author(ity). The acknowledgement to an infant whose cry did *not* disturb a crucial stage of the writing would prove one of the tenets of deconstruction: that absence too is presence, and must be acknowledged. There is even a tale, hopefully apocryphal, of an author who included one of his sworn enemies on the acknowledgements page in the fervent hope that having been so 'contained', no responsible editor of an influential periodical would dare send the *bête noir* the book for review. Hence the acknowledgements page, like other family 'lists', becomes a repository even for a volume's potential negations, a clear sign that it is nearing the status of a genre.

One wonders when the threat of diverse hands and influences upon a productive process became so great as to necessitate the re-instantiation by which a (signing) 'father' of the text had to take back what had been given in a legalistic recuperative gesture: 'I remain solely responsible for all errors or infelicities.' Even if not responsible for the contents, the author is made to serve *in loco parentis*. Recently, even the casual oral comment in the echoing corridors of academe has come to demand its inscribed place. The revised Statement of Professional Ethics of the Modern Language

Association of America contains the following chilling reminder that fugitive discourse must be acknowledged:

Unpublished scholarly material which may be encountered when it is read aloud, circulated in manuscript, or discussed – is especially vulnerable to *unacknowledged appropriation* [ital. added], since the lack of a printed text makes originality hard to establish.

The oral contributor – like the gossip-figure – is to be brought into a *responsible* academic community, even though such a ‘bringing to book’ might violate other communities, like those founded on friendships fashioned by the casual exchange of ideas. In addition to whatever other functions it might have, then, the acknowledgements page serves the myth of academic totalization: all that is disembodied must be given an Origin, a proper owner (as if the two were interchangeable). That whose life *is* the life of circulation must be fixed. The irony of the usual supplementing coda should not be lost on us: ‘It would be impossible to include the names of all who have contributed.’ And in truth, most of us recognize that the acknowledgements page(s) are entirely dispensable in most instances save, God forbid, for those wilfully or otherwise *omitted*.

How is it possible that a convention can be simultaneously legally necessary and entirely dispensable? How can a convention reflect the dream of totalization, even as it confesses to being fragmentary and inconclusive? Is the acknowledgements page an anachronistic *appendix* to the body of the text or, is it indistinguishable from the inscribed body, as in Paul Theroux’s *World’s End and Other Stories*, wherein the narrative consists only of its own acknowledgements? These questions might suggest that whom, how, and where to acknowledge has become a crucial part of our critical discourse, sufficiently important to warrant legal and institutional intervention so as to attempt its governance. And yet most of us read the acknowledgements only to learn who is *stylishly* ‘in’ or ‘out’.

It was not always thus, for far too many examples of the Epistle Dedicatory or the Epistle to a Reader are extant in literary history, albeit largely before the nineteenth-century novel. A kind of ‘dedication’ appears to have occupied this space, now reserved for acknowledgements, which defined the book as a real *gift*, traditionally sent to a master or teacher of the intellectual trade by an apprentice, claiming descent from his patriarch. Dedication editions were elaborately packaged and often presented with the

ceremony befitting a 'family' of interests and influences. Often, the presentation included a certain defensive posture toward real or imagined rivals from other 'schools' or literary families. At what point, one wonders, did a gesture which sought to affirm a writer or critic's place in a hierarchical tradition, become something else which might include the family cat?

A radical change in the nature of the dedication is to be seen in one of the authors treated in this volume: Sir Walter Scott. The assorted bibliophiles, collectors and would-be authors who seek to enrich and recuperate a genealogy of literary descent in his work are scatologically ridiculed as an obsolete gerontocracy obsessed with

ancient histories or in the little work compiled by Julius *Obsequens* [ital. added] by the learned Scheffer, the editor, to his patron, Benedictine Shytte, Baron of Dudershoff.

Scott is able to achieve this parody of literary dedication at the same time that, under his impetus, the very conditions of novelistic production were undergoing such dramatic change. Given the fact that he was simultaneously the author, a joint stockholder and later sole proprietor of a publishing house, and the owner, through changes in copyright law, of the regular reproduction of his works in a cheap format for mass consumption, Scott was well-placed to realize to what extent the ownership of discourse had become complicated. Suddenly, the discursive stage at which ownership arises comes to be indeterminable. Because of Scott's incredible popularity, his 'investment' in a productive process came to be threatened by counterfeit Scott novels imported from cheaper labour markets, so that suddenly 'authorship' comes to be intricately in questions of the 'authorized', even as these new forms of social reproduction were obscuring the lines of narrative patriarchy. Perhaps what we are describing is merely a shift from a landed model of literary investment to an industrial one, with value added by different hands at different stages of a productive process. As the first commoner to be knighted in the nineteenth century, Sir Walter Scott in some sense represents a new kind of *entitlement*: credit accrues from something other than noble descent from a landed family.

The Oxford English Dictionary reminds us that 'acknowledgement' itself was originally synonymous with 'knowledge', before

evolving to include notions of personal confession (recognition as self-knowledge or admission). By the early nineteenth century, 'to acknowledge' was 'to own as genuine, to avow in legal form'. Confession remains inherent in the concept of 'avowal', to be sure, but the sudden appearance of the demand for the 'genuine' (as opposed to the inauthentic) in the chronological development of meanings, would suggest that the acknowledgement page was being used to bond coercively an identity between ownership and authenticity that had become severed. Since so many hands (some of them invisible, like those which Adam Smith had used earlier) were combined in the production of cultural objects, a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate circulation was suddenly necessary; *credit* must be given even though the nature of the *creditor's* precise investment is not entirely clear. Otherwise, it will be dissimulated *within* the work.

Gossip is the (often) studied resistance to *propriety* – the ownership of discourse imagined to be self-same or identical. The forms that this resistance assumes in nineteenth-century fiction is the business – albeit one based upon a different economy – of this book. Hence, the difficulty, inherently common to gift-giving if we are to believe Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida or Lewis Hyde, of restoring the acknowledgements page as a genuine gift. For, once a gift has become part of an economy of exchange, it cannot be given save as part of a symbolic exchange which nullifies its materiality. In Japan, an elaborate social code prescribes in fact that a gift valued at one-half the price of the original gift be customarily returned to the donor within a prescribed time-period (seventy days for wedding gifts; one hundred days for monetary donations at funerals, the *kōden*). Hence one never gives without receiving and never receives without giving. All gifts are *already* enmeshed within a web of determined social relations which insures that one can never give too much, a kind of tax upon the largesse of those who would control by their donations. The practice has a side-effect of creating an endless supply of unconsumed (and in truth often unconsumable) 'gifts'. The dedicatory gift accompanied by a prefatory epistle in the eighteenth century ceased to be that when it came to be perceived as existing within a 'field' of institutions exclusively dedicated to the publication and reception of literary works and their commentaries. The Dedication's 'echo' may well be the complimentary 'copy' or the circulating academic off-print, often similarly resistant to consumption.

The conception and production of this book have always been indistinguishable from gossip. It had a theoretical and practical inception when I was invited to speak at the University of the Ryukyus on 'New Journalism and the Economy of Speculation' under the grateful sponsorship of the United States Information Agency. Once I had completed my academic assignment, a companion – whom I should describe as my wife-to-be – and I had made plans to rendezvous on the remote island of Iriomote, illicitly combining work and pleasure. As chance (or design) would have it, the largest typhoon in a decade roared through the archipelago, disrupting air travel, our travel budget, and the itinerary for the return to jobs on the main island(s) of Japan. Separately, at a decent half-hour interval, each of us telephoned the university switchboard; I to cancel my classes, my companion to explain her unexpected absence to an administrative section chief. Upon our return three days later than expected, the anonymous telephone operator asked each of us separately (and after a decent interval), if we had by chance met in the sole airport's departure lounge. My delay in answering initiated a community-wide narrative of our friendship which travelled with the speed of the typhoon. In making a resolvable 'plot' of what had previously been a 'socially unacknowledged' relationship, that telephonist brought about this book and brought us to the 'book' of marriage. Closer to weddings than death in its periodicity, gossip in Japanese folklore has a half-life of seventy-five days.

My editors at Macmillan, Margaret Cannon and Charmian Hearne first heard of this project as an echo from an academic conference, before writing to ascertain whether or not any of it had been committed to inscription, reminding me that in some quarters the distinction is crucial.

Masao Shimura invited me to join the Anglo-American Studies Department of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies as its first full-time, foreign faculty member, subjecting himself to whispers. For me, as an occidental enduring the Japanese equivalent of 'affirmative action', it has been the most exciting experience of my life.

Tony Tanner taught me that every gossip must know when to stop; books, like gossip, must ultimately be abandoned to the belief of others.

Joe Fisher taught me that good gossips are ventriloquists who bring life to the dead by projecting.

Peter Whitehead was a reminder that echos can be shared among total strangers.

And finally, a word to my not-so-gentle readers who always have the last word. As a form of social subversion, gossip and its economies are more dependent than most of their practitioners would admit upon 'acknowledging' a provisionality in the product. There are always other stories to be told. And even when the gossip gives us a new 'account' – to combine narrative and economic metaphors – it often strikes the reader as something he either already knew or *should have known*. To have the new perceived as a mere reminder is one of the techniques by which the gossip effaces her 'share', to become one of us, alternately claiming and disowning discourse. Gossip is a temporary franchise, never a monopoly, dependent upon others who pass it along with their own supplements in a progressive *divestment* from an author's best intentions. In this dynamic, it resembles nothing so much as literary criticism itself. I need you, even without acknowledgement. Only then, may 'it go without saying'?

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