



Europeità globale/ Global Europeanness, 1450-1900

a cura di Irene Gaddo
e Daniela Piemontino

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Europeità globale/ Global Europeanness, 1450-1900

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■ ROBERTA GEFTER WONDRICH

“Wings of Wire”.

The (Failed) Romance of the Telegraph and English Fiction

Introduction: the Telegraph, a Very Short Outline

In 1858, the year of the first unsuccessful attempt at a transatlantic cabling, Charles Fredrick Briggs and Augustus Maverick published one of the early histories of the telegraph, which professed a passionate celebration of the invention that was to change the world:

How potent a power, then, is the telegraph destined to become in the civilization of the world! This binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth. It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth. [...] It shows that nothing is impossible to man, while he keeps within the sublimely imperious orbit of Nature's laws¹.

Briggs and Maverick's eudemonistic if not utopian vision was to be disproved after less than half a century, but the importance they attributed to the telegraph was not overestimated. After forty years in which the perception of a global world has been shaped by the internet more than by any other technology or even economic reality, it is worth reminding that the first model of digital communication that would connect human beings living apart dates to the origins of the telegraph in revolutionary France, with the optical telegraph invented by Claude Chappe in 1794. However, it was its evolution in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States that transformed it into what Richard Standage in his 1998 study brilliantly established as “the Victorian Internet”², analysing the many similarities between the two revolutionary inventions. The spread of this first comprehensive information network was so fast that almost all the towns and cities of England were linked by the end of the 1840s.

Ever since its inception, the technology of the telegraph had been conceived as organic, modelled on the nervous system of the human body, in keeping with the

¹ Charles Frederick Briggs, Augustus Maverick, *The Story of the Telegraph, and a History of the Great Atlantic Cable*, Rudd and Carleton, New York 1858, p. 22. Also quoted in Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet*, Bloomsbury, London 1998, p. 82 and *passim*.

² Standage, *The Victorian Internet*, cit.

tendency to associate technology and human physiology, to the extent that, as Laura Otis put it, «resemblance between sensory organs and technical devices was more than an informative metaphor; it inspired the design of communications devices»³. This pioneering system of global communication had a huge influence over multiple aspects of modern civilization worldwide, from the military and political field to information technology and trade and economics, to the very conception of literary writing and its consumption, as it came to affect the actual awareness of language and knowledge, and even the «very structure of awareness»⁴. As James Carey put it, in enabling for the very first time in history the separation of communication from transportation⁵, the telegraph «freed communication from the constraints of geography» and ultimately «changed the fundamental ways in which communication was thought about»⁶.

Among the different domains which were greatly impacted by the development of the telegraph, information technology and politics were prominent. The expansion of the telegraph industry was directly related to the history of the press, and hence of journalistic writing, as in 1848 and 1849 respectively the first press agencies were established in the United States (the Associated Press) and in France (Reuters), both of which used telegraphic press service. Being a new system of encoded signification which could beat any other postal network, the telegraph couldn't fail to impress the collective imagination as to the very nature and awareness of language. As will be illustrated, the effects of this change of perception of written communication were to have a complex but significant reverberation on literary style itself. For example, the model of a communication pared down to the essentials was to affect even Hemingway, who acknowledged the fascination of the «lingo of the cable»⁷.

Such a far-reaching and encompassing action was inevitably bound to acquire ideological implications, given its political and economic use. In his *Communication as Culture*, James Carey outlines three relationships between the telegraph and ideology: the first which binds the telegraph and monopoly capitalism and rendered business transactions impersonal. The second had a largely religious connotation in the popular imagination, and was associated with its early use, defined by Carey as the «rhetoric of the electrical sublime», consisting of two opposites: the desire for peace, harmony, and self-sufficiency along with the wish for power, profit, and pro-

³ Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2001, p. 13.

⁴ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture. Essays on Media and Society. Revised Edition*, Routledge, New York and London 2009, p. 155.

⁵ Ivi, p. 203.

⁶ Ivi, p. 157.

⁷ Ivi, p. 163.

ductivity⁸. The third ideological connection was then «that mixture of science, commerce, politics, and pious religious unity»⁹ which coalesced the tenets of eighteenth century universalism and middle-class mindset, and was thus to prove utopian and utilitarian at the same time.

The Telegraph and the Nation: Knowledge and Empire

In the British context, the ideological import of telegraph technology and industry was also strongly bound with the epistemological dimension of the colonial and later imperial construction. As Thomas Richards demonstrated, Victorian England established a decisive bond between knowledge and power that created “fantasies” about an empire united not by military or political control but by information, which could be circulated by the rapidly evolving technologies of the time:

Technologies like the railway, the steamship, the telegraph and the telephone made it possible for people to imagine knowing things not sequentially but simultaneously. The great Victorian projects of knowledge all had at their center a dream of knowledge driven into the present¹⁰.

In the complex transformation undergone by the very concept of the archive during the eighteenth century, the idea of the political use of information underscored for the British a «fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire»¹¹. Thus, the imperial archive required a powerful information network that could connect all the parts of the administrative compound and combine all data, particularly the domains of knowledge that converged towards the metropolitan centre from all the parts of the Empire¹². Interestingly, Richards also points to two different types of knowledge that were the object of the imperial archive, one comprehensive and one particularized and minutely factual, the latter of which aligned with the nature and function of telegraphic communication.

The telegraph's strategic importance was evident from its inception, particularly in military applications, with the Crimean war (in the British context) as the first event where it played an important role¹³. This strategic power soon extended to the other domains of the country's colonial and imperial ascendancy. The confidence in

⁸ Ivi, pp. 158-159.

⁹ Ivi, p. 160.

¹⁰ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive. Knowledge and the Fantasy of the Empire*, Verso, London 1993, pp. 5-6.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 6.

¹² Ivi, p. 7.

¹³ Standage, *The Victorian Internet*, cit., p. 149.

the transparency and immediacy of telegraphic communication was bolstered by the nation's positivist legacy¹⁴. However, the vigorous development of communication technology, which saw the progress from the optical telegraph of the end of the eighteenth century to the establishment of the first transatlantic cables in 1866, the patent of the telephone by Alexander Bell in 1876 and finally the wireless telegraph by Marconi in 1895, were to inspire the literary imagination in various ways, as will be explored.

The importance of the telegraph in the social and cultural politics of the British Empire has been widely investigated by several historical and cultural media studies¹⁵, and the telegraph features prominently in the «imperialist rhetoric common in nineteenth-century technological discourse»¹⁶. One of the most iconic visual representations that peremptorily subsumes the celebration of the imperial import of telegraphic technology as “a tool of the empire” is the famous *Punch* cartoon featuring Cecil Rhodes standing astride from Cairo to Cape Town, holding a telegraph wire in his hand¹⁷. Carey remarks how the very transition from colonialism to imperialism, from a localized power controlled by the centre to an all-controlling central authority, was most certainly supported by the widespread use of the telegraph in political and military correspondence and in the development of multinational business, particularly after the creation of the transatlantic cable in 1870. He states that «it was the cable and telegraph, backed, of course, by sea power, that turned colonialism into imperialism: a system in which the center of an empire could dictate rather than merely respond to the margin»¹⁸. Evidently, this evolving connectedness which held together the different strata of society was related to the idea of power from the start, and bound up with the transformation and empowerment of communicative impulses and strategy. Overall, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the very perception of a “global” world, a world conceived as entirely interrelated, became shaped by the idea of the “network” and its accessibility. In Roland Wenzhuemer's

¹⁴ Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, cit., p. 75.

¹⁵ See Roland Wenzhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World. The Telegraph and Globalization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 78 and chapter 4, *passim*. Among the studies on imperial and global political control and communication technology some of the most comprehensive studies are Daniel Headrick's influential *The Tools of Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1981 and *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford 1988; Peter McMahon, *Global Control: Information Technology and Globalization since 1845*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham 2002; Harold A. Innis, *Empire and Communications*, Dundurn Press, Toronto 2007; David Paul Nickles, *Under the Wire: How the Telegraph Changed Diplomacy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) and London 2003.

¹⁶ Jay Clayton, *The Voice in the Machine. Hazlitt, Austen, Hardy, James*, in *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace. The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, pp. 50-80: 54.

¹⁷ Wenzhuemer inserts it at the beginning of chapter 4 in *Connecting the Nineteenth Century*, cit., as an iconic reference.

¹⁸ Carey, *Communication as Culture*, cit., pp. 163-164.

words, «Individual perceptions of global space and time depended heavily on an actor's physical, economic and cultural position in the network. In short, it depended on network access»¹⁹. It is this idea of the access to a connectedness, mediated and afforded by the telegraph as a quasi-magical cultural object, that was to prove particularly suggestive to the literary imagination.

The Deflated Optimism: from Global Connectedness to Individual Interaction

Standage defines the initial elation and subsequent deflation of the great promise conveyed by the telegraph as one where the ideal of a global connectedness of individuals was actualized in single interactions, mediated by operators, and magnified by the impulse given to press coverage. His delineation of such parable is worth quoting at length:

Despite the widely expressed optimism that the telegraph would unite humanity, it was in fact only the telegraph operators who were able to communicate with each other directly. But thanks to the telegraph, the general public became participants in a continually unfolding global drama, courtesy of their newspapers, which were suddenly able to report on events on the other side of the world within hours of their occurrence. The result was a dramatic change in world-view²⁰.

On the whole, this was the paradoxical frustration that the telegraph seemed to reveal along the course of its development: that the potentially unlimited connectivity promised by this extraordinary invention and its improvements was ultimately far more restricted in its usage and accessibility than had ideally been expected. Therefore, the telegraph was bound to be perceived on the one hand as an essentially individual interaction, and on the other as a truly democratic and global communicative mean only in the context of press coverage, with the newspapers offering the impression of an all-encompassing, potentially unlimited gathering and processing of information. As Standage points out, the very widening of the news coverage was conceived as an instrument of universal peace and harmony: «Such rapid distribution of news was thought to promote universal peace, truthfulness, and mutual understanding»²¹. However, the celebration of the moral potential and agency of the telegraph, of its active promotion of worldwide unity, kinship and collaboration, was bound to alter. Towards the end of the century the telegraph's eudemonistic premises and promises were on the wane, and eventually forced to acknowledge the telephone as the ultimate

¹⁹ Wenzehuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth Century*, cit., p. 258.

²⁰ Standage, *The Victorian Internet*, cit., p. 145.

²¹ Ivi, p. 163.

and true instrument of global connectedness and heir to their “humanitarian” legacy. In the context of the British nation’s oscillation between technophilia and technophobia, the optimistic expectations focused on the telegraph as a groundbreaking invention were also met by a cultural anxiety about its impoverishing influence on epistolarity²², and were thus to pave the way for the late twentieth-century celebration of the internet and the proliferating anxieties about its evolution.

Recent criticism has investigated the way in which British literature of the second half of the nineteenth century has represented telegraphic communication, or, rather, the “literature of the telegraph”²³. Broadly speaking, not only did the telegraph as a relevant cultural object frequently appear in Victorian fiction, but the very profession of the telegraphist inspired a specific genre of popular (especially transatlantic) dime novels and short stories fiction. However, despite the frequency with which telegrams and telegraphs are mentioned in Victorian narrative prose, and the relevance of some adventure novels based on the transatlantic enterprise that pertain to the above mentioned category, it can be argued that only two prose fictions – of different profundity – seem to have brought to the fore the semantic complexity of the new medium in its relation to literature, language, imagination and social class: Anthony Trollope’s short story *The Telegraph Girl* (1882) and Henry James’ short novel *In the Cage* (1898).

As the telegraph was to become a transnational and transcultural project which would not be restricted to «a single nation, empire, or literary tradition»²⁴, it is interesting to analyse how English fiction (in this case made to include the American expatriate Henry James) largely pictured the telegraph in an essentially national, all-British dimension. The transmission of information was, in fact, the real object of fascination to the eyes of writers of varying fame and quality, as, in Richard Menke’s words, «imaginative writing responds in crucial and defining ways to the nineteenth century’s new media and the ideas they encouraged about information, communication, and language»²⁵. The literary involvement in the telegraph, thus, focused on the relationships between the new forms and methods in which reality was being codified and communicated by means of transmission and Victorian fiction’s modes of mimesis, which at the end of the century would radically question the transparency of the narrative medium in representing human experience. As the semiotic

²² See Laura Rotunno, *Postal Plots in British Fiction 1840-1898: Readdressing Correspondence in Victorian Culture*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2013, p. 120.

²³ See Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism. Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2008; Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines*, cit.; David Trotter, *The Literature of Connection. Signal, Medium, Interface, 1850-1950*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 16.

²⁵ Menke, *Telegraphic Realism*, cit., p. 3.

interest of literary fiction primarily converged on the dynamics of that new kind of communication that it created, the telegraph produced what David Trotter, in his sophisticated *The Literature of Connection*, defines works that explore «the transformation of connective relationships of all kinds induced directly or indirectly by the introduction and diffusion of technologies of communication between the middle of the nineteenth and of the twentieth century». Trotter identifies what he calls «the romance of connectivity», the tension arising «out of the sheer excitement of making a connection» as the recurring trope of this literature²⁶. He also distinguishes between the two constituents of the communicative process: the signal and the sign, where «[A] signal makes a connection. A sign makes sense of a connection already made. A signal thrills, whenever, wherever; a sign may or may not». And both stand for the excitement of the act of communication which turns the process into a “romance”²⁷. His study analyses novels and fictions which are not primarily centred on telegraphic communication but delves deep into the implications and the complexity of this new form of communication and the sense of often thwarted or frustrated adventure that it entailed.

Unfulfilled Promises: the Telegraph Romance in Victorian Fiction

The presence of the telegraph in Victorian fiction has been investigated by a number of critical studies, among which Menke, Clayton, Otis and Trotter's rank as the most significant. Although frequently mentioned in novels, for obvious reasons due to the extension and complexity of the plots, the telegraph may not be frequently central to the narrative, but often plays a semantically resonant function in the articulation of Victorian mimesis. As anticipated, apart from the conventional and popular “telegraphic fiction”, only few major writers specifically valorised the telegraph as a cultural object, so that Trollope, James and Stoker remain the “usual suspects”. What follows is an inevitably and intentionally limited overview of some relevant occurrences of the telegraph in Victorian fiction and, in one instance, poetry, which attest to some of its most interesting and resonant cultural and social implications.

Predictably, the technical prodigy of the telegraph was what initially captured the British writers and the public's imagination. Dickens offers an example of this wonderment in a piece included in a periodical he directed at the time, *Household Words*,

²⁶ Trotter, *The Literature of Connection*, cit., p. 1.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 7. Trotter does not exclusively analyse novels which incorporate the use of technological communication, but also dwells on others which lay emphasis on the signaling process, such as Thomas Hardy's *Jude*. Trotter, *The Literature of Connection*, cit., p. 52.

where he describes the “mystery” and the “secret” of the material composition of the telegraph with an almost naïve and enthusiastic fancy, employing the conventional comparison with the nervous impulses of the human brain:

One Wire dipped in to the Earth, and starting from some great central point, say London, with other wires spreading from it may run in all directions, as the nerves of the Human body run from the Brain all over the frame as the well runs the nerves come sounds strange Spirit runs through wireless, and those wires stay at any point no matter whether Birmingham, or Dover, or Plymouth²⁸.

The typical Dickensian touch comes across as the writer sketches the acoustic dynamic of the telegraphic transmission being the only noise made in the otherwise silent process of communication: «Jerk! Jerk! go the handles – Chop! Chop!» are the sounds heard in response²⁹, followed by a long list of iterations that create a comedic effect. Dickens concludes his article reflecting on the usage of the telegraph in the United States with an elusive allusion to the greater demand for telegraphic communication in a country of greater distances and more abundant availability of timber.

While notable instances of telegraphic communication appear in major Victorian works such as George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Thomas Hardy’s *A Laodicean* (1881), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), it is arguably Anthony Trollope’s novella *The Telegraph Girl* (1882) that stands as a recognized signpost of specific literary interest in telegraphic communication. Trollope, a prolific writer with extensive experience as a postal officer, possessed firsthand knowledge of the communications world. In his story, he portrays the transition from the material and semiotic aspects of telegraphic technology to its auratic dimension, through a shift in sensory perception from paper-imprinted signs to auditory code. Trollope’s narrative can be read primarily within the conceptual framework of realism and seems to adhere to an apparently banal marriage plot in which the two telegraphers embody contrasting characteristics: one represents the virtues of bourgeois realism, while the other embodies the inconstant frivolity typical of cheap romance. While Lucy is steadfast in her compliance to moral rectitude and abnegation but struggles to adapt to the introduction of technical innovations in her work (the sounder), Sophie unscrupulously exploits her roommate’s good heart and naivety, but is far more receptive to workplace evolution, deftly and single-mindedly using her good looks to secure an advantageous marriage. Both Trollope and James’ narratives share a focus on the telegraph as a primarily female professional domain, exploring gender roles

²⁸ Charles Dickens, *Wings of Wire*, «Household Words. A Weekly Journal, conducted by Charles Dickens», 7 December 1850, 2 (1851), pp. 241-245: 241. Cfr. <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=-householdwords> (ultimo accesso 23 gennaio 2025).

²⁹ Dickens, *Wings of Wire*, cit., p. 242.

and social class, but Trollope's places greater emphasis on the sociological implications of the context and motifs. Remarkably, the opening paragraph of Trollope's story relates Lucy's job and her forced choice to find an employment to the symbol of the English nation, as a civil and "government servant":

She had lived for many years with a married brother, who was a bookseller in Holborn, – in a small way of business, and burdened with a large family, but still living in decent comfort. In order, however, that she might earn her own bread she had gone into the service of the Crown as a "Telegraph Girl" in the Telegraph Office³⁰.

Her plight as a woman of no means forces her to weigh the balance between the independence that would isolate her in a dreaded false companionship with other fellow women and another form of safety offered by domestic servitude as a governess, the most conventional profession accessible to her peers.

When, therefore, it was suggested to her that she had better abandon the Telegraph Office and seek the security of some household, her spirit rebelled against the counsel. Why should she not be independent, and respectable, and safe? But then the solitude! Solitude would certainly be hard, but absolute solitude might not perhaps be necessary. She was fond too of the idea of being a government servant, with a sure and fixed salary, – bound of course to her work at certain hours, but so bound only for certain hours. During a third of the day she was, as she proudly told herself, a servant of the Crown. During the other two-thirds she was lord, – or lady –, of herself. But there was a quaintness, a mystery, even an awe, about her independence which almost terrified her. During her labours she had eight hundred female companions, all congregated together in one vast room, but as soon as she left the Post Office she was to be all alone!³¹.

The "doctrine as to the necessity of a husband", of marriage as a fundamental trope of domestic fiction is openly proclaimed by the new roommate and antagonist, Sophie Wilson, who shares a supposedly common ambition to find a good catch. This idea is shared by all the girls employed in the office but appears morally disgusting to Lucy, who later becomes painfully aware of her inadequacy in adapting to the new system based on acoustic signals rather than written signs:

she found herself to be less quick, less expert, less useful than her neighbours. This was very sad, for she had always been buoyed up by an unconscious conviction of her own superior intelligence. And then, though there had been neither promises nor threats, she had become aware, – at any rate had thought that she was aware, – that those girls who could catch and

³⁰ Anthony Trollope, *The Telegraph Girl*, in Trollope, *Frau Frohmann and Other Stories*, Chatto and Windus, London 1892, pp. 262-310: 262 (available through Hathitrust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=n-jp.32101067179018&seq=7>).

³¹ Ivi, p. 265.

use the tinkling sounds would rise more quickly to higher pay than the less gifted ones. She had struggled therefore to overcome the difficulty. She had endeavoured to force her ears to do that which her ears were not capable of accomplishing. She had failed, and to-day had owned to herself that she must fail³².

The novella thus dramatizes a story of gender roles, female emancipation and the struggle to keep pace with technological advancement in its professional, and hence social, repercussions, and engages with the entwinement between the marriage plot and the evolutionary drama that characterises many late Victorian fictions, where the telegraph office functions as a kind of arena of survival. While Lucy takes upon herself a nurturing role, also thanks to her physical stamina, and endures all sorts of hardship to support her friend, Sophie parasitically exploits her under the pretense of her poor health, but ultimately thrives in securing a husband, challenging Lucy's adamant sense of duty. Significantly, as the narrative progresses, the opening theme of the dilemma between the oppressive "freedom" granted by the employment at the telegraph office and the fearful solitude of a private post gains resonance when Lucy is virtually forbidden from any contact with the outside world, embodied by her suitor Abraham Hall, who vehemently proclaims «She is not a prisoner!»³³. Trollope's heroine's life "in the cage" is thus less deeply imbued with metaphoric and symbolic significance than James' anonymous protagonist's, but the story similarly engages with questions of freedom and agency, with the metaphor of the prison, and with the precarious process of female self-assertion, as when Lucy says of herself «I am such a poor thing»³⁴, and is rebuked by her future husband for underestimating her. Nevertheless, both protagonists in Trollope and James' stories eventually conform to the marriage plot by marrying their respective suitors and leaving the office, thus confirming the general idea that telegraph professionalism offered limited social mobility and gender emancipation. Trollope's novella presents an apparently conventional drama in which women are not sufficiently aware of their own worth as to fully embody their mediating agency in the material execution of their profession. This aspect will be more complexly explored in James' novel, where the mediation of communication is subtly dramatized as deeply affecting consciousness, and would reverberate through the entire system of the emerging consumer culture in the last part of the century. Moreover, this association of the evolution of telegraphic technology from the visual to the acoustic dimension with desire has also been analysed in an early novel by Thomas Hardy, *A Laodicean*, through the configuration of a *queer* "space"

³² Ivi, p. 284.

³³ Ivi, p. 307.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 313.

of attachment and intimate communication between two women³⁵. Significantly, as further analysed, *queer* is the word that defines Henry James' telegraphist's extended experience in the cage. Trollope's novella is a crucial text in the context of telegraph literature primarily in its specific focus on the transition from the visual to the aural system of telegraphic technology, for it reveals the instability of that transition, a phenomenon which Jay Clayton analysed as an important development, that, in Raymond William's terminology, cannot be considered only emergent, but neither residual: «Despite its importance in the nineteenth century, the voice in the machine remains odd, a discordant experience, not conformable to the regime of modernity»³⁶. Trollope's short story thus remains noteworthy in emphasizing the importance of such "auratic turn", while ostensibly embedding it in the conventional marriage plot.

The most celebrated fiction centred on the telegraph remains Henry James' short novel (or novella) *In the Cage*, which consecrates it as a leading cultural object, and which has repeatedly been analysed the context of the cultural perception of the changing nature of written communication affecting interpersonal relationships. Exploring the «commodification of language in the telegraph office»³⁷, it constructs it as a metonymy of that opacity of communication and fluidity of consciousness that is already distinctly modernist, and even, to some extent, postmodern³⁸. James' personal experience of the technologies of writing was gained during his stay at Rye, in England, where he had been forced to dictate to a number of typists, as he was affected by chronic wrist pain. He had thus become acquainted directly with the social interaction between different social classes, a key theme of *In the Cage*. The plot is deceptively simple, but oblique enough, when unravelling its central intrigue and suspense, to let the reader uncertain as to what exactly happened. A young, nameless telegraphist works in a postal office adjacent to Cocker's grocery shop in the elegant Mayfair in London. In the office she attends to the instrument called «the sounder», a transmitter for electric impulses which came to replace the earlier paper registers, and which became the standard receiving instrument of the telegraph. Having accepted a marriage proposal by a pragmatic grocer whom she does not truly cherish, the girl is aware of her professional skills and of her vivid imagination. Fascinated by the social interactions of the upper class, she becomes involved in a secret relationship between a beautiful woman, Lady Bradeen, and a handsome young man, Capt.

³⁵ Clayton, *The Voice in the Machine*, cit., pp. 70-73.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 52.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 78.

³⁸ For a reflection on the story's communicative and metaliterary dimension see Saverio Tomaiuolo, *From The Cage To The Net: Henry James And The Questions of (Literary) Communication*, «Il Lettore di Provincia», 37 (2006), pp. 65-80.

Everard, for whom she develops an infatuation. She finally meets him and promises him unconditional help in rescuing a highly compromising telegram. Constantly updated on the London gossip by a widow friend who arranges flowers for the London aristocrats, the protagonist ultimately learns that Everard is heavily indebted and is a gold digger, and that in her turn the lady, now a widow, has forced him to marry her. Eventually, she decides to anticipate her marriage to the grocer and leave her job and she settles with him in a working-class London suburb.

There are at least three aspects of the novella worth considering in the context of this analysis: firstly, the similarity between the cage and the telegraphic office and the dimension of literary writing, as the “barrier” – the glass and wood pane dividing the post office from the shop – evokes James’s famous metaphor of the house of fiction³⁹. Secondly, the importance of the oscillation between the embodied and disembodied dimension of telegraphic communication and its consequent affection of consciousness, through a dimension of queerness that is identified in the duality experienced by the young woman: «the queer extension of her experience, the double life that, in the cage, she grew at last to lead»⁴⁰. Such queerness is also shared by the gentleman in his secret dalliance with the lady, and it is perceived by the girl as the true conduit to their otherwise unconceivable proximity, given the social gulf that separates them. Finally, *In the Cage* dramatizes the entropic rather than outreaching and liberating power of telegraphic communication in the disillusionment which the protagonist experiences in her relationship with the upper class and her eventual decision to accept her socially prescribed position.

They would never perhaps have grown half so intimate if he had not, by the blessing of heaven, formed some of his letters with a queerness! It was positive that the queerness could scarce have been greater if he had practised it for the very purpose of bringing their heads together over it as far as was possible to heads on different sides of a wire fence. It had taken her truly but once or twice to master these tricks, but, at the cost of striking him perhaps as stupid, she could still challenge them when circumstances favoured⁴¹.

Thus, the cage encloses and engulfs all, both the working and the upper class, its symbolism overt but complex: it both confines and protects, excludes and brings together, if only fleetingly. It is both socially unifying and troubling, dividing, as it “produces” an “other” consciousness in the protagonist: «to be in the cage had sud-

³⁹ Like the novelist in the essay, the telegraphist, and, through her, indirectly, the reader, have «the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern». Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*, in Id., *Literary Criticism*, vol. I, The Library of America, New York 1984, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁰ Henry James, *In the Cage*. *The New York Edition of Henry James*, Scribner’s, New York 1936, pp. 366-507: 386.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 416.

denly become her safety, and she was literally afraid of the alternate self who might be waiting outside. He might be waiting; it was he who was her alternate self, and of him she was afraid»⁴². Significantly, the cage as a specifically denoted workplace has been read by Greta Olsen as a figuration of the prison, on both the social, cultural and literary level: «a symbol for the inflexible limits of the protagonist's future» as well as a «metaphor for the mental confinement women enter into when they buy into the conventions of romance fiction»⁴³.

The novella's opening passage encapsulates its thematic richness, contrasting the disembodied, suspended life "in the cage" with the vital vulgarity of ordinary life represented by the adjacent grocer's shop. This juxtaposition underscores the complex interplay between social classes, gender roles, and the transformative power of technology in late nineteenth-century society, foregrounding the telegraph office as a kind of microcosm, simultaneously claustrophobic and permeable:

It had occurred to her early that in her position – that of a young person spending, in framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie – she should know a great many persons without their recognising the acquaintance. That made it an emotion the more lively – though singularly rare and always, even then, with opportunity still very much smothered – to see any one come in whom she knew outside, as she called it, anyone who could add anything to the meanness of her function. Her function was to sit there with two young men – the other telegraphist and the counter-clerk; to mind the "sounder," which was always going, to dole out stamps and postal-orders, weigh letters, answer stupid questions, give difficult change and, more than anything else, count words as numberless as the sands of the sea, the words of the telegrams thrust, from morning to night, through the gap left in the high lattice, across the encumbered shelf that her forearm ached with rubbing. This transparent screen fenced out or fenced in, according to the side of the narrow counter on which the human lot was cast, the duskiest corner of a shop pervaded not a little, in winter, by the poison of perpetual gas, and at all times by the presence of hams, cheese, dried fish, soap, varnish, paraffin and other solids and fluids that she came to know perfectly by their smells without consenting to know them by their names⁴⁴.

In the topological symbolism of the "cage", the machine to which the girl attends, the "sounder" is even more an instrument of confinement, «being the innermost cell of captivity, a cage within the cage, fenced off from the rest by a frame of ground glass»⁴⁵. However, the sounder is also functional to a social economy, or, rather, to

⁴² Ivi, p. 469.

⁴³ Greta Olson, *Prisons of Stone and Mind: Henry James's "The Princess Casamassima" and "In the Cage"*, in *Stones of Law, Bricks of Shame. Narrating Imprisonment in the Victorian Age*, edited by Jan Alber and Frank Lauterbach, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2009, pp. 233-255: 233.

⁴⁴ James, *In the Cage*, cit., p. 367.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 376.

that junction of the social and the economic that is at play in the intercourse between different social classes, as the text clearly foregrounds: «the exuberance of the aristocracy was the advantage of trade, and everything was knit together in a richness of pattern that it was good to follow with one's finger-tips. [...] What did the sounder, as she called it, nimbly worked, do but keep the ball going?»⁴⁶. Nonetheless, the prosaic social economy of the telegraph also triggers an imaginative power, a sort of romantic "power of vision" on the girl's part that sustains her infatuation and her fantasy of control, which James crystallises in the magnificently parodic sentence: «But if nothing was more impossible than the fact, nothing was more intense than the vision»⁴⁷.

The metaliterary dimension of the novella is so articulate as to comprehend multiple sides: on the one hand the analogy between the telegraphist and the artist, both observing and interpreting reality and the world from a secluded observatory that engenders a subjective imaginative creativeness, an analogy widely appraised by Jamesian criticism. On the other, it also deploys a parodic component which alludes to the penny dreadfuls and the «blackmailability of paranoid masculinity»⁴⁸, caused by the homosexual scandals which involved telegraph boys⁴⁹, as when the protagonist is «quite thrilled herself with thinking what, with such a lot of material, a bad girl would do»⁵⁰. In both cases, the creation and command of communicative codes is also linked to a dimension of power and secrecy, or a proper rhetoric of power which alludes to the literary codes of the mainstream genre: «It would be a scene better than many in her ha'penny novels»⁵¹. The novel has been analysed as displacing the atmosphere and theme of fin de siècle homosexual panic onto an illicit heterosexual affair, thus allowing for a queer reading of its material⁵². The morality of the protagonist's behaviour is thus preserved despite the masterful ambiguity created by James' narrative, since she accepts her social collocation while being irredeemably aware that she will never fully belong with the grocer and the life he envisages for them. Significantly, in the economic logic in which both the tradesman and the telegraphist partake, when she reveals him her secret, the grocer implicitly asks for something in return, as his mentality is of a thoroughly trading type. Thus, while the girl ideally

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 410.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 421.

⁴⁸ Gero Bauer, *Globalising the "Closet": Henry James, in Houses, Secrets, and the Closet. Locating Masculinities from the Gothic Novel to Henry James*, Transcript Verlag, Tübingen 2016, p. 180.

⁴⁹ A context reconstructed by Eric Savoy in *In the Cage and the Queer Effects of Gay History*, «Novel», 82 (1995), pp. 284-307.

⁵⁰ James, *In the Cage*, cit., p. 405.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 417.

⁵² Savoy, *In the Cage*, cit., p. 296.

embellishes her relationship with Everard according to the stereotypes of the cheap romance, this is so subtly nuanced as to disarray a common reader's expectations: «Hadh't she precisely established on the part of each a consciousness that could end only with death?»⁵³. To some extent, both the girl and Mr. Mudge are colluded with a morally opaque handling of secrecy, so that the very medium that has been the conduit to that source of power – the knowledge of shady illicit sexual secret relationship – is permanently implicated in such a rhetoric of secrecy and, hence, of power. In this dynamic, the actual "secret" – the fact – is never openly mentioned or described, while what is truly crucial is the subtlety and ambiguity of the communicative strategies. As Laura Otis put it, «as a reader of signs, James's protagonist seeks power through language»⁵⁴.

Overall, the novel foregrounds the crucial role of the telegraph in the reconfiguration of social and communicative spatialities in which the private/public divide is doubly questioned, as «the private becomes public, and secrets become readable through signifiers in public circulation»⁵⁵, to quote Gero Bauer's acute reading. This centrality of the telegraphic medium is strongly connoted in gendered terms, as previously outlined, in foregrounding the woman figure as a mediator, acting as recipient and conduit of a complex communicative dynamics that implicates desire. This was a function that had been entrusted to women by the communicative industry and the postal system. As noted by Jennifer Wicke, in the late nineteenth century, «women came to mediate exchange. Communication flow[ed] through them; telegraphically or otherwise enhanced; information traveling across class lines collocate[d] in them; the mechanisms of mass cultural transfer of libidinal, commodity desire were set up with "woman" at the switch point»⁵⁶. Alongside the gender question, the complexity of James' novel weaves together a wide array of thematic and ideological connotations pertaining telegraphic technology in its nuanced exploration of how technological advancements can both temper and reinforce social divides: the "cage" dramatizes imagination, gender roles and desire across social classes and power imbalance, while it also represents the power and the restrictions of consciousness in a drama of interpretation that is already and provocatively modernist in its concerns with the themes of social power, language and knowledge. In this overarching ambiguity, significantly, the abrupt ending denies closure while seemingly reinstating the realist precept of marriage as the only possible protection from vulnerability.

⁵³ James, *In the Cage*, cit., p. 407.

⁵⁴ Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines*, cit., p. 174.

⁵⁵ Bauer, *Globalising the "Closet"*, cit., p. 182.

⁵⁶ Jennifer Wicke, *Henry James's Second Wave*, «The Henry James Review», 10 (1989), pp. 146-151: 148.

The modernity of James' intuition of the female telegraphist's intimate connection with technology has been suggestively emphasized by Jay Clayton's definition of the protagonist as an anticipation of a posthuman enhancement, an «early version of Donna Haraway's cyborg, a woman wired into the information network, the interface between a vast technological network and a human system of customers and exchange»⁵⁷. This intertwining of communication technology and female subjectivity is further exemplified in one of the masterpieces of the *fin de siècle*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The novel emphasises Mina Murray's seemingly innocuous typewriting skills as a crucial asset in the alliance against Dracula's evil power, thereby celebrating the nexus between women and information technologies. *Dracula* is probably the most important fiction to valorise the telegraph as a cultural object that is crucial to the development of the plot and the narrative design. In the novel, the late-Victorian gothic reinvention of the vampire is conducted through what Richard Menke ironically calls a «romance of information management»⁵⁸, combining «attention to new media with an emphasis on the consciousness of the women who help them mediate»⁵⁹. Stoker's masterpiece reimagines the telegraph's potential to spread information that James valorised in his exploration of consciousness in *In the Cage* as a powerful organic force in the conjunction of telegraphic and telepathic communication. As a successful theatrical entrepreneur and manager, Stoker had direct experience with the information technology of his time, and most notably of the telegraph, which he effectively incorporated into the novel's imaginary. All the protagonists share in a collective effort of communication against the Count using letters, shorthand journals, telegrams, Dr. Seward's phonograph diary, with Mina as the skillful receptor and collector of such material, to which newspapers clippings and train timetables are added. Dr. Van Helsing, the only scientist able to fight the vampire, not only requires Mina to send him a telegram to Amsterdam every day⁶⁰, but gathers the various journal entries written by Harker, Seward, and the others, and Dr. Seward's phonographic recordings, in the attempt to put together a narrative that will lead them to the Count. Information, rapidity and encoded textuality are thus prominent in the narrative texture, which bears metanarrative overtones and sustains a formidable hermeneutic and epistemologic adventure, aimed at defeating Dracula's superhuman force. As Laura Otis remarked, «[a]lthough the novel describes a vampire hunt, it is also a story about how to construct a narrative»⁶¹, that is,

⁵⁷ Clayton, *The Voice in the Machine*, cit., p. 77.

⁵⁸ Menke, *Telegraphic Realism*, cit., p. 10.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 188.

⁶⁰ Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983, p. 114.

⁶¹ Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines*, cit., p. 195.

the «whole connected narrative»⁶² that Harker and Mina create and unravel. In the context of this metanarrativity, the prominence of information network in the novel also incorporates occasional newspaper clippings reporting supernatural events, a device that will also be exploited by later detective fiction. Otis gives one of the most perceptive readings of *Dracula's* momentous nexus between communication, writing and technology, in which telegraphic communication, hinging on Mina's collecting feat, is aligned with the vampire's telepathic power in a mechanic and organic conjunction and mirroring effect: «While the Count's network is primarily organic and the British hunters' is technologically based, the two systems correspond in a great many ways. Both carry out the activities of a vast nervous system, perceiving, encoding, transmitting, recording, and recalling information»⁶³. The novel thus emphasises the power of organized knowledge in the face of the unknown. Gathering, ordering and transmitting information is the collective endeavour that can ensure agency and power to the forces of good, with Mina Murray's documenting skills and instinct at the centre of such controlling feat. Mina is actually a step forward in the evolution of the technological woman as a precursor of the cyborg, compared to James' telegraphist, as she masterfully appropriates technology across a wide range of forms, particularly as a "train fiend" who can impressively memorise train timetables. All of which she achieves to the service of her male companions simultaneously reinforcing her gendered identity and challenging assigned gender roles.

Overall, then, in *Dracula* the Victorian telegraph network plays a crucial role in the plot as a symbol – or a synecdoche – of British and western civilization. The vampire as the supreme dis-embodied villain could hardly have been stopped without the frantic daily use of the telegraph by the protagonists across different nations. As Stoker himself did habitually in his profession, the group of men and Mina use the telegraph to reach out from and to different places and to act at a distance, ordering garlic flowers, reserving rooms in Valachia and checking the movements of the ship carrying the Count's fifty boxes of earth. Throughout the novel, the telegraph and the letters are the structuring narrative device which imparts a fast pace to the plot, largely based on rapid and timely despatches and reception of the messages. Such messages are gathered and collated by Mina who typescripts them, thus creating a very strong emphasis on the link between female emancipation and bodily contiguity with the machine. As Otis remarks, «at this stage, their telegrams shape the narrative because the flow of the story depends not just on what they know but on when and how they learn it»⁶⁴.

⁶² Stoker, *Dracula*, cit., p. 225.

⁶³ Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines*, cit., p. 197.

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 202.

Harker, Van Helsing, Morris, Seward and Holmwood use the telegraph to rapidly muster and wield information to beat Dracula in his fast and mysterious progress. The role of the telegraph is thus doubly significant in its cultural and symbolic function, as it proves to be an actual connector, bringing together different people of different nationalities, crossing national borders, catalysing evolving gender roles in Mina's determination and skills, uniting and enabling the protagonists in a collective effort to crush the invader and preserve England's supremacy as the leading nation of the world. In the context of major late Victorian fiction, then, it appears that only in *Dracula* does the telegraph take on an overtly positive engaging role, at the service of enlightened altruism, as it enables to exploit technology to the benefit of collectivity, rather than of an intersubjective social and gender dynamics or class power struggle, as, for instance, in the case of Trollope and James' stories. The whole novel is based on the idea of the network, represented by a connectedness that is exemplified on the communicative level by the technologies of writing, where the telegraph is pivotal, and by the vampire's telepathic action on his victims. Presenting telegraphy as a counterpart to the vampire's telepathy, *Dracula* pictures a synthetic convergence of the mechanic and the organic conception of wired and wireless communication technology. The attack of evil haunts modern civilization though an intangible and invisible communicating network, which can only be crushed by the collective communicative effort afforded by modern technology – post, phonograph records, telegrams – and by their ordering and interpretation, through which the «little band of men»⁶⁵ tries to exert control, with Mina's invaluable mediating competence.

However, in the confrontation between the atavistic forces of evil embodied by the count and the irresistible impetus of modernity in defence of good, the *denouement* questions positivist faith in the supremacy of civilization: «*Dracula* depicts no triumph of telegraphy over telepathy, nor does it depict the human mind's triumph over the machine»⁶⁶. The ultimate destruction of the invader is made possible only by the traditional popular methods used against vampires for centuries, so that the celebration of modernity through technology is clearly limited, and the opposition between modernity and the primitive nature of the past which challenges the future becomes complicated, and therefore even more compelling. Moreover, the concluding paragraph of the novel reveals the protagonists' recording feat to be construed, as the textual material they collected to beat the vampire are ultimately not “hard” facts but textual traces⁶⁷ which provided the

⁶⁵ Stoker, *Dracula*, cit., p. 378.

⁶⁶ Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines*, cit., p. 215.

⁶⁷ «We were struck with the fact that, in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document! nothing but a mass of type-writing, except the later note-books of Mina and Seward and myself, and Van Helsing's memorandum. We could hardly ask anyone, even did we wish to, to accept these

illusion of control over "the old centuries" that «had, and have, powers of their own which mere "modernity" cannot kill»⁶⁸.

While Conan Doyle's Sherlock Homes stories are replete with countless telegrams being written and delivered, and with visits to the telegraph offices which are often relevant to the plots, *Dracula* probably remains the most fascinating literary fiction to have captured the full potential of the telegraph as a symbol of the modern world and to have represented its connecting and unifying power across nations and cultures. The symbolic christening of Harker and Mina's son after the American Quincey Morris, who sacrifices his life to ensure the termination of the vampire for the future of humankind, is a clear indication of the prominence of the United States in the context of the struggle against atavism. Significantly, though, *Dracula's* geographical and historical context embraces western Europe threatened by reverse colonisation by its orientalist other represented by the Count's Transylvania. The symbolic relevance of this setting's in-betweenness between the West and the Orient, through which Stoker addressed the Eastern question and possibly expressed his Russophobia, is well known⁶⁹, but it could be argued that the novel reaches out to a "global" perspective primarily through the role of the valiant American character.

Conversely, it is noteworthy that the only fiction which represents telegraph technology and communication in a world-scale perspective, expanding its context from a national to an imperial and transatlantic dimension, should fall within the category of that "telegraphic fiction" which has so far been considered as part of a recognizably mainstream production, predominantly American. The most important collection of telegraph literature, by then acknowledgeable as such, was *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes*, published in New York in 1877, which included stories written by actual telegraphists, and Ella Cheever Thayer's *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1880), both romancing the wire. Another collection of short stories by Bracebridge Hemming showcases the idea of secrecy in the very title of *Telegraph Secrets* (1867). Two adventure novels by Robert Michael Ballantyne should be mentioned in this respect, *Post Haste: A Tale of Her Majesty's Mails* (1880) and *The Battery and the Boiler, or, Adventures in the Laying of Submarine Electric Cables* (1883). The latter, in particular, is worth mentioning as it celebrates the epic of the transatlantic cabling in an imperialist perspective, featuring as protagonists a group of cable-laying Englishmen who journey to the Indian Ocean where they discover and rescue a beautiful English girl held captive on a pirate island. When reporting

as proofs of so wild a story», Stoker, *Dracula*, cit., p. 378.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 36.

⁶⁹ For a recent survey of Stoker's vision of the Eastern question see Matthew Gibson, *Dracula and the East*, in *The Cambridge Companion to "Dracula"*, edited by Roger Luckhurst, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, pp. 96-103.

this back to England they find their telegram sabotaged by hostile foreigner forces, but the girl will eventually marry one of the engineers and breed an English progeny fit to ensure imperial stability in India⁷⁰. This kind of fiction seems to refer to the fact that the transatlantic cabling had been largely a British achievement, in which «the cables connected two parts of the British Empire (Ireland and Newfoundland) and were bought, built, laid, and operated almost entirely with British money and by British experts», and later expanded to the east and south, primarily to serve the imperial needs of Great Britain⁷¹. In other words, it seems that it was only in jingoist, second-rate adventure novels like this that the British literary imagination would engage with a “global” (namely, transatlantic and imperial) diffusion and agency of telegraphic technology, only to reconfirm its essentially nationalist and imperialist spirit. I would argue, therefore, that no matter how exotic or adventurous, the romance of the cable was to remain, to the British reader, an essentially domestic one.

Conclusion: Kipling's Deep Sea Cables

Having referred to jingoism, by way of conclusion, a passing reference to a celebratory poem about the transatlantic telegraph by Rudyard Kipling, “The Deep Sea Cables”⁷², is worth mentioning, as truly resonant in the context of this analysis. Collected in *The Seven Seas* (1896), the poem suggestively combines the modern technological material of the oceanic cables with the mythical and Coleridgean image of the sea snakes, but it also acknowledges the disruptive impact of the advancement of science in the line «They have wakened the timeless Things; they have killed their father Time». The poem's final exhortation («And a new Word runs between: whispering, “Let us be one!”») reasserts the hope for fraternity, connectedness and global communication that the invention of the telegraph had bred, a hope that would ultimately remain unfulfilled. Kipling's notion of telegraphic communication in the poem invokes a unifying force «Joining hands in the gloom», hence ultimately func-

⁷⁰ For a survey of telegraphic fiction and this specific text, see Menke, *Telegraphic Realism*, cit., notably pp. 175-178.

⁷¹ Bruce J. Hunt, *Doing Science in a Global Empire*, in *Victorian Science in Context*, edited by Bernard Lightman, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997, pp. 312-333: 319.

⁷² «The wrecks dissolve above us; their dust drops down from afar – Down to the dark, to the utter dark, where the blind white sea-snakes are. // There is no sound, no echo of sound, in the deserts of the deep, // Or the great gray level plains of ooze where the shell-burred cables creep. // Here in the womb of the world – here on the tie-ribs of earth Words, and the words of men, flicker and flutter and beat – // Warning, sorrow and gain, salutation and mirth – // For a Power troubles the Still that has neither voice nor feet. // They have wakened the timeless Things; they have killed their father Time; // Joining hands in the gloom, a league from the last of the sun. Hush! Men talk to-day o'er the waste of the ultimate slime, // And a new Word runs between: whispering, “Let us be one!”», Rudyard Kipling, *The Deep Sea Cables*, in *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century. An Anthology*, edited by Laura Otis, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 104.

tional to its strategic role in social and political harmony. However, the most remarkable poetic trait of *The Deep Sea Cables* is the fusion of a material nautical and engineering reality with a transfigured symbolic vision of the terrestrial, expressed through organic imagery renewing the idea of the telegraph as a nervous system. This imagery, recurrent in representations of telegraphy, as previously stated, describes the oceanic depth as the «womb of the worlds» crossed by «the tie-ribs of the earth». Kipling vividly evokes a cosmological scenario of intellectual and moral awakening and global interconnectedness, which, however, appears somehow disturbed by a vague sense of violence conveyed by the verb «killed».

Considering the widely investigated mid and late Victorian writers' interest and anxiety about scientific and technological advancement, it is to be reminded that Kipling also celebrated the agency, power and intrinsic moral innocence of modern technology in another well-known poem, "The Secret of the Machines"⁷³. This contains two lines that, through pathetic fallacy, dramatise the essence of the problematic moral agency of automation, over which our contemporary world is struggling: «But remember, please, the Law by which we live, We are not built to comprehend a lie». Significantly, these verses were chosen by Ian McEwan as the epigraph to *Machines Like Me* (2019), a remarkable novel that investigates and dramatizes the interactions between humans and androids, and probes into the moral quandaries of artificial intelligence.

The telegraph as well had shared in the collective illusion of the innocence of the machine: that it should have bred illusions, if not lies, and unfulfilled promises, alongside its wondrous romance of connectivity, is yet another facet of that prismatic relationship between science, technology and the cultures of communication that is to be our present and future reality.

⁷³ Originally published in Charles R.L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, *A History of England*, Clarendon Press, London 1911.