“What Did They Say?”

In lieu of some grand statement about the nature, history, or future of “Romantic Media Studies,” in which I would attempt to place my own work, I’d like to offer a series of citations for discussion. This is not only an attempt to forestall the difficulty of offering an adequate conceptualization of the former, or an interesting account of the latter. For I’ve been thinking more and more about citation, exploring the possibility that some Romantic literary experiments in verse and prose profited from their authors’ increased exposure, as readers or “consumers” of print, to what’s called “reported speech” (but since reported speech constitutes an “entextualization,” it can serve as a type for all forms of textual citation, within and across media).¹

1. The Government bulletin of the 19th was ... all hearsay; but that hearsay sublimated into official authenticity by the manner of communicating it to the public. (William Cobbett, Political Register [1805])

2. It is no less an error in teachers, than a torment to the poor children, to enforce the necessity of reading as they would talk. In order to cure them of singing as it is called; that is, of too great a difference, the child is made to repeat the words with his eyes from off the book; and then indeed, his tones resemble talking, as far as his fears, tears, and trembling will permit. But as soon as the eye is again directed to the printed page, the spell begins anew; for an instinctive sense tells the child’s feelings, that to utter its own momentary thoughts, and to recite the written thoughts of another, as of another, and a far wiser than himself, are two widely different things; and as the two acts are accompanied with widely different feelings, so must they justify different modes of enunciation. (S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria [1817])

3. —Quid tibi dixerunt? (Que vous ont-il dit?) lui criant d’une voix forte, du plus loin qu’il l’aperçut.
   Julien s’embranchant un peu à traduire en latin les discours de l’évêque: —Parlez français, et répétiez les propres paroles de Monseigneur, sans y ajouter rien, ni rien retrancher, dit l’ex-directeur di séminaire, avec son ton dur et ses manières profondément inélégantes.
   [“Quid tibi dixerunt?” (What have they said to you?) he cried out to him in a loud voice as soon as he saw him in the distance. “Speak French, and repeat my lord’s own words without either adding or subtracting anything,” said the ex-director of the

¹ “Entextualization” is a term used by linguistic anthropologists to describe “the process of rendering discourse extractable.” While many anthropologists use the transcription of oral performance as an example of entextualization, Michael Silverstein has extended its reference to a range of media practices; for example, the entextualization of something called “message” (but distinct from any particular statement) across media in recent U.S. political campaigns. Intriguingly, he traces the entextualization of a candidate’s “message” to the 1952 presidential campaign, though without specifically referencing his teacher Roman Jakobson’s use of “I like Ike” to distill the poetic function. “What Goes Around…: Some Shtick from ‘Tricky Dick’ and the Circulation of U.S. Presidential Image,” Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 21:1 (2011): 54-77.
seminary in his harsh tone, and with his particularly inelegant manners, as Julien got slightly confused in translating into Latin the speeches of the bishop.] 
(Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir* [1830])

4. Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches. 
(Gertrude Stein, *“If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso”* [1923])

“Reported speech” interests me as a category because (a) it’s a simple example of what’s called “remediation.” Although I’m most interested in the appearance of “reported speech” in print, the fact that speech can be reported using the same “medium”—that is to say, voice—allows us to avoid the potential error of attributing the effects of remediation to technological differences or innovations. Obviously, at this level “reported speech” corresponds to the trade upon orality that is a well-known feature of Romantic writing and prominent in my own and others’ work in “Romantic media studies.”

Reported speech also interests me because (b) it offers a model of utterance that is neither entirely expressive (of an intention, a thought, a feeling) nor determinately referential (since reported speech will often contain shifters). 2 By virtue of this “neutrality” with respect to intention (which may correspond to “ambiguity” in the literary genres), reported speech might be said to constitute a unit of “information” as it comes to be defined in the nineteenth century. (I follow John Guillory in discerning a new language ideology underlying the new “media concept”—language understood as “a vehicle for the communication of a message”—and like Jonathan Mulrooney (and Wordsworth), I associate the development of that ideology with Romantic-period newspapers, periodical publications which distinctively “authorize themselves as rapid and objective conveyors not of opinion but of information.”) 3

Finally, reported speech interests me as a specific type of mediation: mediatization. My interest in mediatization derives from my current research, in which I’ve been attempting to trace the migration of overtly political questions of sovereignty raised by all things Napoleonic (the usurpation that transformed a Republic into an Empire; the internal colonization of Europe; suppression of non-governmental newspapers) into the domain of literary discourse. “Mediatization” was a political term circa 1800, describing the loss of German states’ “imperial immediacy.” But now it is used in communication and media studies, somewhat loosely, to describe the subjection of a range of institutions and practices—political, economic, religious—to the influence of dominant media. The suggestion of domination and subordination is important, I think, for it registers the anxiety that may subvert media studies, including Romantic media studies. Asif Agha outlines this

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2 Take, for example, the first line of Stein’s poem: “Would he like it if I told him. If I told him would he like it.” We do not even know if the shifters “he” and “him” reference the same person, nor whether “it” refers to the content of the message or to its being told. Of course, it’s by no means clear that these references would be ascertainable in a given “speech situation,” either; Michael Silverstein calls this “pragmatic contradiction.” (M. Silverstein and G. Urban, “The Secret Life of Texts,” in *Natural Histories of Discourse* (U. Chicago Press, 1996).

tendency in a recent essay, suggesting that contemporary approaches to the media tend to “extract particular communicative technologies (the newspaper, radio, television, etc.) from the totality of communicative processes.” Agha describes “the media concept” as “an ideology of communication” that tends to focus on one fragment of “commodified communication” (the book, the newspaper, the internet), in ironic imitation of the very procedures of mediatization that are often regarded with anxiety as threats to a treasured freedom of expression.

A slogan, a press release, an internet meme: these would be examples of “commodified communication” or mediatization; entextualizations of a social process (communication) formatted to be reproducible with minimal alteration in subsequent phases of mediation. Without assuming that poetic form is necessarily “commodified,” we can recognize that it’s both citable and recitable to a high degree. How then to understand the difference that scale makes? What happens when the point-to-mass dissemination of “reported speech” seems to overwhelm communicative networks and social practices? Surely this is the question raised by Wordsworth in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads.

A focus on “point-to-mass dissemination” will seem to diminish agency; Agha notes that the “media concept” postulates a deverbalized “receiver,” reified as an antenna. The (sovereign?) power attributed to “media” as subject/agent is what makes some scholars uncomfortable with claims like “media delimit what we can know about the world” (in a forthcoming review of work in the field). Such statements can seem to assert, as Kevi Goodman puts it, “that all experience is reducible to its discursive or technological mediation” (γ). But her own and others’ work has taught us to think about “mediation” as a concept not limited to the discursive or the technological; the body and its sensory organs are media; war is a medium, as is the air we breathe. Nonetheless, the work of Jacques Rancière allows us to validate the claim that media delimit experience merely as an assertion that media establish boundaries of the un/sayable, the difference between knowledge and feeling; in short, the distribution of the “sensible.”

I’m attracted to Agha’s claim that “mediation englobes mediatization” (“Mediation constitutes the larger context and ever-present backdrop for any process of mediatization that links communication to commodities in some specific way”). Texts are only “precipitates of social processes” (Silverstein and Urban). But I’m less sanguine than Agha that the social uptake of mediatized “information”—its remediation—is always sufficiently creative to offset the effects of point-to-mass dissemination. I recall Niklas Luhmann’s claim that the “critical distance” of second-order observation functions to produce an “ambiguity of knowledge” that allows, even requires, endless elaboration: “in the process of producing information, the mass media simultaneously set up a horizon of self-generated uncertainty which has to be serviced with ever more information” (82). How, then, are we to draw a distinction between mediatization and mediation? If, as Agha suggests, social practice will always “englobe” mediatization (however global its reach), is the difference between a state-controlled medium on the model of Napoleon’s and a putatively “free” press

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4 “Meet Mediatization,” Language and Communication 31.3 (July 2011): 163–70.
inconsequential? Is a “free press” a near-oxymoron, on the model of “free trade,” and “free speech” similarly a fantasy of the “media concept”?

In regard to these questions, and because I have always regarded the “medium” of Romanticism as an untranscendable present, the most relevant work I’ve read in “Romantic Media Studies” recently may be the analyses of the “Occupy” movement in the fall 2012 issue of *Critical Inquiry*. Analyzing Occupy’s preferred medium of communication, W. J. T. Mitchell links “the mic-check tactic, which both amplifies speech and exposes its curtailment by police forces that prohibit the use of amplification” to “the overall strategy of refusing to designate representatives or spokespersons and, more generally, to the insistence on staging a politics of radical equality and nonsovereignty” (11). Bernard Harcourt notes that “the human mic interrupts charisma. It’s like live translation; the speaker can only utter five to eight words before having to shut up, while the assembled masses repeat. The effect is to defuse oratory momentum—or to render it numbingly repetitive. It also forces the assembled masses to utter words and arguments that they may not agree with” (40). Finally, Michael Taussig offers us a sample of reported speech, transcribing what he heard one day in Zuccotti Park:

5:50 AM: sudden mic check. “Breaking News” (funny how they reproduce the media, especially at this crucial moment). The park has filled to overflowing the past dark hour along with rising tension, and three “echoes” or rebooting of the mic check are required to get to the people at the back.

Breaking News
Breaking News
Breaking News

The human microphone is bursting to capacity. Echoes chase echoes, and only the most alert ears and powerful voices are able to transmit anything. Hope and fear blur the message. ... You strain forward. Then pivot 180 degrees to catch the repetition. We feel the incredible power of repetition, each repetition the same, each one slightly off. (“What did they say?”) (86)

Developments in new media, we are told, allow us to rethink old media in its terms. Print literature, for example, can be accurately, if anachronistically, described as “wireless telecommunication.” So too can the “mic check” technology of reported speech. Wireless telecommunication relies for transmission on an environment that is not always conducive to ... well, *conducting*, and sometimes refracts and reflects the radio waves. The transmission is therefore subject to distortion by what’s known as “multipath propagation,” ghosting effects also known as “echo” and “jitter” (that can make the image on a television screen, for example, look like *Nude Descending a Staircase*). I propose that we can read such effects in the passages I’ve cited.

“Reported speech” constitutes a major category of the information that serves point-to-mass communication. I’m willing to argue that something like reported speech also structures Romantic literary experimentation from Blake to Stendhal (and to Stein et al.). These literary experiments are part of the system of “commodified communication” they would oppose. Yet perhaps attention to reported speech as *recitation*, a citational practice that is part of, but not limited to “the media” might help us to distinguish the reciter from the “receiver” and better understand the complexity of mediation.