

adducing a wide range of recent scholarship and criticism. The result is an engaging narrative and analysis of individual agents working with large social and cultural processes not only to imagine things otherwise but to make them so, through print. Throughout these investigations, Keen returns to their use for us now in critiquing the literary institution, and academic discourse itself, in relation to contested ideas of civil society and the public sphere.

In his conclusion, “Romantic revisions,” Keen positions his work in relation to the question, once again, and as raised most pointedly by Jerome McGann, of the Romantic ideology still informing, in largely unrecognized ways, our ideas of literature, identity, and nation, especially as seen in the apparently unavoidable figure of Wordsworth. The book returns, then, to the long vexed questions of the relation between Enlightenment and Romanticism, across the decade of the Revolutionary 1790s, and, more broadly, of the relation between the aesthetic and the political—a question that studies such as this help is to pursue for our own time.

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Peter Gibian. *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Pp. 398.

Fittingly, I had just sat down for a good boiled egg at the breakfast table when I took up Peter Gibian’s *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation*. Beyond providing astute and convincing critical analyses of Holmes’s “breakfast table” conversation books, Gibian demonstrates how Holmes’s unique structure of *conversation* figures in the development of Holmes’s other startling and progressive ideas found in his novels, medial essays, notes and correspondence. Especially as a “structure” for confident self-development, conversation played an active role in creating a culture of public socio-political participation by energizing the public sphere with the critical exchange of ideas. As the boarding house breakfast table suggests a space for the engagement of life’s diverse travellers, so the conversation it generated was to be heterogeneous and non-exclusive. Differences of class, gender, and region all come to the table to talk.

Conversation is not dialogue in a simple sense of chit chat or polite agreement amongst familiars. As Gibian argues, it is dialogic in a Bakhtinian sense, consisting of multiple voices interrupting to disallow the dominance of any single viewpoint. Dialogism here is the “contact zone,” “carnavalesque,” controversy at play. However, it is structured by a double logic of two contrasting principles or alternating polarities—those of autocratic monologism and revolutionary interruption. Such polarity reappears throughout Holmes’s oeuvre, whether, for instance, as “levity” and “gravity,” “house-building” and “house-breaking,” or the in and out of “breathing.”

Convincingly linking Holmes’s medical writings to his various literary works, Gibian reveals Holmes’s unique ability to recognise and feel at home with the divided nature of persons and their ideas. Psychologically speaking, a divided constitution is not an illness in itself, and no cure for it is required. What is needed is the promotion of a structure on both the social and the personal levels that puts divisions into play. Play should generate a genial humour able to maintain one’s own and others’ differences and contradictions together. On the social and national levels, this multiplicity generates the energy of ideas, which should be tapped for constant personal and national renovation. But relative to contradiction and play, an irony emerges. In detailing so extensively how the conversational structure relates to all of Holmes’s ideas in his various works, Gibian shows us a very monologic Holmes in the end. “Everything in Holmes’ world emerges in a tension of polarities” (96)—really, everything. There seem to be no free radicals in this body of work generated outside of duality and polarity.

That said, Gibian is not writing a biography of Holmes so much as what might be called an intellectual history of a structure, and one that does change our perspective on “the context for our understanding of the major literary works of the American Renaissance,” to quote the book jacket. Gibian’s perceptive readings of select novels provide examples of where, how, and with what significance the conversational model plays out in canonical literature from England and New England. Such re-readings do reaffirm the extent to which conversation was on the minds of Sterne, Dickens, Melville, and Hawthorne—though with Melville, perhaps more negatively than positively so. Silence in Melville signifies more importantly than Gibian credits, and those biting ironies in *The Confidence Man* show geniality as a dupe and talk as a swindle as the *Fidèle* steams toward the South. Yet overall, Gibian truly inhabits one of Holmes’s most positive figures, the “thought-sprinkler,” refreshing various disciplines, subjects,

and historical periods with Holmesian ideas. He challenges Habermas's too agreeable understanding of the public sphere, for instance, and notes Holmes's similarities with Richard Rorty's more current call to talk.

Today's dearth of real conversation in the public sphere is part of why we need to be reminded of Holmes and the energy of the nineteenth century. As Gibian notes all too briefly, Americans today seem to desire conversation, as suggested by the plethora of "talk shows" and "talk radio." Rorty is the spokesperson of the more serious call for its importance for a culture of public participation in politics and ideas. However, as appears in an endnote referencing Frank Lentricchia's criticism of Rorty (359–60, note 20), perhaps the energetic potential of talk is no longer possible in late capitalism. As the talk *show* suggests, perhaps the public desires only the image and idea of talk. To fetishize talk shows means that viewers can consume the image of talk passively as an entertainment, yet avoid having to converse and be challenged actively themselves. Conversation demands a minimum level of self-confidence that desires to be actively public. In an age of Homeland Security, with its "legal" authority to police the public sphere, few in America are prepared to live in the push-pull dynamic of house-breaking and house-building. One could land in jail without formal charge.

Gibian notes the Sixties as a time when America enjoyed at least a version of energetic talk on a public scale, where monologism and dialogism challenged each other and very often duked it out on the grounds of Kent State and the streets of Birmingham, Alabama. The era revealed a destructive potential, that conversation can move from challenge to aggression, creating a physical contact zone of hatred. Gibian is mindful of this potential, noting repeatedly that others in the nineteenth century worried about it as well. As Holmes was writing *The Professor at the Breakfast Table* in 1859, the nation's talk was at its most volatile. However, via Holmes, Gibian argues that conversational participants can't forget that they are always engaged in rule-based play. Sometimes a challenging point is put forward in order to infuse contradiction into the talk more so than for the content of the point itself. Integrity lies in the structure of exchange over and above the content. If participants forget the rules, they might think that they're hearing hate speech, for instance, and desire the silence which slugging the talker provides. What keeps free play from spinning out of control? Is the discontinuity of conversation truly vitalising?

The answer seems to be that the structure has to be its own cure, transforming potential opponents into equal participants, in two ways. First, conversation draws participants out of themselves, encouraging them "to

sense the limits of their provincial beliefs and private laws, and so to stop judging each other and acting on those judgments—to begin, most simply, to try to talk, with only the ‘law’ of ‘civility’ to guide their verbal interaction” (319). “Talk leaders,” such as Holmes’s Autocrat of the breakfast table, create such encouragement by dispersing charm over the table. The second way is less charming. Conversation is built on interruption. When monologism and monotony threaten the table, someone else must burst in with an interruption. At its most extreme in the breakfast table books, such interruption is often figured by a youth who fires a cap gun at the monologist. This shocking action shows the potential for destructiveness in one’s opinions at the very time that it interrupts such destruction from becoming a reality (88). If this solution is logical but unconvincing and potentially dangerous, then perhaps the model of “breathing” makes more sense. Dialogism as the back and forth should be thought of as not just a regular course of events, but rather as a necessity that keeps the body alive. The body senses when it is hyperventilating and strives to relax. We hope. Either that or it just passes out.

If breathing is a figure for the conversational structure, it can also explain the back and forth of the nation’s desire for conversation over the course of history. The antebellum period was energised by conversation; however, rather than leading to continued free play of ideas, it pushed the envelope on the issue slavery. The South left the table. The North forced it back, but in so doing came to control the discourse. Gibian importantly compares Holmes Sr. with Holmes Jr. who, after fighting for the Union in the War, became a representative post-bellum figure for the necessity of limited discussion culminating in judgement. A polar opposite of the father, Holmes Jr. could make the following pronouncement: “In cases of differences between ourselves and another there is nothing to do except in unimportant matters to think ill of him and in important ones to kill him” (qtd. in Gibian 334)—tongue in cheek, but not. The bridge between father and son, I suspect, is Lincoln. “A house divided cannot stand” is a motto of unionist discourse. “Right makes might,” though, is another; and such a trope has reappeared in America, revealing the dangers of a unionist discourse now on an international scale. If in the early ’90s one President drew “a line in the sand,” it has reified now into “an axis of evil.” Hopefully Peter Gibian’s engaging and scholarly reminder of the necessity of Holmesian conversation will be the beginning of a return to the healthy world of talk.

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