Gossip and Literary Narrative

Vermeule, Blakey.

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 30, Number 1, April 2006, pp. 102-117 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/phl.2006.0021

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/phl/summary/v030/30.1vermeule.html
GOSSIP AND LITERARY NARRATIVE

Since its murky origins in Grub Street, a specter has haunted the novel—the specter of gossip. In its higher-minded mood, literary narratives have been very snobbish about gossip and the snobbishness is unfair. Even the most casual reader of social fiction will recognize that gossiping is what characters do most passionately. However, they can neither admit nor be aware of it. Only minor or morally compromised characters are allowed to indulge in its pleasures. Matronly middle-aged women, chatty maids, little girls, and effeminate fops are the ones who gossip; their more reflective counterparts—the men and women designated as heroes and heroines—only briefly tolerate such idle chatter. Gossip is derided, decried, condemned, and maligned. It is womanish, low, slavish, servantish, silly, pert, loose, wanton, jiggety, mean. It is the “tittle-tattle of Highbury” in Austen’s Emma, an activity for the old maid Miss Bates and her even older, blind, and senile mother. In Middlemarch, although the world is “apparently a huge whispering-gallery,” the greatest gossip of all is Mrs. Cadwallader, a matron with a mind like “phosphorous, biting at everything” (Spacks, p. 194). In Richardson’s Clarissa, Lovelace—a man not known for his indifference to social information—airily dismisses gossip as “the female go-round.” (In novels, the male equivalents of the “female go-round” tend to be such despised modes of exchange as business letters, gambling, chess, and games of chance.) Gossip has always been a part of charivari with the power to turn the world upside down. It also has the power to destroy lives (Les Liaisons Dangereuses) and to derail love (when it becomes the “prejudice” of Pride and Prejudice). If it ever innocent, it is only because it is meaningless.

Gossip is all of these things even—especially—when it powers the
whole narrative. This paradox is evident almost anywhere we choose to look. Social novelists view the stuff of direct, unmediated social information as so intense that it requires special handling—even disavowal. I will briefly survey examples from French, English, and Russian fiction. The first is a lurid and overheated speech by Henri de Marsay, the peculiar hero of Balzac’s short novel, *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (1815). De Marsay is a dissipated aristocrat in love with a mysterious young girl who, he finds out much later, is the sexual slave of de Marsay’s long-lost sister. But first, after a night of passion that “had begun with a slow trickle of pleasures and ended in overflowing torrents,” de Marsay realizes, when his lover accidentally lets slip the name of his rival, that the person he is competing with is female. The next day he becomes consumed with a bitter plan to kill his faithless lover. He reflects to his friend Paul “Upon my honor, man is a clown dancing on the edge of a cliff. We’re told about the immorality of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, and some book with the name of a chambermaid. But there is one ghastly, dirty, dreadful, corrupting book that is always open and never closed, the great book of the world—not to mention another book, a thousand times more dangerous, that consists of everything passed on by word of mouth between men or women behind their fans at the ball.”

Even though de Marsay is a corrupt aristocrat, his sentiments are little different from those the narrator expresses in the book’s opening chapter, a panoptic survey of Parisian life as a glorious mosaic of infection, rot, and moral disease.

In Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff’s new tenant Lockwood breaks his self-imposed exile from social life by pressing the housekeeper Nellie Dean to do what housekeepers do best and launch into an aggrieved saga about her master’s family. He wants her to serve up the gossip hot. “I ate . . . , hoping sincerely she would prove a regular gossip, and either rouse me to animation, or lull me to sleep by her talk.” When she does not pick up her cue at once, he thinks, despondently, that she may only gossip about her own affairs, “which could not interest me.” One turn of the screw and all epistolary novels look like gossip: two people talk fervently about the doings of a third and a fourth, reporting on the world’s shifting shapes and trying to unpack the motives, intentions, feelings, and plans of the people in it.

Authors often use gossip as their framing device. In a way this is formally inevitable: gossip flows into a text the moment a writer chooses frame tales or letters as her narrative vehicle. These forms are preeminently conversation overheard. Gossip automatically distances the
reader from actions that may be too painful to contemplate. If a writer can complete an action through gossip, he pushes the action deeper into the background, just as George Eliot does at the end of *Middlemarch* when she discreetly pulls the curtain over Dorothea and Will Ladislaw’s conjunctions, sending everything into the middle and deep distance.

Literary narratives, in short, are deeply ambivalent about gossip: they depend on it even as they disavow it. In this respect, they are just like the rest of us. Gossip, though everywhere practiced, is everywhere despised. The history of the word reflects the ambivalence. The gos-

derives from God, the -sip from sib, as in sibling or kin. Gossip is an archaic term for godparent. It has always denoted an extraordinarily close social bond. The OED quotes John Davies’s 1612 colonial treatise on why Ireland was never entirely subdued to the English: “The English were forbidden to marry, to foster, to make gossippes with the Irish.” In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a gossip became “A person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler.” In fact, women gossip no more than men do, but gossip’s gods are always female—Arachne the spider goddess sitting amidst her web. What work does gossip do? What are the psychic forces behind it?

In her study *Gossip* Patricia Spacks traces the history of gossip hatred back to the Middle Ages, although I would imagine she could have traced it back to the beginning of recorded culture had she wanted to. Certain themes emerge again and again, some of which I have already touched on. Gossip is for women. It is idle, frivolous, and vicious. At the same time it is profoundly threatening. It taps into an ancient belief about the magic powers of language to wound or kill. Moralists have dined out on it for centuries calling it malicious, treacherous, and terrifying. Predictably, the subaltern classes become the site onto which dominant groups project such “outlaw emotions” as envy, Schadenfreude, pleasure in gossip, betrayal, exaggeration and so on (Portmann, p. 188). “At one extreme,” Spacks writes, gossip is the less-than-human practice of an Iago: it

manifests itself as distilled malice. It plays with reputations, circulating truths and half-truths and falsehoods about the activities, sometimes about the motives and feelings, of others. Often it serves serious (possibly unconscious) purposes for the gossipers, whose manipulations of reputation can further political or social ambitions by damaging competitors or enemies, gratify envy and rage by diminishing another, generate an
immediately satisfying sense of power, although the talkers acknowledge no such intent. Supplying a powerful weapon in the politics of large groups and small, gossip can effect incalculable harm. (Spacks, p. 4)

At the other extreme, gossip is a form of intimacy, even “pastoral.” “Serious” gossip, she writes, “takes place in private, at leisure, in the context of trust, usually among no more than two or three people. . . . It provides a resource for the subordinated . . . a crucial means of self-expression, a crucial form of solidarity” (Spacks, pp. 3, 5).

Gossip relentlessly favors some kinds of information over other kinds. Sexual scandal, cheating, sudden windfalls, dramatic successes, spectacular failures, and social climbing all take precedence over other kinds of information. Gossip is always concerned with power. It follows in the track of the great and never clings for very long to the down and out. People gossip up: Samuel Johnson observed that only the poor have privacy. And in his interesting discussion of Schadenfreude, John Portmann notes that it seems somehow more legitimate to take pleasure in the sufferings of the strong than the weak: “we are unlikely to feel Schadenfreude toward people with little or no self-esteem. Only a cruel or malicious person takes pleasure in the injuries of those who do not like themselves” (Portmann, p. 188).

Everyone gossips. This was one of the findings of an ingenious set of “gossip experiments” run by the British cognitive psychologist Robin Dunbar and detailed in his book *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (1996). Dunbar and his research cadre fanned out over the U.K. to eavesdrop on conversations in as wide a range of settings as they could—from corporate boardrooms to academic lunchrooms to pubs—sampling conversations involving individuals from all classes and social backgrounds. What they discovered is that, excepting situations in which it is agreed in advance that conversation will focus on some topic of mutual concern, about two-thirds of casual talk in groups concerns social topics—who is doing what with and to whom, who is in and who is out, who is up and coming and so on. Moreover, this category of social talk excludes things—like politics, religion, and sport—that one might have thought belonged to it.  

However, even this category of social talk is too general. People’s conversations, Dunbar found, were specifically concerned with a few things: managing their own and other people’s reputations, and the fair allocation of resources. Dunbar argues that gossip serves roughly the same function for humans as grooming does for other primates: it drenches
us in pleasure; it helps us form coalitions with others; and it helps us keep track of the coalitions people are forming with others. Grooming behavior is adaptive from the perspective of the group—since large stable groups are less vulnerable than small groups to predators—and also from the perspective of the individual, who benefits from a widespread diffusion of social benefits. A plethora of experimental evidence from game theory and other social sciences has shown that cooperating is usually the most fruitful social strategy for an individual to pursue. This emphatically does not mean, however, that total cooperation is the most fruitful strategy; we are always in danger of being taken advantage of by cheaters and free riders. Free riders and cheaters set off a storm of negative feeling not only in the person cheated but also in people who are not being directly cheated. Imagine that you are in a slow-moving line at the bank. If somebody pushes up to the front of your line, you feel justifiably outraged. But if somebody pushes up to the front of the line next to yours, you also feel outraged—even though you lose nothing—because it is just wrong for people to do that. A key function of gossip turns out to be to identify cooperators and cheaters and to advertise their reputations—to make free-riding a costlier strategy for others to pursue, to induce other people to cooperate, and to signal that you are a cooperator. Indeed a common social signal is whether somebody is a “good person,” rough code for whether they are reliable and can be trusted to uphold their end of a bargain.

The information we get through gossip, then, would seem to be highly useful—indeed information that we desperately need in order not to make giddy mistakes of trust. Why, in that case, does gossip have such a bad reputation? Pascal Boyer, a brilliant cognitive anthropologist of religion, suggests that there are two reasons gossip is held in contempt. The first is that “as much as we want to hear about other people’s status and sex and resources, we are reluctant to broadcast such information about ourselves.” The second is that “every bit as much as we like gossip, we have to represent ourselves as trustworthy. This is necessary if we want to maintain any stable social interaction, particularly cooperation, with other people. We must be seen as people who will not betray secrets and spread information beyond the circle of our real friends. So our ambivalence does not mean that contempt for gossip is hypocritical” (Boyer, p. 124). Boyer’s assessment takes us farther into the psychic economy of gossip. We are willing to know information about others that we do not want known about ourselves. We are willing to engage in an activity that we do not want it known that we engage in—even
gossiping turns out to be the sort of thing we wouldn’t want known about ourselves. Ambivalence, I suspect, has also to do with the way that individual interests conflict. There is no such thing, finally, as “the interests of the group” or the interests of the corporate agent; this is a fiction we easily grant. In fact within any corporate entity, the interests of two individuals are never fully congruent with each other, and gossip always threatens to explode the precarious fiction that they are.

The literary ambivalence is so widespread and intense that it deserves its own analysis. I will risk a general claim: no less a “trope of the novel” than the ones that Margaret Doody has identified in her magisterial study *The True Story of the Novel* (the opening break that sutures readers into the narrative, the imp-god Eros, the muddy shore, ekphrasis) is the trope of the flayed gossip.\(^6\) The flayed gossip comes in many guises, from the benign to the satanic. Her consequence varies, too, from the mere passer of information to the Gordian knot at the center of a plotting conundrum. Her peculiar fate is to be excoriated for engaging in the same practices as everyone else, including the novelist.

Flayed gossips, for example, are the sirens who sing the imprudent but warm-hearted Lily Bart along her terrible downward path in Edith Wharton’s tragi-gossip masterpiece *The House of Mirth* (1905).\(^7\) Lily’s cousin Grace Stepney is one such. She is a middle-aged spinster and inveterate hater, with nothing better to do, apparently, than to collect nuggets of information to use against people at the ripe moment: “Grace Stepney’s mind was like a kind of moral fly-paper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of an inexorable memory.” Grace Stepney is the one who insinuates to Lily’s rich aunt, Mrs. Peniston, that Lily is Gus Trenor’s kept mistress; Mrs. Peniston disinherits Lily and Grace Stepney gets the bulk of the estate.\(^8\) Lily, however, is not completely blameless in the matter. Her mistake is to imagine that Grace has nothing better to do than to admire her, which a rather unlikely psychological scenario:

Lily would have been surprised to know how many trivial facts concerning herself were lodged in Miss Stepney’s head. She was quite aware that she was of interest to dingy people, but she assumed that there is only one form of dinginess, and that admiration for brilliancy is the natural expression of its inferior state.

Lily thinks this not only because she is vain, but because she has mentally classified her cousin as “a Gerty Farish,” but “without the saving
traits of youth and enthusiasm.” Gerty Farish is the spinster-cousin of Lawrence Selden. When Lily thinks about Gerty, it is to imagine that Gerty “admires her blindly”—a terrible miscalculation. Lily’s mistake is closely connected to the psychology of gossip. She at once discounts Grace Stepney’s own vanity and freezes her in the posture most flattering to herself, little considering that most people do not like to be minor characters in someone else’s drama.

There is, memorably, “that horrid little Dabham who does ‘Society Notes from the Riviera’” and who helpfully spreads the word that Lily and the husband of a friend have spent the night out alone together—a twisting of a half truth that runs utterly to Lily’s disadvantage. With his terrible staring eyes and imperviousness to inputs, Dabham could be an allegory of gossip out of Spenser’s parade of the seven deadly sins:

His little eyes were like tentacles thrown out to catch the floating intimations with which, to Selden, the air at moments seemed thick; then again it cleared to its normal emptiness, and he could see nothing in it for the journalist but leisure to note the elegance of the ladies’ gowns. Mrs. Dorset’s, in particular, challenged all the wealth of Mr. Dabham’s vocabulary: it had surprises and subtleties worthy of what he would have called “the literary style.”

Then there is the truly malevolent Bertha Dorchester, a jealous socialite who sets first a small and then an enormous trap for Lily. The second more powerful trap comes at a crucial juncture in the narrative, pushing Lily firmly along on her tragic downward path. But long before she does so, Lily gets a warning from her patroness and friend Judy Trenor. Sitting one morning at Bellomont, the Trenor’s country estate, Lily and Judy start gossiping. Lily sits with her patroness and friend Judy Trenor at the Trenor’s country home, Bellomont. Lily Bart and Judy Trenor have important information to pass, information about whether the handsome but impecunious and fallibly passive Lawrence Selden will be a member of the weekend party. The answer turns on Bertha Dorchester, who was Selden’s girlfriend for a while. The affair has ended, she wants him back, he has lost interest. But in the midst of all this gossip, Judy Trenor’s plays her trump card, a bone-chilling warning about what Bertha Dorchester is really like:

“Every one knows you’re a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you’re not nasty. And for always getting what she wants
in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman.” Miss Bart stared in affected reproval. “I thought you were so fond of Bertha.” “Oh, I am—it’s much safer to be fond of dangerous people. But she IS dangerous—and if I ever saw her up to mischief it’s now.”

And dangerous, only a few days later, she turns out to be. Lily Bart has come to Bellomont to pursue Percy Gryce, the stolid heir to two ancient New York fortunes. Percy Gryce is boring, wooden, uptight, conventional, and narrowly committed to his uncle’s Americana collection, not for any intrinsic interest it possesses, but for the reflected light it throws on the family name. Such an unpromising mate leaves Lily cold, but she cannot quite bring herself to admit how she feels. In deference to Percy Gryce’s prudishness, she makes certain strategic sacrifices. She foregoes the pleasures of cards during the evening, and she pretends she doesn’t smoke. She allows Percy Gryce to bathe in the warm glow of her domestic attentions, to feel “the confused titillation with which the lower organisms welcome the gratification of their needs.” She perceives that Percy Gryce’s “egoism was a thirsty soil, requiring constant nurture from without” and devises the appropriate strategy for feeding it.

Yet against such a bleak future, Lily Bart unconsciously rebels. She agrees to accompany Percy Gryce to church on Sunday morning, but lets the carriage drive away without her. Then she spends the afternoon walking and flirting with Selden, so provokingly that Percy Gryce deserts the house party for good. The next day Judy Trenor throws up her hands in exasperation: “All I can say is, Lily, that I can’t make you out! . . . You’ll never do anything if you’re not serious!” Lily remonstrates a bit against this judgment but knows it to be true. “Serious” here seems to mean something close to acting and intending all in one direction. Lily faces a problem of practical reasoning, one so severe that Judy “can’t make her out.” She likes money and fine things, but she can’t help liking Selden who doesn’t have any. She has a powerful vision of how suffocating her life with Percy Gryce will be, but she can’t quite bring herself to stop thinking of him as her future husband. Lily’s ambivalence has a pattern—as one character explains it to another: “she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic.” The character then offers a quick and accurate diagnosis of Lily’s plight: “Sometimes,” she added “I think it’s just flightiness—and sometimes I think it’s because, at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for. And it’s the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study.”
The difficulty of deciding is what puts people in a plight. Gossip is drawn to a plight; gossip delights in a plight. But gossip also hates a plight and tries to flatten it into a terrifying Machiavellian caricature. In doing so, gossip shows itself to be uninterested in mixed or incoherent motives; but it shows, too, that it has enormous practical value. Lily, for example, makes up her mind about Percy Gryce in a moment of gossip’s clean dismissal—her burrowing insight delivers the goods on him, although what she thinks may not in fact be fair:

She knew that Mr. Gryce was of the small chary type most inaccessible to impulses and emotions. He had the kind of character in which prudence is a vice, and good advice the most dangerous nourishment.

The narrative, slipping from reported third-person interior monologue into the quasi-objective mode represented by Free Indirect Discourse, polishes one of the horns of Lily’s dilemma while ignoring the other—her love of finery. Gossip is thus a response, albeit an insufficient one, to the difficulties of practical reason: Lily has a commitment problem to which gossip is inexorably drawn. But gossip solves the commitment problem for her by maliciously flattening her motives, thus making it impossible for her to have incoherent ones and cutting off her avenues of action. Thus is Bertha Dorset gossip personified.

Why should any of this be a problem? Why mention it at all? The flayed gossip can simply make her way through the eddies of narrative history without our needing to add our own judgments. Surely the flayed gossip is merely an emblem of a rather poignant human situation—perhaps so universally felt that mentioning it is merely banal. We live in a web of opinion and judgment—we constantly evaluate and are evaluated in turn. People have opinions about us that may not correspond to our self-conceptions; whether they do or no depends on circumstances that are themselves largely external to those self-conceptions. In this tangle, gossip serves a rather ambiguous purpose. On the one hand, it is a crucial tool in the arsenal of practical intelligence, a way of making sense of the world and cutting it down to a manageable size. Gossip can be useful when we need information in a hurry. Where other people come into play, cutting the world down to a manageable size implies a whole architecture of inter-subjectivity. It implies a standpoint and an object, an author and the various characters he or she creates. But on the other hand, gossip can never be as true to the complexities of personhood as we would like it to be. It underplays that architecture by typifying,
essentializing, and smoothing out contradictions and disjunctions. Perhaps pre-reflectively, people think that there is something literary about this poignant human situation because giving people motives involves making narratives and hence making sense.

There are many hypotheses in circulation, some historical and conceptual, about the origins and purpose of fictional narratives. Several of these hypotheses emphasize the connection between gossip and fiction, but neither hypothesis adequately addresses the widespread fictional excoriation of gossip and other obvious tropes of social exchange. Nor do they address the myriad problems of practical agency that gossip hatred raises. One powerful conceptual hypothesis comes from writers who favor evolutionary and cognitive approaches to culture. They argue that that fiction is popular and widespread because it gives people roughly the same pleasure as gossip does. Especially beguiling are some brief suggestions of Steven Pinker’s. Pinker has claimed that, “an enjoyment of fiction may be both an evolutionary by-product and an evolutionary adaptation. The by-product consists in using virtual reality technologies to simulate pleasurable experiences, especially gossip. The adaptation may consist in mentally exploring the ordinary consequences of combinatorial, strategic human interactions involving fitness-related goals in a simulated world, not unlike case-based reasoning in artificial intelligence systems.” In the course of his magisterial syntheses of evolution and cognitive science, Pinker raises a host of issues about the purpose and function of art. Are the arts directly adaptive, indirectly adaptive, or merely “cheesecake?”

Now, if the intellectual faculties could identify the pleasure-giving patterns, purify them, and concentrate them, the brain could stimulate itself without the messiness of electrodes or drugs. It could give itself intense artificial doses of the sights and sounds and smells that ordinarily are given off by healthful environments. We enjoy strawberry cheesecake, but not because we evolved a taste for it. We evolved circuits that gave us trickles of enjoyment from the sweet taste of ripe fruit, the creamy mouth feel of fats and oils from nuts and meat, and the coolness of fresh water. Cheesecake packs a sensual wallop unlike anything in the natural world because it is a brew of mega doses of agreeable stimuli which we concocted for the express purpose of pressing our pleasure buttons. Pornography is another pleasure technology . . . The arts are a third.

Literary narratives should be flattered: fiction has been elevated to one of the greatest pieces of evidence for how the mind works. And in fact
the gossip hypothesis has a great deal to recommend it. First of all it is intuitively true. Why else do we allow ourselves to become absorbed in stories about people we have never met and never will if not to get large doses of the delicious social information we crave? Indeed, there is something rather chaste about getting our dose of gossip through fiction: what better way to indulge in gossip than to hear about the doings of people we have no relationship to? Consider this account, by Spacks, of the “moral comfort” derived from the practice of long-distance gossip. Here Spacks describes what it is like to read the letters of the eighteenth-century belletrist and world-class gossip Horace Walpole:

He also provides us with a relatively “cost-free” outlet for feelings we might find unacceptable in other contexts . . . We vicariously enjoy the position of aristocrat even while condemning its intermittent moral shoddiness: a set of responses parallel to those involved in reading about millionaires in People. Part of what we buy in buying letters is the moral comfort implicit in our capacity to make the letter-writer both subject and object of contemplation. (Spacks, pp. 83–84)

Indeed some of the best novel criticism of the last decade has explored the way that the form achieves special cognitive effects precisely through this kind of “cost-free” identification. A strong piece of evidence in favor of the gossip hypothesis is its proximity to several influential arguments from within literary studies (arguments that evolutionary psychologists do not seem to be aware of). I will single out one example, the historically detailed and immensely satisfying argument of Catherine Gallagher’s book Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820. Gallagher argues that when the category of fiction emerged in the eighteenth century British novel, it offered readers a chance to practice the sorts of emotions they would need to get along in an economy that was shifting from settled landownership to finance capital. “The release into the culture of strongly marked overtly suppositional identities, belonging to nobody and hence temporarily appropriate to anybody . . . should be seen as one among many modes of facilitating property exchange and investment in the period.”11 Gallagher is more interested in the formal properties of fiction than in its content. She thinks the very act of learning to credit fiction as fiction helped readers to

reach [a] state of conditional emotional being by inviting [them] to sympathize with characters because they were fictional and then requir-
ing them to cease feeling the transferred emotional upon closing the
book because, after all, characters are only fictional. Such a deliberate
creation of emotional discontinuity allows for a separate dimension of
affective life, one in which emotions were only “practiced,” in which the
feelings themselves take on the same suppositional, conjectural status as
the “nobody” in whom they supposedly originate. (Gallagher, p. 192)

According to Gallagher, fiction gave people the chance to practice their
emotional connections with other people. Depending on one’s political
slant, this is an innovation rich in benefits or laden with costs. Gallagher
is subtly suspicious of it. She suggests that fiction is an entry point for
market control of human consciousness, a development with markedly
different consequences for men and women. For eighteenth-century
British men, emotional speculation was training for financial specula-
tion: “a commercial man is imagined to undergo spells of suppositional
self-suspension in order to invest profitably and increase his property”
(Gallagher, p. 194). Emotional speculation was good practice for stock
jobbing. For women, by contrast, the consequences were more insidious.
Eighteenth-century English women needed to learn how to suppose they
could love men (since they could not straightforwardly love them without
first having been given encouragement by the men themselves), while
at the same time learning to accept that when they married they would
have to relinquish their property (Gallagher, p. 194).

A second reason the gossip hypothesis is appealing is that it elides
any real distinction between what F. R. Leavis called mass and minority
tastes. The Great Tradition of Austen, Eliot, James, and Conrad is just
as juicy, in its difficult and ambivalent way, as any dollar dreadful or
chronique scandaleuse. (Richard Simon has recently called attention
to the way that “trash culture” recycles plots and characters from past
high cultural products for consumer society: Seinfeld from Etheredge
“Friends” from Shakespeare’s comedies, Star Wars and Terminator from
_The Faerie Queene_.12) No less than popular forms, the Great Tradition is
subject to the principle that in an information society, the free circulation
of information isn’t free; what constrains it is the importance of what
people care about. Although this principle is now an ideological staple
of the mass media (we’re just giving the people what they want), it struck
me with a new force when I first began to teach the eighteenth-century
novel. I tried to explain to my students why authors of early novels wrote
so passionately and anxiously about form, building ever-larger porticos
to their fictions through which a reader has to pass, concentrating as
she goes on sorting out the rather obscure and forgettable differences between biography, history, epic, and so on. The paradox was that, for all their breathtaking formal experiments, eighteenth-century writers conserve content with remarkably consistency. Romance, science fiction, scandal, pornography, travel and exploration, realism with a stable point of view and a first or third person narrator, gothic, detective fiction, the country house novel—these are all genres that were either invented in the eighteenth century or reinvented by being grafted onto newer forms. Cycling through all of them is sex—either in its erotic or metaphysical manifestations—commerce, and scandal. But what I have just described does nothing to distinguish novels from the vast wash of social information, of human-interest stories, of news, of advertising.

This argument is in fact quite close to the second hypothesis about the relationship between gossip and fiction, a hypothesis that comes from literary history. Like the hypothesis from cognitive science, the second hypothesis is partly right and partly wrong. It comes out of a broad, serious reaction to Ian Watt’s enormously influential 1957 book *The Rise of the Novel*. Watt identified a tradition—Defoe, Fielding, Richardson—and a formal element within that tradition—formal realism—that distinguished it from the wash of scandal narratives, travel journals, Arabian Nights, and amorous tales that proliferated during the early part of the eighteenth century. According to Watt, formal realism is “the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.” Watt linked the spread of formal realism to the demands of an expanding middle-class reading public, an expansion driven by rising literacy rates and a Whig urban mercantile class that wanted a sanitized literature to reflect its own increasingly polite values and aspirations.

A generation of scholars has reacted to Watt by trying to break down distinctions between forms, between different media, and between different rhetorical spheres within the same medium. Their reasons have been explicitly revisionist and anti-formalist. The notion that formal realism is a distinguishing trait of elevated fiction has come under sustained, withering attack from literary historians. They have starkly rejected the claim that an especially referential use of language or a special sort of particularity is what distinguishes polite art from low. For example, Lennard Davis takes the view that there are tremendous historical and emo-
tional connections between literary narratives and more general-purpose human interest stories. Davis argues that the British novel arose in the eighteenth century out of a vast undifferentiated primordial soup of news, scandal, and popular writing that he calls the “news/novel matrix.” The news/novel matrix consisted of ballads and broadsides, travel narratives, satires, songs, and journalism about what was happening in the court and centers of finance. Much of this popular writing was marked by several characteristics. First was a deep and intentional obfuscation of the line between fact and fiction. Second was an attempt to arouse and titillate the reader sexually by employing various tactics of intimacy, suggestion, even pornography. Third was an emphasis on scandal, the doings of the great and the powerful. These developments were themselves made possible by new economic and financial conditions. One condition had to do with book production: publishing on a mass scale first became possible. The average consumer of printed fare in late seventeenth-century London was a middle class—a tradesman perhaps, and almost certainly a Puritan. Living in the great rich teeming cosmopolitan town, he would have found himself awash in information. He could read English, Latin, and Greek because he had been educated at a Puritan school. He would have been involved in various political and religious controversies. He had access to booksellers and printing shops. He could go around to the bookseller—also printer and publisher—and find on sale various chapbooks or octavo pamphlets costing a few pennies at most. But much of what was on sale was not political or religious at all—it was satirical or political or erotic or thinly disguised account of scandals going on at court. According to Davis, the novel claimed that it emerged suddenly triumphant from this tar pit like a whole new species and made people forget its suspicious lineage (see Davis’s first three chapters). The novel still bore all the marks of this lineage, but it concealed and integrated them in ever more sophisticated ways.

The newest generation of literary historians denies that social information makes any distinction between the different media that transmit it. Again, this seems to be intuitively plausible. The genius British comedy team of Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders do a skit about gossip. Two women sit around having a conversation—apparently the same one they’ve had a thousand times before. One woman says to the other: “do you know who had it all, lost it all, and then won it all back on her own terms?” The answer turns out to be Princess Diana (the skit was obviously rendered moot in 1997), but it can just as easily be someone else (like Jerry Hall). Clearly there is a large class of
glamorous, melancholy, but feisty women—well-known to the readers of _Hello_ and _Okay_ magazines—who had it all, lost it all, and then won it all back on their own terms. But there is more. Once French and Saunders start describing how whoever it is had it all, lost it all, and then won it all back on her own terms, they introduce a dark double—“a real bitch that one”—somebody who does not deserve everything she has got because she is “common” (in the case of Princess Diana it is, almost inevitably, Sarah Ferguson). But any reader of novels can instantly recognize the peculiar blend of moralizing and sympathizing that equally glamorous, plucky, and failed heroines have to contend with. Do you know who had it all, lost it all, and then won it all back on her own terms? Moll Flanders! Clarissa! Scarlet O’Hara!

But all this just takes us right back to the paradox about gossip that I began with. I will grant that there is a certain frisson to be gotten from thinking of Austen, Eliot, and Flaubert getting jiggly in the mosh pit with “cult studs, khmer newts, Langley spooks, techno-geeks, video drones, serial killers, vampire media, alien sperm-suckers and satanic therapists” (to quote the title of a recent book by critic John Leonard). Frisson undeniable, even if repeated priming has made the sensation ever harder to come by. Robin Dunbar may be right that the “up-market London Times and the mass-market UK tabloid _The Sun_” devote roughly the same number of column inches to actual gossip because “most of us would rather hear about the doings of the great and the not-so-good than about the intricacies of economic processes or the march of science” (although it is surely significant that they are both Rupert Murdoch papers) (Dunbar, p. 6). He may be right that fiction sells so well because people crave knowledge about “the unfolding intimacies of the main characters...the way they handle their experiences...their reactions to the vagaries of life—those ‘there but for the grace of God go I’ situations” (Dunbar, p. 5). All the same, Richardson especially did not want his writings confused with pornography or with scandal. The fact remains that gossip poses a problem for the novel—a problem that the novel has found itself pointing over and over again in its modern form. The modern novel has renounced social information of a direct, unmediated kind. But there is a curious logic to a form that repeatedly flays the gossips: in some deep way, it is flaying itself.


7. I have used a searchable online e-text of *The House of Mirth*, available at http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=284.

8. I am indebted to Jonathan Freedman’s unpublished article, “‘Information Wants to Be Free’: Insider Trading, Blackmail, and the Racialization of Knowledge in *The House of Mirth* and *The Great Gatsby*” for my understanding of the novel’s gossip economy; he also makes this point about Grace Stepney.


