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Early Talking Books: Spoken Recordings and Recitation Anthologies, 1880-1920

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Early Talking Books

Spoken Recordings and Recitation Anthologies, 1880-1920

Introduction: The Phonograph and the Rhetoric of Immediacy

In 1878, when Thomas Edison first speculated in print upon the practical significance of his invention of a sound recording device, or talking machine (in "The Phonograph and its Future"), and then in 1888, when he reported on "The Perfected Phonograph," the phonographic cylinder suggested itself as a material artifact that would bear the voices of a culture into the distant future, not to be read, but simply to be experienced as they had been heard when they were first captured. In the first of these predictive essays Edison posited grand and optimistic claims for the ascendancy of sound over print resulting from a technology that could replicate speech without the "mediating" practice of reading: "The advantages of [talking] books over those printed are too readily seen to need mention. Such books would be listened to where now none are read. They would preserve more [End Page 147] than the mental emanations of the brain of the author; and, as a bequest to future generations, they would be unequalled."¹ In the second of the two essays, he likened the markings of a phonographic recording to those found on ancient Assyrian and Babylonian clay cylinders, only to move from the inscriptive analogy to an argument about the phonograph's ultimate eclipse of writing: "It is curious to reflect that the Assyrians and Babylonians, 2,500 years ago, chose baked clay cylinders inscribed with cuneiform characters, as their medium for perpetuating records; while this recent result of modern science, the phonograph, uses cylinders of wax for a similar purpose, but with the great and progressive difference that our wax cylinders speak for themselves, and will not have to wait dumbly for centuries to be deciphered."² Edison was not alone in identifying his invention as an apparent transcendence of the "technology" of reading (as decipherment), leading to an experience that was even more immediate and intimate than that of the reader with his book. Late Victorian fantasies concerning a book that talks (some of them promotional in their conception) often focused on the author's immediate, individualized presence for the "reader" as a result of the preservation of his voice. According to one journalist of the 1880s, the phonographic book represents the fantasy of "a spoken literature, not a written one" that will allow writers to communicate "with all the living reality of the present moment."³ Similarly, the first article in the inaugural issue of *The Phonoscope: A Monthly Journal Devoted to Scientific and Amusement Inventions Appertaining to Sound and Sight* (1896) tells us: "It is by the voice that men communicate with each other in all the fullness of their individuality. The voice, formerly invisible and irretrievably lost as soon as uttered, can now be caught in its passage and preserved practically forever."⁴ Yet another enthusiast of the period stated that the phonograph was remarkable not only because it preserved literature (after all, print accomplishes that), but because it preserved the voices of the authors "which are the indices of the characters of those originating them."⁵

Such claims suggest that even before the phonograph materialized as a real artifact, there was already a well-developed Victorian yearning for a technology that would make the reading experience more immediate, that would, in a sense, capture the character and subjectivity of an author without the mediation of the printed page. Indeed, one can point to a variety of practices that involve the manipulation or interpretation of written scripts or printed texts and identify them with this desire to move beyond text toward an indexical trace of character. Interpretive techniques like graphology (the analysis of handwriting) looked at signatures for "selfhood epitomized."⁶ The new "science" of stylistics emerging in the 1880s sought each individual author's identifiable "characteristic curve," "sentence-sense," or "instinct of sentence thought" by counting the number of words [End Page 148] in an author's sentences...

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