

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES AND  
THE CULTURE OF CONVERSATION

Peter Gibian explores the key role played by Oliver Wendell Holmes in what was known as America's "Age of Conversation." He was both a model and an analyst of the dynamic conversational form that became central to many areas of mid-nineteenth-century life. Holmes' multivoiced writings can serve as a key to open up the closed interiors of Victorian America, whether in saloons or salons, parlors or clubs, hotels or boardinghouses, schoolrooms or doctors' offices. Combining social, intellectual, medical, legal and literary history with close textual analysis, and setting Holmes in dialogue with Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Fuller, Alcott, and finally with his son, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior, Gibian radically redefines the context for our understanding of the major literary works of the American Renaissance.

PETER GIBIAN is Associate Professor of English at McGill University. He is the editor of *Mass Culture and Everyday Life* (1997), and the author of articles in *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900–1950* (1999), *American Modernism Across the Arts* (1999), and *The Legacy of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.* (1992).

## CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

*Editor*

Ross Posnock, *New York University*

*Founding editor*

Albert Gelpi, *Stanford University*

*Advisory board*

Sacvan Bercovitch, *Harvard University*

Ronald Bush, *St. John's College, Oxford University*

Wai Chee Dimock, *Yale University*

Albert Gelpi, *Stanford University*

Gordon Hutner, *University of Kentucky*

Walter Benn Michaels, *University of Illinois, Chicago*

Kenneth Warren, *University of Chicago*

*Recent books in this series*

- 126 PHILLIP BARRISH *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory and Intellectual Prestige 1880–1995*
- 125 RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934*
- 124 KEVIN J. HAYES *Poe and the Printed Word*
- 123 JEFFREY A. HAMMOND *The American Puritan Elegy: A Literary and Cultural Study*
- 122 CAROLINE DORESKI *Writing America Black: Race Rhetoric and the Public Sphere*
- 121 ERIC WERTHEIMER *Imagined Empires: Incas, Aztecs, and the New World of American Literature, 1771–1876*
- 120 EMILY MILLER BUDICK *Blacks and Jews in Literary Dialogue*
- 119 MICK GIDLEY *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Inc.*
- 118 WILSON MOSES *Afrocentrism, Antimodernism, and Utopia*
- 117 LINDON BARRETT *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*
- 116 LAWRENCE HOWE *Mark Twain and the Novel: The Double-Cross of Authority*
- 115 JANET CASEY *Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine*
- 114 CAROLINE LEVANDER *Voices of the Nation: Women and Public Speech in Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*
- 113 DENNIS A. FOSTER *Sublime Enjoyment: On the Perverse Motive in American Literature*

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES  
AND THE CULTURE OF  
CONVERSATION

PETER GIBIAN



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**CAMBRIDGE**  
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521560269](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521560269)

© Cambridge University Press 2001

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2001

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Gibian, Peter, 1952–

Oliver Wendell Holmes and the culture of conversation / Peter Gibian.

p. cm. — (Cambridge studies in American literature and culture; 125)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 56026 8

1. Holmes, Oliver Wendell, 1809–1894 — Criticism and interpretation.

2. Literature and society — United States — History — 19th century.

3. Conversation — History — 19th century.

4. Table-talk — History — 19th century.

5. Conversation in literature.

6. Dialogue in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PS1992.C67 G54 2001

818'.309—dc21 00-068945

ISBN 978-0-521-56026-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-10612-2 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-0-521-56026-9 — Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation  
Peter Gibian  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

*For my parents*

*Socratic irony is the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation . . . It originates in the union of savoir vivre and the scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of the indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication . . . It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.*

(Friedrich Schlegel, *Lyceum* fragment 108)

## *Contents*

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction	i
<b>PART ONE OPENING THE CONVERSATION</b>	
1 THE CONVERSATION OF A CULTURE: strange powers of speech	15
<b>PART TWO HOLMES IN THE CONVERSATION OF HIS CULTURE</b>	
2 “TO CHANGE THE ORDER OF CONVERSATION”: interruption and vocal diversity in Holmes’ American talk	61
3 “COLLISIONS OF DISCOURSE” I: THE ELECTRODYNAMICS OF CONVERSATION A carnival of verbal fireworks	91
4 “COLLISIONS OF DISCOURSE” II: ELECTRIC AND OCEANIC “CURRENTS” IN CONVERSATION The cultural work of Holmesian talk	110
5 A CONVERSATIONAL APPROACH TO TRUTH: the Doctor in dialogue with contemporary truth-sayers	127
6 CONVERSATION AND “THERAPEUTIC NIHILISM”: the Doctor in dialogue with contemporary medicine	161
7 THE SELF IN CONVERSATION: the Doctor in dialogue with contemporary psychology	184

**PART THREE THE TWO POLES OF CONVERSATION**

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 8  | THE BIPOLAR DYNAMICS OF HOLMES' HOUSEHOLD<br>DIALOGUES: levity and gravity  | 215 |
| 9  | HOLMES' HOUSE DIVIDED: house-keeping and<br>house-breaking  | 235 |
| 10 | “CUTTING OFF THE COMMUNICATION”: fixations and<br>falls for the walled-in-self – Holmes in dialogue with<br>Sterne, Dickens, and Melville | 280 |
| 11 | BREAKING THE HOUSE OF ROMANCE: Holmes in<br>dialogue with Hawthorne   | 289 |

**PART FOUR CLOSING THE CONVERSATION**

- |    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 12 | CONCLUSIONS: Holmes Senior in dialogue with<br>Holmes Junior | 313 |
|    | <i>Notes</i>   | 341 |
|    | <i>Index</i>   | 383 |



## *Acknowledgments*

“We must not begin by talking of pure ideas – vagabond thoughts that tramp on the public roads without any human habitation – but must begin with men and their conversation.” These words from C. S. Peirce that introduce chapter three of this book also provide the most apt introduction to the true ground of the entire project. This analysis of the dynamics of talk was sparked by and is the product of a long series of collegial conversations and intellectual collaborations over a great many years. While I hope that my substantial debts to a wide range of foundational works in literary criticism and cultural history are made clear in the over-ample footnotes to this text, here I would especially like to remember debts that are personal as well as intellectual.

My initial fascination with the mercurial movements of conversation was stimulated by years of invigorating everyday converse with a truly exceptional cohort of graduate students in English, Comparative Literature, and Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford University. These primary intuitions then began to emerge as an argument grounding a revisionary reading of American cultural and literary history under the guidance of a very special group of teachers and thesis supervisors whose diversity of interests – literary, psychological, socio-historical, or philosophical – was ideally suited to the multi-faceted research involved in this project. Through his day-to-day counsel, through stimulating idea-exchanges in campus corridors, and through an incredible commitment of long-distance telephone time, Jay Fliegelman was a tremendous help at the thesis stage of this project. And he has remained a key source of enthusiastic encouragement over the long haul, always intervening at just the right moment to spur the next turn in thinking. With his generous, open, and creative critical mind, he has an extraordinary ability to sense the potential latent in even the most rough materials,

and then to suggest ways of bringing those rich implications to the fore. David Halliburton influenced the dissertation greatly through the example of his own work and through his close readings of later drafts. And Albert Gelpi, who became a literary–critical model for me during the course of several classes I had with him, played a key role as a reader of this project, urging me to shape the sprawling thesis into a book for the Studies in American Literature and Culture series at Cambridge University Press.

Several other professors at Stanford contributed greatly to the definition of this new approach to Holmes and to conversation. During classes on the English Romantics and through several discussions of this project, Herbert Lindenberger influenced my sense of the relations between mid-century American literature and important lines of English and European writing; he remains for me a key model for his scholarly energy and his range of critical vision. Ian Watt, always a wonderful example of intellectual rigor, breadth, and generosity, helped me greatly as the Chair of my Program for many years; he also in effect commissioned the first version of the chapter on Holmes Junior for a Stanford Humanities Center conference on legal history, and then helped me to hone it for publication in *The Legacy of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*, ed. Robert W. Gordon (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

In the years since those first stages, the argument has broadened and shifted considerably, again with the aid of colleagues who were remarkably generous with their time. Mary Louise Pratt helped me look into parallels with some forms of conversational analysis in linguistics, and spurred new thinking with her provocative conception of “arts of the contact zone.” Deborah Tannen provided keen responses to my initial notions about interruption and vocal diversity in Emerson, Alcott, and Fuller, influencing both this study of Holmes and a forthcoming companion volume surveying a wide range of mid-century authors. With characteristic kindness, Robert Ferguson brought forth challenging questions about early versions of the discussion about the legal vision of Justice Holmes. Faith Wallis’ careful reading of sections on the history of medicine and psychology was clarifying. Thoughtfully commenting on the entire manuscript in great detail from the perspective of his broad vision of nineteenth-century literary history, Thomas Wortham provided invaluable insight and enthusiastic guidance. In another supportive reading, Thomas Gustafson sharpened my sense of the interactions between

*Acknowledgments*

xi

literary texts and cultural context here. And I am especially thankful to Bob Levine for his amazingly generous help at several stages of the revision process; his penetrating comments on many sections were crucial in giving shape to the final argument – both in this Holmes book and in the companion volume with its expanded treatment of Fuller, Douglass, and Truth. Finally, the overall conception of the “conversation of a culture” here was significantly developed in recent years through lively interaction with a number of colleagues in several departments at McGill University.

Even the institutional support for this project was often richly personal. At Cambridge University Press, the series editors (Eric Sundquist and Ross Posnock) and acquisitions editors (especially Susie Chang) were greatly encouraging as they expressed their real understanding of the goals of this project and their belief in it. In copyediting, Linda Woodward was efficient and scrupulous. Financial support from the Whiting Foundation provided much-needed help at the thesis stage, a research leave from Williams College made it possible early on to rough out the book project, and a Humanities Research Grant from the Faculty of Graduate Studies at McGill University helped me to complete the manuscript and prepare it for publication.

Throughout the extended gestation period for this project, the three women in my life played key roles in the stimulating and sustaining household conversation within which this book was developed. My daughters Rachel and Rebecca, twin figures of interruption, were always there to remind me to focus on the big picture. If, in everyday dialogues about this book, those two girls tended to ask “Why,” my wife Wendy Owens was more likely to ask “When.” She finally made this book happen, and makes it all worthwhile.