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, Jr., Gibian radically redefines the context for our understanding of the major literary works of the American Renaissance.

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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES
AND THE CULTURE OF CONVERSATION

PETER GIBIAN
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 avoises 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 boys 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, *Lysceum* fragment 108)
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“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,
Acknowledgments

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 Gelpli, 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

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. Finan-
cial 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 devel-
oped. My daughters Rachel and Rebecca, twin figures of interrup-
tion, 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.
Figure 1 Oliver Wendell Holmes in a caricature by “Spy.”
(Vanity Fair, June 19, 1886). Private collection.