

Will Abberley, “His father’s voice’: Phonographs and Heredity in the Fiction of Samuel Butler.” *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 18 (2014): 1-22.

This article forms part of a special issue of *19*, themed “Orality and Literacy” and edited by James Emmott and Tom F. Wright, which explores interactions between voice and text through the nineteenth century, including “the phonographic dimensions of literary culture” (Matt Rubery’s and Will Abberley’s articles). Abberley reveals how Edison’s phonograph provided a useful analogy in conceptualisations of heredity. Heredity seemed to record and transmit vibrations through generations much as the phonograph did sound waves; children echo their parents, becoming passive sound reproduction devices. Abberley illustrates how these ideas circulate through Butler’s autobiographical *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and, crucially, explores how children could resist the forces of ancestral and especially parental inheritance through writing, which seemed to promise a means of expressing individuality, as opposed to speech, as voice was a “bodily index of heredity.” Less bound up with the body than voice, literature is rendered the “best vehicle for individualistic expression” (2).

Abberley brilliantly weaves together two areas in the history of science, namely theories of evolution and sound technologies, showing how these areas fed into each other. He first discusses Victorian ideas of heredity and disputes around Darwin’s theory of natural selection in opposition to Lamarck’s model of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. It was through the lens of Lamarck’s theories that reproduction could be imaginable as reincarnation: parents survive or even become immortal through their offspring. Through articulations of Lamarckian ideas such as Henry Maudsley’s notions of degeneration, people seemed to lose individuality, becoming composites of ancestral stock. Despite the prominence of ideas of Darwinian natural selection, which in contrast suggested how change could take place without hereditary transmission (random variations and environmental pressures instead driving the evolution of species), Lamarckism persisted, and Butler firmly supported it. Heredity, for Butler, was a form of ancestral “memory,” expressed through organisms’ bodily forms and behaviours.

Running parallel with theories of heredity, nineteenth-century discussions of sound recording and reproduction were similarly concerned with the persistence of previous generations. In Edison’s vision of the uses of his phonograph, the “great men” of previous generations will be preserved for the younger generations to passively listen to. Both theories of heredity and sound recording technologies suggested ways in which ancestors could survive after death, haunting their children. Further, as Abberley puts it, “developments in voice recording coincided with emergent views of heredity as a form of inscription” (7). The popular idea that mental states consist of material vibrations fed into Lamarckian accounts of hereditary memory: the vibrations of ancestral experience are recorded and transmitted through generations.

Butler’s novel enacts his ideas of heredity, the son becoming a passive “living phonograph,” echoing his father’s dominant voice (14). Abberley convincingly argues that in Butler’s work we see a convergence of Lamarckian theory and phonographic discourse, and that it is mainly through writing that Butler envisaged a way to escape the ancestral “grooves” (14). The essay deftly contributes both to literary-historical

understandings of nineteenth-century theories of heredity - demonstrating the persistence of Lamarck's own theory in a battle against Darwinian ideas – and to the field of sound studies with its strand of focus on voice recording technologies. As primarily a sound studies scholar in this respect, I am likely to think Abberley could have spent a little longer unpacking and connecting his references to Babbage and Edison among other theorists of sound conservation and reproduction, but the value of his article is in great part in straddling the two fields and thereby demonstrating the crucial valorisation of writing - imagined as a kind of freedom, a means of escape from the dictates of an inscribed, ancestral past.

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