

**There's Nothing Natural About  
Natural Conversation:  
A Look at Dialogue in Fiction and Drama**

**Ryan Bishop**

While discussing some of the ideas presented in this paper, a colleague mentioned that after reading David Mamet's play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, he thought to himself that the dialogue in the play portrayed the way people really talk. I followed his comment by saying what makes *The Great Gatsby* such an excellent novel is the dialogue, especially the off-hand remarks that strike my ear as being real. Our remarks were not unusual in the least. Probably everyone reading this paper has experienced the same sort of conversation. Readers from a culture with a long literary tradition bring biases, ideas, and a great deal of information regarding texts to each text they encounter. They know what a literary work should be and should do. Knowledgeable readers can then judge conversation in a literary text to be "natural" or "unnatural," as my colleague and I had done. What we must consider, though, is that dialogue is only "natural" or "unnatural" within the literary mode or framework, what "natural" conversation in a literary work should be or what we presume it to be, and that even "natural" conversation bears little resemblance to everyday conversation (Bishop 1984:21).

In this article I will examine dialogue and its relation to everyday conversation. In doing so, we will see how literacy and knowledge of the literary tradition have influenced dialogue and the evolution of conversation as presented in literary works. Therefore, this will be an examination of dialogue writ large, for it will also include the dialogue found between text and readers, as well as within the text itself. And we will see that our judgments regarding "natural" dialogue are determined by our literacy and literary tradition, not by the event of actual conversation we engage in every day. Thus, dialogue will serve as yet another example of Western culture's preoccupation with *mimesis*, or representation, and its willingness (even desire) to confuse the map for the territory.

**I See Your Lips Movin', But I Don't Hear Nothin' Comin' Out**

I think it worthwhile at this point to glance at conversation (or speech) in day-to-day life and discuss some of the problems it poses for writers who attempt to capture and display it in texts.<sup>1</sup> The first, and what should be the most obvious, quality of speech that we will discuss is its evanescence, its constantly going out of existence as it comes into existence, for as I say the word, “existence,” the “exis” sounds have vanished before the “tence” can cross my lips (Ong 1982:32). Indeed, these initial sounds must be gone in order for the latter sounds to come out; speech passes away as it comes into being, as it is being produced. Thus, the first task writers face in producing dialogue is perhaps the most difficult: the making of a thing (a text, in this case) from a process (conversation, or speech). Writers must make readers believe that the text is not simply “frozen” speech, but speech itself. They must conjure away the thing-like qualities of texts and bestow dialogue with the “speech as event” characteristics it manifests in everyday experience. While such a trick (sleight-of-hand, performed pen-in-hand), if successful, seems worthy of the greatest magicians, it is not so difficult when the audience desires to be duped (as my colleague and I were in the situation presented above and, indeed, most readers are when approaching a text, all of which casts a disturbing hue on the concept of the “suspension of disbelief” in which all audiences of art/fiction are supposed to engage—how much suspension should there be and, more importantly, when does it stop?).

The swallowing of the word as event by texts is not as spurious as it may initially seem. In fact, it has been argued that the technology of writing is one of the reasons Western culture values things, or nouns if applicable, and interprets much of the world as “thing” rather than process, or verb. Many primary oral cultures, on the other hand, display biases toward processes. They lack the technology required to make speech static (Tyler 1987). Such a bias on the part of Western culture might lead readers to texts in order to find “natural” conversation.

Compounding the difficulty of producing a static entity intended to resemble a dynamic process is the fact that people do not read one word at a time, due to physical restraints regarding eye movement. Some

---

<sup>1</sup> Please note that I have in no way exhausted the travails of trying to represent conversation in dialogue. Further, it is beyond the purpose of this paper to deal adequately with the extensive body of literature comparing literary discourse and everyday discourse, and that engaging the manifold ramifications of shifts from oral to literate world-views, which comes from a variety of disciplines and from a variety of positions for an even larger variety of purposes. To mention just a few excellent examples of these works and to cover a broad spectrum, I would direct interested readers to consider Tyler 1987, Ong 1982 and 1977, Havelock 1963, Pratt 1977, Smith 1978, Tannen 1989, Bakhtin 1981, Friedrich 1986, Clifford and Marcus 1986, and Goody 1977.

psycholinguists contend that we pick up groups of words at a time and lump them together in order to derive meaning from the word units. So from the outset the reproduction of conversation in a text contains another inherent obstacle, for we cannot produce a group of words together in an utterance. In fact, we cannot manage even a single word at a time unless it is constituted by a single morpheme, the largest single unit of sound that can be produced by a human being at any given moment. In attempting to reconstruct conversation presented in a text, we fall prey to space (the realm of things) at the expense of time (the flux in which speech occurs) by grouping words in a way impossible in day-to-day life. Writers are unable in this situation to shield the readers' eyes (and ears) from the "thingizing" (the objectification) of the process of speech, and the difficulty of their task of presenting "natural" dialogue is increased.

Everyday conversation is filled with backtracks and elliptical thoughts. Added to these is an enigmatic mixture of redundancies and references to shared knowledge, which often take the form of seemingly magnificent leaps in logic to an eavesdropper, but which are usually easily followed by the interlocutors. Often utterances in everyday conversation are not composed of complete, uninterrupted sentences. Usually, much overlapping of statements and completion of thoughts by the other interlocutor occurs. To bear these points out, consider the difficulties one has in transcribing a recorded conversation. Punctuation becomes random at best, and text-like structure often has to be abandoned altogether, as those who do linguistic, anthropological, and sociological research that requires such transcription are acutely aware. In a satirical statement regarding critics and the difficulty of writing dialogue for the stage, Harold Pinter (1977:9) highlighted the randomness of punctuation in speech and attributed the success of his second play to slight shifts in his use of punctuation:

In *The Birthday Party* I employed a certain amount of dashes in the text, between phrases. In *The Caretaker* I cut out the dashes and used dots instead. So that instead of, say: "Look, dash, who, dash, I, dash, dash, dash," the text would read: "Look, dot, dot, dot, who, dot, dot, dot, I, dot, dot, dot, dot." So it's possible to deduce from this that dots are more popular than dashes and that's why *The Caretaker* had a longer run than *The Birthday Party*. The fact that in neither case could you hear the dots and dashes in performance is beside the point. You can't fool critics for long. They can tell a dot from a dash from a mile off, even if they can hear neither.

Pinter has good fun in this passage by sending up critics and other holders of judgment. However, there is a lurking concern regarding what judgment is based on. In a culture that finds "natural" conversation in texts, we should not be surprised to also find chirographic bias, which Pinter plays up, in the representation of pauses in speech or a leaning

toward the eye over the ear in such a representation. Seeing, as Tyler (1987) shows, and everyone knows, is believing; hearing is merely hearsay (or heresy).

Most of the qualities of everyday conversation pose problems for a writer of literature, but the movement from time to space (as we have seen above) presents fundamental obstacles. One of these obstacles, as yet unaddressed in this paper, is the quality of overlapping, in which more than one person speaks at the same time. Esau and Poth, in their study of conversation, especially that which occurs between intimates, state that the interlocutors' speech is not so much focused on "linear sequences and consecutive turns [as] it is on an overall *gestalt*" (1980:21). Writing is unable to reproduce nonlinear, overlapping speech because of textual restraints. Esau and Poth go on to say that most conversations, while not linear, represent "variations on a theme" (27). These "variations on a theme" conversations manifest a vertical form of verbal play in which one topic receives more or less different treatments by the interlocutors, and the treatments serve more for the entertainment of the interlocutors than for the passing of information. Written conversation, by necessity, must be linear and maintain turn-taking between interlocutors. In addition, the representation of "variations on a theme" does little to propel traditional plot line. Writers, therefore, face the task of turning a nonlinear, overlapping process into a linear, space-restricted thing when attempting to write dialogue. Still, in spite of all this, we find and judge dialogue to be "natural" or not.

### **What's Relevant Is Relative**

As different as speaking and writing are, there is an underlying quality which intimately binds them: their communicative intention (if we allow that the communicative *gestalt* includes both communication *and* intention, for both are prevalent in both spoken and written communicative constructs). Both speaking and writing have senders (speakers or writers) and receivers (listeners or readers) of a message conveyed via a medium (speech or writing). Even though they share this important property, there is one major difference: writers are rarely present at the reading of the text, an act usually performed, as was the production of the text, in isolation. Thus, writers have to be far more careful than speakers in their presentation if anything like the intended message is to be understood. (This is, of course, assuming that writers do have something that they wish to communicate, which is not always the case). Writers, unlike speakers, cannot clarify the message if readers become confused. In fact, the writer of any given text, as is the case with many texts, may even be dead. From

these realities rise the myths of precise language use and exact word meaning and, from these, *the* meaning of a text—myths that many linguists, literary critics, and hermeneuticians seem reluctant to give up. (While not all in these fields hold these myths sacrosanct, those who do not are, unfortunately, much in the minority.) Thus, by invoking this particular model of communication, I am not stating that the process is merely one of encoding and decoding with perfect understanding occurring at all times. (After all, with such a view of language, there would be no need for critics.)

For our purposes here, we will assume that most writers do have a message (or messages) they want to convey to readers, no matter the dangers of misunderstanding. In order for this to occur, in order for the text to operate successfully, it must function meaningfully on at least two levels: within the world of the text itself, and between text and readers. For drama, a third level, that between actors and audience, must be added (Bishop 1984:19-21). A text, just as a person in a conversation, should adhere to Grice's Co-operative Principle (1975), which simply states that certain rules, or maxims, need to be followed in any communicative construct if communication is to occur.<sup>2</sup> This principle operates on the assumption that people enter communicative acts with the intent to perpetuate communication, not destroy it. Readers approach texts as attempts at meaningful communication and expect this principle will be followed, an assumption the absurdists preyed on, for people will go to great lengths to make sense of something they assume to be communicative.

For this study, perhaps the most important of the Gricean maxims is relevance, the requirement that the statements issued by a speaker or a writer be relevant to the topic and the understanding of what is being communicated. Relevance, however, is a rather protean phenomenon, for what is relevant is often solely dependent upon context. However, readers assume that the information provided by writers is relevant to their understanding of the text. Also, readers assume that the characters within a given text are being relevant when conversing with one another, or not, in order to maintain relevance between text and readers. It is possible, of course, to have characters who are unable to communicate with each other due to irrelevance, or by being trapped in their subjective worlds, or by manipulating one another (as in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*), but still the text remains relevant to readers via other provided information. If the text does not maintain relevance with readers, then the writer has either failed or is attempting to show the artifice of the entire writing enterprise.

Closely related to relevance, and containing information that influences what is relevant, is the Given-New Contract (Clark and Haviland

---

<sup>2</sup> See Grice 1975 for further explanation of this principle and its maxims.

1977), which demands that the dimension of experience, the shared knowledge of the interlocutors, be expressed either through syntax or intonation.<sup>3</sup> In any communicative act, assumptions regarding the audience's knowledge have to be made by the writer or the speaker. What is assumed to be known is marked as Given; that which is assumed not to be known is marked as New. The more intimate the relationship between sender and receiver—the more shared knowledge of the world, the more shared experience—the more the Given aspect of the communicative act expands. The more the Given expands, the more the area covered by relevance expands. My use of terminology in this paper, for example, is controlled by my assumptions regarding my audience's knowledge. Certain terms I use freely; others I think may need explanation. Therefore, in an intimate conversation, the Given is quite large, as is what can be considered relevant. This situation allows the interlocutors to make huge leaps in logic difficult for a non-intimate to follow; old, shared information is abundant in such conversations and manifests itself in many ways.

I would contend that relevance and what writers assume the audience knows have greatly influenced conversation as represented in literature. I would even contend that these things have greatly influenced texts and literature as a whole. However, the shared knowledge in this case is not shared knowledge of the world, *per se*, but rather of the literary tradition and literacy itself. Texts became the context (“con”-text, “with”-text). As literacy became further entrenched in cultures and in the consciousness of readers, as it became more widespread, the shared information regarding texts (which we may call intertextual context) between writers and readers grew, and more information that could be considered relevant was allowed writers. Thus a kind of conversation between text and readers evolved that allowed, ironically, for the representation of conversation with more of the qualities found in everyday speech. This phenomenon is traceable to the shared knowledge of the literary tradition, what texts were and could do. Dialogue grew to be more like real conversation but still remains a far cry from the nonlinear, overlapping process we engage in every day. It remains removed from real-life conversation because of the restraints mentioned above and also because it was spawned by literacy and the literary tradition. Yet this mutation of conversation hatched from texts still strikes readers as being “natural” or “unnatural.”

In charting this change of intimacy, I will start very late in the development of the literary tradition with Henry James and move, focusing primarily on American writers, up to the present. There will also be a brief foray into drama by looking quickly at Samuel Beckett and David Mamet.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Given-New Contract as applied by writers, see Glatt 1982.

### **The Growing Intimacy: Text as Context**

Although Henry James came from and wrote for a highly literate community, one that had also incorporated the effects of mass printing, he still relied on the “dear reader” convention of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, in which readers are addressed in the text as if the writer were telling the story orally. This convention manifests itself in several ways, specifically in the amount of information given to readers through both narration and dialogue. Although the audience James wrote for was steeped in literacy, the Given aspect of the literary tradition (the shared information regarding texts) was still relatively small. Therefore James assumed his audience would not understand a text, and/or would stop reading the text, unless a good deal of information, New information, was supplied. James felt it necessary to provide his readers with a great deal of information.

A relatively late story, “The Jolly Corner” (1909), begins in the middle of a conversation, an unsettling but hardly innovative technique at the time. However, it is interesting to note the amount of information provided in the two sentences of dialogue and the one sentence of description immediately following it, all of which James must have felt necessary (1986:688):

“Everyone asks me what I ‘think’ of everything,” said Spencer Bryden; “and I make answer as best I can—begging or dodging the question, putting them off with any nonsense. It wouldn’t matter to any of them,” he went on, “for, even were it possible to meet in that stand-and-deliver way so silly a demand on so big a subject, my ‘thoughts’ would still be almost altogether something that concerns myself.” He was now talking to Miss Staverton, with whom for a couple of months now he had availed himself of every possible occasion to talk; this disposition and this resource, this comfort and support, as the situation in fact presented itself, having promptly enough taken the first place in the considerable array of rather unattenuated surprises attending his so strangely belated return to America.

This passage contains the only snippet of conversation for several pages, the rest being filled in with information regarding characters’ intents, thoughts, and motives, again all of this being necessary, evidently according to James, for the audience to understand the events and conversations that occur later in the story. Not just in this story but in many works, James spends what seems to contemporary readers an inordinate amount of space on providing background for dialogue. So, although James daringly thrusts his readers into the middle of a conversation, which he never completes, he immediately falls back on effusive New information provided by a narrator, who sounds suspiciously like the character Bryden, to set up the rest of the text.

If we turn from Henry James to James Joyce, we will see a striking

difference in not only the conversation within the text but also in the one between text and readers. Although published only five years after the James story mentioned above, Joyce's slim volume, *The Dubliners*, represents a major shift regarding relevance in literature. The stories contained in this collection seem rather staid, though certainly excellent, to contemporary readers. Yet Joyce had tremendous difficulty getting the collection published, due in no small part to his steadfast refusal to make changes demanded by the publisher, but basically because the stories were considered far too daring, an adjective which few readers today would probably apply to these works.

Daring? How? Actually, the stories were daring in many respects, especially in the demands Joyce placed on the readers' knowledge, the amount of information provided readers, and also in the dialogue, which reflected the rhythms of daily conversation, as well as other qualities of this phenomenon, but which were not common in dialogue at the time. In the story "A Little Cloud," two men, Chandler and Gallagher, meet in a pub to discuss old friends and their new lives. Their conversation is laced with references to people and events familiar to the interlocutors but about which readers do not have a clue. In the following segment, Chandler invites Gallagher home to meet his wife and child (1969:79):

- I hope you'll spend an evening with us, he said, before you go back. My wife will be delighted to meet you. We can have a little music and —
- Thanks awfully, old chap, said Ignatius Gallagher, I'm sorry we didn't meet earlier. But I must leave to-morrow night.
- To-night perhaps . . . ?
- I'm awfully sorry, old man. You see I'm over here with another fellow, clever young chap he is too, and we arranged to go to a little card party. Only for that . . .
- O, in that case . . .
- But who knows? said Ignatius Gallagher.

The rhythms of the lines certainly seem more natural than those spoken by James's character, who like all of James's characters always sound to my ear how I imagine James talking to himself would have sounded. This seemingly more natural conversation is due not only to the lines being less contorted, but also because of the way in which they intertwine. The conversation contains interruptions, incomplete sentences, and utterances that fade into the silence whence they emerged, all qualities not frequently found in texts before Joyce. Also, obviously not heeding Pinter's advice regarding the dubious merit of dashes, Joyce substitutes dashes for quotation marks, which in some way lessens the visual intrusion of the text upon the dialogue (perhaps due to the lines' apparent freedom from the constricting, bound image given a line by quotation marks). This dash technique was later employed, as we will see, in the work of William

Gaddis.

Regardless of the innovations, Joyce is still ever-present in his authorial intrusions. Not wanting to plunge readers in too far over their heads, Joyce maintains speaker identification virtually every time Gallagher speaks. This technique provides readers with sufficient information as to who is speaking when. Joyce intrudes in other ways, but one of these is particularly innovative or daring: the use of realistic detail and/as symbols. In this way Joyce resembles an earlier American writer, Stephen Crane. Unlike Crane, however, most of Joyce's symbols were either coupled with literary or historical allusions, or were actually allusions themselves, and this is where he broke new ground.

Numerous such allusions can be found in the frequently anthologized and lauded story "Araby," a tale of personal anguish and disillusionment as a young boy struggles to come to terms with himself as he moves from his personal world into the public one via his infatuation with a girl. The boy recalls finding three books in the room of a former boarder, a now-deceased priest. The books are *The Abbot* by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant*, and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*, all works that amplify themes in the story, particularly self-confusion and feelings of failure. The first book is a romanticized account of Mary Queen of Scots, a person both loved and loathed in history and idealized by both sides for their own ends. The second is a book of rules for holy week written by a Protestant clergyman involved in public debate with Jesuits. The third book recounts the somewhat ribald tales of a well known criminal who engaged in blasphemous imposture to elude the police and in blatant sexual liaisons. All of these details reveal as much about the boy as they do the priest, for the boy, too, idealizes a young woman, is caught in an almost religious fervor for the woman that casts doubts on his devotion to Catholicism, and feels guilty of lust and crime that have led him to be an imposter of himself—an aspect of the epiphany at the end of the story. The books become literary manifestations of the boy's anxieties and of themes in the work. Joyce also employs allusions to Yeats's story "Our Lady of the Hills" and a poem well known in Ireland at the turn of the century, "The Arab's Farewell to His Steed," to further evoke themes, respectively, of the idealization of love's object and the selling of love for personal gain, for vanity. The poem is a particularly interesting usage, for it was very popular in Ireland, so much so that Joyce did not even quote it, with the narrative leaving the boy's uncle on the verge of recitation. Readers are left to fill in the lines of the poem themselves, lines that foreshadow the conclusion.

Joyce demanded his audience use its literacy and literary tradition (the sources necessary to garner the information needed to understand literary, mythological, and historical allusion) in the reading and

understanding of the text. He relied upon shared, intertextual knowledge. Joyce, in other words, depended much more on Given information—Given textual information—than James had. He employed references from a wide variety of fields of literary knowledge and assumed his readers could understand the work. *This* was daring. (Of course, the extent to which his audience could understand these allusions is open to debate and is grist for those who perceive such modernist moves as elitist.) By placing these demands on the readers' knowledge, Joyce expanded relevance, what is relevant, in literature. He also heralded the coming of modernism and all of its demands stemming from literacy and shared cultural knowledge.

Ernest Hemingway, strange as it may seem, follows closely behind Joyce by employing much of the innovation the Irishman displayed in his stories. However, by the time Hemingway began producing his best work, Joyce's innovations were already interiorized by an increasingly sophisticated and intimate (due to expanded relevance and more Given information) audience, thus providing a basis for Hemingway's own daring moves. These moves, it seems to me, are most apparent in his short fiction, especially his so-called "dramatic" stories. One of the most anthologized and analyzed of these is "Hills Like White Elephants," first published in 1927. Of the 1,445 words in the story, sixty percent are given over to dialogue (Kobler 1980). Thus narrative information is minimized, although still exceptionally important as we will later see. Hemingway relies on the conversation of the protagonists, a man and a woman, minimally described, to carry the bulk of the story. The conversation, which we hear (read) from beginning to end, seems very "real" to most readers, even though lacking the above-mentioned qualities of everyday conversation.

The interlocutors are intimates, and their conversation reveals their intimacy through marked Given information and the subject matter of the conversation or argument, in this case whether or not the woman should abort the child they have conceived—clearly marking the relationship as intimate. Hemingway's approach to readers via the text is also as intimates. The abortion is always referred to as "it" or "the operation" and is never called what it actually is. Likewise, the unborn child/fetus bears the pronoun "it" throughout the text. In this manner, Hemingway supplies little direct information and places the onus of topic discovery on the reader. He does not, however, leave readers in a narrative wasteland. All of the narrative description reveals important information. Hemingway places the interlocutors in the Ebro valley, the man looking at dead, barren hills from which the woman breaks her gaze to look at green, lush fields. From these descriptive paragraphs alone, it is easy to discern who is pro-abortion and who is not; however, Hemingway relies solely on the audience to infer the topic of the argument, an inference only possible

from the dialogue. Hemingway pushes relevance further than Joyce did by supplying less narrative information and by forcing readers to rely on their knowledge of the text and the world to create the meaning of the story. This intimacy between text and readers helps make the story successful and satisfying. Yet Hemingway gives readers ample clues through narration and by following the argument from its beginning to its supposed end. In real life such a discussion, with the participants at complete loggerheads over a subject as emotionally charged as this, would probably have no such neat opening or closing. Such structuring may be a bow by Hemingway to the space-restrictedness of texts and to the artifice of closure.

Heather and Donald Hardy (1990) argue, successfully I think, that the essential conflict of the story stems not from the abortion, although it is certainly a catalyst for conflict, but rather from a difference of life metaphors. The man wants to continue avoiding life by traveling and trying new drinks, while the woman desires to participate in life and its natural processes. I would contend that the abortion itself serves as a metaphor for what Hemingway was trying to accomplish in writing the story, specifically in the attempt to reproduce actual conversation. Hemingway distances himself from real conversation (via the technology of writing, a technology that separates the producer of communication/ language/text from its audience), much as the male protagonist distances himself from life and the child he has created, by making the process of conversation into a thing, an "it." Hemingway makes his story into a thing that cannot be born, for it cannot be process; it must always remain a static text. It is a story that should be spoken, but is written. In the end the story remains a dead, mimetic model of speech, which is all dialogue can ever hope to be. Yet an audience steeped in literacy is willing to clutch the corpse to its breast and breathe the breath of life, which is no longer speech but dialogue, into the moribund and dub the corpse alive and "natural," using much the same terminology we use to describe someone displayed in the front room of a funeral parlor.

### **The Ghost of Dialogue Present**

Since Hemingway, fiction and drama have taken many different directions, far too many to be done justice in a paper of this length. However, in the last thirty years or so, two major directions seem to have developed in prose. One of these intensifies Hemingway's minimalist tendencies by presenting stark, bare narrative in which surface facts regarding characters and minute details of day-to-day life are presented. The information provided is not so much the unifying features of these writers as is the flatness of the prose. Conversation in this sort of fiction

is expectantly brisk and short and sometimes avoided altogether. Writers in this vein seem to think curtness equals reality. Some representatives of this style are Jean Stafford, Alice Munro, Tillie Olsen, Ann Beattie, and Raymond Carver, whose writing is so spare as to make Hemingway's seem (in comparison) as lush as the fields at which the woman gazes in "Hills Like White Elephants."

The other major direction taken by American writers reveals fiction for what it is—artifice. Those following this path, often called Post-Modernists, emphasize their roles as writers and write about writing or play with traditional prose structures and conventions. Yet it is literacy and literary tradition that serve not only as a springboard for this sort of writing, but also as the tool that allows writers such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, and Donald Barthelme to perform their metafictional machinations and be understood by their audience. The intimacy between text and readers has become such that these writers can produce texts that, in many important ways, do not resemble traditional texts, and that present characters in a world completely created and determined by the text and show readers this is the case. The conversations in these texts often still bear little relation to everyday conversation, nor do they seem to have any aspiration to do so. The fiction of fiction is on display. In this way, the conversations presented in these texts often bear little relation to traditional literary dialogue either. Occasionally, as in the case of Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* or Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, traditional prose styles are employed to facilitate the metafictional fun, for parodic purposes. Readers lacking the shared literary knowledge required to get the punch line of these sorts of texts are often left unsatisfied or befuddled, their literary knowledge having been outstripped by that demanded by the text.

The reason for this harrowingly cursory examination of American fiction is twofold. The first is to show how vast the change in the relationship between text and readers has been and what it has allowed writers to do. In a remarkably short time, say from James of 1909 to Barth of 1960, the publication date of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the intimacy between text and readers grew to the point where minor details of minor events are presented starkly and succinctly, and where some writers (such as the metafictionalists) no longer care if their dialogue resembles either everyday or literary conversation or if their texts resemble those that readers are accustomed to reading. Again, it should be borne in mind that increased shared information garnered through literacy about literacy and the literary tradition has allowed the intimacy between text and readers to deepen, a shift that in turn allows for the understanding of such disparate literary works and writers as those exemplified by these two major directions in American fiction.

The second reason for this examination is to provide background for a novel which does not neatly fit into the two directions mentioned above, although it certainly lists to the post-modern side. This is *JR*, by William Gaddis (1975), a work which in my estimation comes as close to capturing everyday conversation as is possible given the restrictions of textual dialogue discussed near the beginning of this paper. The first edition of *JR* runs to 706 pages, a good ninety-five percent of it dialogue, to which is added many of the sounds that intrude on everyday conversation. Gaddis, like Joyce, employs dashes rather than quotation marks to introduce spoken lines. Not one line of dialogue includes speaker identification by the author. Readers are left to fend for themselves in a chaotic ocean of dialogue churning with interruptions, back-tracks, elliptical phrases, and vague references to incidents both inside and outside the text as well as some inside the speaker's consciousness—all of this and only the speaker's "voice," as presented in print, to identify who is speaking to whom. Reading *JR*, as one might imagine, can daunt even the heartiest of readers. There is little traditional literate rope for readers to hang onto when scaling this dialogue. Yet the work renders the aural world in a way unlike any other I have encountered: a maelstrom of multi-layered voices, sounds, noise, and consciousnesses spewing forth in speech. Demanding as it is, this novel yields tremendous returns in its beauty, hilarity, and frightfulness (229):

— Hello. . .? the door clattered closed—is Mister Bast there . . .? Who me? I'm his, I'm this here business friend of his is he still at the city? See I have this urgent matter which I have to discuss my portfolio with him to . . . No I said I have this here urgent mat . . .he went where . . .? No but look lady, he . . .no but holy . . .no but how could he be someplace accepting some reward see we have this here ouch, boy hello . . .?

The line rang with three more piercing notes. —Mercy! they could burst an eardrum hello? I said Mister Bast is abroad somewhere just a minute, Julia? The card that came yesterday with a picture of a mountain, where, hello . . .?

— Who in heaven's name . . .

— Well I never! The oddest voice, it sounded like someone talking under a pillow. I thought he was a business friend of James, the most awful shrill sounds on the telephone line and then it sounded like a loud bell ringing and he simply hung up. I thought we asked Edward to take it out.

— No the stock Anne, the stock, we asked him to sell our telephone stock. Once that's done I may take it out myself.

— I hope he can find someone who wants to buy it though I must say, I'd feel a bit guilty. It's like selling poor soul shares in a plague, my ear is still ringing. Who was it that called here this morning.

— Some wretched woman who had a wrong number. She asked me to name the second president of the United States, when I told her Abraham Lincoln she congratulated me.

— Oh I think that Lincoln came later, didn't he? When Uncle Dick came back from Andersonville prison . . .

— I'm certainly quite aware of that, I simply said Lincoln for a little

joke but it didn't disturb her in the least. She told me I'd won a free dance lesson.

The excerpt presented above exemplifies the style and technique of *JR*. We hear the contorted syntax of JR himself in the first monologue. By this point in the text, readers are quickly able to recognize his "voice" and know he is a junior high school student and are able to understand the bells ringing in the background that confuse the elderly woman on the other end. The transition of moving from JR's side of the telephone conversation to that of his interlocutor's (one of two elderly women) is typical of Gaddis. He relies on the context of a phone conversation and the very familiar voice of one of the women to make the move from JR's school to their home. Once inside the house, readers get snippets of conversation that wander off track and that place historical events in the context of family history, conversational repetitions in which these two characters often engage.

For all of its efforts, *JR* does not reproduce overlapping voices, but it does (like *Waiting for Godot*) include conversations that are "variations on a theme" and that have no real desire to propel plotline, to lead the reader between events. Although much happens in the novel and much more is spoken, there are no real events, in traditional plot terms. In *JR*, the conversations are the events, much as they are in our everyday lives, and it has only taken us several hundreds of years of writing and print to yield a text that effectively evokes our aural life-world, our daily conversations. The irony is obvious, especially when we find this text "difficult."

### **Winged Words, Words from the Wings, and Other Frozen Things**

When dialogue takes to the stage, it is intended by its author to be event, to be performed, to be Homer's winged words dying as they come into existence. This is the obvious advantage that the stage holds over fiction, that the lines of dialogue are meant to be spoken aloud. In drama, therefore, we should be able to find "natural" dialogue more worthy of the adjective. However, this is not the case until, again, fairly late in the literacy game. When we do reach playwrights capable of rubbing elbows with day-to-day conversation, the results are exciting, unnerving, and not quite what you and I do every day, in one case, and a Gaddis-like evocation of speech that eventually bows to the literary constraints of plot and closure in the other. The first case is Samuel Beckett, the latter David Mamet. I choose these two playwrights because they have done much to push everyday conversation into the limelight.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* blends elements of everyday conversation, such as continuation of thoughts by another interlocutor, "variations on a theme," and a certain nonlinear quality of conversation, with traditional characteristics of written dialogue, specifically those that occur due to spatial restrictions, for example turn-taking. This combination of everyday and textual conversational elements are exemplified in the following passage (Beckett 1955:62-63):

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.  
 Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.  
 Estragon: It's so we won't think.  
 Vladimir: We have that excuse.  
 Estragon: It's so we won't hear.  
 Vladimir: We have our reasons.  
 Estragon: All the dead voices.  
 Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.  
 Estragon: Like leaves.  
 Vladimir: Like sand.  
 Estragon: Like leaves.  
*Silence.*  
 Vladimir: They speak altogether.  
 Estragon: Each one to itself.  
*Silence.*  
 Vladimir: Rather they whisper.  
 Estragon: They rustle.  
 Vladimir: They murmur.  
 Estragon: They rustle.  
*Silence.*

The interlocutors engage in their favorite game, indeed the essence of their existences: the killing of time through the voice (conversation). Their themes build upon one another, and it seems more like a shared monologue than a conversation, which is a quality ascribed by Esau and Poth, among others, to intimate conversation. The whole construct collapses occasionally into silence, Vladimir and Estragon's most feared state. This silence most frequently occurs when Estragon is unable to keep the game going and unimaginatively repeats his last utterance.<sup>4</sup> Vladimir, however, always wrests more talk from silence (a truly heroic act in Beckett's world), and the entire play moves spasmodically along in this manner as both men continually verify their existences through conversation.

The combination of both everyday and textual elements of conversation, the great reliance by the characters on Given information when the whole question of linear time is in doubt, and sporadic bursts of beautiful "thematic" dialogue spoken by two bums in a landscape empty of

<sup>4</sup> For interesting and profitable analyses of the links between repetition, speech, and poetry, see Friedrich 1986 and Tannen 1989.

everything except a lone tree creates a highly unusual experience for the reader/audience. The dismantling and recombination of familiar qualities of both everyday conversation and dialogue is unsettling. This portmanteau dialogue that combines “variations on a theme” and huge leaps in logic allowable by shared experience with resolutely maintained and regularly metered turn-taking yields something hauntingly familiar but not quite right for audiences schooled in literacy. Beckett has defamiliarized these familiar qualities of everyday conversation and textual dialogue by combining them in unusual ways and placing them in unusual contexts. All of these strategies help to make this work, in my opinion, one of the greatest and most original in literature.<sup>5</sup>

The American playwright David Mamet employs many elements found in everyday speech in his play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which in many ways resembles Gaddis’s *JR*. The dialogue is full of interruptions, incomplete statements, backtracks, and referents unclear to readers or the audience, as exemplified in the passage quoted below. Mamet also tries to break the back of overlapping by including in his stage directions the requirement that a given line start on the last word of the preceding line. While this technique gives the suggestion of overlapping, it does not present overlapping as it occurs in day-to-day speech (some transcriptions of conversations studied by discourse analysis linguists have even resorted to presenting overscored utterances to express simultaneity, although brackets, vertical lines, or equal signs are more common devices for indicating overlapping; even when readers are capable of mastering these sorts of textual manipulation, I would find it difficult to believe that the overlapping hits the mind’s ear in the same way such utterances aurally strike the real ear). When we examine the ending of the play, we will see why Mamet is ultimately unable to present overlapping if he is to achieve his purpose.

Within the level of the text itself, the characters are not trying to communicate with each other as much as they are trying to manipulate one another; therefore, relevance is not maintained at that level. However, the attempts at manipulation grow out of the characters and their situation (salesmen caught in a market with little leads of any value), so the manipulation is evident to readers or the audience. Thus the text remains cooperative at that level. The text does demand a great deal of the readers or the audience by thrusting them into the middle of various conversations, well underway, with little or no background knowledge of the interlocutors or the topic of their conversations—a strategy similar to, yet very different from, the technique employed by James and more like the example given from Gaddis. These conversations also serve the purpose of showing the

---

<sup>5</sup> A detailed examination of Beckett’s dialogue in *Waiting for Godot* can be found in Bishop 1984.

characters engaged in acts of manipulation, making the readers or the audience privy to information not known by all of the other characters. In this way, Mamet maintains relevance and also allows the readers or the audience a way of making sense of what they are reading or hearing.

Where Mamet has the most difficulty maintaining his portrayal of everyday conversation is in the climax. The final scene brings together all of the characters in a tense, confrontational situation. As a result, many simultaneous conversations occur, with characters breaking off conversations and interrupting other ongoing ones, which we can hear/read in the following passage (Mamet 1984:106-8):

Baylen (*Comes over*): . . .Get in the room  
 Roma: Hey, hey, hey, *easy* friend, That's the "Machine." That is Shelly "The Machine" Lev . . .  
 Baylen: Get in the goddamn room.  
 Levene: Ricky, I . . .  
 Roma: Okay, okay, I'll be at the resta . . .  
 Levene: Ricky . . .  
 Baylen: "Ricky" can't help you, pal.  
 Levene: . . .I only want to . . .  
 Baylen: Yeah. What do you want? You want to *what*?  
 Roma: Williamson: listen to me: when the *leads* come in . . . listen to me: when the *leads* come in I want my top two off the list. For *me*. My usual two. Anything you give *Levene* . . .  
 Williamson: . . .I wouldn't worry about it.  
 Roma: Well I'm *going* to worry about it, and so are you, so shut up and *listen*. (*Pause.*) I GET HIS ACTION. My stuff is *mine*, whatever *he* gets for himself, I'm taking half. You put me in with him.  
 Aaronow *enters*.  
 Aaronow: Did they . . .?  
 Roma: You understand?  
 Aaronow: Did they catch . . .?  
 Roma: Do you understand? My stuff is mine, his stuff is ours. I'm taking half of his commissions—now, *you* work it out.  
 Williamson: Mmm.  
 Aaronow: Did they find the guy who broke into the office yet?  
 Roma: No. *I* don't know.  
 Aaronow: Did the leads come in yet?  
 Roma: No.  
 Aaronow: Oh, God, I hate this job.  
 Roma (*Simultaneous with "job," exiting the office*): I'll be at the restaurant.

Mamet, like Pinter, uses dots to show lapses and pauses (and like Pinter, he was quite successful since this play won the Pulitzer Prize the year of its release). He also uses ellipses to show where other speakers jump in. Even though this is a small segment of the climax, and one with relatively few characters speaking cross-conversationally, I think it is easy to get a good idea of how Mamet constructed this final scene. While there are many characters speaking more or less simultaneously, textual turn-taking is maintained. If it were not, a cacophonous chaos would result, leaving the

readers or the audience with no idea of what is happening, or of what happened. Yet, in everyday life, such a great noise *would* occur in this particular situation. Mamet bows to plot-line and to closure at the expense of everyday speech. In fact, the only art forms I know of that extensively employ the overlapping of speech are ones in which time is a necessary component of the performance: the films of Robert Altman (who was roundly criticized for using overlapping dialogue because it made it difficult for the audience to follow what was being said) and opera.

In examining these two plays, it is interesting to note once again the dependence upon literacy and literary tradition that allows Beckett to disconcert readers or the audience and Mamet to elicit the response my colleague felt. If the Given portion of the text-reader relationship had not expanded, these writers could not have written these works, or at least they could not have readily been understood by their audiences. These plays, although difficult, still maintain relevance between text and reader/audience, and they do so by relying on literary elements, for example literary dialogue, which remains distantly removed from its everyday counterpart.

### **Parting Words / Parting Thoughts / Parting Shots**

Throughout this paper I have skirted an issue that needs to be briefly addressed here: that speech and dialogue serve different functions. Speech is rarely used to propel plot line, to connect events, or to reveal character (in the way literary characters reveal theirs), all of which are functions of dialogue. Speech, as I have argued, usually serves entertainment, the sharing of verbal play with friends. There are, of course, many other uses for speech, but none of these fits the needs of dialogue. Dialogue need not be like speech, for it does indeed serve different purposes. The main points of this paper have been to examine briefly the relationship between the two (and the dialogue between text and reader) in order to glimpse how literacy has influenced texts and the representation of conversation as dialogue, and to hint at some of the ramifications of the way we speak about dialogue, what these may mean for our culture, our thought, and our interpretation of the world.

In conclusion, what can I say (write) about conversation in literary texts? Being true to my literary heritage, I will invoke the conversation alluded to in the introduction and write about a conversation dealing with dialogues in written texts. Also, by returning to an item mentioned in the introduction, I have yielded to the artifice of closure because my audience is comfortable with it and expects it (see Ong 1982:132-35). I was struck then, as I am now, by how much we are influenced by literacy and its

forces, which we have unquestioningly accepted and interiorized and which have shaped our commonsense knowledge of reality. Even in the midst of discussing the ideas presented in this paper, my colleague mentioned the “reality” of the dialogue in Mamet, which prompted my statement regarding *The Great Gatsby*; both comments were made as if the ideas currently being discussed did not exist. Are we so influenced by literary tradition and literacy that we go to a text, say the dialogue is “natural” or “real,” and believe it, when we know that it bears little resemblance to the phenomenon we engage in every day? Will I, as writer of this essay, return to the world of everyday discourse where we refer to dialogue as “real” and “natural” and use these terms myself? Has our culture’s desire for *mimesis* so privileged representation that we look at the map and call it the territory? Is the comfort found in freezing the flux of temporal existence—where speech and pain and death occur—into static space-like things the result of fleeing from existence and the desire for wanting the representation to be reality because it is manageable? To these questions, I would, in writing, say yes.<sup>6</sup>

*Rice University*

### References

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Bakhtin 1981 | M. M. Bakhtin. <i>The Dialogic Imagination</i> . Austin: University of Texas Press.                     |
| Beckett 1955 | Samuel Beckett. <i>Waiting For Godot</i> . London: Faber and Faber.                                     |
| Bishop 1984  | Ryan Bishop. “Beckett and the Language of the Void.” <i>Southwest Journal of Linguistics</i> , 7:16-25. |

---

<sup>6</sup> This article is an outgrowth of a paper given at the 1988 International Conference for Cross-Cultural Studies: American, Canadian, and European Literatures, 1945-1985, held in Lake Bled, Yugoslavia, published in the proceedings of that conference (ed. Mirko Jurak, pp. 257-69). I would like to thank Jurak and the University of Ljubljana for inviting me to this conference and for allowing me to participate. The present article also reflects my rereading of Walter J. Ong and Stephen A. Tyler, both of whose voices pervade this work. I would like to thank Tyler for his help, encouragement, and insight. Many thanks are also due to Ong for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper and for the friendship via correspondence that was initiated by his reactions. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the help of Robin Bates, fellow Fulbrighter in Yugoslavia, with whom I discussed the seeds of this paper, and that of Jeff Petry, a colleague at Rice, whose discussions and intelligence did much to shape this paper.

- Clark and Haviland 1977 H. Clark and S. Haviland. "Comprehension and the Given-New Contract." In *Discourse Production and Comprehension*. Ed. by R. D. Freedle. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. pp 1-40.
- Clifford and Marcus 1986 James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Esau and Poth 1980 Helmet Esau and Annette Poth. "Conversational Dominance." Unpublished manuscript.
- Friedrich 1986 Paul Friedrich. *The Language Parallax: Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gaddis 1975 William Gaddis. *JR*. New York: Knopf.
- Glatt 1982 Barbara S. Glatt. "Defining Thematic Progressions and their Relationship to Reader Comprehension." In *What Writers Know: The Language, Process and Structure of Written Discourse*. Ed. by Martin Nystrand. New York: Academic Press. pp. 87-103.
- Goody 1977 Jack Goody. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grice 1975 H. Paul Grice. "Logic and Conversation." *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3: *Speech Acts*. Ed. by P. Cole and J. Morgan. New York: Academic Press. pp. 41-58.
- Hardy and Hardy 1990 Heather K. Hardy and Donald E. Hardy. "Love, Death, and War: Metaphorical Interaction in Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants'." *Language and Literature*, 15:1-56.
- Havelock 1963 Eric Havelock. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heidegger 1971 Martin Heidegger. *On the Way to Language*. Trans. by Peter D. Hertz. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hemingway 1986 Ernest Hemingway. "Hills Like White Elephants." In *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. Ed. R. V. Cassill. New York: Norton. pp. 641-45.
- James (1909) 1986 Henry James. "The Jolly Corner." In *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. pp. 688-715.
- Joyce 1969 James Joyce. *The Dubliners*. New York: Viking.
- Kobler 1980 Jake F. Kobler. "Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants'." *Explicator*, 38:6-7.
- Mamet 1984 David Mamet. *Glengarry Glen Ross*. New York: Grove Press.

- Ong 1977 Walter J. Ong. *Interfaces of the Word*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Ong 1982 \_\_\_\_\_. *Orality and Literacy*. London: Methuen.
- Pinter 1977 Harold Pinter. *Complete Works: With an Introduction, "Writing for the Theater."* New York: Grove Press.
- Pratt 1977 Mary Louise Pratt. *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Smith 1978 Barbara Herrnstein Smith. *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tannen 1989 Deborah Tannen. *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tyler 1987 Stephen A. Tyler. *The Unspeakable*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.