

### 3 *Dialogue*

Dialogue, as everyone now thinks, enlivens a novel. In libraries and bookshops, aspiring readers may be seen turning the pages, confident they can tell at a glance whether dialogue predominates, and in a brisk and animated way. It now represents the most important fact one can easily discover about a novel without actually reading it.

The evolution of dialogue has been largely an acceptance of that popular taste. It is a history, by and large, of increasing frequency and brevity, moving away from the great blocks of set speeches common in the seventeenth-century romance, still subject in some degree to the rules of classical rhetoric, towards the quick to-and-fro favoured by many readers since the novel came of age. A novel containing no dialogue at all, like Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951), is a notable rarity in its century.

Growing both brisker and more predominant, and detaching itself typographically from its enveloping tissue of narrative prose, dialogue has evolved over three centuries towards the buoyancy of such extreme exploitation as P. G. Wodehouse's, where a speech can be as brief as one or two words, and where the exchanges are set out on the page as a captivating trickle to draw the reader in and propel the story forward at the same time.

I reached out a hand from under the blankets, and rang the bell for Jeeves.

'Good evening, Jeeves.'

'Good morning, sir.'

This surprised me.

'Is it morning?'

'Yes, sir.'

So opens *The Code of the Woosters* (1938): a near-dramatic technique

where the narrative comment, though minimal ('This surprised me'), is still sufficient as a frame for dialogue. It is a technique evolved out of long experience and a dozen generations of novelists. That it took so long to evolve is a measure of the traditional inhibitions against allowing dialogue so large an operational role in works which, after all, are not designed for theatre.

In this chapter I shall consider the place of dialogue within narrative, the nature of those traditional inhibitions, and the manner of their slow decline and fall.



The texture of fiction may be usefully divided into seven modes, though in practice they are not entirely exclusive and cannot hope to exhaust the possibilities. (For this purpose I shall choose illustrations from the beginnings of novels, more often than not, to reduce the distortion of quoting out of context.)

1. *Authorial voice*, where the author speaks in his own person, offering an opinion or a view directly rather than through a character. Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) begins: 'Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope . . . ; attend to the history of Rasselas. . . .' The passage is declarative rather than narrative, and it is Johnson himself who warns against credulous optimism.

2. *Plain narrative*, where one is told what happened. 'In the latter days of July in the year 185-', Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857) begins, 'a most important question was for ten days hourly asked in the cathedral city of Barchester, and answered every hour in various ways – Who was to be the new Bishop?'

3. *Coloured narrative*, where something which a character (or in the fullest instances, a narrator) supposed or thought is indicated in the third person. Much of Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1731) is like that, being told by the love-sick Des Grieux; or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) begins: 'There was no possibility of taking a walk that day' – a judgement on the weather which, as the ensuing sentences show, had been made, among others, by the odious Mrs Reed, guardian to Jane as a little girl.

4. *Free indirect speech (style indirect libre)*, where the speech of a

character is embedded in the narrative, free of conjunctions, inverted commas and other indicators of direct speech such as 'he said'. This requires the mind and style of a character to have been already established, so that it can hardly open a novel. But Dickens, in a surprising turn, imitates the speech habits of Mr Gradgrind at the start of the second chapter of *Hard Times* (1854):

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir – peremptorily Thomas – Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature . . .

5. *Indirect speech, or oratio obliqua.* The opening of *Jane Eyre* offers an illustrative instance which the modern reader may fail to recognise because of the printer's use of inverted commas – common enough attendants of indirect speech until the later nineteenth century:

Me, she had dispensed from joining the group, saying 'She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but that until she heard from Bessie . . . that I was endeavouring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition, . . . she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy little children.'

6. *Direct speech, oratio recta, or dialogue.* Jane Eyre, the heroine, enters dialogue at this point for the first time: "What does Bessie say I have done?" I asked. . . .'

7. *Description*, usually of persons or places, where the time sequence of narrative is abandoned in favour of analysis. Dickens is fond of introducing a character in a whirl of tiny, highly visual details; here is Mr Turveydrop in *Bleak House* (1853):

He was a fat old gentleman with a false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig. He had a fur collar, and he had a padded breast to his coat . . . He was pinched in, and swelled out, and got up, and strapped down, as much as he could possibly bear. . . . (ch. 14)

The first and last of these seven modes, it will be noted, are non-narrative.



The evolution and growth of dialogue in the novel through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is largely a story of its progressive liberation from the remaining six of these elements. In the early novel, dialogue is often felt to be a privileged mode of discourse and one proper to drama rather than to novels – and so involving a daring or indecorous mixture of *genres*: the reader expecting, even demanding, to be gently prepared for it. That inhibition was felt as late as Victorian fiction, though diminishingly. It explains the opening of *Jane Eyre*, which steps down from a coloured narrative (3) bordering on plain (2) – ‘There was no possibility . . .’ (it doubtless was raining hard, that day in Yorkshire), before entering free indirect speech (4) – ‘Me, she had dispensed from joining the group . . .’ – a phrase that may be close to what Mrs Reed said to Jane; and so into indirect speech (5) and finally direct speech (6), with Jane’s first remark. This satisfies a traditional demand for hesitation in the use of dialogue. It also confers upon the heroine herself, who is only a little girl here, a narrative eminence which, as narrator, Jane vengefully denies to her harsh guardian and her spoiled companions.

The same descent into dialogue – or rather, in this case, a thought within inverted commas – can be watched in the opening of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) nearly twenty years later, though by now the movement is so fast as to be almost a blur:

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice, ‘without pictures or conversations?’

‘It had no pictures . . .’ is a brief element of free indirect style, and ‘conversations’ is Alice’s childish word for dialogue. Long before 1865 it was an expectation of readers that dialogue should be spaced out as such on the page rather than run together within narrative, so that Alice is probably right to feel she can dislike a book without having read it.

Given that dialogue, in the early novel, needed to be gently introduced, the dialogue opening was exceptional in the nineteenth century and almost unknown in the eighteenth, though it is commonplace in the twentieth. It was in no way radical of Kingsley Amis to begin his first novel, *Lucky Jim* (1954), with a remark in mid-conversation from the hero's elderly and tedious superior, Professor Welch, leaving the story to catch up during the rest of the first chapter:

'They made a silly mistake, though,' the professor of history said, and his smile, as Dixon watched, gradually sank beneath the surface of his features at the memory. . . .

On the other hand, it must have looked astonishing at the opening of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768), which is perhaps the first European novel to begin with a remark of dialogue; but then Sterne's reputation for technical virtuosity was already established by *Tristram Shandy*, and the start of the *Sentimental Journey*, like the finish, may represent a sort of witty fracture, with something broken off at either end:

– They order, said I, this matter better in France –  
 – You have been in France? said my gentleman, turning quick upon me with the most civil triumph in the world. . . .

to conclude:

. . . So that when I stretch'd out my hand, I caught hold of the fille de chambre's

*A Sentimental Journey* has the double distinction of being the first novel to begin with dialogue, and the first (and almost only) novel to end without punctuation. No eighteenth-century French novel of note begins or ends in this way.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the instances have grown more numerous, at least in English. Susan Ferrier began *Marriage* (1818) with "Come hither, child," said the old Earl . . .'; Disraeli opened *Sybil* (1845) with an exchange of dialogue, and later *Lothair* (1870); and Dickens allowed it to himself once, and once only, in his fourteen novels, though the opening of *Hard Times* (1854) might better

be described as an unanswered monologue, addressed by Mr Gradgrind to a schoolmaster:

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. . . .

All these cases must have looked odder in their day than they do now. The twentieth century feels this mode of opening to be normal: Thomas Mann used it for *Buddenbrooks* (1901), his first novel, and Ronald Firbank in his first three (1915–16). By the inter-war years it was unremarkable. But Ivy Compton-Burnett is perhaps the only notable novelist to begin all her mature fictions in this way.



The advance of dialogue was neither rapid nor continuous. Its very punctuation and arrangement on the page were for long uncertain, with numerous variations between individual printers, including italics for the spoken words, and even a dramatic arrangement with the speaker's name at the start of each speech – a form sometimes occurring even in letter-novels, as in Richardson's *Clarissa* (V, 26). It was only as late as the 1780s that French and English settled into something approaching their present conventions: the French opting for what they supposed a predominantly English form, or starting each speech with a dash, as in the opening of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*; and the English adopting one version of the French system, or inverted commas. By 1800 the initiatory dash was to look characteristic of French fiction and inverted commas of the English; though Joyce, a cosmopolitan writing in Trieste and Paris, was to prefer the French dash in his handling of English dialogue. But Alice, if she had lived a hundred years earlier, might not have felt so certain after a glance at her sister's book that it contained no conversations, since the convention of starting each speech with a new line was not regularly established before 1800; and speeches, in any case, could be paragraph-long in eighteenth-century fiction, and even more.

The growth of dialogue as a propellant of narrative was unsteady. Richardson, like other eighteenth-century novelists, often handles scenes in which the story concerns shifting relations between characters where those shifts are marked by dialogue and little else: what he said to her, and what she said to him. But the proportion of

dialogue is often less, for all that, than it would have been a century or two later, with a greater prominence to such intermediate forms as indirect speech. Dickens uses dialogue with full power, and as a principal mode of story-telling, as early as his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–7); but he seems to prefer it for situations of comedy and even farce, and some of his later novels are more discursive than his first. George Eliot, whose first novel appeared in 1859, uses it less, and less adroitly, as befits an unremittingly analytical mind; and though Henry James moved strongly towards it in the 1890s, in his period of obsession with the theatre, and encouraged *The Awkward Age* (1899) to approach dramatic form in its emphasis upon dialogue, he moved after 1900 into a less theatrical and less lively mode, where coloured narrative has a notable place. And yet the growth of dialogue over the centuries, for all these checks, strikes one as essentially irresistible.

The sources of the inhibition against dialogue are curious to consider. One was vulgarity: polite readers continued to prefer a correct standard of speech, and even to insist on it. That is why 'common' speech needs to be excused, as Defoe excuses Moll Flanders's, though Challe had already used some exceptionally realistic exchanges in the frame-story for his *Les Illustres Françaises* (1713), and Marivaux was to be scolded by his critics for a low-life quarrel in *La Vie de Marianne* (1731–41). Dialect, or a regional version of the vulgar, only rarely enters the English novel before 1800, apart from a few stagey Scots, Irishmen and the like; and even where it enters powerfully, as in the Yorkshire characters of the Brontë sisters, or in West Country speech with Hardy, it is modified in order not to baffle or repel polite taste. To this day it remains a question whether a reader wants idiosyncrasies of speech, whether social, regional or merely personal, to be forced continually upon his attention. The effort can be fatiguing even when the effect is not repulsive. It is also faintly implausible, for some. The great fault of Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* (1782), Horace Walpole remarked acutely in a letter, is that she is

... so afraid of not making all her *dramatis personæ* set in character, that she never lets them say a syllable but what is to mark their character, which is very unnatural; at least in the present state of things, in which people are always aiming to disguise their ruling passions, and rather affect opposite qualities than hang out their propensities. (1 October 1782)

Since many people are as skilled in disguising their regional origins as their oddities of character, it might well be argued that it is absurd for a novelist to parade them. Far from being a realistic element, oddities of speech can all too easily look implausible and unreal. They can certainly tire.

Another source of suspicion, if not hostility, relates to the origins of the novel, real or imagined, in classical epic and seventeenth-century romance. Such works obey certain rules of literary decorum. They are not, as drama is, radically based on dialogue. They rarely allow brisk exchanges of speeches, as opposed to long set speeches, to propel the narrative forward, but prefer such exchanges to work as a decorative or illustrative element, just as they preserve a decorum of style within speeches. English fiction, which was often less confinedly aristocratic than French in the eighteenth century, was breaking free of these inhibitions as early as Defoe. Smollett, a radical liberator in his use of dialogue, even interested himself in its psychological oddities, long before Chekhov or Harold Pinter, and a little before Sterne's *Uncle Toby*; and he remarks in a letter on the queer habit some people have of 'answering from the purpose', or replying in a manner not required by the question, instancing someone who, on being asked if he had ever known an honest fellow than a certain acquaintance, replied: 'By God, I was at his mother's burial' (1 March 1754). That is a real intuition of how mind works, or fails to work. But it requires a certain indifference to decorum to dare to use it.



The technical progress of fiction in the eighteenth century, nowhere so marked as in dialogue, lies in a growing confidence in itself and a gradual forgetting of its roots. By the nineteenth, the cry is all for liveliness. Trollope recommended that a speech should rarely exceed a dozen words. The printed page, after all, has to work hard to make good the loss of intonation that speech possesses in life and in the theatre, and much that sounds lively in the mouth looks like cold turkey on the page.

The best trick here, and the hardest, is to write speeches that force a highly marked intonation upon the reader's mind. Richardson and Smollett have that enviable gift. Jane Austen, for whom Richardson was a favourite author, uses dialogue for witty concentrates of language, and often triumphs by economy. 'Can he be a sensible man,



sir?’ Elizabeth Bennet asks of her father, on receiving Mr Collins’s letter in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), to which Mr Bennet replies composedly: ‘No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse’ (ch. 13). Such sentences are a gift to the actor’s ear, even in the least histrionic of readers: they can only sound in one way, and that as the novelist meant them to sound.

It is not surprising, then, if the taste for dialogue grows. Scott recognised that it could make things less flat. ‘You blame me for introducing dialogue’, he wrote to his publisher Ballantyne in the winter of 1814–15, on *Guy Mannering* (1815), ‘but you [are] not aware that the incidents which must be known would be flatter in the mouth of the author himself than in those of the actors.’ Odd that a novelist should ever have needed to give that advice to a publisher; for the Victorians, it was ordinarily a matter of advice from publisher to novelist. But Scott, though not continuously adept in applying the principle, was already learning it. Dialogue disciplines a novelist into brevity and enlivens his page to the eye of a reader. It is the wine of Victorian fiction. That is something Henry James sometimes needed to be told.

One had seen good solid slices of fiction, well endued one might surely have thought with the easiest of lubrications, deplored by editor and publisher as positively not, for the general gullet known to *them*, made adequately ‘slick’.

‘Dialogue, always dialogue,’ I had seemed from far back to hear them mostly cry: ‘We can’t have too much of it, . . . and no excess of it . . .’ This wisdom had always been in one’s ears,

he complained in a preface to *The Awkward Age*, protesting that the English, for all their love of dramatic speech, will not buy the texts of plays they admire, as Parisians do. His later fiction, especially, after 1900, contrasts a highly sophisticated prose of objective or coloured narrative with startlingly colloquial dialogue, tricked out with circumlocutions in place of ‘he said’ and ‘she said’, which he had come to feel were impossibly commonplace. This is by now among the most easily mimicked of Jamesian mannerisms – ‘he risked’, ‘she ventured’, and the like. In his later fiction it works towards a larger effect: an extreme dissimulation between the novelist’s own mannered voice, on the one hand, and the highly colloquial remarks of his characters; all serving to enhance a reader’s sense of the creator’s superior

intelligence over his fallen creatures.

By the mid-twentieth century there is no limit to the work that dialogue can be set by the novelist to do. Though its role can still be relatively minor, it rarely looks as minor as it did before Smollett and Sterne made of it a chief motive force in story-telling. It can be used as a modest illustrative device; or, as in the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, it can fill the plot until it usurps the ordinary functions of narrative prose. If dialogue is the essence of drama, then a novel can now be as dramatic or as undramatic as the novelist pleases. But it now seems irreversibly true that, whatever pleases the novelist, the modern reader will always ask for more dialogue: 'We can't have too much of it, and no excess of it. . . .'

SAMPLE