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Dialogue



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Dialogue

By

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DIALOGUE¹

ALTHOUGH it is probable that the subject I have chosen to speak about this evening is rather outside the ordinary scope of your proceedings, I have thought it better to take that risk than to attempt to address you on some topic which I, as a working novelist and one who has made experiments in the dramatic line also, have had less occasion to study, and therefore should be less likely to be able to say anything deserving of your attention—not that I am at all confident of doing that even as matters stand. Yet perhaps it is not altogether alien to the spirit of this Association to consider sometimes a more or less technical aspect of literature itself, even though its main object may be to promote the study of literature; such a discussion, undertaken from time to time, may foster that interest in literature, on which in the end the spread of its study must depend. With that much said by way of justification, or of apology, as you will, I proceed to my task.

Some months ago I happened to read a novel in the whole course of which nobody said anything—not one of the characters was represented in the act of speaking to another with the living voice. One remark was indeed quoted in a letter as having been made *viva voce* on a previous occasion, but this sudden breach of consistency did not command my belief—it seemed like an assertion that in an assembly of veritable mutes somebody had suddenly shouted. The book was not in the main in the form of letters—it was almost pure narrative. The effect was worse than unreal. An intense sense of lifelessness was produced; you moved among the dead—or even the shadows of the dead. It was a lesson in the importance of dialogue in fiction which no writer could ever forget.

What, then, is this dialogue? Formally defined it includes, I suppose, any conversation—any talk in which two or more persons take part; while it excludes a monologue, which one delivers while others listen, and a soliloquy, which one delivers when there is nobody to listen—unless, perchance, behind the arras. But some dialogues are, if I may coin a word, much more thoroughly dialogic than others—there is much more of what is the real essence of the matter. That real essence I take to be the meeting of minds in talk—the reciprocal exhibition of mind to mind. The most famous compositions in the world to which the title of dialogues is expressly given—Plato's own—vary greatly in this essential quality. Some have it in a high degree: others become in great measure merely an exposition, punctuated by assents or admissions which tend to become almost purely a matter

¹ An address delivered to the members of the English Association, October 28, 1909.

of form. Later philosophical dialogues, like Landor's, give, to my mind, even less the impression of conversation—though an exception may well be made to some extent for Mr. Mallock's *New Republic*. But speeches are not true dialogue, and you cannot make them such by putting in a succession of them. For an instance, see Mr. Lowes Dickinson's *Modern Symposium*. One is inclined to say that unstinted liberty of interruption is essential to the full nature of dialogue—to give it its true character of reciprocity, of exchange, and often of combat. Without that it inclines towards the monologue—towards an exposition by one, and away from a contribution by several.

Thus it is that not all good talk can be cited as a good or typical example of dialogue. I have taken philosophical examples—let me turn hastily to something which, I hope at least, I know rather more about. We all know, and doubtless all love, Sam Weller's talk, but Sam's creator is, naturally enough, too much enamoured of him to give his interlocutors much of a chance. The whole is designed for the better exhibition of Sam—the other party is, in the slang of the stage, 'feeding him'—giving him openings. It's one-sided. A quite modern instance of the same kind, and one which, at its best, is not unworthy of being mentioned in the same breath, is to be found in *The Conversations of Mr. Dooley*. 'Hinnissey' gets no chance, he is merely a 'feeder'; the whole aim is the exhibition of the mind of Mr. Dooley. Contrast with these the conversations in *Tristram Shandy*—to my mind some of the finest and, scientifically regarded, most perfect dialogue in English literature. Every character who speaks contributes—really contributes, and is not merely a feeder or a foil. Each has his own mind, his own point of view, and manfully and independently maintains it. Uncle Toby is the author's pet perhaps, but I think he is hardly less fond of Mr. Shandy—while Mrs. Shandy, Dr. Slop, Corporal Trim, and the rest, are all sharply defined and characterized out of their own mouths, and have their independent value as well as their independent views. If you would seek good modern examples of these dialogic virtues, you might turn to Mr. Anstey's *Voces Populi* or to Mr. Jacobs's stories. In the latter the things that make you laugh most are often not in themselves remarkable—certainly not witty and indeed not aiming at wit; but they suddenly exhibit and light up conflicting points of view—and irresistible humour springs full-born from the clash of outlook and of temperament.

It is precisely this power inherent in dialogue—the power of bringing into sharp vision the conflict of characters and points of view—which favours the increased use of it in modern novels. Serious modern novels tend to deal with matters of debate more than their predecessors of corresponding rank did—at once to treat more freely of matters open to question, and to find open to question more matters than our ancestors thought—or at all events admitted—to come within that category. It is both more efficacious and less tedious to let A and B reveal their characters and views to one another than for the author to tell the reader A's character and views, and then B's character and views, and to add the obvious statement that the two characters and views differ. We do not want merely to be told they differ; the drama lies in seeing them differing, and in seeing the difference gradually disclose and establish itself until it culminates in a struggle and ends in a drawn battle, or a hard-won victory. Of

course, when a man is fighting alone in his own soul, you must rely on analysis—on analytic narrative (unless indeed you resort to an allegorical device), but where there is a conflict between two men—representing perhaps two types of humanity, or two sides of a disputed case—dialogue comes more and more to be used as the most technically effective medium at the writer's disposal.

But its increased use is not limited to this function. It is found possible to employ it more and more in the direct interest of literary form and technique. There are very many facts which the author of a novel desires to convey to his readers. A considerable proportion of them must be conveyed by narrative—so considerable a proportion that it is all gain if the number can be cut down. Here a skilful use of dialogue comes to the author's aid. To take an example. The author wishes to acquaint the reader with the heroine's personal appearance, since the reader is required to understand the hero's passion and the villain's wiles. We all recollect how in many old novels—even in those of the great masters of the craft—the fashion was to catalogue the lady's charms on her first appearance on the scene. There they all were—the raven locks, the flashing eyes, the short curling upper lip, et cetera. You read them—and according to my experience you were in no small danger of entirely forgetting what manner of woman she was by the time you had turned half a dozen pages. But if you can see her beauty in action, so to speak, it's a different thing. Say that her eyes are the feature on which special stress is desirable. Merely to state that 'she had beautiful blue eyes'—well, you accept the fact, but it leaves you cold. But if the hero, by a dexterous compliment, gallant yet not obtrusive, can, first, tell *you* about the eyes, secondly exhibit to you the effect the eyes are having on him, thirdly, get a step forward in his relations with the lady, and fourthly, aided by her reply to the compliment, show you how she is disposed to receive his advances—the result is that the author has done more and has done it better. I have purposely chosen a simple—almost a trivial—instance, but it is not therefore, I think, a bad example of how the use of dialogue can not merely avoid tedium, though that is a supremely desirable and indeed a vital thing in itself, but can also give a natural effect instead of an unnatural, and add to the dramatic value of a fact by showing it in actual operation, producing results, instead of merely chronicling its existence, almost as an item in a list. Novelists have realized this, and the realization of it unites with the reasons which I have already touched upon to make them try to work more and more through dialogue—more and more to make the characters speak for themselves, and less and less to speak for them except when they must. There is a gain all round—in naturalness, in drama, in conciseness, and in shapeliness.

It remains, while we are on this point of the technical usefulness of dialogue, to note two or three other ways in which it serves the novelist's turn. He finds it exceedingly to his purpose if he wishes to be impersonal, to be impartial, to keep a secret, or to hold a situation in suspense. It enables him to withdraw behind the curtain, and leave his characters alone with the reader. It enables him to get rid of the air of omniscience which narrative forces upon him, and to assume the limitations of his *dramatis personae*. By so doing

he adds reality to them—they are less puppets. Speaking through A's mouth, he sees only A's point of view, and when he speaks through B's mouth his knowledge of the state of events is only B's knowledge, and no greater. He may often desire to do this, for much the same reasons as sometimes lead a writer to assume, altogether and throughout the book, the garb of one of the characters, to write in the first person, to see only what the hero sees, to know only what he knows, and to feel only what he feels. The use of dialogue is in this aspect of it a less drastic form of the same device.

I have tried to indicate the uses of dialogue to the writers of books—I must say a word or two about the stage later on—but it would be a mistake to suppose that its employment has no limits. One we have already touched upon—a man can't talk dialogue to himself—well, unless he's a ventriloquist, and in these days his right to soliloquize, or even to say 'Hallo!' when he's by himself—except into the telephone, of course—is keenly canvassed or sternly denied. But even apart from this necessary limitation on dialogue, there are, I think, no doubt others. In the first place, dialogue, so excellent a means of exhibiting character and opinion, is on the whole not the most appropriate or effective mode of exhibiting action—unless, that is, the whole importance of the action depends on how it is received by one of the parties to the dialogue. Take the case of a murder. If the object is to tell an ingenious and thrilling story of a murder, it is in nine cases out of ten far better for the author to tell it himself. He gains nothing by putting it into the mouth of a character, and he probably loses directness and effect. But if the import of the murder lies not so much in itself as in the effect the news of it may have on A, B, then it is good to tell it to A, B; the reader can see the effect in operation. But with this exception I think it may be taken that books containing much external action, and much rapid action, will tend to rely less on dialogue, and more on narration. Not only is dialogue less quick-moving and direct, but when action is in the case, it loses just that naturalness which is so pre-eminently its own where it is dealing with a clash of temperaments or with contrasted views of life. It seems to come at second hand, and the reader feels that he would sooner have been with A, who really saw the thing done, than merely with B, who is only being told about it by the actual witness.

Again, I think there is little doubt that the ordinary reader is fatigued by too much talking, and that a long novel, mainly relying on dialogue and reducing narrative to a merely subordinate position, is in great danger of becoming tedious. This it may do in one of two ways—or, if it is very unfortunate, in both—at different places. The writer may try to tell too much by dialogue, with the result that his characters speak at great length, and he topples over the line which divides dialogue from speech-making. Or, on the other hand, alive to the perils of speech-making, he may try to cut it all up into question and answer, and to enliven it by constant epigrams or some other form of wit. This latter expedient may not bore the reader so much as the speech-making, but it will probably fatigue him more. Dialogue does, in fact, make a greater claim on the reader than narrative. I think this is true even when it is good dialogue. Something may be done to help him by skilful comment or description—clever stage-

directions in effect—but none the less he is deprived, or curtailed, of much of the assistance on his way which the narrative form can give him. I think that probably the best advice to offer to a novice would be: As few long conversations as possible—but as many short ones. Let the dialogue break up the narrative, and the narrative cut short any tendency to prolixity in the dialogue.

Just now I referred to the possibility of assisting dialogue by comment or description, much as when you read a play you are assisted to follow and appreciate the lines written to be spoken on the stage by the directions inserted to guide the actor. This reference, I dare say, raised in your minds the thought that the dialogue I have been speaking of—dialogue as it is used in novels—is very rarely pure dialogue at all. The objection is well founded, and its application is wide, though the degree of its application varies immensely. You may find pure dialogue, without stage-directions, here and there, even in novels. George Borrow, for instance, is fond of it, and is a master of a peculiar quality of it. But far the more general form is dialogue assisted by comment and description—a hybrid kind of composition, in which the author plays a double part, speaking through the characters' mouths at one moment, describing their actions, gestures, even their unspoken thoughts, at the next. This is the normal form of novel dialogue. The variations occur in the relative amount of this description or comment—of this stage-direction, as I have called it. And I call it that because this comment or description takes the place of what they call 'business' on the stage. The actor's task is divided between his words and his 'business', and the playwright is entitled to rely on the 'business' to help out the words, just as the novelist describes or comments on the actions and gestures of his speakers, in order to assist and elucidate the meaning of the actual words they use. If you read a play—not seeing the actors—and if the author has given no stage-directions as to how the characters look or speak—as to whether they show anger or fright, or pleasure, or surprise, for instance, you will find, I think, that you have to read with an increased degree of attention—perhaps I may say of sympathetic imagination—and that, even with this brought to bear, you will sometimes be in doubt. So with novel dialogue. If the author denied himself description or comment interlarded with the actual words spoken, he would set a harder task both to his own skill and to the reader's intelligence. The comments of the novelist, like the 'business' of the playwright, clothe the skeleton of the actually spoken words with a living form, expressing itself in action, in gesture, by frowns or smiles, by tears or laughter. I have little doubt that if we possessed not only Shakespeare's words, but Shakespeare's 'business', many a controversy as to the exact meaning of this passage or that, many a question as to the precise character or mental condition of this or that of his *dramatis personae*, could never have arisen—and many learned, and possibly some tedious, books would have gone unwritten.

Now, so far as I know—but I hasten to add that I am not a wide reader of plays, though I am much addicted to seeing them acted—Mr. Bernard Shaw was the first among English dramatists to see and exploit fully the possibilities of stage-directions in helping the imagination of those who read, as distinct from those who see, his plays. Some of his stage-directions are, in my humble opinion, among the

best things he has ever done—terse, humorous, incisive, complete—see, for example, his description of Mrs. Warren. But novelists were quicker to see the possibility of their stage-directions, their comments on moods, their descriptions of the actions or the gestures accompanying the spoken words. When you talk to a man or woman, you don't shut your eyes and merely listen to the voice. You do listen carefully to the voice—since he may say 'Yes' as if he really meant it, or as if he only half-meant it, or as if he meant just the opposite—but you also watch his eyes and his mouth—and in moments of strong excitement it is recorded of many a villain that his fingers twitched, and of many a heroine that her bosom heaved; so fingers and bosoms are worth watching too. Now the point is that a skilful use of these stage-directions can not only immensely assist the meaning of novel dialogue, but can also add enormously to its artistic value and merit. It can diffuse an atmosphere, impart a hint, create an interest by a dexterous suspending of the answer. This last is, from a professional point of view, a particularly pretty trick—it's not much more than a trick, but let us call it a literary device—and Sterne brought it to great perfection—and knew well what he was doing. I will make bold to quote a passage of his which bears on the whole subject, and shows both his method and the absolute consciousness with which he employed it—to say nothing of the shameless candour with which he laughs at his own trick. Corporal Trim is discoursing to his fellow servants on the death of Tristram's brother, Master Bobby. 'Are we not here now?' continued the Corporal (striking the end of his stick perpendicularly upon the floor, so as to give an emblem of health and stability) 'and' (dropping his hat upon the ground) 'gone in a minute?' Then Sterne digresses, and repeats—as his manner is. But he comes back—and is good enough to explain: 'Let us only carry back our minds to the mortality of Trim's hat,' he says. 'Are we not here now—and gone in a moment? There was nothing in the sentence—'twas one of your self-evident truths we have the advantage of hearing every day: and if Trim had not trusted more to his hat than to his head, he had made nothing at all of it.' And he proceeds: 'Ten thousand and ten thousand times ten thousand (for matter and motion are infinite) are the ways by which a hat may be dropped on the ground without any effect. Had he flung it, or thrown it, or cast it, or skimmed it, or squirted it, or let it slip or fall in any possible direction under heaven—had he dropped it like a goose, like a puppy, like an ass—or in doing it or even after he had done it, had looked like a fool, like a ninny, like a nincompoop—it had failed, and the effect upon the heart had been lost.' And he ends—most justifiably—'Meditate, I beseech you, upon Trim's hat!' Trim's hat may certainly stand as an instance of the value of stage-directions to novel dialogue.

Returning to actually spoken words—the real talk between the interlocutors—we may note the great adaptability and elasticity of the dialogue form. The hesitation, the aposiopesis, the interruption, are all ready and flexible devices, apt to convey hints, innuendoes, doubts, objections, apt to convey the sense of a balance inclining now this way, now that, to show one mind feeling its way towards a knowledge of the other, while sedulously guarding its own secrets. Or you may seek the broader effects of comedy with the sudden

betrayal of irreconcilable divergence, or of an agreement as complete as it is paradoxical, or of the mutual helplessness which results from total misunderstanding of the one by the other, or, finally, of the well-worn but still effective device—a favourite one in the theatre—of two people talking at cross-purposes, one meaning one thing, the other a different one, and the pair arriving at an harmonious agreement from utterly inharmonious premises—the false accord of a hundred scenes of comedy.

Such are some of the arts of dialogue, as they are employed sometimes in the task of serious and delicate analysis, as for example by Mr. Henry James, sometimes in the cause of pure comedy, as by Gyp. That lady made an interesting experiment. She tried to indicate the gestures, wherein her countrymen are so eloquent, by a system of notation—so many notes of interrogation, or so many of exclamation, being B's response to A's spoken observation. But here, I think, she must be held to have resorted to 'business' as we have already discussed it, and to have passed beyond true dialogue. An 'Oh', an 'Ah!' or a 'Humph!' constitute about the irreducible minimum of that articulate speech which makes dialogue. Notes of exclamation won't quite do.

One other function of dialogue deserves especial mention. Unless an author adopts the drastic course I have already alluded to—that of sinking himself absolutely in the personality of one of his characters and writing in the name and garb of that character—as for example did Defoe—and as, for example, does Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, when he plays Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes's 'lead' as they say in the theatre—unless he does this, dialogue alone will enable him to impart 'local colour', in other words, to set before his reader the speech and the mind of races or classes far different in their thoughts, in their modes of expression, and in their actual vocabulary and pronunciation, from what we may term the ordinary educated reader. Scores of Dickens's cockney characters, Mr. Hardy's Wessex rustics, Mr. Kipling's soldiers, live and move and have their being for us solely in virtue of what they say and the way they say it. In fact they couldn't be described—they must be seen and heard. They must be on the stage. Therefore they must use—their creators must use for them—that literary form which is, in the end, the link between novels and the stage—the form common to both—the form of dialogue.

That last observation leads me naturally to pass on to the literary vehicle in which dialogue is in its glory—in which it is the sovereign instrument, in which it reaches its highest level of independence, in which it leans its lightest on any other aid than that inherent in its own capacity. This is the drama—and the drama written for the actual stage. I do not think that what are called 'plays for the study' need detain us. It is really only a question of degree in each case. They either approximate closely to the true stage-play or, on the other hand, they are really books in which, by artifice and often by an effort which is rather too visible, those parts that would naturally assume a narrative form, are presented in the guise of dialogue—or rather not so much of dialogue as we are now discussing it, but, as I should say, of speeches which are, in essence, either narrative, or argumentative, or reflective, or hortative in character.

We may come then to the theatre itself—but before I attempt to

say anything on the relations between stage dialogue and book dialogue, I should like to remind you again that even this greater independence of stage dialogue is very far indeed from being absolute. We have already referred to the stage-directions. These are amplified by the actor, of his own motion or in pursuit of the instructions he receives at rehearsal. The result is his 'business'—everything he does on the stage except what he does with his tongue. The 'business' counts for much, but what counts for even more is that the words are spoken there on the stage by living man to living man. I think it is hard to exaggerate the effect of this—the immense help it gives to the words. It is not merely a question of vividness, though that is important enough. It is equally, or even more, a question of appropriateness, of the words matching the personality from which they proceed. The novelist can make his words match the personality which he has created in his own mind. Where he is at a disadvantage compared with the playwright is that it is infinitely harder for him, in spite of all *his* stage-directions, and his descriptions, and his analysis, to set that personality as completely before his reader as the corporeal presence of the actor sets it before the audience in the theatre. Hence the match—the harmony—between the words and the personality—though it may exist, is apt not to be nearly so effective in the book as on the stage, and a line that misses its mark as written in the one may triumph in the other, thanks to the man who speaks it—to his skill, to his emotional power, not seldom, and especially in comedy, even to his personal appearance. In a word the independence of dialogue on the stage is qualified by its dependence on the actor. He has to do what the novelist does by descriptions and comments. He has to clothe the skeleton; and if it has been one's fortune to see two or three great or accomplished actors play the same part, especially, say, in a classic play, where they are not guided—or trammelled—by too many stage-directions, and are not instructed—perhaps sometimes over-instructed—by the author, one will not, I think, doubt that the clothes they put on the skeleton may very considerably affect the appearance of its anatomy, sometimes seeming to alter the very shape of the bones.

Still, all allowances made, it remains true that the stage offers the fullest, the fairest, and the most independent opportunity for pure dialogue—and it is necessary to ask the question—however hard the answer may be—what effect the medium of the theatre has upon dialogue. I admit at once that I think the question is very hard to answer. We are in presence of the indisputable fact that dialogue which is highly moving or amusing in a book may fall quite flat on the stage—while on the other hand dialogue which is very effective on the stage may sound either obvious or bald in a book. This is not to say, of course, that some dialogue will not be found good for both. Practical experiments are constantly being tried, owing to the habit of dramatizing novels which have achieved a popular success. The temptation is to carry over into the play as much of the dialogue of the novel as you can contrive to use; the object is to preserve as far as possible both the literary flavour and the commercial goodwill of the original. The result is interesting. The novelist, whether he acts as his own dramatist or not, will almost always notice, I think, that passages of dialogue which are most effective in the book are

least effective on the stage—often that they need complete remodelling before they can be used at all. On the other hand, passages which he has little esteemed in the book—regarded perhaps almost as mere machinery, part of the necessary traffic of the story—make an immediate hit with audiences in the theatre.

It is a commonplace in the theatrical world that there is no telling what 'they' will like—'they' means the public—not even what plays they will or will not like, much less what particular scenes or passages—and nobody with even the least practical experience would care to back his opinion save at very favourable odds. If then it is impossible to tell what they will or won't like, it seems still more hopeless to inquire why they will or won't like it; but that is, in reality, not quite the case. It is not, I think, so much that the playwright does not know what he has to do to please them, as that it happens to be rather difficult to do it, and quite as difficult to know when you have done it. Happily, however, we are to-night not on the hard highroad of practice, but in the easy pastures of criticism, and may therefore be bold to try to suggest what are the main features of good theatrical dialogue—features which, though they may be found in and may assist novel dialogue, yet are not indispensable to it, but which must characterize theatrical dialogue and are indispensable to success on the stage. These indispensable qualities may in the end be reduced to two—practicality and universality.

By practicality—not a happy term, I confess, and one which I use only because I cannot think of any other single word—I mean the quality of helping the play forward, either by getting on with the evolution of the situations, or by exhibiting the drama which is the result of the situations (I must add, parenthetically, that by situations I do not mean merely external happenings—the term properly includes both characters and events, and their reciprocal action on one another). A play is a very short thing; a very solid four-act play—I am talking of the modern theatre now—will not cover more than 140 to 150 ordinary type-written sheets; a novel of the ordinary length will cover from three to four hundred. The obvious result is that the author has not, to put it colloquially, much time to play about. He may allow himself a little of what is technically termed 'relief'. A good line pays for its place. But broadly speaking, all the dialogue has to work—each line has its task of advancing action or exhibiting character. Now only so many lines being possible between the rise and the fall of the curtain, it is clear that there is no room for digression or for rambling—things that are often most delightful in a book, where space and time are practically unlimited. More than this. Not only is there no space for rambling and irrelevant talk, but the necessary talk—the talk that is helpful and pertinent—must at the same time carefully consult the limits of space. There are a lot of points to be made in every act—aye, in every scene. The playwright cannot afford too much space to any one point. And the point must not only be made with all possible brevity—it must be made with all possible certainty, so that there may be no need of going back to it, no need of repetition; it should be stuck straight into the audience's mind, as one sticks a pin into a chart. Hence there is need of directness—a certain quality of unmistakableness—one might almost say bluntness, when one compares theatrical dialogue with

some of the minutely wrought novel dialogue to which I have referred to-night. But what then—I'm afraid you will be beginning to ask—what then, if you are right, is to become not only of the literary graces of style, but also of the intellectual quality of your work—of its profundity, of its subtlety, of its delicacy? Well, I can make only one answer—and being to-night, as I say, in the happy pastures of theory—I can give it light-heartedly. You must keep all those, and manage to harmonize them with your brevity and your certainty. That is one of the reasons—not the only one—why it is distinctly difficult to write good plays, not very easy to write even what are often contemptuously referred to as commercially successful plays—and not absolutely easy to write anything that can be called in any serious sense a play at all. There is a great deal of difference between just being a bad play and not being a play at all. The real playwright sometimes writes a bad play—but it is a play that he writes. Yes, your beauty, your profundity, your subtlety, your delicacy, must submit to drill—they must toe the line—they must accept the strait conditions of this most exacting medium. Conciseness and certainty—a quality of clean-cut outline—is demanded by stage conditions. The writer must know with accuracy where he is going at every minute and just how far. He ought to do the same in a book, you'll say, and I admit it. But in the latter it is an ideal, and many a successful and even many a delightful book has been written without the ideal being reached—or perhaps even aimed at. On the stage the ideal is also the indispensable—for there a writer in the least of a mist wraps his audience in the densest fog.

The second quality which I suggest as pre-eminently required by stage dialogue and which I have called universality really goes deeper and affects more than the mere dialogue, though strictly speaking we are this evening concerned with its effect in that sphere only. Consider for a moment the different aim which a writer of novels and a writer of plays respectively may set before himself. Of course the novelist may set out to please the whole British public—and the American and Continental too, if you like, though for simplicity's sake we may confine ourselves to these islands. A certain number no doubt start with that aim. A few may have succeeded—very few. But such an ambitious task is in no way incumbent on the novelist. Whether he looks to his pride or his pocket, to fame or to a sufficient circulation, it is quite enough for him to please a section of the public. He may be a famous literary man and enjoy a large income, as fame and incomes go in authorship, without three-quarters of the adult population—let alone the boys and girls—knowing or caring one jot about him. And he may be quite content to have it so—content deliberately and voluntarily, and not merely perforce, to limit the extent of his appeal, finding compensation in the intenser, though narrower, appeal he makes to his chosen audience, and in the increased liberty to indulge and to develop his own bent—to go his own way, in short, happy in the knowledge that he has a select but sufficient body of devoted followers. For example, I don't suppose that Mr. Meredith expected or tried to please the boys who worshipped Mr. Henty, or that Mr. Henty, in his turn, had any idea of poaching on the preserves of Mr. Pett Ridge. In a word, a novelist can, if he likes or if he must (often the latter is the case), specialize in his audience

just as he can in his subject or his treatment. If he pleases the class he tries to please, all is well with him ; he can let the others go, with just as much regret and just as much politeness as his circumstances and his temperament may dictate.

Now, of course, this is true to some degree of the theatre also—at any rate in the great centres of population like London, where there are many neighbourhoods and many theatres. You would not expect to fill a popular ‘low price’ house with the same bill that might succeed at the St. James’s or, in recent days, at the Court Theatre. Nevertheless, it is immensely less true of the theatre than it is of the novel. Take the average West End theatre—it has to cater for all of us. The fashionable folk go, you and I go, our growing boys and girls go, our relations from the country go, our servants go, our butchers, bakers, and candlestick-makers go, the girls from the A.B.C. shops, and the young gentlemen from Marshall & Snelgrove’s go—we have all to be catered for—we have all to be pleased with the same dinner ! Across the footlights lies a miniature world, in which wellnigh every variety that exists in the great world outside has paid its money and sits in its seat. Is this to say that the theatre must rely on the commonplace and obvious ? Not at all—but it is to say that it must in the main rely on the universal—on that which appeals to all the varieties in virtue of the common humanity that underlies the variations. It must find, so to say, the least common denominator, and work through and appeal to that. The things that will do it differ profoundly—

‘To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle !’

That does it. Or Congreve’s ‘Though Marriage makes man and wife one flesh, it leaves them still two fools !’—That does it, though obviously in quite a different way—or ‘Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo ?’—again in a different way. Or again something quite elementary—even schoolboyish if one may dare to use the word of Shakespeare—may win its way by its absolute naturalness, as when Jacques says to Orlando—of Rosalind, ‘I do not like her name’—‘There was no thought of pleasing you when she was christened’—an unanswerable retort to an impertinent observation which I have never known to fail in pleasing the house. The thing may or may not be simple, it may or may not be profound, it may or may not be witty, but it must have a wide appeal—it must touch a common chord. I imagine that very few plays—though I think I have known a few—get produced and then please nobody—absolutely nobody in the house. I have known some failures that have pleased very highly people whom any author should be proud to please. But they haven’t pleased enough people—not merely not enough to succeed, but not enough to establish them as good plays, however much good literary stuff and good literary form there might be contained and exhibited in them.

Now this need for universality—for the thing with a wide appeal

not limited to this or that class or character of intellect—has its effect, I think, on the actual form of the dialogue, though I freely admit that is an effect extremely hard to measure and define with any approach to accuracy. It in no way excludes individuality or even whimsicality, whether in situation or dialogue. The writer who is probably the most successful living British dramatist to-day is also probably the most individual and the most whimsical. It in no way demands undue concession to the commonplace—but it does, I think, require that the dialogue shall be in some sense in the vulgar tongue—that it shall be understood of the people. The thing need not be seen or put as the audience would see or put it, but it must be seen and put as the audience can understand that character seeing and putting it. It must not be perverse, or too mannered, or too obscure. It may not be allowed so much licence in this respect as book-dialogue, if only for the reason that its effect has to be much more immediate—there can be no such thing as reading the speech over again the better to grasp its meaning—a necessity not unknown in novel reading. Its appeal is immediate, or it is nothing at all. It must also be, above all things, natural—and this again is on the stage even more pre-eminently requisite than in the written page—if only for the reason that the speaker is more vividly realized on the stage, and the author less vividly remembered—so that any discrepancy between the speaker as he lives before you and the particular thing he says is more glaringly apparent. And, as a corollary to this necessity for naturalness, follows the need for full and distinct differentiation of character. The dialogue must clearly attach to each character in the play his point of view and must consistently maintain it. On the whole therefore we may say that the universality of appeal which the stage demands operates on the form of the dialogue by way of imposing upon it certain obligations of straightforwardness of effect, of lucidity and immediateness in appeal, and of naturalness and exact appropriateness to the speaker—obligations which exist for book-dialogue also, but are less stringent and less peremptory there than in the theatre.

This question of naturalness, which is germane to the whole subject of dialogue and not merely to stage dialogue, is one of the most difficult things to lay down any rule about. It is not easy even to get any working formula which is helpful. On the one side there seems to lie the obvious rule—that all dialogue ought to be natural, appropriate to the person in whose mouth it is put—not merely what in substance he would say, but also said in the way he would say it. On the other side is the obvious fact that no two writers of any considerable merit do, as a fact, write dialogue in the same way, even when they are presenting the same sort of characters. Comparatively impersonal as the dialogue form is, when set beside the narrative, yet the writer's idiosyncrasy will have its way, and in greater or less degree the author's accent is heard from the lips of his imaginary interlocutors—and of each and all of them, however widely different they may be supposed to be, and really are, from one another. This appears to land us in an *impasse*; the obvious fact seems to conflict with the obvious rule. If it be so, I suppose the rule must go to the wall, for all its obviousness. But I fancy that some approach to a solution may be found in the suggestion that no two authors of creative power do, in fact, ever create characters of quite the same sort, and that we got into

a seeming *impasse* by being guilty of a fallacy. When an author sits down at his desk to contemplate, criticize, and reproduce the world about him, it is natural at the first thought to regard the author as subject contemplating and reproducing the world as object—pure subject as against pure object. Here is the fallacy as I conceive. The author as subject does not and cannot contemplate the world as pure object. What he sees is object-subject—that is to say, he consciously sets himself to contemplate and describe a world which is already modified for him by the unconscious projection of his own personality into it—or, in more homely language, he always looks through his own spectacles. It follows that when two creative minds—say Dickens and Thackeray—both set out to describe a duke or a costermonger, it is never the same duke or costermonger—it is not the abstract idea of duke or costermonger, laid up in heaven—but it is a duke-Dickens or a duke-Thackeray—a costermonger-Dickens or a costermonger-Thackeray. Consequently again it is not in the end natural—and, therefore, as the Admirable Crichton would remind us, it is not in the end right—that these two dukes or these two costermongers should speak in exactly the same way—though no doubt both of the pairs ought still to speak as dukes and costermongers of some sort—be it Dickensian or Thackerayan as the case may be. Of course, if an author's idiosyncrasy is so peculiar that the subjective infusion of himself which he pours into the objective costermonger is so powerful as to cause the human race at large to object that no costermonger of any kind whatsoever ever did or could speak in that way—well, then the world will say that the picture of the costermonger is untrue and the language of the costermonger is inappropriate and unnatural—a conclusion summed up by saying that the author can't draw a costermonger. His personality won't blend with costermongers—perhaps it will with dukes—he had better confine himself to the latter. The author may take comfort in the thought that there are sure to be a few persons enamoured of singularity, and perhaps liking to be wiser than their neighbours, who will declare that his costermongers are of a superior brand to all others, and are indeed the only complete and veritable revelation of the quiddity of the costermonger ever set before the world since that planet began its journey round the sun.

We arrive, then—as we draw near the close of these remarks—rather rambling remarks, I am afraid—at the conclusion, perhaps a conclusion with a touch of the paradoxical in it—that in dialogue the writer is always trying to do what in the nature of the case he can never do completely. He is always trying to present objectively a personality other than his own. He never fully succeeds, and it would be to the ruin of his work as literature, if he did. The creator is always there in the created, and it is probably true to say that he is there in greater degree just in proportion to the force of his personality and the power of his creative faculty. Is the greater writer then less true to life than the smaller? I am not going to be as surprising as that—for, though he puts in more of himself, the greater writer sees and puts in a lot more of the objective costermonger also. But it is, I think, true to say that what we get from him is not, in the strict use of words, anything that exists. It is a hypothetical person, if I may so put it—it is a compound of what the author takes from the

world outside and what he himself contributes. The result is, then—to take an instance or two—in *Diana of the Crossways*, not an actual historical character, but what Mr. Meredith would have been had he been that lady—not an actual skipper of a coastwise barge, but what Mr. Jacobs would have been had he been skipper of a barge—not an actual detective, but what Gaboriau, or Wilkie Collins, or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would have been had he been a detective, or, to take extreme cases, not the inhabitants of the jungle, but all the varieties which Mr. Kipling's fertile genius would have assumed if he had had to people the jungle all off his own bat. True as this is of all imaginative writing, it is most true of dialogue. That is an attempt at direct impersonation, as direct as the actor's on the stage—and it is and can be successful only within the limits indicated. The author, like the actor, must go on trying to do what he never can and never ought to succeed in doing—namely, obliterating his own personality. The real process is not obliteration but transformation or translation—a fusion of himself with each of his speakers—he modifies each of them and is himself in each case modified by the fusion. And we may probably measure a man's genius in no small degree just by his susceptibility to this fusion. We talk of Shakespeare's universal genius, and say that he 'understands' everybody; that is to say, that he is at home in speaking in any man's mask—that he can fuse himself with anybody. Lesser writers can fuse only with people of a certain type, or a certain class, or a certain period, or a certain way of thinking. Some very clever people and accomplished writers fail in the novel or the play because they are deficient in the power of fusing at all, and their own personality is always the overpowering ingredient, so that they can preach, or teach, or criticize, but they cannot, as the saying goes, get into another man's skin—a popular way of putting the matter which will express the truth about what is needful very well, if we add the proviso that when the author gets in he must not drive the original owner out, but the two must dwell together in unity.

Thus we see dialogue fall into its place among the varieties of literary expression, as the most imitative and the least personal, yet not as entirely imitative nor as wholly impersonal. It carries the imitative and impersonal much further than the lyric coming straight from the poet's own heart, much further than the philosophic poem with its questioning of a man's own thoughts about the universe, further than narrative with its frankly personal record of how things appear to the narrator, and its unblushing attempt to make them appear in the same light to the reader. At its best it carries imitation to such a point that its own excellence alone convinces us that there is something more than imitation after all, and more than the insight which makes imitation possible—that among all the infinitely diverse creations of a rich imagination and an unerring penetration there is still a point of unity, which determines the exact attitude of each character towards the life which it is his to lead and the world which he has to live in. The point of unity is the author's voice, veiled and muffled, but audible still, however various, however fantastic, however transformed, the accents in which it speaks. The unity in multiplicity for which poetry yearns, philosophy labours, and science untiringly seeks—this is also the aim and ideal of dialogue, and of drama, its completest

form—so that out of the infinite diversity of types and of individuals which pour forth from the mind of a great creator there shall still emerge something that we know to be his, something that he has given to, as well as all that he has taken from, the great scene about him, his view of life as it must present itself to all sorts and conditions of men, his criticism of a world in which all these sorts and conditions of men exist.

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