

THE FORM OF TALK: A STUDY OF THE DIALOGUE NOVEL

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ABSTRACT
The Form of Talk: A Study of the Dialogue Novel
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The “dialogue novel” is best understood as an ongoing novelistic experiment that replaces narration with dialogue, so that such basic narrative constituents as character, setting, chronology, and plot find expression not through the mediation of an external or character-bound narrative consciousness, but through the presented verbal exchange between characters. Despite sustained critical attention to the variety and “openness” of the novel form, dialogue novels have been largely ignored within English studies—treated as neither a sustained tradition within, nor a perverse manifestation of, the novel. This study seeks to address that absence and to situate the dialogue novel within narrative and novel studies. Drawing from analytic philosophy, narratology, literary theory, and the dialogue novels themselves, this study demonstrates how the unique formal texture of the dialogue novel opens onto valuable discussions about such topics as cooperative language communities, narrative desire, the power dynamics implicit in talk, and the relationship between time and narrative. Overriding these concerns is an attention to how the social nature of conversation determines how the dialogue novel represents institutional power and character agency, as well as how the dialogue novel establishes a dynamic between reader and text for the refiguration of meaning and the reconstruction of fictional worlds. Chapter One uses Paul Grice’s Cooperative Principle as a baseline for delineating how communities are formed and maintained through dialogue in Henry

James's *The Awkward Age*. Chapter Two considers Henry Green's late dialogue novels alongside his novel theory and René Girard's theory of mimetic desire to illustrate how both character and readerly desire function as imitative practices. Chapter Three considers the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett through Aaron Fogel's theory of "forced dialogue" to argue that dialogue's constraints can offer liberative structure to the novel form and those who are subject to these strictures. And Chapter Four reads dialogue novels by William Gaddis and Nicholson Baker through Paul Ricoeur's threefold mimesis and Lubomír Doležel's possible-worlds theory to argue that the dialogue novel presents an ideal form for examining the complex intersection of formal texture and history, as well as the dialectic between narrative configuration and human time.

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INTRODUCTION

The “dialogue novel” is best understood as an ongoing novelistic experiment that replaces narration with dialogue, so that such basic narrative constituents as character, setting, chronology, and plot find expression not through the mediation of an external or character-bound narrative consciousness, but through the presented verbal exchange between characters. Despite sustained critical attention to the variety and “openness” of the novel form, dialogue novels have been largely ignored within English studies—treated as neither a sustained tradition within, nor a perverse manifestation of, the novel genre. This study seeks to address that absence and to situate the dialogue novel within narrative and novel studies by offering a structurally- and historically-minded analysis of dialogue novels by Henry James, Henry Green, Ivy Compton-Burnett, William Gaddis, and Nicholson Baker. Drawing on analytic philosophy, narratology, literary theory, and the dialogue novels themselves, this dissertation will demonstrate how the unique formal texture of the dialogue novel opens onto valuable new discussions about such topics as cooperative language communities, narrative desire, the power dynamics implicit in talk, and the relationship between time and narrative. Overriding these concerns is an attention to how the social nature of conversation determines how the dialogue novel represents institutional power and individual agency, as well as how the dialogue novel establishes a dynamic between reader and text for the refiguration of meaning and the reconstruction of fictional worlds.

The paradoxical character of the dialogue novel originates in its seeming to be simultaneously the most realistic and artificial of genres. The dialogue novel typically displays a greater realism by representing only those fictional elements, like character speech and movement, that manifest themselves in the material world. Ever since Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* proposed that the novel is distinguished by its "more largely referential use of language" and "more immediate imitation of individual experience," fidelity to a represented material world has been seen as characteristic of the novel genre.¹ But the dialogue novel's resistance to representing character interiority—that is, private thoughts and feelings that exist only in the minds of characters—has made the novel seem less realistic because Watt's realism depends significantly on the purely fictional ability of a novelist to get inside a character's head.² So by excising narrative representations of interiority, the dialogue novel forfeits the fictional "reality" offered by the conventions of literary realism even as it presents its reader with a stricter scientific realism.

The dialogue novel's difficult fit with contemporary narrative theory is apparent in the rather scant attention afforded to dialogue in some significant introductions to the field: Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980), Gerald Prince's *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narratology* (1982), and Mieke Bal's *Narratology* (1985). These studies tend to present dialogue as only one of many narrative modes for representing point-of-view (Prince), consider the complex temporal

1. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 32.

2. Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 109-16.

effects of dialogue *alongside* narrator's text (Genette), or feature its uses in non-narrative commentary, or argumentation (Bal). As the above studies demonstrate, narratology tends to treat dialogue as subordinate to other forms of narrative discourse—a treatment that proves rather unworkable for the novel that subordinates all else to dialogue. Nevertheless, narratology stands as the most comprehensive attempt by post-1950s literary studies to formulate a comprehensive taxonomy of the forms of narrative discourse. This dissertation, therefore, uses the insights of narrative theory throughout and explicitly attempts to reconcile the dialogue novel with narratology in its final chapter.

Recent critical studies that theorize novelistic dialogue tend to examine dialogue either as a mere imitation of speech or as a narrative mode that speaks directly to the cultural milieu of late-capitalist culture. Norman Page's *Speech in the English Novel* (1973) catalogues the varied methods by which written dialogue replicates human speech, examining works by both Henry Green and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Page's study, however, erases many distinctions between the dialogue novel and other novel forms by exclusively discussing how dialogue produces the illusion of real speech and the real-world speech practices that dialogue mimics. In contrast, Irene Kacades's *Talk Fiction* views contemporary American fiction as a dialogue with the late twentieth century "talk culture" of talk shows, chat rooms, and conference calls. While both Page and Kacades perform a valuable service by identifying fictive modes for representing human speech (particularly Page) and the concrete historical conditions under which such modes arise

(particularly Kacades), neither provides a compelling account of how the dialogue form acts with or against its reader, or within or against the dominant novel tradition.

To understand why the dialogue novel has been ignored within accounts of the novel tradition, we must consider how formal experimentation within the twentieth-century novel form has been figured by English studies. Simply put, formal experimentation after the Victorian era has become virtually synonymous with modernist (and then postmodernist) fiction, which has not been fully receptive to narratives that emphasize exterior forms over interior consciousness. Seeds for this preference may be found in Virginia Woolf's profoundly influential essay "Modern Fiction" (1919). Here Woolf argues that "materialist" novelists such as H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy disappoint the novel reader and the novel tradition because they replicate the outward material of life without adequately conveying the "spiritual" matter of life, which Woolf describes as "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."³

In Woolf's formulation, life (also called "truth," "reality," "spirit," or "the thing we seek") properly conceived is a time-bound interface between a conscious mind and the material world, and it is the novelist's task to convey this mediating halo "with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible."⁴ Thus, "Modern Fiction" dismisses mimesis of the material world and forwards mimesis of consciousness as the mode by which the modern novelist pursues a greater realism and represents identity. Woolf's

3. Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 741.

4. *Ibid.*, 741.

judgments have influenced and prophesied numerous preoccupations of formally-minded English studies since the modernist period: a claim that a decisive break between the historical conditions of the early twentieth century and previous eras simultaneously produced and demanded evolved fictional forms; and a sense that the mimesis of consciousness is characteristic of the novel generally and the experimental novel particularly.⁵ This dissertation will show that the dialogue novel does indeed limit itself to the outward material of life to explicitly critique Woolf's "spiritual," isolated subjectivity, even as the dialogue novel form explicitly implicates its reader in the construction of textual meaning to extend Woolf's "luminous halo" beyond just what is represented on the page.

Chapter One, "'Good Talk': The Novel at the Awkward Age," uses Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle as a baseline for delineating how communities are formed and maintained through dialogue in Henry James's *The Awkward Age*. James's own novel theory is also invoked to show how that novel's plot allows him to work through some of his concerns for the novel genre at the end of the nineteenth century. As we shall see, James demonstrates how freedom of discourse and mind, which he memorably labels "good talk," requires a compromise between social institutions like the novel itself and *ad hoc* "smart sets." Ultimately, James demonstrates how committed talk cultivates freedom of mind, and how freedom of mind can serve as an impetus for new forms of social commitment.

5. See Leon Edel's *The Modern Psychological Novel* (1955) and Erich Kahler's *The Inward Turn of Narrative* (1973) for studies that elevate the representation of consciousness in the modernist novel as the culmination of narrative fiction.

Chapter Two, “Henry Green and the Dialogue of Desire: ‘Through mishearing, a new level of communication is reached,’” considers Henry Green’s late dialogue novels, *Nothing* (1950) and *Doting* (1952), alongside Green’s 1950s novel theory and René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire. By considering character and readerly desire in the dialogue novel as imitative practices, I will show how the dialogue form uniquely challenges the notion that autonomous, intrinsic desire serves as the engine of action and interpretation. Further, I propose that the dialogue novel stands as what Girard labels the most *romanesque* of genres because its form explicitly reveals how mimetic desire works within both its represented action and the interpretive process of reading.

Chapter Three, “‘Silence has its uses’: Dialogues of Power in I. Compton-Burnett,” offers something of a counter-narrative to the more cooperative vision of dialogue addressed in the first two chapters. Focusing on Ivy Compton-Burnett’s dialogue novels and Aaron Fogel’s theory of “forced dialogue,” I demonstrate how the formal character of fictional dialogue actively constructs, perpetuates, and inscribes institutional and ideological power structures. But this study does not propose that these constrictions are categorically limiting; instead, it argues that dialogue’s constraints can offer liberative structure to the novel form and those who are subject to these strictures.

In the final chapter, “William Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic* and Nicholson Baker’s *Checkpoint*: ‘rescued from uncertainty, raised to the surface,’” I propose a narratological framework for the dialogue novel through Paul Ricoeur’s idea of threefold mimesis and Lubomír Doležel’s possible-worlds theory. This chapter argues that the dialogue novel explicates the dynamic between the configurations of plot and the

refigurations of reading that allows narrative to represent human time. Further, this dialectic establishes narrative as a dialogue between reader and text that opens onto Doležel's possible-worlds theory and its reflection on the dynamic between historical and fictional worlds. Ultimately, this chapter allows us to see how the dialogue novel presents an ideal form for examining the complex intersection of formal texture and history, as well as the dialectic between narrative configuration and human time.

This project undertakes what might be considered a formally-minded recovery project. While most recovery projects address works that have been silenced because of ideological, socio-political, or historical objections to their content, the dialogue novel has been ignored because our field hasn't clearly theorized how we should talk about represented talk. My dissertation, therefore, considers how dialogue, as both form and concept, uniquely structures our ability to represent and engage with issues like community, desire, violence, and the relationship between narrative and time. Further, I believe that the object lesson of the dialogue novel reveals how much we overlook the work of dialogue in more typical narratives. Ultimately, I hope that by directing attention to the dialogue novel, we can better understand the complexities of dialogue in all fictional narratives and see that formal criticism still has much fresh ground to talk about.

CHAPTER ONE

“GOOD TALK”: THE NOVEL AT THE AWKWARD AGE

This study of the dialogue novel begins with the one author whose canonicity is not in question, and whose dialogue novel most explicitly addresses the question of what constitutes appropriate talk for the novel genre. Henry James’s *The Awkward Age* (1899) considers the connection between forms of talk and the foundations of community, and it thus serves as a perfect entry point for our consideration of what a recovered dialogue novel can offer to the community of readers today.

Henry James’s Preface to the New York Edition of *The Awkward Age* has probably had as much influence over how contemporary readers and critics approach the novel as the text of the novel itself. One of this Preface’s most famous claims insists that the novel “helps us ever so happily to see the grave distinction between substance and form in a really wrought work of art signally break down.”¹ The happy union of form and content in the novel obviously developed from James’s decision to write a novel about talk almost exclusively in dialogue. And while most critics draw attention to the nonstandard—particularly for James—dialogue form, these discussions tend to center on James’s theorization of the “scenic mode” and his (occasionally compromised) pledge to avoid narrating a character’s interior thoughts and feeling through an act of “going behind.”² For James, the scenic mode is contrasted with the pictorial mode, which

1. James, “Preface to *The Awkward Age*,” 115.

2. *Ibid.*, 111.

provides a more distanced, reflective perspective on events in a novel.³ *The Awkward Age*'s reliance on the scenic mode has led some critics to debate the accuracy of James's statement that the novel approximates "the successive Acts of a Play" and the "guarded objectivity" of dramatic form by the imposed absence of that "going behind."⁴ But reading the novel as a triumph of scenic method and the necessary and justified outcome of James's 1890s struggle to write for the theater tends to simplify James's awkward appropriation of the dialogue-novel form, which had a significant vogue during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

While the Preface has had the greatest role in framing *The Awkward Age*, James's essay "The Future of the Novel," which was published during the same year as *The Awkward Age*, provides a clearer window onto that novel's preoccupations and interests. The 1899 essay proclaims that "the future of fiction is intimately bound up with the future of the society that produces and consumes it."⁵ According to James, fiction must keep pace with the astonishing social transformations facing England in the 1890s—change exemplified by "the revolution taking place in the position and outlook of women"—if it is to remain relevant for the new century.⁶ In "The Future of the Novel," James argues that the Anglo-American novel has likewise imposed "morally well-meant"

3. The classic example of the pictorial mode is Isabel Archer's fireside meditative vigil in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In the Preface to that novel, James describes the scene as "obviously the best thing in the book"; "it all goes on without her being approached by another person and without her leaving her chair." 57.

4. James, "Preface to *The Awkward Age*," 110-11.

5. James, "The Future of the Novel," 106.

6. *Ibid.*, 109.

and “intellectually helpless” compromises upon itself and its potential development by ignoring certain subject matter—namely sex, or what James famously called “an immense omission in our fiction.”⁷ While James still believes the omission of “love-making” in the works of Dickens and Scott is eminently preferable for them, he fears that the novel’s future relevance is endangered precisely by these well-meaning omissions and constraints.⁸ He describes the novel at the turn of the century as too complacent, “settled down into [its] way of doing” and neglectful of “too many sources of interest.” For James, this conservative tendency of the novel may ultimately render it without interest and therefore limit its influence. He goes on to imply that a simplified novel might lack interest for future generations. Or, as he says, “The simple themselves may finally turn against our simplifications.”⁹

Despite the popularity of novels and plays obsessed with talk, James’s *The Awkward Age* was panned by critics largely because it did not satisfy the reading public’s

7. Ibid., 108.

8. James writes, “I cannot so much as imagine Dickens and Scott *without* the ‘love-making’ left, as the phrase is, out.” Ibid., 108.

9. Ibid., 109. For James, the novel has the advantage of being “the most comprehensive and the most elastic” way for people to acquire experience “as cheaply as possible.” But it is this insatiable hunger for experience that has led to what James identifies as another aspect of modern society: “the demoralization, the vulgarisation of literature in general, the increasing familiarity of all such methods of communication.” Indeed James argues that the novel’s status as “the book *par excellence*” and its mass production according to rules and formulas that seek to satisfy the innate hunger for vicarious experience (that is, for *story*) endangers the novel’s ability to serve as the most elastic means of conveying experience to readers. In fact James’s use of the term “vulgarization” does not refer exclusively to lowbrow subject matter or a poor command over the technical aspects of fiction; it also to the public’s general unwillingness to make the novel a continuous experiment.

expectations for dialogue novels, which tended to rely on comedy and offer a satisfactory resolution. A critic from the *Pall Mall Gazette* found James's novel a conflict between irritation and attraction, with irritation "winning the rubber decisively."¹⁰ A critic for the *Saturday Review* accuses James of incivility and inaccurate caricature, warning that "Mr. James will imperil his vogue if he is not careful."¹¹ James's contemporaries were right to point out the awkwardness of James's 1890s novels, because, as David McWhirter has argued, these novels were engaged with refiguring realism toward "an awareness that we can know anterior reality only through the representational technologies that both restrict and construct whatever view of life we have."¹² Within the complete arc of James's career, however, this reformulation of realism has largely been received as necessary fodder for his twentieth-century masterpieces: *The Ambassadors* (1902), *The Wings of the Dove* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Among the influential designations for this period are Leon Edel's "the treacherous years" and F.W. Dupee's "the awkward period," both of which seem to situate the 1890s as an extended adolescence. The tendency to define the period as an anxious transition between realist mastery and modernist prophecy has compromised a more complete appreciation of James's 1890s novels. Indeed, while I do not want to abandon the productive implications of seeing this period as the adolescence of a fully-modernist James, I would like to argue that *The Awkward*

10. "Mr. Henry James Exasperates," 318.

11. Review of the *Awkward Age*, 322.

12. McWhirter, "'Saying the Unsayable': James's Realism in the Late 1890s," 240.

Age figures this in-betweenness as an essential component of novelistic discourse and as a metaphor for the socially engaged novel.

Although recent studies have done valuable work on the novel's grappling with social issues like the status of women and consumer culture, it still feels awkward to treat *The Awkward Age* as socially engaged because the novel remains emphatically, even willfully, obscure.¹³ Among critics who have successfully mined this obscurity, Tzvetan Todorov argues that the novel can best be read as a pure linguistic surface, Michael Trask traces the obscurity of the book to James's efforts to suppress its queer subtext, and J. Hillis Miller's proposes that Vanderbank's decision not to marry Nanda remains undecideable.¹⁴ Despite the strengths of these readings, they ignore the fact that James seemed disheartened when his contemporary readers responded to *The Awkward Age* with confusion. In a restless midnight letter to Etta Reubell dated November 12, 1899, James complains that the "ingenious volume appears to have excited little *but* bewilderment.... A work of art that one has to *explain* fails...of its mission."¹⁵ But if James considered inscrutability a failure, we must ask why he so clearly cancelled the expectations for 1890s dialogue novel with *The Awkward Age*. Ultimately, *The Awkward Age* does its social work by turning a largely frivolous genre into a meditation on how talk—and by extension, the novel—determines community and how community enables

13. See Bilson, Mendelssohn, and Tintner for recent critical works dealing with issues of gender and consumer culture.

14. See Todorov's "The Verbal Age," Trask's, "Getting Into it With James: Substitution and Erotic Reveal in *The Awkward Age*," and Miller's, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James*.

15. James to Henrietta Reubell, 328-29.

talk. It does this by implicitly recasting the argument of James's 1899 essay, "The Future of the Novel" onto its question of how to bring a young woman (or a young genre) to her maturity. Using Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle as an ideal cooperative language situation, this chapter will argue that, through dialogue, *The Awkward Age* constructs two distinct communities—Mr. Longdon's long done commitments and Van's social smart set—to demonstrate how and where distinctions between movement and stasis, knowledge and inexperience, maturity and youthfulness, and sincerity and play break down to reveal how a community founded on speaking awkwardly can keep the novel relevant to its times.

The Awkward Age develops these issues through the crisis of eighteen year-old Nanda Brookenham's introduction to the salacious "Good talk" of her mother's (Mrs. Brook's) London set. Nanda's presence as an unmarried girl privy to the "downstairs" talk of infidelities, possible homosexual activity, racy French novels, and other late-Victorian unspeakables constitutes the crisis and "prime propulsive force" of the novel.¹⁶ James's Preface defines this compromising predicament as a uniquely English situation. According to James, while the French cloister unmarried girls upstairs and Americans limit their talk to G-rated inanities, the English allow unmarried girls into the drawing room where inappropriate talk must be curbed *ad hoc* to avoid corrupting the young women.¹⁷ James describes this arrangement as "the so morally well-meant and so intellectually helpless compromise" because the attempt to preserve youthful

16. James, "Preface to *The Awkward Age*," 100.

17. *Ibid.*, 107.

inexperience condemns “the freedom of the circle to be self-conscious, compunctious, on the whole much more timid than brave.”¹⁸ Despite the compromises made on Nanda’s behalf, Nanda attains and exposes her inappropriate knowledge, thereby giving the dashing Mr. Vanderbank a gentlemanly excuse not to marry her at the novel’s conclusion. Even though Nanda’s traditional marriage plot is disrupted, the novel closes with two significant but distinct commitments: Nanda’s commitment to the elderly Mr. Longdon, a figure of past days who is literally “long done” and defined by his unshakeable commitment to Nanda’s late grandmother, Lady Julia; and Vanderbank’s promise to remain faithful to Mrs. Brookenham (who also loves him) and her commitment to “Good talk,” which is characterized by freedom of discourse and mind.¹⁹

Nanda’s “compromised” exposure in the drawing room is juxtaposed to the upbringing of Little Aggie, the representative of the cloistered, “French” approach. Although Aggie realizes a classical marriage-plot closure by marrying Mitchy, the wealthy but peculiar and unattractive member of Mrs. Brook’s set, this union is anything but successful as Aggie quickly finds herself in a scandalous imbroglio with Mitchy’s close friend Lord Petherton, and Mitchy finds himself regretting that he did not instead marry Nanda, the girl he has always preferred. The novel suggests that Aggie’s cloistering is at least partly responsible for her reckless behavior, as Nanda’s brother, Harold, says of Aggie’s cavorting, “Well, she *has* gone at a pace—But then don’t they always—I mean when they’re like Aggie and they once get loose—go at a pace?”

18. Ibid., 105.

19. James, *The Awkward Age*, 170.

Despite Harold's cutting observation, Aggie's guardian, the Duchess, maintains that this pace is appropriate when she responds, "I married her... exactly that she *should* come out, and I should be mightily ashamed of every one concerned if she hadn't. I didn't marry her, I give you to believe, that she should stay 'in.'"²⁰ For the Duchess, the mental and physical event follows naturally from the social framework of marriage. But both *The Awkward Age* and "The Future of the Novel" seem to propose that society would ideally follow the internal revolution, rather than the other way around. This dispute rhymes interestingly with how different approaches to talk in *The Awkward Age* also mediate this "coming out." For example, Longdon's probing manner and inclination toward clarity find him seeking a committed, cooperative social structure with, and for, Nanda, as she reveals herself to be the other character in the novel who can realize and benefit from such a commitment. In contrast, Van's commitment to free and unfettered "Good talk" finds him refusing to tie himself to any formal relationship (such as marrying Nanda) that might conceivably limit his future freedoms.

Given the unexpected, awkward consequences of Aggie's "French" upbringing, James's comments about the influence of the French *roman dialogue*—represented by the "charming, philosophic 'Gyp'" and Henri Lavedan—virtually begs for an ironic reading.²¹ James simultaneously encourages and discourages this when he playfully claims that he "seriously—ah so seriously!—emulate[d] the levity of Gyp."²² But the

20. Ibid., 248.

21. James, "Preface to *The Awkward Age*," 106.

22. Ibid., 107.

influence of these authors should not be taken too lightly, because the plot of *The Awkward Age* echoes the plots of Gyp's *La Mariage de Chiffon* (1894) and *Autour du Mariage* (1895), and Lavedan's *Les Petites Visites* (1896).²³ More importantly for this study, however, James's strategic citation of these French authors in the Preface diverts attention from the English tradition of the dialogue novel and the lessons James learned from his direct competition. In fact, singling out Gyp and Lavedan follows James's career-long tendency to situate his writing within a very particular, and very particularly French, novelistic community.²⁴ Interestingly, by ignoring the community of English dialogue novelists, James's Preface reveals an allegiance to old-world standards that have "a certain extraordinary benightedness on the part of the Anglo-Saxon reader" (similar to the novel's Longdon), even as it goes on to mythologize how he arrived at the subject and form of *The Awkward Age* through his commitment to the genre's absolute freedom (à la the novel's Vanderbank).

We know that James had read and largely disapproved of the dialogue in E. F. Benson's immensely popular *Dodo: A Detail of the Day* (1893) because Benson quotes a critical letter from James in his autobiography, *Our Family Affairs: 1867-1896*.²⁵ In many respects, *The Awkward Age* seems to revise Benson's earlier *Dodo*. Both feature a

23. Tintner, *The Cosmopolitan World of Henry James*, 146-47.

24. A vivid example of James's efforts to align himself with a continental novelistic tradition can be found in "The Lesson of Balzac" (1905). For a detailed discussion how James adopted the language of the visual arts to situate his career within a literary tradition, see "Henry James: Tradition and the Work of Writing," in Brodhead's *The School of Hawthorne*.

25. Owen, "The Awkward Age and the Contemporary English Scene," 64.

modern “smart set” known for Good talk and scandalous behavior. Both revolve around the talents of a brilliant woman, Mrs. Brook in *The Awkward Age* and Dorothea (Dodo) Vane in *Dodo*. Both plots concern the courtship by several men of one remarkable young woman: Nanda in *The Awkward Age* and Dodo again in *Dodo*. Both novels present the marriageable girl clearly favoring a suitor who is dashing, witty, and “emphatically ‘London’”: Van in *The Awkward Age* and Jack Broxton in *Dodo*. And both conclude with the marriageable young woman abandoning the “smart set” for a rather surprising life partner, the elderly Mr. Longdon in *The Awkward Age* and the supremely bizarre Prince Waldenech in *Dodo*.

It is likely that James also read other English-language dialogue novels by friends—like F. Anstey’s *Lyre and Lancet: A Story in Scenes* (1895) and Violet Hunt’s *The Maiden’s Progress: A Novel in Dialogue* (1894) and *A Hard Woman: A Story in Scenes* (1895)—and that he would be at least passingly familiar with Anthony Hope’s colossal bestseller, *The Dolly Dialogues* (1894). Someone as well-read as James could certainly have encountered *fin-de-siècle* philosophical dialogues by Oscar Wilde and Vernon Lee, as well as John Oliver Hobbes’s (Pearl Mary Theresa Richard Craigie’s) remarkable *Some Emotions and a Moral* (1891). And James probably read some of the numerous instances of dialogue fiction published in Oscar Wilde’s magazine *Woman’s World* and *Chapman’s Magazine of Fiction*, which published James’s own “The Way It Came” (1896). The editor of *Chapman’s*, Oswald Crawford was a dialogue novelist himself and issued the clearest indication of what the English reading public could expect

from most dialogue fictions in his introductory remarks to his collection, *Dialogues of the Day*:

Our prospectus asked for a very short story which was to be told in dialogue, virtually a very short play, which should be without the drawback of technical stage directions, which should do without narrative, description, or reflection from the author, and should possess an attractive setting for the due development of character and incident, embroidered upon a ground of true comedy, and a final satisfactory culmination and solution.²⁶

While some stories in *Dialogues of the Day* do not abide fully by these dictums, generic expectations for dialogue fiction were defined clearly enough that James could lament the English public's insatiable but uncritical appetite for the form. In the Preface to *The Awkward Age*, James adopts the voice of an uncritical reading public when he writes, "We can't have too much of it, we can't have enough of it, and no excess of it, in the form of no matter what savourless dilution, or what boneless dispersion, ever began to injure a book so much as even the very scantest claim put in for form and substance."²⁷ Clearly, James disapproved of this attitude and viewed *The Awkward Age* as a possible correction for it.

One way that *The Awkward Age* attempted this correction was through its almost complete eschewal of epigram. Epigram became a defining characteristic of the dialogue

26. Crawford, *Dialogues of the Day*, iv. Crawford, who has been largely forgotten by literary history, was a gifted editor but a rather less skillful writer. As editor for *Chapman's*, he serialized Violet Hunt's *A Hard Woman* alongside skillful dialogue fictions by Anthony Hope ("Bad Matches"), Stanley Weyman ("For the Cause"), and Joseph Strange (the dystopian "The Newer Woman"). His 1895 short fiction anthology *Dialogues of the Day* also published works by many of these same authors alongside his own, "An Election Idyl," a ridiculous tale in which one Captain Drender turns the pretext of canvassing for votes into a successful marriage proposal.

27. James, "Preface to *The Awkward Age*, 106.

novel during the 1890s because the most popular examples of this form, including *Dodo*, *The Dolly Dialogues* (1894), and Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler's *Concerning Isabel Carnaby* (1898), were noted for their skillful use of epigram.²⁸ As much as James hoped that *The Awkward Age* would succeed in the marketplace, he did not bow to market convention and construct it as an epigrammatic text. I suggest that James found the crowd-pleasing epigram insufficient to his project because the epigram tends to answer itself and close off other interlocutors while *The Awkward Age* focuses on dialogue as a communal, social activity. This opposition is made brilliantly clear when one of *The Awkward Age*'s characters is fined five pounds for stating a "cheap paradox": "[M]y moral beauty...is precisely my curse. What on earth—is left for a man just rotten with goodness? It renders necessary the kind of liking that renders unnecessary anything else."²⁹ By eschewing such talk, James places greater emphasis on the system of conversation rather than individual utterances; or, as we shall see, it reveals that James is more interested in what Paul Grice calls conversational implicature (which emerges from the system of a dialogue) than conventional implicature (which emerges indirectly from the actual words of an utterance).

28. While Fowler's novel features more traditional narration than other dialogue novels discussed in this chapter, her dialogue was considered her true selling point. A review of *Isabel Carnaby* in the *London Speaker* reads, "Epigram, paradox, anecdote—in short, all the weapons in the born conversationalist's armory—appear in this entertaining novel in the highest polish, and the dialogues alone would make the fortune of the story." Later, G.K. Chesterton would discuss *Isabel Carnaby* novel alongside other epigrammatic dialogue novels in "On Smart Novelists and the Smart Set" in *Heretics*, thereby demonstrating that epigrammatic novels, even if they weren't predominantly constructed of dialogue, would often be considered part of the *fin-de-siècle* dialogue-novel genre.

29. James, *The Awkward Age*, 183.

By privileging the interplay of speakers over the dazzle of any singular *bon mot*, James demonstrates his commitment to exploring the interrelation of talk and community. Somewhat surprisingly, one of the central discourse communities in the novel, Mrs. Brook's set, is notable for its insularity and inscrutability for those outside the set. As Todorov's "The Verbal Age" points out, Mr. Longdon's initial status as an external observer to the plotting of Mrs. Brook's set places him in a position analogous to that of the reader, and his frequent request for clarifications of the characters and circumstances of a particular conversation provides a convenient mechanism for orienting the reader to the action. He also becomes an active plotter after adopting the Duchess's scheme to put up Nanda's dowry, thereby improving her appeal as a marriage partner, particularly for the relatively impoverished Vanderbank. Indeed, Longdon's plot has destabilizing potential precisely because he is opposed to the radical freedom of their talk and is aligned with more committed, settled relations like friendship. In contrast, Vanderbank stands dedicated to charming, absolute, and merciless freedom—the type of freedom that James consistently aligns with the novel genre.

Thus, it is appropriate that *The Awkward Age* begins with its focus on only two characters—the charismatic Vanderbank (whose unwillingness to marry Nanda at the end of the novel marks him as the character least disposed to definitive action of any sort) and Longdon (the member of the ancient set dedicated to commitments and definitive plots)—whose dazzling exchange reveals what both men most highly value. Vanderbank says to Longdon:

“It probably strikes you as the kind of thing we must be constantly doing; it strikes you that, right and left, probably, we keep giving each

other away. Well, I dare say we do. Yes, ‘come to think of it’ as they say in America, we do. But what shall I tell you? Practically we all know it and allow for it, and it’s as broad as it’s long. What’s London life after all? It’s tit for tat!”

“Ah, but what becomes of friendship?” Mr. Longdon earnestly and pleadingly asked...

The young man met his eyes only the more sociably. “Friendship?”

“Friendship,” Mr. Longdon maintained the full value of the word.

“Well,” his companion risked, “I dare say it isn’t in London...; I never have really believed in the existence of friendships in big societies—in great towns and great crowds.”³⁰

Here, Longdon deliberately evokes the “full value” of friendship as a life-long commitment (which in the case of his attachment to Lady Julia extends into the afterlife), while Vanderbank explains that such attachments are simply outmoded. For Vanderbank, marriage plots and other committed resolutions simply don’t fit with modern life. Statements of this type cause Longdon to admit, near the conclusion of Book One, that he is “rather frightened” by the freedom, excessive cleverness, and lowness of the set’s talk and relations.³¹ As Van acutely notes, Longdon views Mrs. Brook’s set as “cold and sarcastic and cynical, without the soft human spot.”³² In the conflict between “the soft human spot” of Mr. Longdon and the morally uncommitted “tit for tat” of London life embraced by Vanderbank, James reveals the conflict between, and the compromise that must be made of, two distinct approaches to plotting and the novel. For James, Longdon and Vanderbank represent two possibilities of the novel form: what

30. Ibid., 28.

31. Ibid., 37.

32. Ibid., 36.

has been and what might be. By placing Nanda between these two figures, James introduces the possibility for compromise.

To theorize this compromise, we must first establish grounds for what might constitute an ideal communicative community. Here, Paul Grice's theory of conversation provides a unique framework for beginning to understand how figures talk in James's novel. Grice, an analytic philosopher at the forefront of ordinary language philosophy during the middle of the twentieth century, adopted everyday conversation as the starting point for his "systematic philosophy of language" that aimed to "determine how any...distinction between language use and meaning is to be drawn, and where lie the limits of its philosophical utility."³³ Grice's key theoretical insight was to identify natural principles that guide the efficient and rational exchange of information by cooperative language users. Grice groups these practices under an overriding "Cooperative Principle," which provides an implicit logic to language and allows utterances to conversationally implicate information that "goes well beyond the information given by the meanings of the sentences uttered, or the propositions they semantically express."³⁴

33. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, 4. Grice took issue with the anti-theoretical trend of much ordinary language philosophy after Wittgenstein, which figured philosophy's role as describing or revealing misunderstandings and misuses of ordinary language expressions that were in clear view. In this conception, the philosopher's role is not to formulate new theories to solve philosophical problems but to expose linguistic conditions that made us think they were problems to begin with. Historically, this purely descriptive function for philosophy can be seen as resulting from a philosophical focus on conceptual necessity and its linguistic expression. Grice maintained this belief in the linguistic explanation of necessity, but he also wanted a more systematic and theoretical approach to language. Grice's disciplinary orientation and interest in conversation as a system for studying meaning resulted in a theory of dialogue that lends itself particularly well to a structurally-minded reading of the dialogue novel.

34. Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, 200.

For Grice, a conversational implicature must be “capable of being worked out” through a procedure Grice describes in “Logic and Conversation”:

To work out that a particular conversational implicature is present, the hearer will rely on the following data: (1) the conventional meanings of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved; (2) the Cooperative Principle and its maxims; (3) the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case.³⁵

It should be immediately apparent that Grice’s theory holds great promise for any study of dialogue fiction because it provides a framework for analyzing character speech, including the degree to which interlocutors actively cooperate with one another (cooperativeness), the amount of history and context these speakers share (familiarity), and the degree to which a conversation produces meaning by direct statement or implicature (directness).

The Cooperative Principle, which Grice claims underlies any practical, purposeful conversation, comprises four categories: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Maxims of Quantity dictate that cooperative language users will not say more or less than is required for the purposes of an exchange; maxims of Quality dictate that cooperative language users will not state something they know to be false or lack evidence for; the sole maxim under the category of Relation requires that speakers keep their statements relevant; and maxims of Manner require speakers to avoid obscurity or ambiguity while remaining brief and orderly. It is important to realize that Grice does not consider his

35. Grice, *Studies in the Ways of Words*, 31. In contrast to conversational implicature, Grice also briefly discusses conventional implicature, in which meaning is present in the words of the utterance itself.

maxims to be absolute guidelines for conversation or a “conduct book” for proper speech.³⁶ Indeed, Grice observes that the maxims are not followed at all times and that interesting things happen when they are “violated” or “flouted.”³⁷ For example, Grice notes that one can deliberately flout the maxims to produce ironic effects. While no character in *The Awkward Age* completely upholds the Cooperative Principle in all of his or her statements, the novel does present two very different approaches to communication and community that Grice might help us better understand. For Longdon, the Cooperative Principle should only be flouted in cases where doing so might preserve the propriety and decorum that stabilizes his ideal of community and tradition (Lady Julia’s set). For Van, the Cooperative Principle should almost always be flouted because his ready-made community (Mrs. Brook’s set) relies upon the self-perpetuation of talk made possible by supposition, digression, and ambiguity. In other words, Longdon’s group represents that set which pursues sincere commitment by largely adhering to the Gricean maxims. On the other hand, Van stands for the group that is sincerely committed to flouting the maxims to perpetuate the “Good talk” and play of mind that determine their community. Thus, Longdon’s relative adherence to the Cooperative Principle reveals through talk his efforts to preserve an old-fashioned community, while Van’s relative

36. Grice’s theory does not attempt to distinguish between verbal and non-verbal context that might produce an implicature; while this might have significant implications for how the Maxims apply to real-world conversations, it is inconsequential for this study of dialogue novels. Second, Grice’s theory overlooks the role culture plays in what constitutes acceptable discourse for a given community. Third, because Grice’s theory attempts to explain how language functions in the real world, it is most useful when analyzing a text that purports to realism.

37. Ibid., 32, 33.

cancellation of the Cooperative Principle reveals his attempt to create a new community through talk.

In *The Awkward Age*, Mrs. Brook's "Good talk," with its enlivening play of mind, rarely adheres to the Cooperative Principle, while Longdon's initial expectations for social interaction (and his hopes for social interaction throughout the novel) maintain the maxims. As the novel proceeds and Longdon struggles to reconcile his principles with non-standard cooperation of Mrs. Brook and her set, one could argue that Longdon's interest in Nanda (and his projection of her grandmother onto her) stems from his belief that she is the character most suited to speaking sense according to Grice's maxims.

It is useful to consider how different characters in *The Awkward Age* maintain or cancel Grice's maxims over the course of the book and how these tendencies shape our judgments of them. Longdon and Nanda adhere fairly strictly to the maxims, so that their surfeit of sincerity marks them as admirable but incompatible with the "tit-for-tat" of contemporary London. In contrast, Mrs. Brook's set *consistently* cancels certain maxims to establish rules and guidelines that govern its talk and found a different type of "cooperative language" community from the one supposed by Grice's maxims. Using terms I proposed earlier, one could classify Mrs. Brook's set as possessing high levels of cooperativeness and familiarity, but low levels of directness. This makes their community rather inscrutable to outsiders like Longdon (and many readers) who approach the text with the expectation that language is oriented toward particular and identifiable ends.

Consider the conversation between Vanderbank and Longdon that opens the novel. After Van offers up a dizzying and delightful dissertation that links London's lack of depth with late nineteenth-century consumer culture, he continues their conversation by saying,

“[Nanda]’s at the age when the whole thing—speaking of her ‘attractions,’ her possible share of good looks—is still to a degree in a fog. But everything depends on it.”

Mr. Longdon had by this time come back to him. “Excuse my asking it again—for you take such jumps: what, once more, do you mean by everything?”

“Why naturally her marrying. Above all her marrying early.”

Mr. Longdon stood before the sofa. “What do you mean by early?”

“Well, we do doubtless get up later than at Beccles [Longdon’s hometown]; but that gives us, you see, shorter days. I mean in a couple of seasons. Soon enough,” Vanderbank developed, “to limit the strain—!”

He was moved to higher gaiety by his friend’s expression.

“What do you mean by the strain?”

“Well, the complication of her being there.”

“Being where?”

“You do put one through!” Vanderbank laughed.³⁸

Longdon’s comic confusion results from Van’s dependence on conversational implicature that assumes initiation to his set to be fully intelligible. From Van’s perspective, his joke about the retarded development of Beccles (which simultaneously violates all four maxims from Longdon’s perspective because it is extraneous, lacking evidence, irrelevant, and obscure) is not mere fun but expected and proper discourse. Vanderbank’s delighted but exasperated laughter at Longdon comes from having his expectations as a London talker and initiated member of Mrs. Brook’s set upended by Mr. Longdon, who simply can’t recognize the rules of the game.

38. James, *The Awkward Age*, 32.

Because dialogue novels do not offer the same window on character interiority, or what James calls “going behind,” that traditional narration provides, a particular character’s motivations must be divined from how he or she interacts with other characters. Grice’s conversational maxims thus become a useful gauge of character development over the course of the novel. Consider, for example, how Nanda’s talk changes from her discussion with Vanderbank in Book Five about her friendship with Mr. Longdon and her last conversation with Van in Book Ten, when Van’s decision not to propose inspires her final commitment to Longdon.

In Book Five, Nanda is torn between the language of London and the language of Longdon; that is, she is caught between the self-perpetuating game of implied meaning that characterizes Van’s talk and the forthrightness offered by Longdon’s community of one. During her talk with Van, both characters endeavor to “bring out” the other on some significant topic without directly discussing it—Vanderbank wants to bring out what Nanda knows about Longdon, and Nanda wants to bring out what Van feels toward her. Her playful admission that she deliberately withholds information shows an increasing allegiance to Van’s Good talk. But Nanda’s willingness to play this game has unintended consequences, so that when she says, “I’m ‘true’,” to implicate the “proper inexperience” that would make her a suitable marriage partner for Van, she must also admit that she fears Van because he values trivial relations over committed community:

“Well,” Nanda replied, “I feel since I’ve known Mr. Longdon that I’ve almost the sort of friend who makes every one else not count.”

....

“Then our long, our happy relations--?”

“They’re just what makes my terror,” she broke in, “particularly abject. Happy relations don’t matter. I always think of you with fear.”

His elbow rested on the back and his hand supported his head. “How awfully curious—if it be true!”

She had been looking away to the sweet English distance, but at this she made a movement. “Oh Mr. Van, I’m ‘true’!”³⁹

Nanda’s perverse desire to commit herself to the man she believes incapable of commitment is yet another manifestation of how she likes to “love in vain.”⁴⁰ While the impossibility of Nanda’s love can be read as the unjust consequence of a gender ideology that presumes female innocence as a requirement for her marriageability, it can also be read as Nanda’s inability to impose a version Longdon’s committed discourse onto the terror of Vanderbank’s unfettered free talk. For Nanda, the combination of these two communities could produce truly “happy relations.” But Nanda anticipates that Van’s commitment to freedom is more likely to make him “monstrous” than marriageable.

Their conversation continues on this subject, as Van says:

“[D]on’t forget that if there’s to be such a monster there’ll also be a future you, proportionately developed, to deal with him.”

She had closed her parasol in the shade and her eyes attached themselves to the small hole she had dug in the ground with its point.

“We shall both have moved, you mean?”

“It’s charming to feel we shall probably have moved together.”

“Ah if moving’s changing,” she returned, “there won’t be much for me in that. I shall never change—I shall be always just the same. The same old mannered modern slangy hack,” she continued quite gravely. “Mr. Longdon has made me feel that.”⁴¹

39. Ibid., 130-31.

40. These are the words Mitchy uses during his final conversation with Nanda to describe her persistent infatuation with Van. When Mitchy asks if she “positively *like[s]* to love in vain,” Nanda answers, simply, “Yes.”

41. Ibid., 132.

What is most interesting about this passage is the discord between Van's belief in limitless self-fashioning and Nanda's fear that her character is essentially determined. What I would like to suggest here is that Van's adaptability and Nanda's set ways are largely dependent on their ways of talk. Van's free talk, with its self-perpetuating cancellations of Gricean maxims, makes his cooperative language community more adaptable, but monstrously unpredictable and uncontrollable. In response, Nanda answers this monstrous instability by inclining toward Longdon's ready-made community of one, whose rigidity threatens to make it obsolete. At this point in the novel, Nanda's fears mirror James's ambivalence about the future of the novel—the comfort of tradition struggles with a potentially monstrous freedom.

Looking toward the end of the novel, Van's charming promise in Book Five that he and Nanda would “move[] together” proves false. By this point in the novel, Nanda's inappropriate knowledge has been exposed at Tishy Grendon's party, Mitchy and Aggie have been married, and Van has been largely missing from the gatherings in Mrs. Brook's parlor. Nanda remains, like Longdon, hopeful that Van might still commit to her while Van remains committed to his freedom. During their final conversation in Book Ten, it quickly becomes clear that Van's presence is a mere formality required by Nanda's written invitation. Upon entering Nanda's room, he prattles aimlessly to the point that James spares his reader (but not poor Nanda) by providing one of the few passages of narrative summary in the novel:

He continued to talk; he took things up and put them down; Nanda sat in her place, where her stillness, fixed and colourless, contrasted with his rather flushed freedom, and appeared only to wait, half in surprise, half in surrender, for the flow of his suggestiveness to run its course, so that,

having herself provoked the occasion, she might do a little more to meet it.⁴²

Van's torrent of talk in this scene cancels the Cooperative Principle and finds the sheer physical quantity of his speech attempting to master Nanda.⁴³ James tells us that "Practically, however, he would let her tell him nothing; his almost aggressive friendly optimism clung so to references of short range." Initially, Van's "flushed freedom" prevents Nanda having occasion to meet his disjointed train of thought. But when she does engage him, she "strikes the right tone" by asking why Van fears her and then expounding at length on why Van should stay true to her mother and that circle's commitment to free talk. Nanda's speech exposes the extent of her conventionally inappropriate knowledge by showing that she can intuit her mother's true, adulterous feelings for Van, even if Van is unaware of their depths. But her appeal is primarily based on her concern that her mother—whom Nanda describes as too "fearfully young"—has become lonely in the wake of Mitchy's marriage and Van's increasingly rare visits. The extraordinary claim of Mrs. Brook's youth imagines her as an individual in her unformed, fragile, and awkward adolescence. While this image figures Mrs. Brook as mired in a condition of stunted development, it also points toward the regenerative capacities of her smart-set's "Good talk." Much as the openness of the novel form that James validates in "The Future of the Novel" allows it to respond to unpredicted societal shifts, the freedom of Good talk allows it to found a new type of community around the

42. Ibid., 283.

43. Aaron Fogel's *Coercion to Speak* discusses the relationship between quantity of speech and physical violence. His theory will be central to Chapter Three on Ivy Compton-Burnett.

cooperative flouting of what traditionally constitutes sincere talk. Just as their talk sustains momentum by habitually flouting Grice's Cooperative Principle through statements notable for being speculative, oblique, and digressive, so the smart set is always in its literal and figurative youth because it is always being (re)born. Van, who is fully implicated in this youthfulness, accuses Nanda of acting like "the modern daughter" out to "make a career for her parents." In response, Nanda explains,

"I don't pretend that's a career for *you* any more than for her; but there it is. I know how I sound—most patronising and pushing; but nothing venture nothing have. You *can't* know how much you are to her. You're more to her, I verily believe, than any one *ever* was. I hate to have the appearance of plotting anything about her behind her back; so I'll just say it once for all. She said once, in speaking of it to a person who repeated it to me, that you had done more for her than any one, because it was you who had really brought her out. It *was*. You did. I saw it at the time myself. I was very small, but I *could* see it. You'll say I must have been a most uncanny little wretch, and I dare say I was and am keeping now the pleasant promise. That doesn't prevent one's feeling that when a person has brought a person out—"

"A person should take the consequences," Vanderbank broke in, "and see a person through?"⁴⁴

While Nanda admits her precocious awareness, she also asks Van to recognize that "Good talk" can "bring one out," and that one should take this responsibility seriously. Remarkably, Nanda reveals herself likewise adept at birthing new communities by reminding Van that free talk exists only insofar as a community, a set, gathers to celebrate it.

It is appropriate that the most serious talk about talk occurs in Book Six, "Mrs. Brook," because she stands at the center of the fashionable London set, holding court at

44. James, *The Awkward Age*, 289-90.

Buckingham Crescent, or what the narrator winkingly calls that “temple of analysis.”⁴⁵

Her wit and conversational virtuosity are admired by all her London set, excepting only the outsider Longdon. For Mrs. Brook, Nanda’s presence in the drawing room is felt as more than a compromising situation of talk: it as a limitation on her mind and self. Mrs. Brook says:

“I happen to be so constituted that my life has something to do with my mind and my mind something to do with my talk. Good talk: you know—no one, dear Van, should know better—what part for me that plays. Therefore when one has deliberately to make one’s talk bad... [S]tupid, flat, fourth-rate. When one has to haul in sail to that degree—and for a perfectly outside reason—there’s nothing strange in one’s taking a friend sometimes into the confidence of one’s irritation.”

“Ah,” Vanderbank protested, “you do yourself injustice. Irritation hasn’t been for you the only consequence of the affair.”

Mrs. Brook gloomily thought. “No, no—I’ve had my calmness: the calmness of deep despair. I’ve seemed to see everything go.”

“Oh how can you say that,” her visitor demanded, “when just what we’ve most been agreed upon so often is the practical impossibility of making any change? Hasn’t it seemed as if we really can’t overcome conversational habits so thoroughly formed?”

Again Mrs. Brook reflected. “As if our way of looking at things were too serious to be trifled with? I don’t know—I think it’s only you who have denied our sacrifices, our compromises and concessions. I myself have constantly felt smothered in them.”⁴⁶

Here, the “delightful” Mrs. Brook chastises Vanderbank for failing to feel the set’s “compromises and concessions” as a smothering sacrifice. For Mrs. Brook, “Good talk” is her life, and she identifies Van as the character most able to appreciate this sentiment. But Van is unable to feel the sacrifice because he believes their conscious attempts to

45. Ibid., 205.

46. Ibid., 170.

“overcome conversational habits” cannot overcome their constitutional bias toward freedom of mind and talk.

Van’s absolute commitment to freedom has its triumph somewhat later in Book Six, when Mrs. Brook, Van, and Mitchy openly discuss the prospects of Van accepting Mr. Longdon’s “bribe” to marry Nanda. This exchange is yet another compromising situation because Mrs. Brook reveals Mr. Longdon’s plot to Mitchy in Van’s presence, thereby giving Van away in the manner typical of London talk. Uncharacteristically silent through much of this exchange, the “detached” Vanderbank finally speaks up to direct conversation from the marriage plot to the topic of conversation itself. Vanderbank proclaims, “What *is* splendid is this extraordinary freedom and good humour of our intercourse and the fact that we do care—so independently of our personal interests, with so little selfishness or other vulgarity—to get at the idea of things.”⁴⁷ What “things” are to be got at or how the “idea” of these things is distinct from the things in themselves is both unknown and inconsequential for Van, because his idea has yet to complete itself. Van humorously asserts his freedom from the set’s probing inquiries by identifying their capacity for probing depths with its freedom. This move might seem like mere sophistry if not for the fact that Vanderbank’s evasion momentarily unites freedom, disinterested “self-consciousness,” and sincere intercourse to reveal the potential of talk for both the set and the novel form.

Van’s position emerges, appropriately, not from logical advancement of the argument on his part but from Mrs. Brook’s later claim for the group’s sincerity, which

47. *Ibid.*, 179.

she forwards in response to Van's scolding her for revealing Longdon's plot to Mitchy. Mrs. Brook states, "If the principle effort of our living together is—and quite according to your own eloquence—in our sincerity, I simply obeyed the impulse to do the sincere thing. If we're not sincere, we're nothing."⁴⁸ And when Mitchy and Van immediately pledge their sincerity, the effect is comically sincere. Indeed this scene might still seem mere talk without consequence, if not for the fact that the mutual sincerity of their set allows Van to finally "complete his idea" about the relation between freedom of intercourse and getting to the bottom of things:

"Yes, we *are* sincere," Vanderbank presently said. "It's a great chance for us not to fall below ourselves; no doubt therefore we shall continue to soar and sing. We pay for it, people who don't like us say, in our self-consciousness—"

"But people who don't like us," Mitchy broke in, "don't matter. Besides, how can we be properly conscious of each other—?"

"That's it!"—Vanderbank completed his idea: "without my finding myself, for instance, in you and Mrs. Brook? We see ourselves reflected—we're conscious of the charming whole. I thank you," he pursued after an instant to Mrs. Brook—"I thank you for your sincerity."⁴⁹

Van recognizes that "self-consciousness" is dependent upon "the charming whole," more particularly that the self is both enabled and obscured by one's relation to others and the discourse that structures those relations.

Van's revelation reminds the reader why James's commitment to presenting the novel's action as dialogue with little "going behind" is not a mere technical stunt, but the most appropriate formal mode for representing the contingent relations that construct and constrict the modern subject. While James argues the absolute freedom of the novel

48. *Ibid.*, 180.

49. *Ibid.*

throughout his novel theory, he also argues that the novelist must be capable of the competing claims of sincerity and wonder. For James, sincerity is the capacity to represent one's point of view authentically, while wonder relates to a capacity for disinterested appreciation of a subject. As Dorothy Hale elegantly argues:

In the Prefaces, it seems, James outlines two competing ideals of novelistic authorship: on the one hand, the successful novelist is the one who most transparently expresses his unique "impression" of life; on the other hand, the successful novelist is the one who does not allow his views to prevent life from making its "impression" on him. In the first case, the novelist is best when he projects his views; in the second, when he refuses to project them.⁵⁰

For James, sincerity without wonder, or wonder without sincerity is a wasted effort. It's important that Van can only complete his "idea" after Mitchy mentions the "proper consciousness of each other" because this exchange shows how free talk can bring together James's "competing ideals of novelistic authorship." The fact that the group arrives at the pledge of sincerity—and the subsequent (though momentary) claims for naturalness and simplicity—not through attention to Mr. Longdon's plot for Nanda but through Vanderbank's deliberate avoidance of plot shows how James refigures uncommitted free talk as grounds for meaningful action in the novel.⁵¹ But mere talk, "without the excuse of passion," remains capable of producing irresponsible relations as well. This is emphasized near the end of this section, where Mrs. Brook chastises Van and Mitchy for speaking too freely around Nanda, even as she disavows her

50. Hale, *Social Formalism*, 27.

51. James, *The Awkward Age*, 180.

responsibility by stating that “after all it has been mere *talk!*”⁵² Van’s reply, by hinting toward the earlier pledge of sincerity while deflecting responsibility for Nanda’s corruption, reveals both the value and the danger in the uncommitted mere talk and the absolute freedom of the novel: “But perhaps it’s exactly the ‘mere’ that has made us range so wide.”⁵³ For Mrs. Brook’s set, the breadth of their passionless talk leads to sincere relations, but the monstrousness that had threatened sincere relations between Nanda and Van lies in wait.

James himself, as “The Future of the Novel” implies, is not entirely certain that such range will best see the novel form to its maturity. Indeed, the resolution of *The Awkward Age* finds Nanda rejecting both Van and Mitchy in order to become Mr. Longdon’s lifelong particular companion. By placing Nanda in the custody of the character who champions definitive, lasting commitments, the conclusion positions the once awkward girl in a resolved union, albeit not with the person she wanted and not in the satisfactory marriage plot of the nineteenth-century novel. But it’s not a wholly pessimistic or conservative ending. Indeed, the relationship between Mr. Longdon and Nanda seems almost a mutual adoption, in which each is both caretaker and child. It is also interesting to note that the contract between Longdon and Nanda depends upon the old man taking her “as she is” and not as a flawed reincarnation of Lady Julia, or as the rejected remains of his flawed plot to marry her to Vanderbank. While negotiating whether or not she will live with him at Beccles, their conversation hints toward a space

52. *Ibid.*, 186.

53. *Ibid.*

for open and free talk that is different from what is practiced by Mrs. Brook and her circle:

[Nanda says,] “You’ve admitted as much when we’ve talked—”
“Oh but when *have* we talked?” he sharply interrupted.

...

She hesitated. “When *haven’t* we?”

“Well, *you* may have: if that’s what you call talking—never saying a word. But I haven’t. I’ve only to do at any rate, in the way of reasons, with my own.”

“And yours too then remain? Because, you know,” the girl pursued, “I *am* like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like what he thinks.” Then so gravely that it was almost a supplication, “Don’t tell me,” she added, “that you don’t *know* what he thinks. You do know.”

Their eyes, on that strange ground, could meet at last, and the effect of it was presently for Mr. Longdon. “I do know.”

“Well?”

“Well!” He raised his hands and took her face, which he drew so close to his own that, as she gently let him, he could kiss her with solemnity on the forehead. “Come!” he then very firmly said—quite indeed as if it were a question of their moving on the spot.⁵⁴

In this passage, talk is expanded to include both words exchanged and implied meanings brought about by mutual understanding. Even though Nanda might sit “never saying a word,” she felt herself in communion with Longdon, to the point that she now gives voice to the understood but never before spoken fact that she possesses certain sexual knowledge—that she is, in other words, “like that.” Like Nanda, the novel is also “like that.” That is, the novel possesses certain sexual knowledge that only a mutually adoptive relationship between tradition and the modern can bring out. But this final discussion about what constitutes appropriate talk in a novel that is ostensibly about what constitutes appropriate talk finds the idea expanded into a non-verbal dimension as well,

54. Ibid., 310.

as Longdon's final invitation to and acceptance of her is marked with a kiss, as is Nanda's affirmative response to him. This talk distinguishes itself from the free talk of Mrs. Brook's set because their free talk achieves sincerity and community only momentarily through the sacrifice of individuality, rather than through an individual's sacrifice.

Nanda's sacrifice, of course, involves her demand that Vanderbank swear to not give up Mrs. Brook. By preserving this relationship, Nanda reveals that she is both experienced enough to recognize her mother's extramarital desires and mature enough to preserve them. In this instance, as in her relation with Mr. Longdon, Nanda assumes a parental status. Nanda's parental status is felt throughout the book as, even early in the novel, Mrs. Brook describes her habit of removing herself when talk becomes unsavory as both "quite maternal" and indicative of "the modern daughter."⁵⁵ Now at the end of the novel, Nanda's unmarried and unmarriageable condition and her nurturing attitude toward her mother and Mr. Longdon likewise both seem maternal and modern. Because Nanda's modern circumstances compromise her character, she must strike a compromise between committed relations and freedom of talk and mind. Likewise in *The Awkward Age*, Henry James presents the novel in its awkward adolescence but demonstrates how the novel can do justice to both its past and its future only by leaving equal space for flirtation and commitment, for freedom and sacrifice, and for free talk and meaningful words.

55. Ibid., 106.

CHAPTER TWO

HENRY GREEN AND THE DIALOGUE OF DESIRE: “THROUGH MISHEARING, A NEW LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION IS REACHED”

While Henry James used the dialogue novel to dramatize his concerns for the novel genre at the *fin de siècle*, another Henry—Henry Green, born Henry Yorke—considered dialogue to be *the* fictional mode best suited to reaching mid-twentieth-century readers who were increasingly trained on radio and other new forms of media. Though it would be inaccurate to claim that Green hoped to mimic the effects of radio for his audience, his attention to how readers interacted with fiction opens this project onto the new topic of how fictional dialogue shapes and is shaped by what readers desire from the text.

Green (1905-73) published nine novels and one memoir over the course of his foreshortened career. Although several of his friends and classmates were precious literary talents—Evelyn Waugh, Cyril Connolly, and George Orwell among them—Green was the first of this set into print, publishing his first novel, *Blindness*, when he was just twenty years old. Just three years after *Blindness*, Green’s talent was affirmed with his second novel, *Living*, which Michael North has since called “the earliest and finest proletarian novel of [its] period.”¹ His subsequent works, which include masterpieces like *Party Going* (1939), *Loving* (1945) and *Concluding* (1948), mark Green as one of the great talents of twentieth-century English fiction. Green’s last two

1. North, *Henry Green and the Writing of His Generation*, 1.

novels, *Nothing* (1950) and *Doting* (1952), are typically discussed together not simply because they were the only novels Green published during the 1950s, or because they both share a deceptively light tone and dramatize what Keith Odom has called a “sexual merry-go-round” of a rather homogeneous multi-generational cast of characters in post-war England.² They are typically grouped because they are both written almost entirely in dialogue. Though dialogue plays an important role in Green’s earlier novels and Green’s keen ear for speech was justly praised, it is not until these final novels that dialogue becomes his dominant fictional resource. Edward Stokes’s *The Novels of Henry Green* (1959) does the tedious work of calculating that 94% of each novel is composed of direct scenic dialogue.³ Obviously, the sheer prevalence of dialogue in these novels means that they forgo many of the complexities and pleasures offered by narrative prose: such as passages that grant direct access to characters’ minds and thoughts, passages of pure description, or passages that represent time as more than a simple sequence of events or phrases.

Critics have tended to argue that Green’s rigid adherence to the dialogue form in *Nothing* and *Doting* produced rather minor novels that were accomplished only in their own perversely limited ways. Writing in 1959 from the assumption that the then 54-year-old Green would publish again, Edward Stokes “hopes...that Green will not continue to deny himself most of the varied technical resources of the novel.”⁴ Unfortunately,

2. Odom, *Henry Green*, 125.

3. Stokes, *The Novels of Henry Green*, 75.

4. *Ibid.*, 22.

Stokes's wish was not fulfilled, as Green spent most of his remaining twenty-one years drinking heavily and creatively stymied. Writing in 1982, nine years after Green's death, Rod Mengham argues that Green's dialogue novels simply rehash and trivialize material from his earlier works, a process that is precipitated by the limitations of Green's scenic method.⁵ And Oddvar Holmesland encapsulates much of the criticism directed toward these novels when he says, "*Nothing* and *Doting* fail to attain 'a life of their own' because they lack, unlike most of Green's other novels, the dynamic interaction of stasis and dynamism; order and disorder; prose and poetry; tragedy and comedy: the dynamic vitality of montage."⁶ This insistence on dynamism is interesting, particularly when we consider Green's novel theory.

The argument that the novels fail to attain a "life of their own" clearly evokes Green's essays on the novel written during the months after *Nothing* was published. This novel theory comprises "The English Novel of the Future," an essay Green published in the English little magazine *Contact*, two talks on the craft of the novel that were broadcast by the BBC and then published in *The Listener*, and various essays and reviews that Green wrote during the early 1950s.⁷ In the first of his BBC talks in November 1950, "A Novelist to His Readers: Communication without Words," Green says that the aim of the novelist is "to create a life which is not. That is to say, a life which does not eat, procreate, or drink, but which can live in people who are alive." Green goes on to

5. Mengham, *The Idiom of His Time: The Writings of Henry Green*, 210.

6. Holmesland, *A Critical Introduction to Henry Green's Novels*, 215.

7. These texts were later collected in *Surviving: The Uncollected Writings of Henry Green*, edited by his grandson Matthew Yorke.

argue that the best way to create this life in the reader is “Of course, by dialogue.”⁸ Indeed, Green argues, “dialogue should not be capable of only *one meaning*.” Its inherent ambiguity creates life in readers by “quicken[ing] their unconscious imagination.”⁹ Further, in properly constructed dialogue, authorial intent may become secondary to how a particular reader interprets the action of a particular scene. Green seems to indicate that similarly intelligent readers can arrive at different, yet equally valid, interpretations of a scene, an exchange, or even a single character utterance when he writes, “To create life in the reader, it will be necessary for the dialogue to mean different things to different readers at one and the same time.”¹⁰ And the many shades of meaning implicit in a line of dialogue not only give life to the reader, they also give life to characters because dialogue allows characters to mean several things at the same time, even if some of these meanings might be unconscious for the character or the author.

Although critics like Holmesland lament the lack of dynamism in Green’s novels, such criticism ignores the dynamic that is central to Green’s novel theory and his final

8. Green, “A Novelist to His Readers: I,” 136, 137. Yet, despite his seeming focus on dialogue as a narrative resource, Green goes on to argue that in life we learn to judge people’s character by watching how an individual behaves after she has spoken. Much like Henry James’s argument in “The Art of Fiction” that distinctions between character and action are false and distorting, Henry Green argues that talk and action cannot be separated if we are to gain an accurate account of character.

9. *Ibid.*, 140.

10. *Ibid.* This assertion has led critics to protest that Green’s last two novels stoop to “the lowest common denominator of shared knowledge.” But it seems to me that just as Green applied modernist technique to the proletarian novel in *Living* (1929), his theory of the dialogue novel proposes formal experimentation in order to reorient toward a mass audience the novel that can “create life” to better compete with new forms of media. The fact that two of his most direct manifestos about the dialogue novel were broadcast to a mass BBC audience underscores this supposition.

two novels: the dynamic between text and reader, subject and desire. This chapter will argue that Henry Green's dialogue novels, *Nothing* and *Doting*, repeatedly demonstrate the folly of imagining any subject or text as an autonomous, self-regulating entity. Instead these novels propose that we conceive both subjects and texts as dynamic, social entities. Working through the lens of René Girard's theory of mimetic, or triangular, desire, I will argue that Green positions the actions of his characters, as well as a reader's interpretations of them, as activities rooted *between* rather than *within* objects. Ultimately, Green's novels and his novel theory demonstrate how the dialogue novel form implicates the reader in an instance of triangular desire, in which the reader's efforts at interpretation are mediated by his or her projected expectations of an absent narrator.

Green's novel theory occupies a curious place within the history of twentieth-century literature. The interpretive theory presented in Green's 1950s radio talks has remarkable similarities with several reader-focused theories of literature that concentrated around the 1970s. Roland Barthes's *S/Z* argues that "the goal of the literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of text."¹¹ And Wolfgang Iser essentially made his career by fine tuning the loose framework that Green presented to his BBC listeners. Indeed, echoes of Green's talks are clearly audible in Iser's "The Reading Process" from 1974:

These gaps [left by the text] have a different effect on the process of anticipation and retrospection, and thus on the "gestalt" of the virtual dimension, for they may be filled in different ways. For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities;

11. Barthes, *S/Z*, 4

as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled.¹²

While Iser was discussing the reading process for all literary texts and not just dialogue novels, the dialogue novel bluntly reveals this process. It should not be surprising, therefore, that one of Iser's primary texts for exploring this process is Ivy Compton-Burnett's dialogue novel, *A Heritage and Its History* (1959). It should also be pointed out that Green, like Iser, does not consider literary interpretation to be a complete free-for-all and that a reader's relative freedom is determined by the text, which can construct more than one legitimate interpretation of its contents.

Beyond the dialogue novel's fitness for his theory of an active reader, Green turned to dialogue because, as he argues in the first of his BBC talks, "communication between human beings has now come to be almost entirely conducted by conversation."¹³ Appropriately for a radio broadcast, Green argues that technology has contributed to the modern dominance of conversation because, as he stated during an interview with Terry Southern, "we don't write letters now, we telephone."¹⁴ In this conviction that the novel must be responsive to recent technological and societal developments, Green's theory evokes the proto-modernist Futurism of F.T. Marinetti. And this unlikely comparison seems even more appropriate in light of Green's admission that changes in speech

12. Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 280.

13. Green, "A Novelist to His Readers: I," 137.

14. Green, "The Art of Fiction," 239. Because of these technological shifts, Green also argues that novelists need to be prepared respond to new media like radio and television. Somewhat playfully, he claims that "one of these days we are going to have TV sets which lonely people can talk to and get answers back. Then no one will read anymore."

patterns may very well render *Doting* “quaint” and ineffective in ten years’ time. But Green’s approach was not nearly as aggressive or destructive as that of the Futurists, even though Green, like Marinetti, predicted a rather short shelf-life for his art. We might also try to situate Green among the canonical English Modernists. Taking Virginia Woolf’s “Modern Fiction” (1925) as a decisive statement of High Modernism in English, we find that Green and Woolf share a conviction that the novel must break from the conventions of realism inherited from the nineteenth century. But while Woolf argues that this goal will be achieved by greater attention to consciousness and not the material world, Green proposes that the novel eliminate direct access to fictional minds and focus on the material world of spoken language, physical gesture, and action. Indeed, when Woolf argues that “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end,” she could be directly criticizing *Nothing* and *Doting* because their strict scenic method can only represent life as a sequential series of dialogues and events with no organizing consciousness.

But Green does not assume that this approach will more closely approximate reality. Green distinguishes real-world conversation from fictional dialogue because dialogue is “non-representational,” which he explains as,

[A] picture which was not a photograph, nor a painting *on a photograph*, nor, in dialogue, a tape-recording. For instance the very deaf, as I am, hear the most astounding things all round them, which have not, in fact, been said. This enlivens my replies until, through mishearing, a new level of communication is reached. My characters misunderstand each other more than people do in real life, yet they do so less than I. Thus when writing, I “represent” very closely what I see (and I’m not seeing so well

now) and what I hear (which is little) but I say it is “non-representational” because it is not necessarily what others see and hear.¹⁵

Beyond the claim that Green’s sensory limitations made him more likely than other novelists to write dialogue that is disconnected from the way people actually talk, Green believed that the tenuous connection between actual conversation and fictional dialogue qualifies all dialogue as non-representational. Real-life conversation, according to Green, consists of far too many nonsense terms, invented phrases, and private telegraphese to make sense on the page. Indeed, Green argues that one of the primary lessons of conversation is that “words by themselves...can mean almost anything.... It is the *context* in which they lie that *alone* gives them life.” And it is the writer’s manipulation of context, or what Green later describes as “how [the writer] places his characters in fiction,” that gives the work its significance.¹⁶ Green summarized this position succinctly in a review of James Sutherland’s *The Oxford Book of English Talk*, an “anthology of conversations...in print between people and extracted from plays, novels, proceedings at judicial trials, and so forth,” when he says, “[a]nyone who writes dialogue knows only too well—that written dialogue is not like the real thing, and can never be.”¹⁷ Indeed, the relativism implicit in the dialogue form, as well as the emphasis Green places on the dialogue between reader and text as the source of meaning, places Green’s theory more in line with postmodernism.

15. Green, “The Art of Fiction,” 239.

16. Green, “A Novelist to His Readers: I,” 141.

17. Green, “The Spoken Word as Written,” 170, 171.

The difficulty of placing Green's theory and work reminds us that literary periodization is always problematic and that perhaps, as Brian Richardson argues in "Remapping the Present," "modern literary history" is best considered as "a testing site or battleground where several continuous, competing poetics [i.e. realism, expressionism, high modernism, and postmodernism] struggle for supremacy."¹⁸ Henry Green's work on the dialogue novel certainly creates this kind of contact zone. And, as Richardson's essay suggests, exploring understudied sub-genres like the "dialogue novel" might allow us to place apparently opposed poetics into dialogue once again.

An essential tool for restarting that conversation is René Girard's concept of mimetic, or triangular, desire. In Girard's theory, which is presented in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961), the modern subject feels compelled to be autonomous and original. But one feels unable to live up to this compulsion to originality, so he or she projects autonomy onto an Other, who then serves as a model for behavior due to the illusory perception of achieved autonomy. The triangle of mimetic desire therefore involves three parties—a desiring subject, a desired object, and an Other or mediator—and figures the desired object as little more than a red herring for the desiring subject's true focus: the mediator who has become esteemed through a projection of self-actualization. As Girard succinctly claims, "[i]mitative desire is always a desire to be Another."¹⁹ So unlike cathetic theories of desire that center on the relationship between a desiring subject and a desired object, Girard's theory emphasizes the relationship between the desiring subject

18. Richardson, "Remapping the Present," 299.

19. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 83.

and his or her mediator. This relationship can be quite complex because the mediator can be real or imagined, paragon or rival, in direct contact with the desiring subject or observed from afar.

One of the most important such associations involves how the desiring subject perceives itself in relation to the mediator, a function that Girard identifies as “distance.” Speaking toward the distance between a desiring subject and a mediator, Girard proposes that we label mediation as either *external* or *internal*, depending on the mediator’s social, intellectual, and spiritual proximity to the desiring subject. As Girard posits,

We shall speak of *external mediation* when the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of *possibilities* of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers. We shall speak of *internal mediation* when this same distance is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly.²⁰

In external mediation, the desiring subject “worships his model openly and declares himself his disciple,” proclaiming “aloud the true nature of his desire.”²¹ External mediation can be proclaimed aloud because the distance between the desiring subject and the mediator is so great that the possibility of conflict between them is negligible. Girard identifies classic examples of external mediation in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. In *Madame Bovary*, Emma’s racy reading practices define her expectations for romance, while in *Don Quixote* the titular hero bases his often outlandish behaviors on the heroes of chivalric fiction. In both cases, the character learns what she or he desires, as well as strategies for obtaining that desire,

20. Ibid., 9.

21. Ibid., 10.

through the example of literature. Both characters also openly own up to their allegiances and delight that they are subject to “the *desires* of models they have freely chosen.”²²

In contrast to the open acknowledgement of external mediation, internal mediation involves an element of self-deception and ensuing conflict between desiring subject and mediator. So, to avoid such discomfort, “the hero of internal mediation” disguises both his desire and his high regard for the mediator. Girard identifies examples of internal mediation in Stendhal, Dostoevsky, and Proust. A rather hilarious example can be found in the first section of Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, where Monsieur de Rênal underhandedly hires Julien Sorel as a tutor because he believes Monsieur Valenod intends to do the same; of course, Monsieur Valenod then conversely seeks to steal away Sorel precisely because Rênal appears to value him. In this case, both Rênal and Valenod attempt to establish their subjectivity by projecting their desires onto the other and then acting vigorously to supersede their *rival*, which is Girard’s term for the Other of a conflictual relationship. The often masochistic nature of internal mediation is displayed in Dostoevsky and Proust when the mediator is chosen “not because of some seemingly positive quality but because of the *obstruction he can provide*.”²³ A vivid example of this can be found in the obscene railing of the underground man during the banquet section of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. In this instance, the narrator proclaims his individuality by acting directly against the presumed desires of his rival, but doing so

22. Ibid., 5.

23. Ibid., 175.

fails to establish his uniqueness and merely confirms that he is dependent on the rival to maintain his delusion of an originality and autonomy. For Girard, internal mediation is far more typical of modern desire, and, as we shall see, most instances of desire in Green's novels exhibit this quality. Michael North smartly summarizes how the intergenerational feuds in *Nothing* and *Doting* play this out when he says, "The two books portray the struggle between these two generations as a struggle between Green's own idea of the self as a conscious artificial creation and aspirations toward an identity free of the taint of social falsehood."²⁴ Even though most of the struggle in these novels takes the form of internal mediation, external mediation remains important for this project because the dialogue-novel form creates conditions where the reader finds his or her interaction with the text mediated by self-projected expectations of an absent narrator.

Regardless of one's distance from or allegiance to the mediator, all desire for Girard is "*le desir selon l'Autre*" [desire following, or according to, the other] rather than "*le desir selon soi*" [desire according to one's intrinsic preferences].²⁵ While all desire is mimetic, some works of fiction reveal the illusion of autonomy while others function to conceal it. For Girard, *romanesque* works demystify desire by exposing the mechanics of mediated desire while *romantique* works merely reinforce the illusion of intrinsic desire and an autonomous self. This distinction allows Girard to wisely claim that not all works of fiction are invested in revealing "the reversible binary opposition between self and other that creates the psychic disguises that establish the illusion of surface

24. North, *Henry Green and the Writing of His Generation*, 199.

25. Chris Flemming's *Violence and Mimesis* was my source for the original French of Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 11-12.

differences.”²⁶ Somewhat surprisingly, Girard develops the idea of mimetic desire from literary works, rather than taking an established theory of desire and applying it to a literary work. For Girard, systematic literary interpretation is “the continuation of literature,” and he believes that this literature-derived theory might even be productively applied to other theories of desire, like those of Freud or Lacan.²⁷ But Girard’s most quixotic claim for literature, and for the literary imagination, is that “all novelistic conclusions are conversions” and “true conversion engenders a new relationship to others and to oneself.”²⁸ Girard argues,

The genius of the novel rises above the oppositions that stem from metaphysical desire. It tries to show us their illusory character. It transcends the rival caricatures of Good and Evil presented by the factions. It affirms the identity of the opposites on the level of internal mediation. But it does not end in moral relativism. Evil exists.²⁹

In other words, *romanesque* works reveal the workings of mimetic desire by exposing false oppositions and preserving authentic subjectivity in the process of mediation. Of course, it requires a leap of faith to accept that exposing the system of mimetic desire might circumvent that very system and that literature is the instrument for doing so.³⁰

26. From the editorial notes to “Psychoanalytic Approaches” in Hale’s anthology, *The Novel*, 287.

27. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 3.

28. *Ibid.*, 294, 295.

29. *Ibid.*, 192.

30. I mean this literally for Girard, whose theory is ultimately founded in a Christian worldview, which his later works reveal more fully.

While I do not endorse following Girard's theory to his ultimate conclusions, the concept of triangular desire is productive for the dialogue novel.

The dialogue novel is a near-perfect structure for considering triangular desire in literature because the lack of narrator's text and subsequent "going behind" emphasizes character as a dynamic, social construction, rather than an autonomous individual that figures itself in opposition to the fictional world that contains it. This is not to say that characters in dialogue novels will not retain the romantic delusion of self-sufficiency and originality; indeed, in *Nothing* and *Doting* the vast majority of characters imagine themselves in just this way. But what I am arguing is that the dialogue form's dependence on interaction through talk quickly exposes the romantic delusion of independence and lays bare the workings of triangular desire. One could even argue that the very form of the dialogue novel inclines it to be *romanesque* rather than *romantique*. And if literary interpretation is to follow from a work of literature, Girard's mimetic desire follows cleanly from Henry Green's *Nothing* and *Doting*, both of which expose the workings of mimetic desire in form and in plots that center on unstable love triangles and quadrangles.

Our present study will focus almost entirely on Green's first dialogue novel, *Nothing*, but the following analyses could have been performed on *Doting* with remarkably similar results. In fact, the similarities between these novels have hindered their reputation among Green's novelistic *oeuvre*, which is otherwise notable for its formal and thematic variety. Both *Nothing* and *Doting* focus around a series of love triangles among members of two generations. Both novels center on celebrations held in

honor of the primary younger male of the novel, who seems less excited than his parents by the event. But unlike *Nothing, Doting's* squabbling members of the older generation, Diana and Arthur Middleton, are already married and have agreed to let each other go out on dates so long as these dalliances don't become serious. Thus, when Diana Middleton encourages Arthur to invite over nineteen-year-old Annabel Paynton so that she can have greater liberty in her pursuit of Arthur's longtime friend, Charles Addinsell, the subsequent series of mimicked desires, conflictual desires, and comic reversals certainly match and possibly outdo what is contained in *Nothing*.

Nothing's plot, such as it is, features several such tangles and centers around the twenty-first birthday party of Philip Weatherby, who is the son of Jane Weatherby and possible son of John Pomfret.³¹ At this event, Philip announces his surprise engagement to Mary Pomfret, John's daughter, thereby setting in motion some rather comic efforts by members of both generations to think through Philip's true parentage and how this information might affect his decision to marry Mary. Philip's "twenty firster" falls near the center of the novel, and most of its surrounding material presents the affairs and flirtations of his parents' generation, the most significant of which is the on-again, off-again relationship between John Pomfret and Jane Weatherby. In addition to this longstanding affair, *Nothing* details romances between Pomfret and the 29-year-old Liz Jennings, Jane and her contemporary Richard Abbot, and, later in the novel, Liz and Richard, who pick up with each other after John and Jane become preoccupied by one

31. According to Treglown, "[a]t one point in both the manuscript and the final transcript, Philip Weatherby is called Philip Pomfret, a slip corrected only after it had been queried by the copy editor." *Romancing*, 200.

another and their children. But perhaps the most disturbing behavior for the older generation is the peculiar behavior of Jane Weatherby's seven-year-old daughter, Penelope, whose pretend wedding to John Pomfret opens the novel.³²

Like many significant events in *Nothing*, the wedding play between John Pomfret and Penelope Weatherby takes place off-page. Because it happens before the fabula begins, their union is presented through one of the novel's few extended narrative passages. During the first of many lunch scenes at the luxurious London hotel overseen by Pascal Medrano, Pomfret explains the imaginary wedding ceremony to his then-current lover, Liz Jennings. Green writes:

He did not look at the girl [Liz] and seemed nervous as he described his tea the previous Sunday when Liz had to visit her mother ill with flu so that he had been free to call on Jane Weatherby, a widow only too well known to Miss Jennings. It was wet then, did she remember he was saying, so unlike this he said, and turned his face to the dazzle of window, it had been dark with sad tears on the panes and streets of blue canals as he sat by her fire for Jane liked dusk, would not turn on the lights until she couldn't see to move, while outside a single street lamp was yellow, reflected over a thousand raindrops on the glass, the fire was rose, and Penelope came in. Jane cried out with loving admiration and there the child had been, no taller than the dark armchair, all eyes, her head one long curl coppered next the fire and on the far side as pale as that street lamp or as small flames within the grate, and she was dressed in pink which the glow blushed to rose then paled then glowed once more to a wild wind in the chimney before their two faces dark across Sunday afternoon.³³

32. In the midst of these dalliances, Arthur Morris—a longtime friend of the older generation who answers some questions Philip and Mary have about their parents—grows increasingly ill and eventually dies from complications resulting from his stepping on a railway spike. The fact that this momentous event barely registers is a further reminder to the older generation of their mortality, which becomes buried under a series of trivial nothings that occupy their time.

33. Green, *Nothing*, 9.

Green's extraordinary language here is characteristic of his previous seven novels, and it's startling just how restrained *Nothing's* language becomes after it shifts to its predominant dialogue mode. It is almost as though Green wants to show his readers what his narrator's text can do—shifting effortlessly from the restaurant window to a window at the Weatherby's where John's memory of rain blots out Liz and recalls young Penelope rising, rose-colored, before her admiring mother and middle-aged suitor—before he removes such textures from the novel's offerings. Rod Mengham attributes this shift to artistic exhaustion, arguing that “[t]he opening passage of *Nothing* is an elegant rigmarole of motifs borrowed from *Caught, Loving, Back, and Concluding*.” This imitation causes the acclimated reader to experience the text with a feeling “of nostalgia, of recognition rather than invention.”³⁴ Although Mengham unjustly devalues Green's last two novels, he is correct to identify a type of nostalgia that these last two dialogue novels produce. This nostalgia, however, is not particular to this passage or to Green's novels; it is instead particular to the dialogue novel as a form. I would like to argue that dialogue novels produce an instance of triangular desire within their readers. Reading a dialogue novel, the desiring reader declares the text of the novel as its object. The difficulties of the text make the act of reading analogous to the act of solving a puzzle for which one might not have all the pieces. Thus, by making sense of a dialogue novel, the desiring reader imposes onto the text a sense of self-generated closure that seems uniquely earned given that interpretation's freedom from the guiding hand of a consistent

34. Mengham, *The Idiom of the Time*, 207.

narrator.³⁵ But, I would argue, this purported freedom is predicated on the reader's ability to project how an absent narrator would structure the text. In this way, the reader's projected ideal of an absent narrator externally mediates any encounter with a dialogue novel.

The scene of Penelope's play wedding reminds us of the narrator's mediation that will be absent from most of the text, and it is significant that Green chooses to narrate this particular scene because the words spoken during a marriage ceremony are a vivid example of what J.L. Austin calls a performative utterance—that is, a statement which does not assert the truth or falsehood of anything but rather performs a specific action, such as the public acceptance of a spouse with all of the legal and, perhaps, spiritual consequences of that union.³⁶ By filtering the performative language of even this farcical wedding through his narrator's text, Green hints that his first dialogue novel will be less concerned with speech that does things than with speech that does *nothing*, which is appropriate because this *romanesque* work demonstrates how much of what might be perceived as authentic change is merely a repetition of previously established formulas.

After Penelope's glorious entrance, Pomfret drops to one knee to propose, prompting her mother, Jane, to escalate the joke by conducting a mock-wedding ceremony "right through her own remembered version of the service." John relates how the fallout of their actions finds poor Penelope unable to sleep and "the little boy who

35. This sense of closure can be produced by the refusal to offer a traditional novelistic closure, such as the marriage plot. I am firmly convinced that refusing closure became the dominant closure for experimental fiction during the second half of the twentieth century.

36. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 5.

comes to tea with her quite heartbroken.”³⁷ Penelope’s family and acquaintances attribute her unease to an inability to separate play-acting from genuine ceremony; thus, the false wedding jokingly prefigures the clash between the older and younger generations that structures the novel. Even though Penelope exists on the outskirts of Philip and Mary’s generation, Jane and John fear that the young people are too serious and literal for their own good. John states that even if Jane had “altered the words to make it unreal for herself” the “harm [for Penelope] was there.”³⁸ *Nothing* establishes that the older generation of John, Jane, and Richard Abbot is promiscuous in friendship and sex, loose with whatever remains of their largely inherited wealth, and more committed to present pleasures than future consequences. In contrast, the younger generation of Philip and Mary is notable for having few friends and treating members of the opposite sex “like human beings,” for possessing an “old-fashioned” thriftiness that requires them to make do with what they earn through their Civil Service jobs, and for espousing a generally over-serious worldview that makes planning for the future their preferred pastime.³⁹ How the younger characters interact with their elders in *Nothing* is a clear example of what Girard labels conflictual mimetic desire. In this configuration, the younger generation of Philip and Mary attempts to establish its authenticity and autonomy by acting contrary to the behaviors displayed by the older generation. While Philip and Mary believe their actions distinguish them from their parents, this negative

37. Green, *Nothing*, 10-11.

38. *Ibid.*, 10.

39. Jane says these things during her opening conversation with Richard Abbot. *Ibid.*, 14, 20.

imitation, as we shall see, instead reveals that they are completely dependent upon their parents and that their perceived autonomy is nothing but romantic delusion. In contrast, the older generation begins in opposition to the younger generation but ultimately mimics the younger generation by entering into more committed relationships at the end of the novel. Of course, this can occur only after Philip and Mary have called off their plans for marriage—thus making the older generation’s mimesis also oppositional in nature.

It is worthwhile to clarify how both generations figure the other as we consider the workings of mimetic desire in *Nothing* and its consequences for the dialogue novel form. Beginning with the younger generation, Philip Weatherby considers his mother’s “whole lot” as “absolutely unbridled.”⁴⁰ In his mind, while he regularly attends work and advances through the Civil Service ranks at an appropriately measured pace, the older generation spends its time dining, drinking, romancing, and generally flaunting their way through a life without purpose.⁴¹ In response, Philip becomes the most reactionary character in the novel. Philip’s conservative character elicits concern from his mother, who initially considers him “so unmanly and serious for his years,” because he seems to lack both ambition and enjoyment in his life.⁴² There are hints that Jane’s claim that

40. Ibid., 26.

41. How work figures in Green’s novels certainly deserves a study of its own. The only figures we actually see working in *Nothing* are restaurant help and Jane’s Italian maid. Philip’s and Mary’s jobs seem real, as they frequently meet for beers after work to discuss the workday and office politics. In contrast, John and Richard seem to spend all of their time at leisure, even though they both conceive themselves as “all slaves to this endless work work work nowadays.” 111. Of course, any study of work in Green would need to focus around *Living* (1929) and its surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of class conflict as the very stuff of modern life.

42. Green, *Nothing*, 21.

Philip is “unmanly” is based on her concern that he is homosexual. But the real source of this label is that Philip’s desire to act as the modern gentleman is determined by his negative imitation of the older generation of John Pomfret and Richard Abbot. In this instance, Philip stands as the desiring subject whose desired object is, ostensibly, a life well lived. In actuality, Philip is less invested in a virtuous life than in enacting revenge on an older generation that seems to have lived too indulgently. So, in an act of negative imitation, Philip convinces himself that he should disregard the activities and behaviors of the older generation but instead preoccupies himself with doing precisely the opposite of whatever they do.

Of course, Philip is entirely conscious that he opposes the older generation, but he does not realize the degree to which his actions are determined by them.⁴³ The depths of his conscious opposition are actually somewhat unnerving, as we can see during one of Philip and Mary’s dates at a respectable Knightsbridge public house:

“They all ought to be liquidated,” he said obviously in disgust.
“Who Philip?”
“Every one of our parents’ generation.”
“But I love Daddy.”
“You can’t.”
“I do, so now you know!”

43. There are certainly similarities between Girard’s theory and psychoanalytic theories of the self. But as Chris Fleming lucidly explains, “[w]here psychoanalysis [specifically Freud] explains conflict as originating *within* the self—the competing demands of the id, ego, and superego—Girard’s explanatory scheme inverts this: conflicts within the individual, sado-masochistic ‘perversions,’ and feelings of ‘ambivalence’ originate in conflicts with others—or, rather, in conflicts located *between* subjects.” Fleming, *Violence and Mimesis*, 35.

“They’re wicked darling,” he exclaimed. “They had two frightful wars they’ve done nothing about it except fight in and they’re rotten to the core.”⁴⁴

Recalling Green’s argument in “A Novelist to His Readers” that dialogue creates “life in the reader” by inviting readers to decipher how a character might occupy “one of several moods, *or even three or more moods at the same time*,” Philip’s unexpected impulse to liquidate those who lived through the recent European conflict enlivens readers to the more enraged undertones of Philip’s purported quest for self-improvement. It also reveals his complex relationship to the older generation, and how his opinions toward them are determined by family feeling and gender expectations.

Despite his argument that the older generation is rotten, Philip does not align his mother with this decadence because he believes that women lack agency and are therefore “really not to blame.” What Philip perceives as generosity toward his mother here is even more perverse because his anger is largely fueled by his recently acquired knowledge that John Pomfret might be his father—a possibility that causes him to denounce that “bestly selfish” generation and its tendency to act “like rabbits about sex.”⁴⁵ So Philip’s perception that women are essentially blameless in matters of sex expresses the same callow disregard for women that he claims to deplore in the older generation. But Philip remains unconscious to the fact that he needs to simultaneously preserve and denounce this espoused wickedness in order to maintain his perceived autonomy from Pomfret’s generation. Philip’s anger originates less from his perception

44. Green, *Nothing*, 54.

45. *Ibid.*

that the older generation is promiscuous or that Pomfret might be his father, than from his fear that his self-worth depends on them. Hence, his voiced but inert desire to liquidate the older men. This empty threat is exemplary of the lack of development—the nothing—that persists throughout this novel. As Mary later says to Philip, “You’re one of those talkers.... You don’t go out and do things.”⁴⁶

But Philip does attempt to do something with words by announcing his engagement to Mary during his twenty-first birthday party. The scene, which occurs in Pascal Medrano’s hotel, is the most vivid and expansive example of the differences between the communication styles of the younger and older generations. While the party ostensibly happens to celebrate Philip, it is really an excuse for Jane to fete herself and her friends. Not surprisingly, the older generation flourishes at this event because such scenes are their natural environment. In fact, the engagement between Jane and John and the relationship between Liz and Richard first seem probable during this scene because it is composed almost entirely of conversations. The mood throughout the “twenty firster” is one of nostalgia, and, appropriately, this scene begins with the novel’s second extended passage of narrative text, which begins, “At the same great hotel in which they held their Sunday luncheons....time stood still for Jane.”⁴⁷ Green also takes this narrative opportunity to pithily distinguish the two generations by writing, “Mrs. Weatherby’s full cream of flesh...seemed to retain a satisfied glow of the well fed against Mary’s youth

46. *Ibid.*, 144.

47. *Ibid.*, 61.

starvation.”⁴⁸ Coming midway through the novel, *Nothing*’s narrator returns to remind the reader that the “full cream” of narrative possibilities has been withheld to celebrate the comparatively starved dialogue form. Unlike dialogue, narrative text can convey the suspension of time because dialogue is an essentially scenic method that assumes a linear progression through time and space to be intelligible.⁴⁹ The emphatic materiality of the older generation’s overwhelming amount of talk almost makes Philip and his tablemates seem absent from his party because the novel relates little of the little that they say. But the gaunt youth momentarily dims Jane’s shine when Philip clumsily announces that he and Mary are engaged to be married. Once he manages to struggle his way through this news—he begins by saying, “I—ah—er...I—well you see—that is”—Jane reclaims her spotlight by graciously embracing Mary and thereby embodying “their generation’s ultimate instinct of how one should ideally behave.”⁵⁰ For a novel obsessed with talk, it is surprising that Jane counters the most momentous statement of the novel thus far with a non-verbal physical embrace. Of course, there are many ways to interpret Jane’s action: it could be a gesture to genuinely welcome Mary to her family, as the party-goers seem to believe; it could convey her realization that spoken words can threaten and not just perpetuate the timeless bubble of Pascal’s restaurant; or it could be the physical manifestation of her generation’s “do-nothing” mentality in the face of a speech act that

48. *Ibid.*, 62.

49. This is not to imply that dialogue cannot be used to reflect upon time’s passage. Samuel Beckett’s dialogue excels at presenting the interminability of time, but even this effect assumes time’s linear progress.

50. Green *Nothing*, 77, 79.

has the potential to genuinely upend her world.⁵¹ Green's refusal to "go behind" here does not allow any definite understanding of how Jane conceives her own actions, even though the novel does indicate the pride and joy that "all [at the party] felt she must feel."⁵² Thus, this non-verbal gesture creates an interpretive gap that offers a counterpoint to Green's claim that dialogue is the best method for "creating life in the reader" by engaging him or her in the making of textual meaning.⁵³

Whichever way we interpret Jane's embrace of Mary, she later expresses genuine worry that her son might be in danger of marrying his half-sister. So she begins plotting against this union and enjoining him to "rid" himself of his "family complex."⁵⁴ Of course, Jane suffers from her own form of "family complex," in which Philip and Mary's engagement renews her intimacy with John Pomfret and finds them engaged by the end of the novel. As Jane rather biting tells her son, "Well Philip for all your generation

51. Just before Philip's announcement, Jane and John recollect a truncated plot to record a song the other's child, and Jane says, with great pleasure, "That is the whole beauty of us, we never can seem to do anything." *Ibid.*, 70.

52. *Ibid.*, 78.

53. Given this example, Green's novel theory of the 1950s could apply equally well to any instance of represented event in which its motivation is not delineated by narrator's text. As such, Green's novel theory does not become less valuable for our study of dialogue; rather it expands its function to non-dialogue novels and usefully, for our study, provides a space to argue for dialogue as a legitimate event in the novel. The possible status of dialogue as action is a highly contested subject in the field of narratology. For some narratologists (e.g. Bal), an event requires a change in a state of affairs of the fabula, a change which dialogue does not strictly perform unless the utterance in question is an instance of Austin's performative language. Green's proposal that we shift the event from the fabula to the reader offers promise for narratologists to rethink what is a narrative event and thus how we talk about dialogue as action.

54. Green, *Nothing*, 155.

being so serious while we're just flighty in your eyes, you certainly seem to have more difficulty in making up your minds than we do."⁵⁵ Despite this confident declaration of self-sufficiency, Jane's engagement is an example of what Girard calls "double mediation," which occurs when a mediator is "tempted to copy the copy of his own desire."⁵⁶ In this convoluted formulation, Philip desires to marry Mary to distinguish himself from his mother and her generation by making a commitment he believes the older generation is too flighty to declare. And in response, his mother copies Philip's desire and practical mindset by proposing marriage to John based upon the imminently frugal notion that "[t]wo people live cheaper than one!"⁵⁷ Despite Jane's apparent shift to youthful frugality, her proposal ultimately perpetuates the overextended indulgence her generation has enjoyed throughout the novel, and this is shown when the next scene finds Jane and John lunching at the same hotel where the novel opened and Pascal delighting in their return together, saying, "it makes like old days to see Monsieur here again with Madame."⁵⁸

As the old days return, *Nothing* concludes with a series of comic reversals to the desires and expectations of the two generations. After John Pomfret's engagement supplants his daughter's, Mary directs attention to the fact that her father has acquired the lack of articulation that was previously aligned with members of the younger generation.

55. Ibid., 154.

56. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 99.

57. Green, *Nothing*, 147.

58. Ibid., 153.

She says, “Lord there was me a few weeks back trying to tell about Philip and now the roles are properly reversed.... You’re the one stuttering and stammering now.”⁵⁹ Even within the younger set, the roles become “properly reversed.” Mary claims that Philip’s growing commitment to talk over action makes him more closely resemble the older generation. Surprisingly, she levels this criticism while planning to throw off her own job and travel about Italy for a few months, a plan that runs absolutely contrary to the serious-minded thrift that has defined her generation throughout the novel. Despite Mary’s ability to identify both her father’s and Philip’s reversals, she cannot recognize her own. Instead of acknowledging the older generation as the mediator of her desire to travel, she figures herself as the authentic voice of her generation and imagines her travel as a positive affirmation of its “family complex” based upon the premise that her travel would help her father settle more seamlessly into his new life with Jane. Thus, despite the action taken, Mary sees herself as consistent and Philip as breaking rank.

These comic reversals reveal that these generational anxieties do not result from any intrinsic composition of the characters but from their misdirected efforts to define themselves by replicating or resisting some ready-made model of subjectivity. The reversals also upend the nature-nurture dichotomy that the younger generation must subscribe to in order to distance themselves from their parents. As Mary posits early in the novel, “it’s all a question of environment now... I was taught the whole question of heredity had been exploded ages back.”⁶⁰ But her juxtaposition of “environment”

59. *Ibid.*, 157.

60. *Ibid.*, 23.

against “heredity” presupposes that behavior can be shaped by controlling one’s surroundings, which is precisely the sort of romantic delusion that Girard’s theory of mimetic desire and Green’s torrent of comic reversals attempt to counter.

While the workings of mimetic desire are most immediately observable in the characters who define themselves according to generational guidelines, the two characters who don’t fit cleanly with either generation show us something new about the working of desire in *Nothing*. The first such character is, of course, the “little saint” Penelope. In addition to her play marriage that opens the novel, the young girl models many other adult behaviors she witnesses to great comic effect: she desires to be bridesmaid at the wedding between her brother Philip and her “stepdaughter” Mary; she imitates Jane who is learning Italian to better communicate with their maid (though Pen succeeds while Jane fails); she imagines herself stricken with diabetes and, in imitation of John, sticks herself with pins to control the disease; and somehow she overdraws her account in the manner typical of the older generation. More than mere comedy, these progressively ridiculous events find Penelope openly imitating the actions of the older generation. In contrast with her brother, Penelope does not see herself as engaged in a conflictual relationship with her mother’s generation. Indeed, despite their physical proximity, Penelope’s relationship with the adult generation that models her desire stands as an instance of external mediation because she openly avows her allegiance and the playful nature of her imitation does not enable her mediator to function as her rival. That said, Penelope’s play does hold consequences for the adult characters in the novel. In fact, one could argue that the novel is framed by Penelope’s play, as her “wedding”

invokes both Jane's desire to marry John and John's willingness to marry Jane. As John states, "I've such a responsibility towards Jane regarding the poor child.... there's no getting away from it, cardinal errors have been made with that little thing. She's just a mass of nerves. I owe this to Jane to get it right."⁶¹ In this way, Penelope's plot demonstrates how misreading instances of external mediation can directly address or redress conflicts resulting from internally mediated desire.

The second and perhaps more theoretically interesting instance of a character who stands outside the generational dichotomy is Liz Jennings. Liz aligns herself with the older generation as first John Pomfret's and later Richard Abbot's love interest, even though her biological age of twenty-nine is much closer to that of Philip and Mary. Indeed, even her romantic partners acknowledge Liz's liminal status. John calls her a "fortunate angel" because she exists outside the dictates of either generation, while Richard Abbot finds her "young but with all the allure of experience" even as he feels uncomfortable discussing the younger generation in front of her because she's "a part of 'em."⁶² But the assessments of both men fail to capture an essential element of Liz's character. While she is between the two generations, this betweenness does not result in her greater freedom. Rather it makes her more attentive to the logic of triangular desire. As Liz explains to Richard after both had been given "packing orders" by John and Jane's engagement, "It was we who rendered everything possible for those two."⁶³ This

61. Ibid., 158.

62. Ibid., 70, 76, 74.

63. Ibid., 165.

statement does not imply that Liz and Richard's flirtation drove John and Jane back into each other's arms; instead, she acknowledges that the nature of her desire invokes a rival that invariably wins her desired object. Or, as she says, "[w]hen I get involved with a man he always goes back to some first love old enough to be my mother."⁶⁴ This admission leads Richard to praise her as "so damned honest," but her honesty only allows her to partially recognize the working of triangular desire: she still cannot (or refuses to) identify the model for her desire, which therefore leaves her victim to its whims. As such, she ends the novel entangled with the aging Richard Abbott, whose mortality is made comically obvious when he almost chokes to death for no obvious reason during their first night together. While Liz can recognize how her desires are implicated in and productive of the desires of others, she dismisses her own desire as "fate" and allows it to guide her into a relationship with Richard that is likely to mimic her past experience.⁶⁵

The unexpected consequences of external mediation (as shown in the example of Penelope) and the ability to chart the workings of mimetic desire on others but not oneself (as shown in the case of Liz) open onto our consideration of how the dialogue novel form produces mimetic desire in the reader. Returning to Green's claim that dialogue is the fictional device most likely to create life in the reader, this argument supposes that a work of fiction will structure a reader's expectations and interpretations without completely closing off interpretive gaps that allow him or her to engage imaginatively with the text. This argument also assumes that the reader will intuitively

64. *Ibid.*, 166.

65. *Ibid.*, 164.

grasp what this gap leaves unstated, why that information has been withheld, and how its withholding affects one's understanding of the text. Indeed, what Green presumes and what I would now like to bring to the foreground is a knowledge that Jonathan Culler identifies as "literary competence." As Culler explains,

The [literary] work has structure and meaning because it is read in a particular way, because these potential properties, latent in the object itself, are actualized by the theory of discourse applied in the act of reading.... To read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for.⁶⁶

To properly read a dialogue novel by Green or anyone else, the reader must have the literary competence to acknowledge that the dialogue novel's excision of a controlling narrator is a divergence from most novels and that the functions typically performed by the narrator are now relegated to the reader. Thus, I would argue that the reader implicitly uses his or her knowledge of what functions narrators typically perform to make sense of the text in the absence of those functions and to evaluate what that absence might mean. In other words, we should think of an encounter with the dialogue novel as mediated by the reader's desire to fulfill his or her self-projected expectations of that novel's absent narrator. Further, the pull of this desire is directly proportional to the reader's literary competence; the greater one's literary competence, the greater the chorus of absent narrators and the louder their call. While this approach has a great deal in common with intertextuality, it privileges the reader's desire toward meaning over the free play of signs. Indeed, I propose that what the dialogue-novel reader imagines he or

66. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 113-14.

she engages with is less a limitless semiotic stew than a purposeful mind. Hence, my decision to use Girard for this theory of reading is particularly apt because Girard makes claims for mimetic behavior as a survival tactic that predates language and is not even limited human beings. Whether or not one accepts such a large role for mimesis, it cannot be denied that the framework of mimetic desire incorporates purposeful action with structural determiners of that purpose. While one might extend what I label the projection of an absent narrator occurs with to non-dialogue texts as well, I maintain that the dialogue novel is the preeminent *romanesque* genre because it's uniquely predisposed to lay bare the workings of this mediation.

As evidence for this claim, I would like to briefly return to the scene that opens *Nothing*, where John Pomfret tells Liz Jennings about his earlier play wedding to little Penelope Weatherby. After the extended passage of narrative text that opens the novel, the scene continues:

“You see [Jane and Penelope] made an absolute picture,” [John] explained. “You know what Janie’s eyes are with that wonderful blessing out of the huge things.”

“Well?” Miss Jennings demanded when he paused.

“Just look at the man over there Liz I ask you,” he temporized. “Where was I? Oh yes,” and went on to describe Penelope’s little face buried in Jane’s bosom. He’d made a further invitation on which Jane did not call him to order, then suddenly, he said, it broke, there was a great wail come out with a “Mummy I don’t want,” after which nothing was any use, all had been tears.

“I nearly sobbed myself. Oh the blame I had to take! No but seriously you can’t think it wrong of me Liz?”

“Are you seeing a lot of Jane these days?” Miss Jennings wanted to be told.

“She’s supposed to lunch here this very afternoon,” he answered. “Which is as much as I ever see her, once in a blue moon, except when you choose to go sick-nursing.”

“Mother isn’t often...” she began.

“My dear what’s come over you,” he interrupted, “I wasn’t serious. No but do look over that man again.”⁶⁷

The fact that Green’s narrator resurfaces to relate more of the past wedding emphasizes some of the inherent limitations of choosing dialogue as the primary narrative mode. For example, dialogue can only reveal what characters choose to reveal about themselves in speech, while narrative allows for the direct representation of a character’s interior thoughts and feelings.⁶⁸ So when we read that Liz inquires about John’s cavorting with Jane Weatherby or that she occasionally visits her sick mother, the desiring reader fills in the narrative gaps by imposing onto Liz a presumed jealousy of Jane, as well as her commitment to caring for the elderly and infirm. Narration also allows for a much more complex and flexible representation of time than dialogue, including the representation of simultaneous time frames, gaps in time, repeated events, and non-linear time. Scenes composed of dialogue, on the other hand, are explicitly linear, proceeding from statement to statement, beginning and ending within a clearly defined temporal space. Following the example of past narrators one has encountered, readers feel compelled to make connections across dialogue scenes. Thus, when Liz and Richard Abbot discuss their ailing parents and when she winds up genuinely delighted to be with Richard and his choking fits, the reader recalls Liz’s attentions to her sick mother opened onto John and Penelope’s play wedding, which opened onto John and Jane’s engagement, which opens onto the sick happiness Liz feels with Richard at the novel’s conclusion. The reader feels

67. Green, *Nothing*, 10.

68. Dorrit Cohn follows Käte Hamburger to argue that this act of going behind it *the* defining characteristic of fictional narrative, thereby excluding the dialogue novel from the novel genre. Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 7.

impelled to make these connections because *Nothing*'s narrator refuses this interpretive work, even when it has already shown itself capable of the task. Thus, after briefly modeling how to structure the text, Green's narrator disappears from the page and now requires that the reader desire to fill this void. In this dialogue between text and reader, between text and genre, between readerly expectation and readerly desire, "a life which does not eat, procreate, or drink, but which can live in people who are alive" finds form.

CHAPTER THREE

“SILENCE HAS ITS USES”: DIALOGUES OF POWER IN I. COMPTON-BURNETT

The first two chapters of this study considered novelists who published important dialogue novels, but who were rightly noted for a broad formal range over the course of their careers. I turn now to a novelist who was so committed to the dialogue-novel form that it almost appears that she was compelled to write this way. Appropriately, the works of Ivy Compton-Burnett offer us an interesting counter-narrative to the freedoms of form celebrated by Henry James and Henry Green; in the work of Compton-Burnett, we see how dialogue's limitations offer a new context for our understanding of the dialogue-novel form and its possibilities.

Ivy Compton-Burnett published nineteen novels between 1925 and 1971 that were written almost exclusively in dialogue.¹ These novels tend to focus on the twisted domestic affairs of certain members of the landed gentry between the years 1888 and 1902. Unlike her Victorian forbears, Compton-Burnett seems uninterested in representing the complex relations between private life and the larger society, or in using the novel as a rhetoric for progressive change. And unlike her modernist contemporaries, Compton-Burnett seems uninterested in claiming a decisive break with the immediate past, or in experimenting with fictional modes to represent mental processes, such as

1. Compton-Burnett wrote twenty novels in all, but her first novel, *Dolores* (1911), was a traditional narrative that was frequently compared with George Eliot's early works. Compton-Burnett later disowned *Dolores*.

stream-of-consciousness or impressionism.² Ivy Compton-Burnett's dialogue novels—characteristically titled after a pair of significant actants in the novel, such as *Pastors and Masters* or *Manservant and Maidservant*—present elaborate plots featuring tyrannical parents, class conflict, power-mad disciplinarians, ineffectual authorities, murder, misdirected or stolen inheritances, and thinly-veiled incest.³ Given this description, it is also rather surprising to find that the books are frequently hilarious. The humor of the novels is so persistent that Robert Liddell's 1955 appreciation of Compton-Burnett opens by explaining that “[t]he serious and even tragic aspects of her art will be considered at some length because many people see her only as a humorous writer.”⁴ This juxtaposition of the tragic and the comedic has also made it rather difficult to identify historical precedents for Compton-Burnett's *sui generis* work. Liddell's effort to bring out the seriousness of her novels leads him to compare them to the works of the Greek

2. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were two years older than Compton-Burnett, while D.H. Lawrence was one year younger than she.

3. Ivy Compton-Burnett's remarkable life story must be briefly mentioned here. After losing her father in 1901, her beloved brother Guy succumbed to pneumonia in 1905, and a distraught Ivy lost interest in her studies at the Royal Holloway College. When Ivy's bullying mother died in 1911, Ivy took control of the Compton-Burnett household and, by all accounts, ruled it like a despot. In 1915, her four sisters rebelled against Ivy's dominion and moved to another house in London. One year later, her brother Noel was killed in war, and Ivy was hard hit by grief again. (Her close relationship with her brothers was arguably the best thing in Ivy's early life and likely the source for the many strong brother-sister relationships in her novels.) The shocking tragedy of her two youngest sisters' joint suicide on Christmas Day, 1917 sent Ivy into a state of bad mental and physical health, which was only broken when Margaret Jourdain moved into the Compton-Burnett estate in 1919. Given this history, Ivy had sympathy for both the tyrants and those they terrify. As she said in a 1962 interview with Michael Millgate, “I feel affection for nearly all of them—for the bad as well as the good,” 40.

4. Liddell, *The Novels of I. Compton-Burnett*, 9-10.

tragedians, while other critics have noted similarities between her novels and Jane Austen's.⁵ Throughout her career, Compton-Burnett was aware of attempts to place her in a literary succession. Always savvy about crafting her literary persona, Compton-Burnett distanced herself from previous writers by emphatically denying the influence of Henry James and the Russian novelists and less vigorously refusing a direct connection with ancient Greek drama and Austen.⁶ Compton-Burnett issued this self-evaluation during a "Conversation" with her life partner, Margaret Jourdain, which offers us the most complete statements Compton-Burnett made about her own art. During this conversation, she ruminates on the origins of her style: "I cannot even tell you why I write as I do, as I do not know. I have even tried not to do it, but find myself falling back into my own way."⁷ This admission of a limited and contracted approach to the novel is both accurate of her overall output and theoretically interesting for an examination of the dialogue-novel form. While Compton-Burnett's writing certainly displays the least formal variety of any novelist discussed in this project, I would like to argue that, taken as a whole, her novels present an argument for the powers of constraint.

5. Ibid., 15. Alice Herbert's review of Compton-Burnett's *More Women than Men* noted similarities between the conversation of that novel and the talk in Jane Austen. Spurling, *Ivy*, 282.

6. From Compton-Burnett and Jourdain, "A Conversation," 24-25. Their dialogue was published in Edwin Muir's literary magazine, *Orion*. Here, Compton-Burnett notes that "I have read Jane Austen so much, and with such enjoyment and admiration, that I may have absorbed things from her unconsciously. I do not think myself that my books have any real likeness to hers. I think that there is possibly some likeness between our minds," 23.

7. Ibid., 22.

To illustrate Compton-Burnett's formal and thematic exploration of constraint, I would like to start with the beginning of the last novel published during her lifetime, *A God and His Gifts* (1963).

"I will ask you once more. It is the last time. Will you or will you not?"

"I will not. It is also the last time. It must be the last."

"You will not give me your reasons?"

"I will give you one. You have too much. Your house and your land. Your parents and your sister. Your sister who is also your friend. Your work and your growing name. I like things to be on a moderate scale. To have them in my hands and not be held by them."

"That is not the only reason. There must be a deeper one."

"There is. And it may be deep. I do not want to marry. I seldom say so, to be disbelieved."

"You don't feel that marriage would mean a fuller life?"

"I don't want the things it would be full of. Light words are sometimes true."

"Then there must be a change. I do want to marry. I want to have descendants. I want to hand down my name. I could not keep up our relation under a wife's eyes. It has escaped my parents."

"Your father I daresay. What about your mother?"

"I am not sure. It is hard to know."

"It has not escaped her, or you would know. Silence has its uses."⁸

Quoting Compton-Burnett at length is the only way to convey the peculiar workings of her dialogue, which frequently withholds not just explanatory narrative text but even speech markers and deictic indicators. This withholding of essential facts produces a double effect that is unique to the dialogue-novel form: it simultaneously reinforces the awareness that narrative is an abstract, linguistic construction, even as its scenic nature appeals to a belief that the text simply reveals an already existent storyworld.⁹ Reading

8. Compton-Burnett, *A God and His Gifts*, 5.

9. "Storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of

Compton-Burnett's dialogue, a reader is thrust into uncertainty and must work to determine who is saying what and why, even as he or she assumes that this interpretive process will reveal always already distinct characters who speak for specific purposes and with discernable motives. Thus, dialogue novels flaunt themselves as constructions and draw attention to their reader's role in constructing meaning very differently from other contemporary experiments—such as the *nouveau roman*—that privilege linguistic surface above the represented fabula.¹⁰

In this passage, the identities of the characters and how they relate to one another is not made fully apparent until a few pages into this scene—even the gender of the characters remains uncertain until the topic of marriage arises in the sixth paragraph. We eventually learn that the first speaker, Hereward Egerton, a writer and landowner, is proposing marriage one last time to Rosa, the woman he desires, before he will move on to his second choice: Ada Merton, who will become Hereward's subservient, unhappy wife and the mother of his three sons. But until the information is revealed, the reader is confronted with a scene of interrogation that encapsulates many of Compton-Burnett's career-long preoccupations, including privilege, family influence, the hazards of marriage, the coercions of language, and the power of silence. In the mode of many of Compton-Burnett's male characters, Hereward works to establish his authority by demanding that Rosa answer his proposal within the narrow limits of "Will you or will

the situations and events being recounted—of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner." Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative*, 106-07.

10. Nathalie Sarraute identified Compton-Burnett as a precursor to the *nouveau roman* in *L'Ere de Soupçon. Essais sur le Roman*, 119.

you not?” But Rosa’s negative response refuses his authority by taking the constrained nature of their conversation literally and even further limiting their discourse by replying mostly in Hereward’s words. Hence, his concept of a “fuller life” becomes a life “full of” Hereward’s immense possessions, which threaten to weigh down Rosa’s “light words” and her freedom. In fact, Rosa is in such control of the exchange that she momentarily becomes the interrogator before the passage ends. Drawing attention to the silence employed by Hereward’s mother, Rosa’s questioning reveals a second tactic for agency in Compton-Burnett’s dialogue. In Compton-Burnett’s dialogue novels, withholding speech becomes a powerful strategy because dialogue is figured as a discourse of constraint.

Given Compton-Burnett’s positive treatment of dialogue’s constraints, Aaron Fogel’s *Coercion to Speak* (1985) provides a near ideal lens through which to view her fiction. Fogel’s ingenious study of Joseph Conrad posits a theory of dialogue that figures constraint rather than freedom as the inherent logic of dialogue and other communicative language acts. As Fogel explains, “The theme in [Conrad’s] work is not ‘lack of communication’ but the recognition that communication itself is by nature more coercive and disproportionate than we think when we sentimentalize terms like *dialogue* and *communication*.”¹¹ Fogel’s emphasis on dialogue’s constrictions over its expansions is rather daring, because thinkers as significant and diverse as Martin Buber, Jürgen Habermas, and Paolo Freire have shared an overriding sense that dialogue is

11. Fogel, *Coercion to Speak*, 35.

intrinsically productive, equalizing, and liberating.¹² This sunny prejudice toward dialogue is equally, if not more, pronounced within English studies. The “high-conversational bias” of F.R. Leavis’s “Great Tradition” presents dialogue as the means by which “an ideal, spiritual class” (“the ‘winners’ in the conversational scheme”) can debate and realize “moral insight and the worth of life.”¹³ And the more democratic, but similarly idealizing, theories of Mikhail Bakhtin hold dialogue’s polyphony as responsible for the vitality of self, language, and genre—a view that has had a tremendous, and justified, influence on formally- and socially-minded critics alike.¹⁴

Providing a counterpoint to these more humanist approaches, Fogel argues that Conrad’s work reveals the degree to which communication and information “can be given only in and through conditions of participatory disproportion and force that resemble those of the physical world.”¹⁵ For Fogel, Conrad expresses this violence most typically through scenes of “forced dialogue,” which “at [their] simplest, [run] as follows:

12. Fogel mentions Buber’s *I and Thou*, Habermas’s image of “the ideal speech situation,” and Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. *Ibid.*, 221.

13. *Ibid.*, 17, 16.

14. Bakhtin does distinguish dialogue from the dialogic: “Dialogical relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life—in general, everything that has meaning and significance.” Bakhtin, *Problem’s of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 40. Nevertheless, for him, dialogue remains a primary means for revealing potentials that might otherwise be obscured by ideology or oppressive social formations.

15. Fogel, *Coercion to Speak*, 3.

there are two speakers, and one repeatedly tries to make the other speak.”¹⁶ A more complex version of forced dialogue—“an Oedipal dialogue process”—displays “the democratic punishment of the speech-forcer, or the idea that inquiring power might be undone, or undo itself, by its own inquiry.”¹⁷ These structures encompass encounters ranging from Sotillo’s torture of Hirsch in *Nostromo* to the dialogue just before the murder of Verloc in *The Secret Agent* to the central dialogue between Mikulin and Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*. What all of these events have in common is their punctuation by “some speech or action of the heretofore silent character which amounts to an answer and yet is at the same time a ‘detonation,’ or a loud silencing, a final non-answer.”¹⁸

Despite its emphasis on forced speech and imposed power structures, Fogel’s theory does not propose a blunt determinism in human relations. Indeed, he argues that “Conrad emphasizes not the successful catechism but the unexpected, mutedly violent, almost toneless answer that briefly shocks the speech-forcer, redefines the relation, and passes a ‘sentence’ upon the scene preceding.”¹⁹ In Conrad, Hirsch’s spitting on Sotillo in *Nostromo* becomes a vivid example of this sentencing, an example that also calls to

16. Ibid., 10. Fogel also argues that forced dialogue must be understood as “(1) coercion to speak as a scene both in literature and in social practice; (2) recurrent dialogue form in the novel as leading to the sense that each novel has a distinctive “idea” of dialogue; (3) the development of dialogue forms over the course of Conrad’s own work.” Fogel pursues all three brilliantly, but we will only be concerned with the first of these projects in our analysis of Compton-Burnett. Ibid., 12.

17. Ibid., 22.

18. Ibid., 10.

19. Ibid., 219.

mind that Fogel's play on passing "sentence" does not necessarily require words for the sentencing.

Fogel is also smart about the materiality of textual dialogue, as he argues that both versions of forced dialogue produce an interesting textual effect, where large swaths of the speech-forcer's speech are "striped" by spotty patches from the object of the aggression. This "striping," which materially demonstrates one speaker's attempt to dominate another through the sheer volume of quoted text on the page, leads Fogel to argue that the relative amount spoken by various characters is a central component of Conrad's aesthetic and one of the more overlooked advantages of printed dialogue. As he intriguingly proposes, "[d]ialogue form as a visual image—and therefore as a kind of 'idea'—may be possible only to printed fiction, or to the dialogue as a written genre, and not to drama or to spoken social practice."²⁰ Among the various approaches to dialogue discussed in the project, Fogel's theory of forced dialogue directs the greatest attention to the physicality of a page of dialogue, a feature that is too often dismissed as trivial, even though it provides the most immediate cue to the reader that the text is about to force him or her to respond to its withholding of narrative text. Although *Coercion to Speak* grapples specifically with Conradian issues like imperialism and "international 'overhearing,'" the overarching theory, with its examination of forced dialogue and the Oedipal dialogue situation, matches seamlessly with Compton-Burnett's aesthetic and her interest in domestic tyranny.²¹ Fogel's theory also provides a groundwork from which

20. Ibid., 7.

21. Ibid., 41.

we can begin to theorize Compton-Burnett's place among her more canonical contemporaries and how her use of dialogue fiction proposes a rather unique conception of literary history.

We can see Compton-Burnett's subtle take on forced dialogue by returning briefly to *A God and His Gifts*. Throughout Compton-Burnett's novels, marriage is figured as a social structure designed for the subjection of women, a pattern that continues in this late work. Having been rejected by his first choice at the start of the narrative, Hereward makes an oddly public proposal to Ada Merton in front of his sister Zillah and Ada's father. During this scene, he explains that his future wife's concerns must remain secondary to his sister's. But because Ada has an equal affection for Zillah, this condition actually makes Hereward's proposal more appealing, so that she asks for her father's consent to their union:

"Father, you have no objection to Hereward as a son?"

"None to him as a son. As my daughter's husband it is hard to be sure. He asks, as he says, more than other men. Is he to give any more? You have a stable nature; I have valued it, my dear. He is more uncertain, and, as I should judge, could be carried away. If there are risks in the future, are they his or yours?"

"They are mine, Father. I face them with open eyes. I am prepared to give some quarter. I don't feel I am so much in myself. I am hardly on the level of Hereward and Zillah, and am not unwilling to redress the balance."

"As your father I can hardly support that account."

"Nor can I," said Hereward. "I accept it even less than you. I don't ask you to trust me with your daughter. That is asking much. If she will trust herself to me, I will accept and fulfil the trust. I think it is for her to judge."

"I have judged, Father," said Ada.

"Then I have no more to say."²²

22. Compton-Burnett, *A God and His Gifts*, 33-34.

In this passage, Hereward's marriage proposal coerces Ada's assent by invoking the existing power of family, both his and hers. But Ada's assent is not entirely her own; instead, her father's silence secures the union, and Hereward's talk secures this silence. Mr. Merton's silence is skillfully invoked by Hereward, as the young man displays like-mindedness with the father's assessment of Ada's poor "account" of things before he comically calls on her judgment of the marriage prospect to stand as the final word. Despite Mr. Merton's misgivings, Hereward's domination is complete with the "detonation," the assenting silence, of Mr. Merton's saying, "I have no more to say." Thus, what appears to be an act of women's agency by the free choice of her marriage partner is actually an instance of forced dialogue in which one dominant male figure, the father, is supplanted by a second dominant male figure, the husband, through the husband's silencing of the father.

Forced dialogue's tendency to reinforce power relations is already apparent in Compton-Burnett's first dialogue novel, *Pastors and Masters* (1925). Here, her aesthetic is firmly in place, as this dialogue novel offers a satirical treatment of familial, educational, and parental authorities alongside a rather hapless attempt to claim another's language for one's own fame. Unlike many of Compton-Burnett's later novels, *Pastors and Masters* is set in a contemporary postwar period.²³ The novel is set in a private English preparatory school for boys and focuses on the school's comic day-to-day management and the literary aspirations of a circle that includes the schoolmaster,

23. Her tendency to set her later novels in the Victorian period reveals another form of withholding that will be discussed in detail alongside *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947).

Nicholas Herrick. The novel also encompasses the household of the Reverend Henry Bentley, whose sons attend the school. Bentley's patriarchal tyranny provides an early example of the father as speech-forcer, a trope that will be echoed by later Compton-Burnett characters like Horace Lamb in *Manservant and Maidservant*. One of Compton-Burnett's most recognizable character types, the domestic tyrant is notable for employing language to enforce the social structures and ideologies that provide his or her power. Bentley's tyranny is given wide reign during chapter five, which is the only chapter set in the Bentley household. This masterpiece of compression and constraint is the literal and thematic centerpiece of the novel, where Compton-Burnett's mastery of forced dialogue is on full display. The opening exchange between Bentley and his daughter introduces dialogue motifs that Compton-Burnett will evoke throughout the rest of her career. She writes:

“Are the boys coming?” said the Reverend Henry Bentley.
“They are out of their room, Father,” said his daughter.
“I asked you if they were coming.”
“They are out of their room, Father. We are all a little late this morning.”
“I know we are late. I asked you if they were coming.”²⁴

The pastor's perverse pursuit of a literal response is a dialogue pattern that occurs repeatedly in Compton-Burnett's works. In this motif, a character who seeks dominance (e.g. a patriarch) repeats an inquiry until the interlocutor (e.g. a child or dependant) replies in language that submits absolutely to the constraints of the initial question and, by extension, to the speech forcer. This browbeating version of forced dialogue is typically invoked by characters in power, and, as such, it produces the peculiar effect of

24. Compton-Burnett, *Pastors and Masters*, 57.

stripping the narrative with false conflict manufactured to establish a hierarchy of speakers and reinforce the status quo. The fact that these scenes are simultaneously comic and threatening is a pointed reminder of the tenuous privilege usually enjoyed by the speech forcer. For example, Reverend Bentley's inquiry about the boys' doings is less concerned with them than with establishing his authority over his daughter by making her submit to his language.

But over the course of thirty years, Bentley's daughter, Delia, has learned to appropriate her father's speech-forcing tactics and to employ silence as a different form of coercion. Compton-Burnett writes:

“We shall have a windy walk to the college chapel,” said Mr. Bentley.
“What did you say, Father?” said Delia.
Mr. Bentley did not answer.
“We shall have a windy walk to the chapel,” he presently said, in a still lower voice.
“What did you say, Father?”
Mr. Bentley did not answer.
“Would you like lunch at one or half-past, Father?”
Mr. Bentley was silent.
“Would you like lunch at one or half-past, Father?”
Mr. Bentley was silent.
“Father, I think you heard me.”
“Since it is the fashion this morning to be deaf, I may as well follow it.”²⁵

The primary forcing principles in this passage become repetition and silence. When Delia implies that she failed to hear Bentley's initial statement, she ingeniously invites him to repeat himself, thereby mocking and appropriating the repetition and literalism that had been Bentley's forcing principles during their opening exchange. Feeling himself possibly coerced, Bentley delays his response to give his eventual repetition the

25. Ibid., 57-58.

appearance of a self-motivated statement rather than a reply to his daughter. Dropping “college” from his second declaration about their walk, Bentley also refuses Delia’s implicit call for him to repeat verbatim his initial statement—even though this type of literalism was his guiding principle during their opening exchange. In short, Bentley positions himself as the character who initiates talk rather than responds to it, who masters talk rather than serves it. Bentley’s ultimate mastery is secured after his silence forces Delia to stop her mocking repetitions, thereby affirming the power of his non-response and allowing him the upper-hand to admonish her behavior.

The quotidian nature of this struggle is confirmed when the chapter moves without warning into the next day’s events where similar battles take place. When Fogel speaks of “detonations” as loud, silencing responses that pass “sentence” on what comes before, he focuses on consequential events that significantly alter a *fabula* and its characters. But I would like to argue that Compton-Burnett’s version of the dialogue novel invites us to see forced dialogue and responding detonations as the more constrained events of everyday life. In a situation like the Bentley household where every instance of dialogue is an instance of coerced speech, detonations do not recast the power structures governing talk. Instead, detonations simply mark the conclusion of one instance of forced dialogue, thereby configuring narrative event in the dialogue novel as the striping of forced speech and silencing response, forced speech and silencing response, with no conclusive concussion.

Furthermore, we must note that speech-forcers like Bentley are forced to acknowledge and engage with an other to maintain authority. Forced speech therefore

operates according to a coercive logic akin to Hegel's master-slave dialectic in which "[a subject] must proceed to supersede the *other* independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being; secondly, in so doing it proceeds to supersede its *own* self, for this other is itself."²⁶ Of course, unlike Hegel's master-slave parable, Compton-Burnett's novels do not present this struggle as a necessary step toward absolute consciousness. Instead, her characters are mired in this eternally present conflict with only their speech to define them. This situation can lend her tyrant's speech-forcing an almost absurdist quality, which makes this verbal violence even more purposeless and terrifying for its objects. For example, the fact of the "windy walk to the college chapel" is never in question but the verbal acknowledgement of this plan's wisdom is. In fact, when Bentley's cruel manipulations find his children fearing to speak with him, he can scarce believe this "breach of manners":

"Can I speak to you, Father?" [asked Delia].

"Speak? Of course you can speak. Do get out of this way of making mysteries. Speak, and try to be natural and to make the point."

"John and Harry [Bentley's sons] have come home, Father. They want to speak to you, I think."

"Want to speak to me! Want to speak! Of all the habits my family has ever had! Call them in, and let them speak, make them speak. I will have no more of it."²⁷

Bentley demands speech because his power can only be enforced through the exchange of words—hence his vigorous resistance to the silence that resists his authority. But, as we have seen, Bentley himself has used silence to force speech. Thus, Bentley's closing words to his sons—"Go away then, and do not speak. Behave as my children always do.

26. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 180.

27. Compton-Burnett, *Pastors and Masters*, 63.

Go away, without a word, to your own concerns”²⁸—force their silence, but it is a silence to which they readily acquiesce. Indeed, it is a cooperative forcing because his sons were refusing to speak before he claimed the authority to silence them. Ultimately, both Bentley and his sons perceive themselves as detonating this exchange, a momentary sense of closure that will inevitably open to future struggles of forced speech and silence.

The plot of *Pastors and Masters* is largely an excuse to display how power is reinforced through the exchange or refusal of language, but it closes with two significant reversals that expose the fragility of these power structures. After Bentley is invited to the school in an effort to placate his dissatisfaction with his sons’ being passed over for an award, his domestic rage becomes surprisingly tame when the conversation turns to what constitutes good reading and his daughter Delia proves better able to engage this topic than he. The extension of their family’s conversational set to the members of the school community renders Bentley’s dominion moot and demonstrates just how important constrained social settings are for the forced-dialogue dynamic of Compton-Burnett’s novels. But by far the more sensational revelation pertains to the literary aspirations of Mr. Herrick and Mr. Bumpus, and the excitement stirred up over a proposed public reading of their newly finished creative works. Mr. Herrick wants to bolster his standing as the learned schoolmaster by delivering a novel that will establish his literary fame and secure the honor of the school. But Herrick’s inability to create causes him to steal a manuscript from the room of a recently deceased friend, Mr. Crabbe. Unfortunately for Herrick, this manuscript turns out to be Bumpus’s novel,

28. *Ibid.*, 68.

which was left behind in Crabbe's room when both men went to pay their last respects. Even more bizarrely, Bumpus's novel is just a reworking from memory of a novel he had written and buried twenty years ago. Once the literary shams of both men are exposed, the reading comes to a sudden halt, as neither will publicly own his deception.

The comedy of Herrick's plagiarism of Bumpus (and Bumpus's plagiarism of his past self) starts early in the novel when Herrick explains that after the death of Crabbe "the form" of the short novel "flashed" on him, although this event was merely his finding what he thought was Crabbe's manuscript and hence a ready-made novel to claim as his own.²⁹ Hoping to figure himself a romantic genius struck by inspiration, Herrick argues that his novel "will be something of an exposure for me. Because my book brings out really a new self in me, a self that I was hardly conscious was there, myself."³⁰ Of course, Herrick's exposure as a plagiarist reveals the illusory nature of his proclaimed depths of mind and inspired self-fashioning. Herrick's exposure also reveals Compton-Burnett's overriding practice of representing characters as constructed from without rather than emergent from within. Instead of conceiving her characters as independent minds peering out and acting upon the world, they tend to be cogs within established hierarchies, like church, school, and family, that must work on and through the language of these institutions.

Compton-Burnett also represents these shaping institutions and the characters they determine as essentially frozen in time. As the author said during her

29. *Ibid.*, 23.

30. *Ibid.*, 55.

“Conversation” with Margaret Jourdain, “I do not feel that I have any real or organic knowledge of life later than about 1910. When an age has ended, you see it as it is.”³¹ Compton-Burnett’s comment is, of course, a play on Virginia Woolf’s oft-repeated claim that “on or about December 1910 human character changed.”³² For Woolf this change necessitated a revolt against the realist novel’s conventional use of language and its inadequate representation of how the mind mediates the material world. But, for Compton-Burnett, change cannot be charted while it occurs, and history divides itself into ages, like scenes, whose import cannot be divined until it has concluded. As a comic reminder of the slow pace and difficulties involved in limning change, she has Bumpus claim his two books as authentic representations of himself, then and now. He says, “Now my book shows an old side of me; a young side, I might say, that I thought had been covered up for twenty years. I wonder if any of you will find my old self in it.”³³ Of course, both books are the same, so, for Bumpus, his old and new selves are one and the same. It is worth remembering here that *Pastors and Masters*, unlike all of Compton-Burnett’s other fiction, has a contemporaneous setting that takes place just after the First World War. Apparently, the continuity of Bumpus’s character was not disrupted anytime on or about December 1910.

Bumpus is not alone in revealing time’s passing as inconsequential in *Pastors and Masters*. Emily Herrick, the thieving schoolmaster’s fifty-year-old unmarried sister and

31. Compton-Burnett and Jourdain, “A Conversation,” 27.

32. Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 746.

33. Compton-Burnett, *Pastors and Masters*, 55.

roommate, spends much of the novel wishing for life changes that remain pathetically out of reach. She wishes she were “not a spinster”; she wishes she had “the vigorous use of metaphor”; she wishes she “could do difficult things without knowing it.”³⁴ While certainly humorous, Emily’s desires seethe with a self-loathing rage that could lead to violence; she says, “I understand now why people sometimes murder people they are known to be fond of. They ought to murder them.”³⁵ Such violence erupts in Compton-Burnett’s other novels, but Emily is not the sort to perpetrate either physical or verbal violence. Instead, she would prefer to live eternally in her present state of bitter longing for utopia. As she says, “I should love to live for ever. I don’t wonder that religious people, who can plan things, arrange it like that.”³⁶ Interestingly, Compton-Burnett’s dialogue-novel form produces just this sense of eternal presentness that stokes unrequited desires like Emily’s and makes frequent buffoons of those seeking to direct their futures. Wolfgang Iser’s analysis of Compton-Burnett’s *A Heritage and Its History* provides a useful description of how her dialogue form impacts the representation of time and purposeful action:

The constant use of the dialogue form has strong repercussions on the narrative, for it automatically sets all events in an immediate present and precludes the description of any external reality. Thus the social setting necessary for an alignment of past and present is shrunk to the barest minimum. The author has vanished behind the words of her characters, declining to comment or to explain, and so we are deprived of any background save the utterances of the characters themselves. And these are so devoid of context—and therefore so loaded with potential

34. Ibid., 38, 39.

35. Ibid., 37.

36. Ibid.

contexts—that they are endowed with a strange and disturbing inexhaustibility.³⁷

Iser's reading is valuable not merely for its delineation of the strangely atemporal "immediate present" that differentiates the dialogue novel form, but also for the implication that the dialogue form denies clear-cut cause-and-effect and, hence, character agency. *Pastors and Masters* further disrupts cause-and-effect by opening chapter five with events at the Bentley breakfast table that occur before the events of chapter four's prize-giving ceremony. Because dialogue novels usually adhere to a strict linear sequence, this analepsis is not immediately apparent and the reader initially assumes that the early events of chapter five occur after the events of chapter four. Thus, Bentley's anger is read as a consequence of the events at the school. Once the disjointed chronology becomes clear, the reader experiences it as a sort of formal detonation, a disruption to our expectations for cause and effect. But the real violence comes from the realization that the disruption hardly matters. Indeed, chapter five's opening scene might be set on any day at the Bentley breakfast table, for the conversation would be the same. This sameness contributes to the reader's delayed realization that the events of chapter five are out of sequence because, regardless of time or subject matter, the forms and motifs of forced speech remain constant.

As we have seen, Compton-Burnett's dialectic of forced speech and silencing detonations tends to authorize existing power structures despite attempts to undermine them. But intelligent readers of Compton-Burnett's eleventh dialogue novel, *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947), have identified a trace of lightness and leniency here that is

37. Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 153.

absent from many of her other novels.³⁸ So while this novel reinforces the patterns we've identified in her other works, it also forces us toward a new understanding of Compton-Burnett's use of the dialogue-novel form. Published at the dead-center of her career (eight books after *Pastors and Masters* and eight books before *A God and His Gifts*) and set at the end of the nineteenth century, *Manservant and Maidservant* dramatizes the lives of the Lamb family and their servants. During the first half of the novel, Horace Lamb, the family patriarch, rules over his family and servants with sadistic and miserly pleasure, drawing particular delight from lording over every crumb and refusing requests for more even though there's plenty. Horace justifies his relentless bullying through egotistical speeches about how others have wronged him and how he alone sacrifices for the family's benefit. His power originates in late-Victorian gender ideology that grants him primacy in the household even though his wealth comes from his wife. Horace also reigns supreme over the servants of his household, including George the footman, Miriam the maid, Mrs. Seldon the cook, and Bullivant the butler. The hierarchies of the servants' world provide an interesting counterpart to the family structure in the novel because some servants, like George, actively resist Horace's tyranny, while others, like Bullivant, consider such mastery the proper order of things. Midway through the novel, Horace's dominance is threatened when he discovers that his wife, Charlotte, and his beloved, live-in cousin Mortimer have fallen in love and plan to elope.³⁹ In an act that genuinely pains

38. "It is as if [Compton-Burnett] has turned a corner in a dark tunnel and emerged into a brighter landscape." Powell, *Compton-Burnett Compendium*, 133.

39. Much like his economic wellbeing, Mortimer's desires are mediated by Horace to the point that he fixates on Charlotte.

him, Horace banishes Mortimer from the house and suddenly becomes the very model of a doting father to align his children against their mother. But Horace's children don't believe in his transformation. Indeed, they remain in such fear of him that when a footbridge on the estate becomes damaged, Horace's two eldest boys, Marcus and Jasper, choose not to warn their father as he sets out for his daily walk knowing full well that he will likely fall to his death. While Emily in *Pastors and Masters* only spoke offhandedly about murder, here we see family members driven to actual murderous silence by hatred for their oppressors. Horace survives this first plot of silence and repairs the bridge, but the young servant George, who at one point considers suicide preferable to facing Horace's rage over some stolen cakes, imitates the Lamb boys and damages the bridge again in the hope that Horace will fall to his death during a later walk. After Horace survives this second murder attempt unfazed—his wife claims that “Horace takes an attempt on his life better than one on his household goods”⁴⁰—he soon falls suddenly and gravely ill, and the novel offers a satirical treatment of the deathbed scene in the Victorian novel, with passages of traditional narrative text and “going behind.” But just as suddenly as he falls ill, Horace recovers, and the novel concludes with a reprise of its opening scene.

The novel's circularity indicates that, despite momentary disruptions, the power structures that permit Horace's tyranny are preserved. The opening of the novel presents the familiar Compton-Burnett pattern of a tyrant invoking literalism to force speech from a resistant interlocutor:

40. Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant*, 260.

“Is that fire smoking?” said Horace Lamb.

“Yes, it appears to be, my dear boy.”

“I am not asking what it appears to be doing. I asked if it was smoking.”

“Appearances are not held to be a clue to the truth,” said his cousin.

“But we seem to have no other.”

“Good morning,” he said in a preoccupied tone, that changed as his eyes resumed their direction. “It does seem that the fire is smoking.”

“It is in the stage when smoke is produced. So it is hard to see what it can do.”

“Did you really not understand me?”

“Yes, yes, my dear boy. It is giving out some smoke. We must say that it is.”⁴¹

What marks this interrogation as different from other instances of forced dialogue in Compton-Burnett’s work is the fact that the speech-forcer, Horace, has a genuine affection for Mortimer. In fact, Horace so loves his cousin that this love survives Mortimer’s plot to run off with his wife. Mortimer is an unusual Compton-Burnett character because he openly admits that he is concerned not with things-as-they-are but with things-as-they-appear—or, as he says later in the novel, “I live on the surface, not in the depths.”⁴² Mortimer’s interest in surfaces helps make him one of the most dazzling talkers in the novel; indeed he is the most Wildean character in terms of both speech and behavior. He speaks in riddles and aphorisms, like, “I have so often resisted temptation, and always without success. When people resist it with success, I always wonder how we know they have had any.”⁴³ Also like Wilde, Mortimer’s surface-level playfulness

41. *Ibid.*, 3.

42. *Ibid.*, 57. While other Compton-Burnett characters are certainly committed with keeping up appearances, they tend to do so because they believe appearances are the outward manifestations of deeper meaning. For example, Horace wants his family to be frugal because restraint in the moment is his guiding principle.

43. *Ibid.*, 174.

paradoxically reveals that he is serious about language. Mortimer even believes that “words” are his “stock-in-trade.”⁴⁴ In so far as the property-less, trade-less Mortimer has possessions or skills, they reside in language.

Mortimer’s facility with language makes him the perfect partner for Horace’s verbal abuse. As the fireside conversation demonstrates, Horace’s tyranny is directly linked to a literal use of language that names and controls his world—as he first asks whether the fire is smoking and continues to badger Mortimer until he receives a declarative statement that the fire is indeed smoking. Horace understands discourse in much the same way that he understands life: there are masters and there are servants. Masters control, while servants submit to the master’s will. But Mortimer, who is neither master nor servant, speaks in language that reflects his displaced situation.

While Mortimer’s play makes him dependent upon but unaltered by Horace’s bullying, it also provides Horace with numerous opportunities to perfect his linguistic violence. Hence, when he is struck by “moods of nervous abandonment, when he feared nothing and nobody,” those rages typically direct themselves against his children, who have the least power to resist him and who he genuinely believes can benefit from his instruction.⁴⁵ Horace’s manic desire to control the household discourse can be seen early in the novel when his sons, Marcus and Jasper, build a large fire to warm themselves. Horace is outraged by this action because he had previously commanded that the fires be kept small for economy’s sake. In place of a large fire, he suggests that the children

44. *Ibid.*, 229.

45. *Ibid.*, 4.

“stand, walk, [or] run” to warm their “congealed or sluggish” blood.⁴⁶ When his son Jasper dares to dispute Horace’s logic, Horace embraces the conflict to reassert his mastery over his children. He asks:

“Was I speaking to you, Jasper?”

“No, but he spoke to you,” said Marcus. “Anyone is allowed to speak.”

“You can wait to speak to your father, until he speaks to you.”

“But suppose there was something we had to say to you?”

“Then say it,” said Horace, sending his voice to a higher note. “Say it, say it, say it. I am not preventing you. I await your pleasure. What is the important communication? I am all attention; I am all ears. Say it, say it.”

...

“Did it exist, Marcus?” said Horace.

“No,” muttered Marcus, his eyes filling with tears.

Horace felt that an argument ended in his favor, when his opponent wept, and as he always pursued one to this point, had no experience of defeat in words.⁴⁷

Horace masters this conversation by demanding that his children refrain from speaking until they are spoken to. Despite this temporary victory, Horace’s mocking request for “the important communication” returns to haunt him when Marcus and Jasper withhold important information about the broken bridge along his walking path, thereby threatening to end his life in a tumble down the ravine. The boys’ refusal to warn Horace about the missing bridge represents both an effort to destroy their tyrant and an inability to escape his domination. In a near-fatal irony, the boys’ refusal to pass “the important communication” about the damaged bridge shows them obeying Horace’s lessons only too well. They cannot speak because they have not been prompted for it, and they have been taught that presuming something has value without such prompting will result in

46. Ibid., 38.

47. Ibid., 39.

future cruelty. In this instance, Horace has forced a silence that threatens his very existence, producing a variation of what Fogel calls the “Oedipal dialogue process,” in which forcing speech—or in this case, silence—threatens to undo the forcing power.

Beyond silencing his household, Horace desires to silence his own impoverished past, his wife’s greater connection to the family wealth, and Bullivant’s greater connection to the family estate. Horace’s efforts to preserve his tenuous power by constantly forcing speech makes him conceive time and causality as a succession of “immediate present[s].”⁴⁸ In other words, Horace’s reliance on dialogue forces him to perceive the world in a manner similar to how the dialogue-novel form affects its reader’s experience of the related events. Like many of Compton-Burnett’s other characters, Horace is so mistakenly committed to his own present self-fashioning that he refuses to see past actions or words as affecting the immediate present. This delusion is most tragically expressed by Horace’s refusal to recognize his role in Marcus and Jasper’s silence on the “important communication” about the damaged bridge. Horace argues that “[i]t is no good to take the stand that it is the natural result of the past. Of anything you like in the past. This is no doing of mine.”⁴⁹ And this claim is not the first time Horace has argued for his freedom from history and past actions. Indeed, throughout the novel, Horace repeatedly argues that the past has no bearing on the present. Near the beginning of the narrative, he dismisses George the footman’s workhouse background, claiming that

48. We should recall these words as Iser’s description of the effects of the form of the dialogue novel on its reader. *The Implied Reader*, 153.

49. Compton-Burnett, *Pastors and Masters*, 223.

“we carry no sign of our history.”⁵⁰ Later in the novel, when Charlotte complains that Horace’s sudden change-of-heart cannot amend for his previous cruelty, Horace confidently states that “[t]he past will not return.”⁵¹ Of course, the past continues to haunt the present, and it does return in the murderous actions of Marcus, Jasper, and George the footman. As Marcus explains, Horace’s past tyranny overshadows his recent efforts to play the role of the “good father”:

“We are afraid of you. You know we are,” said Marcus. “Your being different for a while has not altered all that went before. Nothing can alter it. You did not let us have anything; you would not let us be ourselves. If it had not been for Mother, we would rather have been dead. It was feeling like that so often, that made us think dying an ordinary thing. We had often wished to die ourselves. It is not the same with you as with other people. If anyone else did something, we should just see that thing. If you do it, it adds itself to all the rest. We cannot help it. Neither can you help it now. It is something that cannot be changed.”⁵²

Horace’s worldview of eternal self-fashioning and freedom from past events makes him not only a supreme Compton-Burnett tyrant, but a vivid example of how the dialogue-novel form lends itself more readily to the representation of certain character types. Unlike the everyman sensuality of a Leopold Bloom or the emergent artistic consciousness of a Lily Briscoe—both of which require extensive representations of character thought and feeling to achieve authenticity—Horace Lamb’s domestic tyranny is best understood through repeated representations of his interaction with other speech-users. Horace stands as a concrete example of how the formal constraints of the dialogue

50. *Ibid.*, 8.

51. *Ibid.*, 147.

52. *Ibid.*, 233.

novel yield characters who are committed to self-invention through forced dialogue and a nearly atemporal worldview. In other words, Ivy Compton-Burnett's cast of dominating and dominated characters over nineteen novels and forty-six years may have been coerced by her chosen form. Perhaps critics who've looked to Greek tragedies or Jane Austen for analogues to Compton-Burnett's novels should also have considered the Greek romance, whose adventure chronotope is characterized by "a *technical, abstract connection between time and space*" and whose characters are "completely *unchanging*" during their "*enforced movement through time and space.*"⁵³ Of course, unlike the heroes of Greek romance, Compton-Burnett's heroes do not travel widely through space, and rather than having "fate" control their destinies, their plots are subject to the structuring strictures of dialogue.

Given dialogue's constraints, it is surprising how frequently discussions of dialogue feature positive considerations of its openness. Bakhtin's note when he was reworking his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) provides a clear statement about the expansiveness and the productive possibilities of dialogue that exemplifies how the idea has typically been addressed:

The dialogic nature of consciousness. The dialogic nature of human life itself. The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this

53. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," 100, 105.

discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.⁵⁴

While Bakhtin privileges the openness of dialogue as the “fabric of human life,” Ivy Compton-Burnett identifies dialogue’s constraints as that fabric instead. She even goes so far as to show how limitations can lead to increased freedoms. In fact, *Manservant and Maidservant* includes two memorable characters who gain agency through submitting to Horace’s mastery. Charlotte Lamb and Bullivant the butler stand as the two characters who best negotiate Horace’s tyranny, neutralizing his power by submitting to it. Charlotte admits that she long ago learned the futility of fighting Horace on his terms. She says, “I spoke many times in the first years, and found the uselessness of speech.”⁵⁵ Paradoxically, submitting to Horace’s speech gives her the freedom to disappear for much of the novel on extended trips and plot to slip away with Mortimer forever.

Unlike Charlotte who learned to submit only after years of punishment, Bullivant has not been bullied into complying with Horace’s wishes. Rather, Bullivant is genuinely satisfied with his position in life and has no ambition to modify it. He sincerely claims, “A servant I am, and a servant I remain.... So it is; so it has been; so it will be; and I am satisfied.”⁵⁶ Bullivant may seem mastered by Horace, but because he submits freely, he

54. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 293.

55. Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant*, 148.

56. *Ibid.*, 210.

requires no mastering.⁵⁷ Further, while Horace owns the house, Bullivant has a more substantial history with the property, having served Horace's father there. This makes Horace respect and even fear Bullivant. We can see the texture of their cooperative master-servant relationship during the novel's closing scene, when the narrative returns to the smoking fire and Bullivant has replaced Mortimer as Horace's interlocutor:

“Bullivant, the fire is smoking,” said Horace. “When did you have the sweep?”

“At the accepted interval, sir. He observes regularity, if no other of his obligations.”

“It is nothing to do with the grate.”

“Nothing at all, sir,” said Bullivant, hastening towards it. “It could not draw as sweet as it does, if that were the case. There may be some slight obstruction.”

“You need not jump back, as if a tiger had sprung at you,” said Horace, as this incident occurred.

“No, sir,” said Bullivant, sustaining a second onslaught without a sign. “It is a mild outbreak. Doubtless some vagary of the wind.”

“The wind must be a woman,” said Horace with a smile.

“Yes, sir, but much of the world is that, as emerges in my calling. And indeed it is not a thing one would speak against.”

Horace could only be silent.⁵⁸

In this passage, Bullivant reveals that his strategy for dealing with Horace is a display of household mastery (noting the physics of the fireplace drawing air) matched with a display of submission to his housemaster (taking an onslaught of smoke after Horace scolds him for jumping away from it). Because Bullivant's history with the house is his strength, he benefits from making the past the future, even if that requires his future subjugation. Thus, it is rather unexpected when he cites the wisdom of his “calling” to

57. This, of course, echoes Hegel's master-slave dialectic, where Bullivant achieves independence from Horace through his work.

58. Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant*, 309.

silence Horace on the subject of women.⁵⁹ By linking this insight with his mastery of the house, Bullivant forces Horace's silence because to speak against what "emerges in [Bullivant's] calling" would be to speak against the property and propriety that empower both men. Hence, Horace's silence on the little vagaries of women shows Horace finally admitting the power of the past and owning that past to ensure his future power.

The tensions between historical continuity and disowning the past, tradition and rebellion, discourse as mastery and discourse as submission undergird the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett. Eschewing interiority, Compton-Burnett represents character as struggles of forced (and forcing) talk and silence. More than any other author in this study, Compton-Burnett uniquely demonstrates how the constraints of dialogue replicate the unequal relations that define everyday life—between women and men, parents and children, institutions and individuals. But her general philosophy that justice is a "literary convention" and that "the evidence tends to show that crime on the whole pays" lends her works a rather harsh worldview that counters the general trend to treat dialogue as primarily liberating and expansive.⁶⁰ That said, Compton-Burnett's work does liberate our conceptions of dialogue by showing how radically the representation of speech affects our perceptions of narrative time and character. The modernist period finds an appropriately contradictory artist in Ivy Compton-Burnett: one who can sustain both Elizabeth Bowen's claim that Compton-Burnett continues the Victorian novel "from the

59. Bullivant's wisdom also implicitly enjoins the patriarch to refrain from patriarchal discourse.

60. Millgate, "An Interview," 43. Compton-Burnett stated this quotable line while defending her work against critics who labeled her novels amoral.

inside” and Nathalie Sarraute’s argument that Compton-Burnett’s representation of “the fluctuating frontier that separates conversation from subconversation” opens onto whatever it is that follows modernism.⁶¹ Indeed, perhaps the most productive lesson offered by Compton-Burnett’s novels is that they remind us that “[w]hen an age has ended, you see it as it is,” while the “immediate present” conveyed by her strict adherence to the dialogue form reminds us that the modernist project is still ongoing.

61. Bowen, “Elders and Betters,” 61. Sarraute, “Conversation and Sub-conversation,” 155. For Sarraute, at least one part of what follows modernism is the French *nouveau roman*.

CHAPTER FOUR

WILLIAM GADDIS'S *CARPENTER'S GOTHIC* AND

NICHOLSON BAKER'S *CHECKPOINT*:

“RESCUED FROM UNCERTAINTY, RAISED TO THE SURFACE”

As some of the terms I used in earlier chapters indicate—e.g. actant, fabula, and storyworld—my discussion of the dialogue novel has been significantly informed by narratology's past attempts to catalogue and explicate the formal dimensions of narrative texts. Yet classical narratology—the more structuralist wing of the field that was prefigured by Russian Formalism of the 1920s and 1930s and institutionalized during the 1970s and 1980s by such critics as Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov, Seymour Chatman, Dorrit Cohn, and Gerald Prince—has devoted comparatively scant attention to dialogue because it has focused primarily on how text (*szujet*) mediates what is represented (*fabula*), and dialogue was assumed to be both the most direct and the least complicated representational mode of narrative fictions.¹ Having considered in the previous chapters how dialogue mediates and embodies community, desire, and constructive constraint, I will now place the dialogue novel into the locus of narrative studies and explain how it also recasts some of that field's methodological assumptions.

1. Of course, narratology has also considered non-fictional narratives. Some of the most interesting work on the distinctions between the formal character of fictional and nonfictional narrative have been performed by some of the founders of classical narratology—e.g. see Cohn's *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999). But my project is concerned with dialogue fictions and will accordingly discuss narratology as a lens for analyzing fictional dialogue.

Even our most perceptive chroniclers of narrative fiction have oversimplified the complexities of dialogue. Gérard Genette's foundational *Narrative Discourse* largely ignored dialogue during its survey of narrative modes. Genette does broach the interesting question of whether or not scenes of dialogue produce passages where the duration of what is conveyed and the duration of what is told coincide—ultimately deciding, quite rightly I think, that scenes of dialogue “cannot serve us as a reference point for a rigorous comparison of real durations.”² But after noting that dialogue usually does little to convey the speed with which words are spoken or the duration of silences between exchanges, he dismisses dialogue as a temporal baseline for fiction and hence a worthy subject for discussion. It is likely that Genette's strict textual orientation makes him unwilling to speculate on unstated characteristics of dialogue; unfortunately, this silence downplays the significance such speculation has in shaping narrative experience. As a second example of important criticism that has contributed to a simplified perspective on dialogue within narratology, Dorrit Cohn's magisterial *Transparent Minds* understandably devotes little time to dialogue in its review of narrative modes to represent consciousness. But, as Alan Palmer has persuasively argued, this perspective overlooks the extent to which internal states of being are conveyed through speech, gesture, and action—what he calls the “social mind.”³ Further, Cohn's emphasis on the

2. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 87.

3. In “The Construction of Fictional Minds” (2002), Alan Palmer argues that “classical narratology has neglected the whole minds of fictional characters in action” (emphasis added, 28) because of a tendency to discuss fictional thought almost exclusively in terms of “speech categories,” like interior monologue or free indirect discourse. For Palmer, the emphasis on “speech categories” overestimates the verbal nature of thought and underestimates the extent to which interiority is conveyed by

representation of third-person interiority as the distinguishing marker of fiction threatens to remove the marker of “novel” from the dialogue novel.

Some formally-minded narratologists go so far as to exclude dialogue from what properly constitutes narrative, arguing that narrative text is only produced by narrators; for example, Mieke Bal’s *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* figures all dialogue as non-narrative embedded texts, offering the example of a short story composed entirely of dialogue in which “[t]he title is the only utterance of the primary narrator.”⁴ Although Bal’s position is more extreme than most, it does express the field’s predominant tendency to consider dialogue apart from other forms of representation.⁵

While I do not consider dialogue to be narrator’s text—i.e. text which is directly attributable to an internal or external narrator—dialogue is narrative text that mediates represented events and is an appropriate and necessary object of study for narratology. I also believe that extending certain insights of classical narratology to dialogue might serve for dialogue novels the same role that Jonathan Culler claimed Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* served for other narrative modes: it can alert readers “to the

character behavior and speech, which is in turn most commonly related as thought report. So, rather than limit fictional thought to “disengaged, highly verbal, thoughtful self-communings” (36), Palmer proposes that we conceive the “whole mind”—which he also calls “the social mind” and “the mind in action” (30)—as a dynamic, purposive entity that largely reveals itself by how it negotiates the context of its storyworld.

4. Bal, *Narratology*, 67. The short story under discussion is Hanna Verweg’s “Anamnesis.”

5. Postclassical narratology, which focuses on the cultural, historical, or ideological working of narrative, has been more engaged with dialogue than its structuralist forebears. For example, see Pratt’s *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* and Herman’s *Story Logic*. But this valuable work has not created the same type of taxonomy for dialogue that structuralist narratology produced for narrator’s text.

existence of fictional devices which they had previously failed to notice and whose implications they had never been able to consider. Every reader...will find that he becomes a more acute and perceptive analyst of fiction than before.”⁶ The two dialogue fictions that will frame our discussion—William Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic* (1985) and Nicholson Baker’s *Checkpoint* (2004)—have been chosen because they display an acute attention to the meditative and manipulative functions of fictional dialogue. As we shall see, these authors use dialogue fiction to blur boundaries between inside and outside, private and public, and formalism and communication.

Such distinctions are blurred in the literal architecture of William Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic*. The architectural style of Carpenter Gothic imitates the outward stonework of European Gothic in wood, resulting in extravagant but fragile external displays with patchwork interiors whose shapes are dependent on what was attempted outside. As McCandless, the owner of the titular house says:

—Oh the house yes, the house. It was built that way yes, it was built to be seen from outside it was, that was the style, he came on, abruptly rescued from uncertainty, raised to the surface —yes, they had style books, these country architects and the carpenters it was all derivative wasn’t it[...] but these poor fellows didn’t have it, the stonework and the wrought iron. All they had were the simple dependable old materials, the wood and their hammers and saws and their own clumsy ingenuity bringing those grandiose visions the masters had left behind down to a human scale with their own little inventions[...] —a patchwork of conceits, borrowings, deceptions, the inside’s a hodgepodge of good intentions like one last ridiculous effort at something worth doing even on this small a scale, because it’s stood here for ninety years....⁷

6. Culler, “Foreword” to *Narrative Discourse*, 7.

7. Gaddis, *Carpenter’s Gothic*, 227-28.

McCandless describes those who built his house as working with limited materials and “clumsy ingenuity” to make derivation “something worth doing.” While this description is absolutely appropriate for how McCandless and other characters in the novel try to impose order on their lives—from Paul Booth’s scheming to his wife Liz Booth’s writing—this passage is also emblematic of Gaddis’s approach to the novel form. Other critics have noticed this relation, including Steven Moore who notes Gaddis’s patchwork of styles and Christopher J. Knight who claims that the succession of laborers also applies to Gaddis because he “clearly imagines himself as working at the end of...the novel.”⁸

While I am inclined to agree with Moore and Knight, I want to draw much needed attention to the similarities between the architectural style of Carpenter Gothic and Gaddis’s dialogue form. Both Gaddis’s dialogue form and Carpenter Gothic architecture emphasize exteriority over interiority—an emphasis that threatens outward coherence by overworking and inward coherence by underdevelopment. The connection between the exterior display of the house and McCandless’s interior thoughts is deepened when the passage continues:

breaking off, staring up where her gaze had fled back with those towering heights and cupolas, as though for some echo: It’s like the inside of your

8. Moore argues that *Carpenter’s Gothic* contains elements of “the Gothic novel, the apocalypse, the romance (in all senses), and the metafictional meditation, along with elements of Greek tragedy, Dickensian social satire, the colonial novel, the political thriller, documentary realism, the contemporary Vietnam veteran’s story, and what Roy R. Male calls ‘cloistral’ fiction.” *William Gaddis*, 117; Knight, *Hints and Guesses: William Gaddis’s Fiction of Longing*, 167.

head McCandless, if that was what brought him to add —why when somebody breaks in, it’s like being assaulted.⁹

McCandless’s gaze here “echoes” Liz Booth’s, which is looking up to the rafters where sonic echoes might form. But the possible echo produces an echo of memory—“It’s like the inside of your head McCandless”—that recalls a conversation between McCandless and his former work acquaintance, Lester, who had broken into the house to riffle through McCandless’s papers. Although Gaddis refuses to make this connection explicit for McCandless, the reader is expected to hear this echo and recall its context. Earlier in the novel, Lester compared the inside of McCandless’s head to his disjointed library, which includes books on plate tectonics, an incomplete history of the Crusades, travelogues, poetry, and a book entitled “Greek Tragedy.” While Lester takes this eclectic library as evidence of McCandless’s lack of direction, the inclusion of “Greek Tragedy” implies McCandless’s interest in artistic unity as a counterbalance to the incomplete historical and scientific narratives that dominate his library.¹⁰ Similarly, Gaddis’s approach to dialogue fiction concretizes the dialectic between formal unity and ungovernable history. McCandless’s library is a statement on the desire for (and ultimate failure of) artistic form to master the complexities of the late twentieth century; but McCandless’s possibly unheard echo demonstrates that this dialectic only reveals itself

9. Gaddis, *Carpenter’s Gothic*, 228

10. *Ibid.*, 127. Moore identifies the book as H. D. F. Kitto’s *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*. Kitto adopts a formalist rather than a historical approach when he says, “A book on Greek tragedy may be a work of historical scholarship or of literary criticism; this book professes to be a work of criticism. Criticism is of two kinds: the critic may tell the reader what he so beautifully thinks about it all, or he may try to explain the form in which the literature is written. This book attempts the latter.” Kitto, v.

through time. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks describes plot as “the organizing line and intention of narrative, thus perhaps best conceived as an activity, a structuring operation elicited in the reader trying to make sense of those meanings that develop only through textual and temporal succession.”¹¹ I would like to argue that Gaddis’s dialogue form lays bare this “structuring operation” by demanding that readers reconcile their attempts to understand the whole of a plot with the contingencies of reading dialogue in the real time that dialogue almost uniquely represents.

Brooks memorably describes our process for interpreting narrative as “the *anticipation of retrospection*.”¹² As he explains this contradictory double logic via the example of a detective story,

The contradiction may be in the very nature of narrative, which not only uses but *is* a double logic. The detective story, as a kind of dime-store modern version of “wisdom literature,” is useful in displaying the double logic most overtly, using the plot of the inquest to find, or construct, a story of the crime which will offer just those features necessary to the thematic coherence we call a solution, while claiming, of course, that the solution has been made necessary by the crime.¹³

In *Carpenter’s Gothic*, this double logic is shown on the base level of plot events. Because Gaddis often presents information whose significance will only be explained hundreds of pages later, the reader proceeds through the text anticipating that narrative gaps will be retrospectively filled. For example, “VCR,” an amorphous economic power, is first mentioned during one of Paul Booth’s tirades on his exclusion from Liz’s family

11. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 37.

12. *Ibid.*, 23.

13. *Ibid.*, 29.

fortune, but the reader does not learn until the final sections of the novel that the acronym stands for Vorakers Consolidated Reserve and that Liz's family name is Vorakers, thereby establishing our context for Paul's early outrage. But, for the dialogue novel, the "anticipation of retrospection" involves more than the detective-like discovery of withheld (or hidden) information that imposes narrative coherence and purports to justify the value of the investigation. The dialogue form also reveals this dynamic because every utterance anticipates completion by, or at least elaboration through, the response of another. Bakhtin argues that a statement only qualifies as an utterance when it is engaged by another voice. "In other words, the difference between the utterance and the proposition (or the sentence)—a unit of language—consists in that the first is necessarily produced in a particular context that is always social.... The utterance is not the business of the speaker alone, but the result of his or her interaction with a listener."¹⁴ So rather than seeing the detective novel as the exemplary form for revealing narrative's "double logic," I would like to argue that the "immediate present" (to echo Iser's term) of dialogue fiction makes the double logic of narrative—the "anticipation of retrospection"—uniquely felt on the level of utterance as event.

To better understand this double logic, which is enacted as the dialectic between authorial emplotment and readerly interpretation, I turn to Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1984).¹⁵ Ricoeur proposes his theory of threefold mimesis to argue that

14. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, 43.

15. Brooks cites Ricoeur as a strong influence on his theory of plot: "Ricoeur's emphasis on the constructive role of plot, its active, shaping function, offers a useful corrective to the structural narratologists' neglect of the dynamics of narrative and points us toward the reader's vital role in the understanding of plot." *Reading for the Plot*, 14.

“[t]ime becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience.”¹⁶ Ricoeur’s statement here refers to the “vicious but healthy circle” of temporality and narrativity, which he enters through the dialectic between aporetic Augustinian time and unified Aristotelian plot. While Augustine’s “threefold present” posits that present time exists in so far as the mind distends into past memory and future expectation, Aristotle’s theory of plot argues that mimesis is the imitation of action, which gains meaning through the totality of plot. In simplified terms, it might appear that the action of mind in Augustine’s “threefold present” acquires meaning by refusing to close off the present, while the action of Aristotle’s plots acquires meaning by closing off form. But Ricoeur warns us against such simplifications when he says, “But so long as we place the consonance on the side of narrative and the dissonance on the side of temporality in a unilateral fashion...we miss the properly dialectical character of their relationship.”¹⁷

Ricoeur’s concept of threefold mimesis attempts to bridge these apparently mutually exclusive interpretive frameworks by discussing the prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration involved with reading a text. To resolve the problem of the relation between time and narrative, Ricoeur seeks to establish “the mediating role of emplotment [mimesis2] between a stage of practical experience that precedes it

16. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.1, 3.

17. *Ibid.*, 72.

[mimesis1] and a stage that succeeds it [mimesis3].”¹⁸ For Ricoeur, this healthy circularity results neither in false interpretation nor redundancy, because the act of reading produces a unique confluence between mimesis2 and mimesis3. He states:

On the one hand, the received paradigms...govern the story’s capacity to be followed. On the other hand, it is the act of reading that accompanies the narrative’s configuration and actualizes its capacity to be followed.... [I]t is the act of reading that accompanies the interplay of the innovation and sedimentation of paradigms that schematizes emplotment. In the act of reading, the receiver plays with the narrative constraints, brings about gaps, takes part in the combat between the novel and the antinovel, and enjoys the pleasure that Roland Barthes calls the pleasure of the text.¹⁹

For Ricoeur, prefiguration, or mimesis1, involves a basic understanding—semantic, symbolic, and temporal—that is required to make sense of a plot. This type of understanding incorporates the ability to distinguish human action from plain physical movement according to an innate understanding of humans as motivated and reasoning beings in time. Configuration, or mimesis2, involves the emplotment that structures a textual narrative in a complete and systematic way. This emplotment performs three primary structuring actions: it mediates between the individual events or incidents and a story taken as a whole (i.e. it draws configuration out of simple succession); it produces “concordant discordance”; and it mediates the temporal qualities of experience.²⁰ Configured this way, plots demonstrate relations among their elements and can be experienced and analyzed in their entirety, thereby opening productively onto mimesis3,

18. Ibid., 53. Ricoeur goes so far as to describe emplotment as an “act of judgment” that is the “joining work of the text and reader.” Ibid., 76.

19. Ibid., 76-77.

20. Ibid., 66.

which is “the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader.”²¹ This third stage, refiguration, finds readers following cues provided by the text to refigure the represented action and its meaning within the whole of a narrative, thereby linking the text to their own temporal experience and providing new insights into time and reality that should shape action in the actual world. Or, in Ricoeur’s words, “We are following, therefore the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time.”²²

As I have argued, the dialogue form of *Carpenter’s Gothic* implicates the reader directly in this refiguration while emphasizing the contingent and incomplete nature of language. In Gaddis’s dialogue, the fragmented nature of even individual utterances is presented with an unrelenting insistence unmatched by any other writer. Even though Gaddis’s slangy, halting, overextended dialogue is widely praised for its true-to-life character, it more directly reveals that what the novel imitates is action, particularly the action of trying to fit a broken language onto a disjointed world. Indeed, much of the drama of a Gaddis text stems from how his characters struggle to speak sense, even though their actions are dictated by external social, political, and economic forces. Further, their language proves inadequate not only to those forces but also to their attempts to situate themselves in relation to those forces. In *Carpenter’s Gothic*, these efforts are exemplified by Liz Booth’s withdrawal from the world through writing and

21. Ibid., 71.

22. Ibid., 54.

Paul Booth's ambitious attempt to "see how all the God damn pieces fit together, whole thing coming in from outside like walking in a God damn mine field."²³

For the physically abused Liz Booth, written language holds some promise for ordering the chaos of her surroundings. For example, Gaddis presents a scene where Liz browses McCandless's discarded address book and begins to imagine him as some weary romantic savior:

Two, then a third palm size page fell free of the worn address book, a meticulous chaos of initials and numbers, crossings out, writings in, arrows, spanning continents, bridging oceans, MHG Gold Links New D tlx 312572TZUPIN; Bill R, MTDI and numbers crossed out for BA and new numbers; for funding GPRASH Luanda and numbers; Jenny Dpnt Crcl and numbers; SOLANT and numbers crossed out; Seiko and numbers, IC, more numbers.²⁴

Despite the disjointed, discarded, hermetic nature of this information, Liz takes it as an impetus for her own writing project, "taking her pencil straight to a man somewhat older and drawing it through another life, writing in other lives; through another woman for other women."²⁵ Beyond language's opening onto possible worlds that might be better for women (this scene pointedly finds Liz reexamining "a fading bruise on the inside of her knee" produced during one of her husband's sexual assaults while an exploitative article entitled "'TEARFUL MOM' wail[s] mute from the coffee table"), Liz is also attracted to the systematic nature of language.²⁶ After her writing is interrupted by an

23. Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic*, 210.

24. *Ibid.*, 93.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

angry phone call, Liz reenters her possible fictive world (one marked by more pleasurable sexual encounters) by browsing a dictionary:

Opened to the Ds now, licking her fingertip past dogtrot, dive, her finger ran down dishevel, dishpan hands till it reached disinterested.... She hatched calm in a cuneate enclosure, licking her finger paging back to the Cs for cunning, past cut-rate, curt, running down from cuneiform and held, abruptly, at cunnilingus. She was reading it slowly, finger back to her lips, pp. of lingerie, more at LICK, when the phone rang again.²⁷

Liz's "calm in a cuneate enclosure" is both the utopian content of her possible, bruiseless world and the strict alphabetical ordering of words in a dictionary. But while the written word seems to offer some respite, her reverie is interrupted both times by telephone calls for someone else—miscommunications that result in further aggression toward Liz.

To understand why Gaddis devotes so much narrative time and actual narration (given his strong inclination toward dialogue) to these two examples of Liz reading, plotting, and writing, I return to Ricoeur's theory of threefold mimesis. In these scenes, Liz clearly hopes that her reading of the address book and dictionary will allow her to configure a plot that will have redemptive powers for herself and possibly for other women who read her text. The fact that these scenes are disrupted by the novel's dominant representational mode of dialogue actually speaks toward Gaddis's use of dialogue to produce the "concordant discordance" characteristic of mimesis². Of course, Liz hopes that she will be able to refigure these fragments and "see how all the God damn pieces fit together," to borrow the words of her abusive husband.²⁸ But Liz mistakes

27. Ibid., 94.

28. Tragically, until her early death, Liz retains an almost religious hope that ordering texts can order her life. We see this when, after learning that her brother's plane was shot down off the coast of Africa, she still "gather[s] up the pages as though, righting

random data and alphabetical order for the configurations of plot, whose temporal dimension might allow her reading to become a productive refiguration. Gaddis draws our attention to the lack of configured time in these examples as he moves from McCandless's address book, whose missing context makes its particularized history meaningless, to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, whose explication of semantics and historical usage lacks the temporal movement of history.

To emphasize the temporal dimension of narrative and involve his reader in the refiguration of the text's configured actions, Gaddis presents his reader with dialogue that can often seem stripped of context to the point that it reads as senselessly as McCandless's address book. But through the act of reading, the attentive reader sees how even the most broken utterances acquire structure in memory through the temporal succession of exchanged talk. In other words, the "immediate present" of the dialogue novel requires a reader to distend his or her mind into past and anticipated actions and utterances to refigure any single statement within the entirety of a narrative. Ricoeur expresses this function of memory, when he says,

By reading the end in the beginning and beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backward, as the recapitulating of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences. In this way, a plot establishes human action not only within time...but within memory. Memory, accordingly, *repeats* the course of events according to an order that it is the counterpart of time as "stretching-along" between a beginning and an end."²⁹

them in their folder, here in her own hand at least lay some hope of order restored." Ibid., 247.

29. Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 176.

Thus, the dialogue novel uniquely exemplifies the intersection of configuration (mimesis2) and refiguration (mimesis3) that characterizes the reading practice for Ricoeur. Despite the open invitation for readers to refigure from the ruins of talk a careful configuration of temporal experience, some critics of *Carpenter's Gothic* have found this novel to be the first of Gaddis's novels that deliberately refuses edification through the reading process. For example, Gregory Comnes argues that "the novel speaks to the reader of the limits of aesthetic mediation, enacting in narrative the fact sometimes aesthetic, coherent solutions are simply not possible."³⁰ Such readings dismiss the temporal dimension of the reading process and instead treat Gaddis's novels as static objects. In other words, they downplay the dialectic between configuration and refiguration that makes Ricoeur's theory of threefold mimesis useful for our understanding of the dialogue novel as a genre.

Carpenter's Gothic dramatizes this dialectic between totalizing narratives and time's contingencies on the level of content as well. It does so most emphatically through the debate between creationism and evolution, which is presented solely through McCandless's complaints against fundamentalist "stupidity." McCandless's anger stems from his belief that substantial cuts made to his encyclopedia entries on Darwin and evolution reflect a societal trend toward easy and complete answers. In one sense, McCandless occupies the voice of reason against what he describes as "the deliberate

30. Comnes also argues more plainly that "*Carpenter's Gothic* does not lend itself to transformation into something that says to its readers, 'Learn how to manage and transform the chaos and negativity within me so that you can learn to manage and transform the same discontinuity in the real world.'" *The Ethics of Indeterminacy*, 128.

cultivation of ignorance.”³¹ Placing his scientific method against religious faith, McCandless argues that “We have the questions and they have the answers, dressing up Genesis and calling it science.”³² But while McCandless is absolutely correct about the dangers involved in deliberate ignorance, he cultivates ignorance himself by hoarding his research. Indeed, the novel implies that his attempts to maintain dominion over his knowledge might have even landed him in a mental hospital at one point. What McCandless’s drama ultimately reveals is that even the evolutionist committed to a theory with no specific direction or conclusion craves the end point that would yield a unified narrative. We should recall here that McCandless includes the book on Greek tragedy among his scientific texts, a fact that his first wife reminds us of during her unexpected appearance late in the novel.³³ Surprisingly, the character best able to perceive McCandless’s hunger for a definitive end is Liz, who increasingly figures as the character most able to sympathize with other points of view. Near the novel’s end, when McCandless rants about religious factions in Africa foolishly engaging in an apocalyptic war, Liz counters that he is just as guilty:

—Because you’re the one who wants [the end of the world...]. And it’s why you’ve done nothing[...] to see them all go up like that smoke in the furnace all the stupid, ignorant, blown up in the clouds and there’s nobody there, there’s no rapture no anything just to see them wiped away for good it’s really you, isn’t it. That you’re the one who wants Apocalypse, Armageddon all the sun going out and the sea turned to blood you can’t wait no, you’re the one who can’t wait! The brimstone and fire and your Rift like the day it really happened because they, because you despise

31. Gaddis, *Carpenter’s Gothic*, 182.

32. *Ibid.*, 183.

33. *Ibid.*, 252.

their, not their stupidity no, their hopes because you haven't any, because you haven't any left.³⁴

Liz's outburst—her first open dissent against the men who dominate her life—proposes that McCandless hopes to silence the cultivation of ignorance because he has lost faith in everything but the sediment of scientific data. What her statement intuits is that this data, properly conceived, is not narrative—it is not human time—, and it therefore fails to give McCandless the hope needed to navigate the contingencies of everyday life. In many ways, a fossil record is similar to McCandless's address book—an accumulation of data waiting for narrative context. One could see McCandless's quest for Armageddon as seeking not merely the eradication of ignorance but an acknowledgement that balancing closure with contingency is required for a complete understanding of human time. Thus, McCandless's sanity falters and his protest against the creationists proves ineffective because he has an incomplete understanding of how “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative.”³⁵

Nicholson Baker's *Checkpoint* also uses the dialogue form to balance closure and contingency. Much like *Carpenter's Gothic*, this short novel depicts a similar conflict between right-wing powers and violent resistance—but rather than Armageddon, *Checkpoint* threatens closure through a political assassination. Published during the final months leading up to the 2004 presidential election, *Checkpoint* presents the recorded dialogue between two old friends, Ben and Jay, which is prompted by Jay's plan to assassinate George W. Bush. Jay claims that he is driven to this assassination plot

34. Ibid., 244.

35. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 3.

because of atrocities performed by the Bush administration during the Iraq war. Baker writes,

JAY: No, Ben, this guy is beyond the beyond. What he's done with this war. The murder of the innocent. And now the prisons. It's too much. It makes me so angry. And it's a new kind of anger, too. There was a story a year ago, April last year. It was a family at the checkpoint. Do you remember?³⁶

This horrific checkpoint shooting that killed ten Iraqi civilians in March 2003 triggers the mentally unstable Jay to decide that “a different kind of action is necessary” and that he is the right person for the job.³⁷ As the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Jay is not just a marginal figure in his extreme political views but a cartoonish figure as well. After all, his plans to assassinate Bush involve such ludicrous contraptions as “flying saws,” “a huge boulder” with a steerable “ball bearing” in its center, and “self-guided” bullets that he directs toward Bush by “marinating” them with a photo of the president.³⁸ While Jay's ludicrous schemes might make his assassination attempt seem mere outlandish fantasy, the final pages of the novel reveal that Jay does indeed possess a gun, bullets, and a plan to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. Jay's interlocutor is Ben, a university history professor who has put off his current academic projects on the Office of Censorship and Cold War politics to indulge a newfound fascination with photography, particularly pictures of trees. The novel's discussions range over politics, history, and art, as Ben attempts to extend the conversation to avoid the possible endpoint

36. Baker, *Checkpoint*, 7.

37. *Ibid.*, 26.

38. *Ibid.*, 63.

of Jay's murderous plot. Because of its topicality and some shrewd marketing by Knopf, *Checkpoint* was widely reviewed, but these reviews tended to focus almost exclusively on whether or not it was appropriate to discuss, even in fiction, the murder of a sitting president. For the most part, this dialogue was not well received, as evidenced by Leon Wieseltier's *New York Times* review which refers to *Checkpoint* as "[t]his scummy little book."³⁹ But *Checkpoint*'s reception was disarmingly silent on what role artistic representation plays in such discussions and why the novel was pointedly presented as a dialogue rather than a more traditional narrative.⁴⁰ To help us address these oversights, I turn to the possible-worlds theory espoused by Lubomír Doležel.

Doležel's *Heterocosmica* (1998) summarizes and extends his groundbreaking work on applying possible-worlds theory to fictional worlds. Possible-worlds theory traces its origins to Leibniz's argument that God created "the best of all possible worlds" and developed its current character through the analytic philosophy of Saul Kripke, David Lewis, and others. Simply stated, possible-worlds theory uses set theory to propose that reality is the sum total of possible, imaginable worlds plus the actual, physical world we live in. For modal logic, this framework can be used to analyze the truth value of statements according to how their logical consistency varies across these

39. Wieseltier, "Checkpoint": Nicholson Baker's Wild Talk."

40. I suspect that so little attention was directed toward *Checkpoint*'s dialogue form because Baker's 1992 phone-sex novel, *Vox*, was also written in dialogue. Indeed, when reviews did note *Checkpoint*'s dialogue form, they generally did so to note that the form was old hat for Baker and, therefore, a lazy choice.

possible worlds.⁴¹ Possible-worlds theory became an important tool for narratologists to discuss truth statements in fiction and to address important narrative problems, like how narrative is formed by a character's choice of one alternative over another, that had tended to elude systematic analysis. Indeed, the most effective narratological uses of possible-worlds theory demonstrate how our experience of fictional narrative is already shaped by alternative worlds adjacent to the actual world conveyed in the text. For example, the question, "what if Hamlet killed himself?" is explicitly figured in Shakespeare's play, and our understanding of Hamlet's character pivots on his decision to take one of several possible choices. Of course, when a fictional world obtrudes uncomfortably into the actual world—posing questions like, "What if someone assassinated the President?"—the sort of controversy that greeted Baker's *Checkpoint* is one possible outcome.

While the critical reception of *Checkpoint* has tended to map the proximity of Baker's fictional world to the actual world of Washington D.C. in 2004 (even though it's unlikely that these reviewers considered themselves engaged in such a possible-worlds exercise), this effort to make fiction speak for reality has obscured some of *Checkpoint*'s most salient concerns. In Doležel's application of possible-worlds theory to fiction, fictional worlds are not imitations of the actual world but are instead autonomous realities called into being through a type of performative language ascribed to literature by

41. According to this model, "we can define a proposition as necessary if it is true in all the worlds linked to the actual world (including this actual world itself); as possible if it is true in only some of these worlds; as impossible (e.g., contradictory) if it is false in all of them; and as true, without being necessary, if it is verified in the actual world of the system but not in some other world." Ryan, "From Parallel Universes to Possible Worlds," 645.

cultural convention. His approach intends to reconcile a strict attention to textual matters with an awareness that fictional worlds tend to expand beyond the words on a page in a reader's mind. While Doležel acknowledges a reader's central role in reconstructing a fictional world, he privileges an author's construction above a reader's reconstruction. As he explains, "we insist on the asymmetry of control in literary production. The author is responsible for text production and world construction; his text functions as a kind of score in which the fictional world is inscribed."⁴² For Doležel, fiction can refer to the actual world, but he resists calling fictional worlds mimetic because mimetic criticism does not account for "fictional particulars" that cannot be "matched with actual prototypes."⁴³ Of course, the mimesis that Doležel rejects is more the Platonic imitation of things than the Aristotelian imitation of action that informs Ricoeur's threefold mimesis. So despite his rejection of "mimesis" *in toto*, Doležel actually joins Ricoeur in developing a theory of how fictive configurations affect how our minds act on the actual world via a "model of *poiesis* we could not find in 'classical' narratology."⁴⁴

42. He continues, "The reader's text processing and world reconstruction follow the instructions of the score. To be sure, nobody can prevent actual readers from reading however they please and from using the text for whatever purpose they wish. But an individualistic ethics of reading, which grants readers this license, is not a theory of reading." Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 205.

43. *Ibid.*, 9.

44. *Ibid.*, ix. He then goes on to argue that "[d]enial of the mimetic character of fiction making does not mean severing the strong links between fiction and actuality. The semantics of this book sees a bidirectional exchange: in one direction, in constructing fictional worlds, the poetic imagination works with 'material' drawn from actuality; in the opposite direction, fictional constructs deeply influence our imaging and understanding of reality."

For Doležel, fictional worlds are structured by how an author manipulates the linguistic texture and the necessary gaps of a fictional world. He states that

The texture [i.e. the exact form of expression or the original wording] of a fictional text is the result of the choices the author makes when writing the text. When an author produces an explicit texture, he or she constructs a fictional fact.... If no texture is written (zero texture), a gap arises in the fictional-world structure. Gaps, let us repeat, are a necessary and universal feature of fictional worlds. Yet particular texts vary the number, the extent, and the functions of the gaps by varying the distribution of zero texture.⁴⁵

The balance between explicit and zero texture determines the relative “saturation” of a fictional world, where a highly saturated text contains relatively high quantities of explicit texture. For Doležel, “[t]he variable saturation of fictional worlds is a challenge to the reader, a challenge that increases as the saturation decreases.”⁴⁶ Despite a reader’s desire to respond to this challenge by closing gaps, Doležel argues that this inclination can result in imposed meaning that distorts the fictional world in question. He makes this position explicit in his criticism of Iser’s reader-response approach to fictional gaps, when he disapprovingly claims that “Iser’s reader does not submit to the text’s control but makes his or her own decisions...guided by his or her life experience.”⁴⁷ Despite his criticism of Iser, Doležel does not ignore a reader’s role in constructing meaning.

Between explicit texture and zero texture, he posits implicit texture, which conveys unstated but probable facts about a fictional world through explicit facts and represented

45. Ibid., 169-70. As an example of zero texture, Doležel mentions that whether or not Madame Bovary has a birthmark on her shoulder is neither addressed by nor consequential for Flaubert’s novel. 22.

46. Ibid., 170.

47. Ibid., 171.

actions—“verbal, mental, and physical.”⁴⁸ In short, explicit texture creates determinate facts about a fictional world; implicit texture creates indeterminate facts about a fictional world; and zero texture reveals gaps in a fictional world.

Beyond manipulating explicit texture by arranging the best words in their best order, Doležel argues that “[t]he fiction writer is free to vary the number, the extent, and the functions of the gaps; his choices between gaps and fictional facts are determined by aesthetic factors, especially by the norms of a period style, and by ideological intent.”⁴⁹ The fact that the imposed gaps can reflect “norms of a period style” or “ideological intent” brings us to another significant feature of Doležel’s theory: his distinction between the incomplete nature of fictional worlds (which are characterized by ontological gaps) and the incomplete nature of historical worlds (which are characterized by epistemological gaps). He writes,

The boundary between fictional and historical worlds is firmly set by the different nature and treatment of gaps. Fictional gaps are produced by the fiction writer, are ontological and irrecoverable. Historical gaps are due to the lack of evidence or the historian’s selectivity; they are epistemological and can be filled either by future evidence or by the historian’s recasting of the relevance hierarchy.⁵⁰

Doležel identifies both historical and fictional report as narrative practices. His distinction between the types of gaps present in both forms stems from his belief that fictional worlds refer to but do not imitate reality, while historical worlds must always subject themselves to what is known about the actual world. Thus, for Doležel, gaps in a

48. *Ibid.*, 176.

49. Doležel, “Possible Worlds of Fiction and History,” 794.

50. *Ibid.*, 796.

historical world and gaps in a fictional world call for quite different responses from their readers—gaps in a historical world invite a reader to fill them in with further external evidence, while gaps in a fictional world invite a reader to feel how this absence shapes this possible world. Hence, Doležel is a useful critical lens for examining Baker’s novel because it allows us to bypass questions about the relative appropriateness of *Checkpoint*’s subject matter to instead focus on its form. Without denying that *Checkpoint* does indeed address significant political and ethical questions for the actual United States of 2004, I believe that Baker’s novel asks us to consider the uses and limitations of pictorial and scenic forms as a checkpoint for the contingencies of temporal experience.

While Doležel argues that gaps are a necessary component of any fictional world, a dialogue novel like *Checkpoint* makes these gaps insistently felt in the texture of its talk devoid of narrative context. Doležel labels this phenomenon, in which explicit texture marks implicit meaning, as a “lacuna,” or “some felt *absence*” that is the “the most suggestive marker of implicitness.”⁵¹ What is unique about the lacunae in dialogue fiction is that absence is felt on both the level of texture and the level of the fictional world. For example, in dialogue fiction, physical space is granted almost zero texture, so a reader finds him or herself confronted with recognizably human characters in an abstracted space—a phenomenon that Gaddis put to great comic use by having his characters constantly crashing into each other and objects in their fictional world. And, of course, this “felt *absence*” for what would seem merely the expected props of a

51. Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 173.

fictional world does not prevent dialogue novels from further lacunae on issues of character motivation or mental processes. Indeed, Baker's decision to write *Checkpoint* as a dialogue novel allows him to present the explicit texture of political debate and political dissent while creating a lacuna for reasoned political thought.

Baker implies that his characters, Jay and Ben, feel pressure not to become defined by the predominant public forums for political discourse leading up to the 2004 Presidential election. Jay indicates that his assassination plot developed only after he detached from "reading Daily Kos and the Agonist, Talking Points Memo, checking Google News twenty times a day."⁵² Similarly, Ben, the history professor trying to dissuade his old friend from his ridiculous murder plan, states that he has chosen to study history partly because he enjoys the escape it offers from current pundits like William Kristol, with "[t]hat sad sickly smile on TV."⁵³ Of course, neither man is aware that they are both nothing but talking heads in the explicit texture of their fictional world.

Ben's desire to study history rather than current affairs also introduces one of the most significant but overlooked features of Baker's novel: its exploration of the connection between artistic form and historical narrative. As mentioned previously, Ben has delayed his recent book projects to explore his newfound interest in photography, particularly his taking pictures of trees. Ben is attracted to trees because of their manageable particularity—"[T]hey're very specific. Each one is different."—, and photography allows him to impose order on this particularity in a way that helps him to

52. Baker, *Checkpoint*, 22.

53. *Ibid.*, 39.

detach from the overwhelming complexities of political conspiracy and media saturation that have driven Jay to such desperate action.⁵⁴ Ben's belief that visual art can serve as a tool for detachment is apparent in his professorial advice to Jay to become a specialist, rather than a generalist, in his conspiracy theories; he advises Jay to "keep focused, keep to a small canvas."⁵⁵ Ben's perspective on the calmative properties of still images conflicts humorously with Jay's argument that abstract art is CIA propaganda designed to flaunt democracy's ideological dominance. Jay says, "[a]bstact painting, promoted by spooks in our federal government to prove how tolerant our democracy is of ugliness. All that awful art, that makes you puke uncontrollably even to be in the same room with it."⁵⁶

Somewhat surprisingly, Ben finds similar calmative properties in temporal distance and historical narrative. For example, he rejects Jay's argument that historians should engage with contemporary events because he believes closure is the first step in constructing historical narrative: "[y]ou need a fair amount of condensing and distilling and sheer forgetting to go on before historians like me can get to work."⁵⁷ This distance can even impart an aural pleasure to names abstracted from their referents. Ben says,

For me the real problem is that if I worked on Now rather than working on Then I'd have to type these names all the time. Day after day I'd have to be typing "Dennis Hastert" or "Richard Perle." "Tom DeLay." They're

54. Ibid., 29.

55. Ibid., 35.

56. Ibid., 33.

57. Ibid., 38.

so familiar. They're for journalists. Much more pleasant to type "Stuart Symington" or "Harry Hopkins" or "John Foster Dulles."⁵⁸

More than mere temporal distance, Ben finds comfort in the forms of historical narrative itself. He tells Jay that he advised his students who had become upset by the Iraq war to select a book and copy it "from cover to cover."⁵⁹ He goes on to explain that he himself copied the entirety of Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* during a summer he spent with his grandmother in Bermuda, where both were engaged in a traumatic war against giant tropical roaches. The act of copying out the Parkman becomes a means for Ben to impose order over that capricious and beetle-spirited world. Somewhat irresponsibly, he extends his personal experience in Bermuda to a conspiracy theory of artistic figuration in general:

There were plenty of roaches around when Francis Parkman was writing *The Oregon Trail*. There were roaches around when all those Dutch landscape artists were painting their landscapes.... The painters were doing the things that they could do, never mind about the pests—the pests were bracketed off. They didn't impinge. The painters looked at the trees. That's what you've got to do.⁶⁰

For Ben, both historical narrative and artistic representation serve as checkpoints for him to regroup within a confusing and contingent world. But Ben's conflation of pictorial art and historical narrative is dissatisfying because it substitutes real-world, time-bound complexities with static instances of copycat mimesis that detemporalize the represented object. Notably, Ben's version of mimesis is precisely the sort that Ricoeur's theory of

58. Ibid.38-39.

59. Ibid., 88.

60. Ibid., 90.

threefold mimesis attempts to correct, as copycat mimesis fails to account for the temporal dimension of human experience. Because Ben, a history professor, proposes historical narrative as a nontraumatic refiguration of time, *Checkpoint* finds him threatening to distort historical narrative into something other than a representation of human time.

Though readers might be tempted initially to see Ben as the voice of reason, Baker's decision to publish a dialogue novel during the hotly-contested 2004 presidential race establishes *Checkpoint* as a counter-narrative to Ben's interest in still images and historical distance. The book's extreme brevity implies that *Checkpoint* was intended to be read in a single sitting that would allow readers to measure the represented temporal progress of its dialogue against the entirety of the configured plot. Recalling Henry James's distinction between scenic and pictorial modes, *Checkpoint* stands as an emphatically scenic novel whose ostensible hero, Ben, is committed to using pictorial art to navigate the contingencies of human time. *Checkpoint's* explicit dialogue texture and high-tension content combine to produce a situation where Ben's desire to distance himself from the "immediate present" becomes both understandable and appealing. Indeed, one could argue that Ben devotes so many of his utterances to these distancing methods primarily to dissuade Jay from continuing with his assassination plot. But Baker clearly intends his reader to see Ben's withdrawal as a different kind of violence. During a scene where Ben conveys the pleasure he derives from taking picture, Baker writes:

BEN: No, no, leaves can be good, too. Leaves are good. Oh, but there was this one enormous catalpa tree a couple of miles from our house. It was kind of a wet, misty day, and I brought it into focus and the whole thing just came alive for me in the viewfinder. It was an incredible

explosion of black twigs reading in every direction. I was down to maybe a thirtieth of a second, and I squeezed the trigger—

JAY: The trigger?

BEN: I mean the shutter, the little button.... Yet and I knew I had that catalpa in the bag. I knew its secrets. Yet there it was still out on the street for everyone else to enjoy. So who cares then about George W.? He's irrelevant. He's irrelevant.⁶¹

The “trigger pulled” and the “explosion of black twigs” clearly evoke the force of a body blown apart by gunfire. But unlike physical violence or assassination, this symbolic violence does not destroy its object, as the tree is “still out on the street for everyone else to enjoy.” Ben claims that this representational violence makes the political crisis that has driven Jay to unwise action irrelevant. But once again, Ben's solution seems too simplistic, because its pictorial victory is a private victory. And the lacuna, the felt absence, at the heart of Ben's pictorial solution is the value of his aesthetic experience for those outside his head, whether we are speaking of Jay or *Checkpoint*'s reader.

While it would be easy to read Baker's novel as a satire of the breakdown of meaningful political discussion during the months leading up to the 2004 presidential contest, I prefer to maintain Doležel distinction between actual and fictional worlds to remain focused on what work (or violence) the play between explicit and zero texture performs in *Checkpoint*.⁶² That said, the main act of physical violence present in Baker's fictional world is perpetrated against a representation, specifically an attack on the image

61. Ibid., 99.

62. I am aware that my desire to follow Doležel's distinction places me somewhat in Ben's camp. If my purpose in this argument was to understand how Baker's novel figures political rhetoric, I would find Doležel's distinction dangerous. But this distinction lends itself well to our current investigation of how *Checkpoint* stands as an instance of the dialogue-novel form.

of the President that Jay uses to train his supposedly Bush-seeking bullets. Ben places the photograph on a pillow and gives Jay a hammer that he calls his “Brazilian Mojo Hammer of Justice” and explains, “[w]hatever harm you inflict upon an evildoer’s image with this hammer will also be visited upon the evildoer himself.”⁶³ After Jay lets his aggressions out by pummeling the photograph with the hammer, Ben states that “[t]he only way to find out that you’re not a killer is by killing the guy.”⁶⁴ Because the novel concludes with Jay’s assassination plot still intact, this symbolic violence against Bush’s image obviously fails to sublimate his aggression. But here we should recall that Ben’s discussion of tree photography involves a violence of its own when he pulls the camera’s “trigger” and the image explodes within his viewfinder. What distinguishes Ben’s relationship to tree photographs from Jay’s relationship to the picture of Bush is the fact that Ben is involved with the production of his images. The act of taking pictures—of artistic configuration—helps Ben refigure his relationship with the actual world, while Jay remains an outsider viewing someone else’s representations of physical exteriors. Ben fails to derail Jay’s assassination plot because his object lesson centers on non-narrative photographic still life and portrait. Just as these images live on the surface of things, Ben does not stir Jay’s mind to understand how the manipulation of their external “texture” might serve as a checkpoint for regrouping and responding to the contingencies of human time. Baker, on the other hand, fares much better. Because he wrote *Checkpoint* as a brief dialogue novel, the reader experiences its fictional world as a

63. Baker, *Checkpoint*, 111.

64. *Ibid.*, 113.

narrative whose time closely approximates the actual time of talk; further, the reader experiences how this time-bound sequence of utterances configures itself into a structured plot, thereby feeling the confluence of narrative time and human time. The first and last pages of *Checkpoint* contain no words but display the image of a single dot centered about halfway down the page. These two images stand as checkpoints inviting the reader to consider what falls between as one piece. Within the configuration of this dissertation, they also recall James's statement in the Preface to *The Awkward Age* that he imagined that novel's form as a configuration of "small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object."⁶⁵ For *Checkpoint*, as for the dialogue novel genre, that central object is the dialectic of time and narrative.

65. James, "Preface to *The Awkward Age*," 110.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored the variety and complexity of the dialogue novel to argue for the historical and aesthetic interest of this form and to show that represented speech performs more work than studies of the novel typically allow. Although the novels discussed in this dissertation display the form's diversity, the communal and situational aspects of represented speech establish some consistency among what the dialogue novel can represent and how it constructs basic narrative constituents like plot, character, and action. The unique form of the dialogue novel brings the roles of community and situation front-and-center, but these exigencies apply equally to the forms of talk in traditional novels, and I believe that the ideas presented in this dissertation should enable a more productive study of fictional dialogue in all its forms.

The communal nature of dialogue was foregrounded most directly in Chapter One, which showed how various cooperative language communities emerge within Henry James's *The Awkward Age*. Although the bases for these cooperative communities vary greatly—compare Longdon's old-fashioned commitments to Vanderbank's free talk—each of these communities aspires toward a greater sincerity that allows individual characters to define themselves through their community. Interestingly, this sincerity also reveals the relative shallowness of individual character, such that Vanderbank's unstated reasoning behind his refusal to marry Nanda implies a lack of deliberative powers that he must mask by verbal display. While it would be inaccurate to claim that all dialogue novels posit all characters as hollow speechmakers, the dialogue novel does

uniquely challenge the autonomy and individuality of characters by demonstrating how all character is the product of one's temporal and communal situation. Through the dialogue novel's refusal to offer passages of interiority, such passages are shown to be pure fiction.

These concerns were developed further in Chapter Two, as Henry Green's novels were filtered through René Girard's theory of mimetic desire to expose the communal and situational aspects of character desire. This chapter moved beyond the situated nature of characters within makeshift social institutions to argue that individual desire itself is a communal construct. Thus, the autonomous and intrinsic nature of individual desire is posited as a further fiction by the dialogue novel form. Of course, the dialogue novel becomes the ideal form for representing an individual's desire as originating beyond that individual because the dialogue novel has no capacity for representing internal desire except by external display. Here, we strike upon the reason the dialogue novel seems simultaneously the most realistic and the most artificial of genres, as our everyday knowledge of others' desires requires external display, even as the traditional novel genre defies this common sense with its commonplace passages of interiority.

The first two chapters of this dissertation tended to treat dialogue's communal nature in a rather positive way. As this disposition is typical across most studies of dialogue, Chapter Three investigated the anti-cooperative character of fictional dialogue by considering the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett through Aaron Fogel's theory of "forced dialogue." Further, Compton-Burnett's novels demonstrate how dialogue can be used to construct and perpetuate imbalanced power structures and unjust gender

ideologies. By considering dialogue itself as an instance of violence and coercion, Chapter Three demands that we rethink issues of cooperative language communities and communal desire that were addressed in the first two chapters. For example, conceiving dialogue as coercive rather than cooperative invites readers to acknowledge how competition among and between James's language communities elides, rather than enables, character subjectivity and how communal desire in *Green* is frequently anti-cooperative and competitive.

The final chapter of this dissertation turned more directly to narratology, as it considered how the dialogue novel configures narrative time and possible worlds by reading works by Nicholson Baker and William Gaddis through the lenses of Paul Ricoeur and Lubomír Doležel. Narrative theory might seem an unexpected lens for studying novels notable for their lack of a narrator. But its precise and comprehensive terminology provides a useful framework for understanding how (and if) dialogue alone can reproduce traditional narrative functions and pleasures. It also provides a clearly defined range within which we can develop terms and concepts to distinguish dialogue novels from traditional narration and thus talk productively about them. Chapter Four used narratology to consider how the dialogue-novel form affects fictional construction of time and space by considering Ricoeur's concept of human time and Doležel's concept of possible worlds. Significantly, both of these concepts emphasize the reader's role in constructing their dimensions, and this dialogue between reader and text helps us understand how the various theoretical approaches of this dissertation function as a piece.

This narratological synthesis adapts the theories of Grice, Girard, and Fogel in order to propose a theory of dialogue that can prove valuable to studies of dialogue as both form and concept. Similar to the Gricean maxims, readers have certain expectations for dialogue in fiction that involve issues of quality, proportion, and relevance. When these maxims are flouted by the dialogue novel, readers tend to occupy the position of an absent narrator to master the text by mimicking the sense-making behaviors of narrators past. But this Girardian desire to mimic an absent narrator threatens to make a reader's relationship to the text more competitive than cooperative. As such, the dialogue between reader and text constantly teeters between collaboration and anti-cooperative "forced dialogue" characterized by readerly imposition of narrative context that is intentionally absent from the text. Thus, this synthesis opens directly onto the narratological issues of represented time and possible worlds by asking how these narrative constituents are present in the text and how they are informed by intertextual or paratextual matters instead. Further, this synthesis invites a significant recasting of how character and subjectivity might be framed by this dialogue between reader and text because the process demands that the reader reflect not merely on how meaning is imposed on the text but how his or her attempts at making meaning are likewise imposed from without by other texts. In addition to helping us analyze dialogue of all kinds, this synthetic approach invites us to reconsider reading as a dialectic between subjection to and mastery of the text.

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