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## **Angles on Dialogue**

**by Douglas unger**

Dialogue in life is most often a transaction—a bartering of desires and intentions implied under the surface of literal communication. In fiction, these implications should be sharpened. Language in dialogue should be hyper-refined, made far more intense than everyday speech. As my writer friend Jim Heynen puts it, “The part of the story where a fiction writer should most feel that s/he is doing the work of a poet is not in description or narration but in dialogue.” As the late great Raymond Carver used to say, “Good dialogue is angled toward a character’s intentions.”

I’d add that dialogue in fiction, as in plays, is most interesting when an action is implied in every line. This level of intensity in fictive speech—action implied in every line—is extremely difficult to maintain. Information needs to get across, the facts expressed. Unpracticed writers often mistakenly feel that they have too much important business to communicate in speeches to set up characters and their situations, and this is especially so at the beginnings of stories. A burden of exposition can fill conversations with lists of facts and self-referential explanations that are about as interesting to read as an instruction manual for furniture assembly. Informational dialogue often strikes the ear as lacking in character as reading locations off a street map of one’s own city.

Still, expository or informational dialogue is necessary. The great writers impart factual information quickly, in a single line or two, or in a briefly narrated mini-story that sets up more angled exchanges between characters. Look at Hemingway’s “The Old Man and The Sea” and how, in one question and answer exchange, the boy, wanting to go out fishing with the old man—bartering with him through argument—implies Santiago’s expositional situation: “But remember how you went eighty-seven days without fish and then we caught big ones every day for three weeks.” Or Fitzgerald’s three-liner by Mr. Jones in “Winter Dreams” setting up Dexter Gordon’s age and circumstances, the reader already aware through narration that Dexter is smitten by Mr. Jones’ daughter: “You’re not more than fourteen. Why the devil did you decide just this morning that you wanted to quit? You promised that next week you’d go over to the state tournament with me.” Or Faulkner’s expositional dialogue at the beginning of “Barn Burning,” when the Justice of the Peace asks for proof of a crime. Look at how Mr. Harris delivers a one-paragraph mini-story establish-ing the sharecropper Snopes’ propensity for arson.

These lines are informational mainly, yet they are angled sharply toward character intentions. What’s important in them aside from letting readers know a plot situation are the motivations implied underneath: the boy wanting to help the old man against his wishes, Mr. Jones wanting Dexter to keep caddying for him while unaware of

Dexter's humiliation at such servility before his attractive daughter, and Mr. Harris seeking justice after the psychotic Snopes has burned down his barn.

For other masterful examples of brief expositions in dialogue, look at Nadine Gordimer's "Home": "They've taken my mother. Robbie and Francie and my mother." Or the exotic lines from Gabriel Garcia Márquez's "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings" (translated by Gregory Rabassa) that imply a whole mythology: "'He's an angel,' she told them. 'He must have been coming for the child, but the poor fellow is so old that the rain knocked him down.'" Or the pure neatness of the opening set-up that closes with a charged challenge in Mary Robison's "Coach": "'I know I'm no Rembrandt,' Sherry said, 'but I have so damn much fun trying, and this little studio—this room—we can afford. I could get out of your way by going there and get you and Daphne out of my way. No offense.'" Or look at the simple yet ingenious exposition in the one-liner of internal dialogue—a character bartering with himself—in Anton Chekhov's "Lady With A Dog" (translation by Ivy Litvinov): "'If she's here without her husband, and without any friends,' thought Gurov, 'it wouldn't be a bad idea to make her acquaintance.'"

One of the best exercises I know of to get a feel for writing effective expositional dialogue is to graze through a short story anthology—or a shelf of classic novels—and read aloud just the opening lines spoken by characters. Disregard for the moment the framing narrative. Listen especially to how characters announce themselves. Select stories from a variety of historical periods and genres. Pause after reading out each utterance and imagine what the lines suggest about the story that follows. For example, read Dupin's classic opener in Poe's "The Purloined Letter": "'If it is any point requiring reflection,' observed Dupin, as he forbore to enkindle the wick, 'we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark.'" Page to Marlow's weighty announcement in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness": "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.'" And Tolstoy's ominous opener (I prefer the version translated by Louse and Aylmer Maude): "'Gentlemen,' he said, 'Ivan Ilych has died.'" Look at Little Bibi's question in Kate Chopin's "The Storm": "Mama'll be 'friad, yes,' he suggested with blinking eyes." Flip to more contemporary voices, as in Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?": "Stop gawking at yourself. Who are you? You think you're so pretty?" Or Edna in Richard Ford's "Rock Springs": "Why not? My datebook's not that full." Close with a line as cutting-edge as the 'topper' after the first paragraph in "Pastoralia," by George Saunders: "'Jeez,' she says first thing this morning. 'I'm so tired of roast goat I could scream.'"

The point of this exercise is to become familiar with just how angled toward plot actions and intentions lines of dialogue can be, especially when the characters first announce themselves. Consider how carefully crafted the lines are to imply not only actions but also to set off more thematic, subterranean movements in our imaginations.

In my opinion—keeping in mind that there are really no rules for writing fiction, that as soon as we come up with something that looks like a rule, a fine writer will come along who overthrows it with a brilliant invention—dialogue can be broken down essentially into four rough categories or types. There is an "open" type of dialogue—composed of contentless or flat lines, such as those spoken in the business of meeting and greeting, similar to the exchanges in an "open scene" exercise used in acting classes, and extremely illustrative of just how much apparently neutral spoken lines can vary with the situation and characters to which they are applied. The next kind I call "informational dialogue" or "first-level dialogue"—lines that of needs communicate facts, circumstances, the set-up of a story or characters. There's a dialogue category I call "second-level" or "dialogue by omission," in which what is left unstated, unsaid, or unfinished in the line

creates all kinds of interesting implied actions and intentions. Finally, there's a "third level" or "dialogue of opposites" in fictive speech, in which the apparent content of the lines—the significations of the language—are easily understood to be at odds with the actions or emotive conditions of characters. In my opinion, the quicker a story or novel can get to second-level or third-level dialogue between its characters, the more engaging it is to our imaginations, and the more lively and interesting the fiction is to read.

Following are examples meant to be workshopped to show these four rough categories of dialogue.

The first exercise is a typical "open scene"—each speaker identified by "A" and "B". It is meant to be a brief yet closed system of flat, almost contentless lines:

#### Open Scene

A: Hi.  
 B: Hello.  
 A: Sorry I'm late.  
 B: That's all right.  
 A: I really am sorry.  
 B: That's fine.  
 A: Well, good-night.  
 B: Good-night.

In a workshop, pick two writers to play the roles—choose a male for "A" and a female to play "B" (though it can be a lot of fun, and in some ways more revealing, if "A" and "B" are performed by two writers of the same gender). Take the two players out of the room or off to the side (so the rest of the workshop won't know the roles assigned). Set them up to act out the following three situations: 1.) "A" has made a date with "B", but "A" has stood up "B" for five hours before arriving at the door, having lost track of time at a local bar with friends. 2.) "A" is a son or daughter and "B" is a mother or father. "A" has to get past the worried parent waiting up and to the relative safety of a bedroom after staying out too late; "A"'s lateness has been caused by a careless fender-bender with the family car, and "A" thinks it's best for family sanity and a good night's sleep not to mention the accident until morning (this can work better, can be more exemplary, if "A" and "B" switch off roles after exercise 1., "A" delivering "B" and "B" delivering "A"). 3.) "A" is visiting an Intensive Care ward of a hospital, almost not making it there in time enough to say good-bye, forever, to dear friend, "B", who is dying.

Have writers "A" and "B" play out the open scene all three ways, one after the other, making entrances and exits as though on and off a stage. After the three versions, go around the workshop and ask each writer to speculate as to who the characters were in each variation and what came across as the story underneath. Even when played by writers with minimal acting skills, workshops can usually agree on fairly accurate readings of the characters and situations in each variation of the open scene. More clearly than studying the lines on a page, this acting out of the open scene shows how much dialogue depends on its angling toward the intentions of characters. This exercise should show also that so-called "open" dialogue is like an empty rhetorical space—in itself devoid of specific meaning or signification. In fiction, such dialogue—especially meeting-and-greeting exchanges and flat self-references—is essentially meaningless and unnecessary, since stories and novels don't offer writers the capacity to present actors performing the lines. More generally—here's another rule that can and will be overthrown by a writer of

genius—open dialogue is inessential to a story unless it is unusually angled at the intentions of characters.

Informational or “first level” dialogue has been discussed at the beginning of this essay, with multiple examples of effective, economical first-level lines by masterful writers that carry much of a story’s exposition. It’s interesting to look at a counter-example, drawn not from fiction but rather from the genre of the old-style TV soap opera (there’s a new style soap opera these days, as my good friend, William Wintersole, who recently retired from 17 years as a contract actor for “The Young and The Restless” tells me, defending what can be achieved by a quality treatment of the soap opera as art). As an example of “informational” or “first level” dialogue, I’ve adapted the following exchange from an early 1980’s episode of a another classic TV soap (changed here just enough not to step on anyone’s copyright). What I usually do in workshop is to assign the roles of “Hugh” and “Joanna” to different writers than those who played the open scene in the previous exercise, and ask them to read it out loud:

#### First-level Soap Opera Dialogue

HUGH

You know how much I love you, Joanna. Ever since we met at the exhibition, I can’t get my mind off of you. Then...

JOANNA

Don’t. There’s no need to explain. I’ve loved you, too, Hugh. But I have to think of the good years with Larry. They’re still so much a part of me. Now with the operation...

HUGH

Don’t make me wish for the surgeon’s hands to slip with the knife, Joanna. Tell him. Tell Larry now. It’s not right for us to go on leaving him in the dark.

JOANNA

You always push so hard for what you want. I’m not sure I like that in you.

HUGH

Pushing hard for what I want is how I got to be president of the Excelsior Corporation. And it’s how I’ve made sure you fell in love.

JOANNA

Oh, Hugh, what are we going to do?

Cut to the pet food commercial. What’s obvious in this exchange, of course, is that it’s laughably overwritten—a requirement of the Soap Opera as a form is overwriting, dictated by the episodic necessity of having to keep viewers who tune in and tune out during the run of a story sequence continually reintroduced to characters and situations.

Still, it's a clear example of how characters can overexpress, and how they can seem artificial by telling each other too much about themselves and their motivations. All is apparent, all is revealed. There is little or no angle or intention left about the characters for the audience to imagine. This overwritten scene shows how informational dialogue carries the danger of making characters seem flat, or ridiculous. Highly romantic writing is filled with this kind of overwritten dialogue. Such overwriting is the most frequent weakness I find in early drafts of stories by developing writers. Also, as the writer Carol Bly often pointed out in student manuscripts—and in published books by less skilled writers—characters who supposedly know each other well continually naming each other in intimate speech can appear to suffer from a bizarrely, even psychotically self-conscious obsession with identity. Reading such a scene aloud in workshop can be a good first step toward a cure.

This is not to say that informational dialogue doesn't have its place—it certainly does, as should be clear by the examples that show how masterful writers use first-level dialogue in set-up lines in stories or in first lines by characters declaring themselves. The point is to use first-level or informational dialogue as sparingly and economically as possible.

Overwriting in early drafts can often be cut and shaped into what I call “second-level” dialogue, or “dialogue by omission”—the technique of leaving portions of speeches unstated and even parts of sentences incomplete. This type of dialogue is intrinsically interesting for what it demands of a reader's imagination to fill in what is missing. Henry James was a master of this second level of implication in dialogue. A good example to act out in a workshop setting can be found toward the close of chapter XXI of *The Turn of the Screw*—the exchange between the Governess and Mrs. Grose. What's fascinating when characters speak throughout this novel—and in other dialogue in James' fiction—is that so much of it is set up so that perceptive readers understand that the characters are speaking about the same subject (usually concerning the manners and customs of other characters) but they have differing assumptions and implications. Because of James' highly allusive style, what is left unstated mainly informs readers about such cross-purposed misunderstandings, and many are the result of characters couched in the coded pretensions of upper crust decorum and propriety.

In this scene, Mrs. Grose is informing the Governess that little Flora will be sent away for a time, according to Mrs. Grose in order to get Flora out of the stressful care of the Governess for the reason that the little girl has been behaving badly and is using shockingly foul language. Mrs. Grose clearly refers to this circumstance in her lines. The Governess, on the other hand, is desperate to be confirmed in her visions (possibly hysterical) of the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel, and to find out that Mrs. Grose also sees them, or knows the ghosts are meddling among the living, so as not to believe she has gone insane. The Governess is convinced the malevolent spirits are possessing the innocent children in her charge—Flora and Miles. In their intense exchange, because of what James leaves unstated in their second-level dialogue, the Governess comes to believe that Mrs. Grose also sees the ghosts (she very probably doesn't). The Governess is misinterpreting what is unfinished in the housemaid's lines. Or it's possible to read the exchange as the Governess believes. The emotive affect of *The Turn of the Screw* depends on how it ingeniously sustains its possibilities at the sharp edge of at least two plausible interpretations.

In a workshop, ask two writers to read out the dialogue between Mrs. Grose and the Governess, skipping the first-person commentary and interlocutions. Start with Mrs.

Grose's declaration: "I'll go—I'll go. I'll go this morning." And the Governess' reply: "If you *should* wish still to wait I engage she shouldn't see me." The exchange then follows:

Mrs. Grose: No, no: It's the place itself. She must leave it. Your idea's the right one. I myself, Miss—

Governess: Well?

Mrs. Grose: I can't stay.

Governess: You mean that, since yesterday, you have seen—?

Mrs. Grose: I've *heard*—!

Governess: Heard?

Mrs. Grose: From that child—horrors! There! On my honour, Miss, she says things—!

Governess: Oh thank God!

Mrs. Grose: Thank God?

Governess: It so justifies me!

Mrs. Grose: It does that, Miss!

Governess: She's so horrible?

Mrs. Grose: Really shocking.

Governess: And about me?

Mrs. Grose: About you, Miss—since you must have it. It's beyond everything, for a young lady; and I can't think where she must have picked up—

Governess: The appalling language she applies to me? I can then!

Mrs. Grose: Well, perhaps I ought to also— since I've heard some of it before! Yet I can't bear it.... But I must go back.

Governess: Ah if you can't bear it—!

Mrs. Grose: How can I stay with her, you mean? Why just for that, to get her away. Far from this... far from *them*—

Governess: She may be different? she may be free? Then in spite of yesterday, you *believe*—

Mrs. Grose: In such doings?... I believe.

Pay careful attention to James' technique of not finishing sentences, often omitting the referents. Note how quickly the dialogue snaps along because of the Governess cutting off and completing Mrs. Grose's thoughts—what is called in acting “stepping on the lines” of the other character—and quite possibly misinterpreting them. After reading this exchange out loud in workshop, ask around the room what is implied versus what is actually being said. Ask if, in confirming she believes “in such doings” at the end of the exchange, is the Governess truly vindicated in thinking that Mrs. Grose also sees the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel and that they are possessing the children? Or is it more likely that Mrs. Grose is trying to separate two naughty children from each other's baleful influence and at least get foul-mouthed little Flora straightened out?

Ask the workshop to appraise the dramatic tension of the scene, how lively it is because of what is at stake for the characters (for the Governess, her sanity is at stake; for Mrs. Grose, her motherly wishes for a child's well-being). How much of this second-level exchange is left up to a reader's imagination?

Leaving it up to a reader's imagination is a modernist principle, even more so in contemporary fiction—a bit like a current movement in architecture in which content follows form. One of the most effective examples of second-level dialogue is found in Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*—a novel written entirely in dialogue save for a gripping police report in its closing chapter. Puig's story of the developing relationship between Molina and Valentin—one a homosexual and the other a heterosexual, locked away together in a dingy prison cell for political reasons by the anonymous repressors of state terrorism—employs all types of dialogue: open scenes, first-level, second-level, third-level, stories within the story, exchanges of missed significance (when one character obviously isn't listening to the other and answers with a non-sequitur), as well as passages of direct Q & A as in the police interrogation. The novel builds to a tender love scene between the two men in Chapter 14, arguably one of the most explicitly sexual scenes in 20th Century literature, yet with the erotic details brilliantly left out, there by implication only, achieved by ingenious omissions in the use of second-level dialogue. Much of this love-making scene is wordless, composed of actions entirely left up to a reader's imagination during pauses indicated simply by ellipsis, “—...”. These pauses are extraordinarily full lines for any perceptive reader. In the fine translation from the Spanish by Thomas Colchie (available in a Vintage edition), turn to the love scene on pages 261 and 262. It's extremely entertaining to read this dialogue aloud in workshop at least two or three times, with writers of varying genders and/or sexual orientations—it's also an exercise which can be revealing of the differing social attitudes in a workshop toward homosexuality.

Consider the following exchange:

—Aren't you going to wait for when lights go out?

—...

— You're not cold taking your clothes off?

As the scene is read aloud, pay attention to what is evoked by the ellipsis—the implied actions contained in the pauses—and note how omissions in what is said create erotic details. The effect of sensual fullness in the scene is astonishing, considering how minimal the dialogue is, save for the one key, most explicit line:

—Better like last time, let me lift my legs. This way, over your shoulders.

Some effective exercises to encourage developing the skills of second-level dialogue run as follows: 1.) Write a dialogue that plays on the familiar trope of the girl telling the boy that she's pregnant, in which "A" is a girlfriend and "B" is a boyfriend. Write the scene implying that "B" is already happily expecting the news, but that "A", unhappily, feels compelled to admit that the child may not be "B"'s after all. Don't let either character directly mention pregnancy. 2.) Write a dialogue about gift giving and guessing, for example, in which "A" is a mother and "B" is a son, and on the table is a wrapped gift. "B" is expecting that the box contains the pearl handled pocketknife he's been asking for; "A" is immensely pleased that she's picked out the expensive fountain pen that she always wanted as a gift herself when she was "B"'s age. Carry the scene all the way through the unwrapping of the gift without making mention of either a pocket knife or a fountain pen. Try other variations on this same scene using different gifts: the wrong TV action figure, a deep sea fishing reel instead of a fly reel, basketball sneakers instead of trendy running shoes, etc., the point being to make sure the gifts are clearly signified in the emotive context of the deluded joy of the parent then contrasted to the veiled disappointment of the child, without directly mentioning the gift. 3.) Write a dialogue in which prisoner "A" is being let out of a cell by either captor or warden "B" and led down a dark hallway. "A" believes this is a final journey to a certain execution; "B" lets "A" go on believing this, for a time, but before getting to the end of the hallway lets it be known that "A" is on the way to being set free. Write the scene until the moment when the door at the end of the hall is pulled open. Don't let either character speak of death or execution, and don't let either character speak directly of freedom. In all these exercises, try to shape the speeches of the two characters so that each picks up on a half-stated line or incomplete thought of the other. Experiment with the technique of one character "stepping on" the line of the other. Write exchanges in which the two characters finish each other's thoughts by misinterpreting the intentions of the other. Include in each of these scenes at least one full moment in which what a character intends to say is best expressed by not speaking. Experiment with different typographic devices on the page to indicate silence.

Our conversations and our casual talk in daily life are, I believe, a lot more reliant on pauses and silences than most of us are probably aware. I'm told there's a small new field in the arena of theoretical Physics called Chaos Theory that's looking into the empty spaces or gaps between signals and the possibility of actually "reading" patterns of silence and absence. Writers have long been aware of the significance of the pause, and of the changing tonalities and meanings of the rhythmic arrangements of voices in dialogue, often using the gesture, the internalized thought, or the intruding image, in the interlucutions between quoted phrases to indicate shifts of emphasis in patterns of speech on the page. Many writers I know will simply feel out these rhythms, speaking lines out loud as they write and revise, changing locations of gestures and pauses in a passage of dialogue. Reading lines aloud, listening closely for pauses and silences, is one of the most essential techniques writers should practice, especially when a story or novel is in stages of revision.

When a passage just doesn't sound right, when lines fall flat or seem too direct, another interesting technique to try is to turn a given line upside down—as it were—inverting its sense, so that a character who, for example, feels terrible about something,

instead of stating so directly, insists, as in several stories by Hemingway, that s/he is feeling just fine. The directly accusatory form of this kind of assertion in life from one person to another is sarcasm. With less of an edge, the effect can be cynical or ironic, as when someone says on a stormy day, "My, what pleasant weather we're having," or, less directly, "What a great day for a picnic." If we think about it, we hear this kind of third-level statement—with a literal meaning directly opposite to what a speaker means to signify—quite frequently, as when someone comments on an acquaintance's or neighbor's list of domestic assaults and mayhem by saying, "Wow. What a great guy." Or when a driver intends an apology to a passenger just picked up at the airport after getting stuck in a traffic jam by saying, "Looks like we're taking the scenic route." We hear third-level dialogue all around us in our daily lives. As an example drawn from literature, consider how Hemingway closes his novel *The Sun Also Rises* with Jake Barnes' notoriously ironic, third-level line, "Wouldn't it be pretty to think so?"

Ernest Hemingway, in my opinion, is the unrivaled master of third-level dialogue. No writer before or since could move his characters so effectively into a play of barbed opposites in their speeches to each other. Hemingway short stories seem to work at a special relationship toward dialogue in general—a few, such as the classic "Hills Like White Elephants" and "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and "Cat In The Rain," use narrative as if impressionist setting for dialogued exchanges in which the most pointed moments of the stories are achieved. Good exercises in third-level dialogue can be made from numerous passages in Hemingway's fiction. Take "Hills Like White Elephants" and break down the quoted lines in the story into a scene for "The American" and "The Girl" and play it out in workshop. Look especially at the tension in the give and take between the characters in the exchange just following the first few spoken lines:

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

Listen to how quickly the voices begin to work at opposites, or third-levels, reaching a painful tension with The American's insistence that it's a simple operation and he's known lots of people who were perfectly happy afterward. Hemingway indicates silence in reply by stating simply that The Girl doesn't say anything. The Girl achieves an ironic, even sarcastic inversion by the end of the story, when she insists:

"I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."

A similar illustration of third-level dialogue can be found in the closing chapter XIX of *The Sun Also Rises*, in the scene between Brett and Jake, when, yet again, Jake has been summoned to Brett's rescue, this time to support her after her torrid and scandalous love affair with the young bullfighter in Madrid. Make a dialogue out of pages 241 to 243, with one writer playing Brett and another playing Jake. Follow how often Brett keeps repeating variations on the line, "let's not talk about it." When, of course, what is moving Brett most in the conversation is her need to talk precisely about her love affair and its sordid end. Also follow Jake's seemingly flat, reactive lines, offering obligatory

support, as in, “You ought to feel set up.” Clearly, both characters are playing out self-conscious roles with one another. And both are tired of their role-playing. After writers in workshop act out this scene, discuss each line and ask questions: What is the emotion implied underneath? What is the significance that is opposite to the literal meaning of the quoted language? Which most accurately expresses your reading of the characters—the literal language? Or the playing at opposites to the spoken lines?

Most workshops will soon agree that the most charged lines—the ones that best express the affect of the characters and our comprehension of their motivations—are the lines we read as third-level dialogue. Who knows but this might be also because of the aesthetics of the modernist story as expressing an essentially ironic stance toward the culture in which it is written. There are less ironic, less cynical movements at work in contemporary fiction, which of course is in the process of discovering its own aesthetic to confront its moment in culture and history. This may indicate a fuller, more elaborate language in the exchanges of spoken lines by characters, such as in the richly textured conversations in Claire Messud’s *The Hunters*, or the labyrinthine confessions in Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, to cite two masterful, recent examples. Still, the technique of shaping dialogue to work at odds to the literal significance of the spoken lines still holds.

Third-level dialogue isn’t always so extremely a play at opposites between literal significance and character intentions—speeches can be shaped with narrower angles of complexity and depth and still create third-level tensions. A good example to study is the verbal feuding between Ralph and his wife, Marian, in Raymond Carver’s “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”:

... Then she said, “I have a nice breakfast on the stove for you, darling, when you’re through with your bath. Ralph?”

“Just be quiet, please,” he said.

Or look at the virtuoso third-level exchanges of “missed” understandings—when two characters can be thought of as speaking past one another, as does the hopeful academic job candidate, Mary, to her supposed friend on the faculty interview committee, Louise, in Tobias Wolff’s “In The Garden of the North American Martyrs”:

“You are very beautiful,” Mary said, “and you know how to present yourself.”

Louise stood and paced the room. “That son of a bitch,” she said. ....”Let’s suppose someone said I have no sense of humor. Would you agree or disagree?”

Or there is in almost every story by Anton Chekhov a third-level exchange in which characters talk past one another—a literary intensification of the distressful truth about human nature that people in conversation quite often don’t really listen to what another person is saying. One classic mini-example of this can be found in “The Lady With The Dog,” when Gurov, desirous to talk about his infatuation and affair, is coming out of the club with one of his card-playing partners (translation by Ivy Litvinov):

One evening, leaving the Medical Club with one of his card-partners, a government official, he could not refrain from remarking:

“If you only knew what a charming woman I met in Yalta!”

The official got into his sleigh, and just before driving off, turned and called out: “Dmitry Dmitrich!

“Yes.”

“You were quite right, you know—the sturgeon was just a leetle off.”

Here are a few exercises that should provide some practice in writing third-level dialogue:

- 1.) Write a scene in which two friends, “A” and “B”, are walking way out in the country and having to bear up against any kind of extreme weather—heavy rain, intense heat, an ice storm, etc.. It was “A”’s idea to take the walk in the first place. “B” is out of sorts, and complains to “A” about the weather and what “B” is suffering by expressing to “A” exactly the opposite of what he observes and feels.
- 2.) Write a scene in which “A” and “B” are passionate lovers. While making love, they express their intense pleasure by playfully turning around their admissions to each other about what they are feeling.
- 3.) “A” is a financial manager for “B”, and “A” and “B” have believed themselves to be friends for a long time. “A” has just lost most of “B”’s money through a foolish investment. “A” is confessing the loss to “B” by describing all the other possible factors in the catastrophic financial loss but his own actions; “B” responds with statements about the irrelevance of money and by speaking at opposites to his and his family’s obvious needs.
- 4.) Write a scene in which a husband, “A”, has just come home for dinner to his wife, “B”, who is still cooking in the kitchen. “A” is full of relief and wonder at the fact that he has just barely missed being killed in a harrowing multi-car pile-up on the freeway. “B” responds by talking only of the details of the food she is cooking, what the kids did that day, and/or other statements about her work day and professional life.
- 5.) Write a scene in which a young soldier, “A”, has just returned from a war. “B” is the soldier’s lover, and “A” is pushed somehow by “B” to talk about the war. “A” then talks about anything but the war, or only does at an extreme angle—with the language of music, with the language of sports, the language of foreign travel, language drawn from books.

As should be clear by now, characters simply talking—or let’s say “talk” in its familiar sense in daily life—has little to do with the painstaking artistic task of writing

good dialogue, which is, in my opinion, the most difficult part of a story or novel to write well. Breaking fictive dialogue down into analytical categories for group discussion is admittedly an oversimplification, and patently fallacious, since we can discover in the books and stories we love as many different styles and varying nuances of dialogue on the page as the inventive authors who wrote out the lines. The linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure asserts a crucial difference between *langue* and *parole*—between written and spoken languages—and from Saussure we can mine a useful description of the way language works relative to meaning, as somewhat like a rapid river with opposing currents, one current moving over the other, and dialogue relative to a character's intentions and motivations seems to me to work this way most effectively in good fiction. One of the writer's tasks in creating dialogue is to set down in an interesting and lively way what must be the differences between written and spoken languages. We learn how by reading the masters and the best of our contemporaries. We should also listen closely to the people around us for the most unusual and estranging conversations drawn from life. In writing fiction—in making art—we should strive to invent new conversations that challenge the conventions, and we should keep pushing at the edges of the form.