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Late-Victorian Novels, Bad Dialogue, and Talk  
Amy R. Wong

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In Walter Besant's 1884 "Art of Fiction" lecture to the Royal Institution—the occasion that spurred the well-known response of the same title from Henry James—he claimed, "nothing is more inartistic than to be constantly calling attention in a dialogue to a gesture or a look, to laughter or to tears" (78). Besant's statement, curiously censorious, captures within it a particular aesthetic assumption which had become consolidated by the end of the nineteenth century about the relationship between dialogue and everyday talk—which *does* depend upon gestures, looks, laughter, and tears for its full expression: in the name of art, dialogue distills talk into a leaner, more stripped down form. This assumption about leanness evidently extended to Besant's understanding of character speech—which is commonly understood today as the entirety of dialogue. In a subsequent essay, "Of the Writing of Novels" (1888), that he published in *Atalanta*, a British monthly magazine that promoted literary careers for middle class women, Besant suggests that amateur writers practice writing character speech by first transcribing drawing room or dinner table talk and then paring it down to become more "brilliant and incisive" (165). He mandates that in fiction, "talk must be crisp, it must never drag, and above all it must not be too long" (374).

The critical history leading up to our poststructuralist present has largely forgotten Besant. Rather, it would be James's "Art of Fiction" essay for *Longman's* that would outlast not only Besant's original lecture but also what James called the broader "era of discussion" about the status and form of the novel among other fine arts.<sup>1</sup> As the story goes, James—who critiqued Besant's naïve "literal opposition of description and dialogue," his rule-bound rigidity, and the very assumption that fiction was beholden to real life in any way—became the preferred predecessor for the formalists of modernism because of his insistence on art's integral, organic form (511).<sup>2</sup> The tendency in our current literary critical practices is to continue this disavowal of representational connections between actual, everyday talk and dialogue. As part of a broader commitment to re-confirming what poststructuralist thought has valuably taught us, we seek not only to avoid the lure of mimetic realism but also to regard all language used to describe the world as slippery and suspicious. Indeed, and rightly so, narratologists such as Monika Fludernik have critiqued the "specious authenticity of direct speech" (28) and dismissed the notion that "characters' direct discourse is the most reliable part of the fictional universe" (445). Similarly, Brian McHale's account of "Speech Representation" in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* cautions against a tendency to regard direct discourse as somehow closer to the "real world" than indirect discourse; rather, as he notes, the "degree of faithfulness does not correspond to formal categories" usually discussed by narratologists.

I argue, however, that our insistence on this distinction between fictional speech and actual speech need not preclude a closer look at other forms of relation—including, as I will show, affective ones—between dialogue and everyday talk. Unless otherwise specified, "dialogue" in this essay will refer, as is customary, to direct speech or direct discourse: what characters are quoted as saying. Defining talk is a more complicated matter; by and large, literary criticism has ceded considerations of talk to other disciplines—sociology, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology.<sup>3</sup> In part, this avoidance of talk in literary studies owes to a broader suspicion of orality, a category of interest largely abandoned in the wake of Derrida's critique of logocentric thinking and the systematic privileging of orality over textuality. The present discussion, however, makes an effort to distinguish talk from orality, specifically emphasizing talk's embodied and contextual features, including the paralinguistic features that Besant wished to exclude and more: any number of social

cues (intended or not), linguistic pragmatics, or even mere accidents of the body and environment that end up directing conversation.

Sociological perspectives can help us clarify these domains of talk. In *Forms of Talk* (1981), Erving Goffman, the self-described “microanalyst of interaction” (2), cautions against “the sins of noncontextuality . . . the assumption that bits of conversation can be analyzed in their own right in some independence of what was occurring at the time and place” (32). In other words, talk is constituted *through* the immersive experience of everyday life, and the many contingencies of the “environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another’s response presence” (Goffman, “Interaction Order” 2). In the happenstance of an accidental tripping, for instance, Goffman argues that a non-communicative motion of the body becomes meaningfully a part of the so-called interaction order: “[W]hen someone trips over another, offers an apology, and has that apology graciously accepted, the acceptance is not simply a reply to the apology; it is also a response to an apologized-for delict. . . observe that the initial delict, although clearly a non linguistic act, is as fully a part of the interchange as the words that follow the trouble in attempting to deal with it” (*Forms of Talk* 41). In his own manner then, Goffman could provide a rejoinder to Besant’s injunctions to write lean, economical dialogue that requires no description of the embodied, relational context. Such a response could also complement James’s criticism of Besant’s “internecine distinctness” between dialogue and description—though Goffman the microsociologist is not concerned with aesthetics.

The present discussion returns us to the moment of the late-Victorian art of fiction debates in order to revisit the question of dialogue’s relationship to talk (conceived in the fullness of its physicalized and experientially determined formation) through the lens of a time when their severance had not quite been decided.<sup>4</sup> I argue that a closer look at some literary examples of “bad” dialogue from this earlier moment of these debates can help us to better understand a continuing bias against talk in the present and what a reconsideration of talk might contribute to this issue’s revisit of dialogue. In particular, I focus on two novels from the close of the Victorian period that critics mocked for dialogue that, in effect, contained too many of talk’s embarrassing, embodied features: George Meredith’s *One of Our Conquerors* (1891) and Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford’s (then Hueffer’s) *The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story* (1901). The “bad” dialogue in these novels, I argue, produces connections to the everyday world of talk that can reinvigorate our own current critical approaches to dialogue. I suggest, therefore, that we do not have to abandon their association in the name of poststructuralist sophistication.

The immediate reception of both novels reflected mainstream assumptions about dialogue’s appropriate verbal economies as well as its ameliorative relationship to talk—echoing the sentiments voiced by Besant quoted above. After all, despite the relegation of Besant to the forgotten annals of critical history, it was he—and not James—who had his finger on the bourgeois pulse of Victorian literary taste. Contemporaries complained, specifically, that Meredith’s dialogue was profuse and wearying, Conrad and Ford’s too spare and stilted. Margaret Oliphant’s sense that Meredith’s earlier novel, *The Egoist* (1879), was made up of a “weak, washy, everlasting flood of talk,” (404) was repeated in critiques of *One of Our Conquerors*, which a reviewer for the *Times* dubbed “more Meredithian than ever in style.”<sup>5</sup> Of *The Inheritors*, a typical review in the *Daily Chronicle* complained, “[t]he style is spasmodic, the dialogue gaspy; the interlocutors would seem to suffer from shortness of breath, as well as from confusion of ideas. We cannot find words strong enough to express our irritation at that asthmatic dialogue.”<sup>6</sup> Notably, these comments reveal a sense of disparagement about talk’s embodied communications, illuminating a similar feeling in Besant’s strong disavowal of gestures, looks, laughter, and tears. As part of her critique of Meredithian dialogue, Oliphant supposes a connection to Meredith’s authorial body, describing him as one who “likes . . . to hear his own voice” (404). The *Daily Chronicle* reviewer’s disgust for the “asthmatic” body—and, perhaps, the

suggestion that it has consequently left the critic gasping for words to describe his “irritation”—is palpably strong.

But these late-Victorian critics missed the ways in which these novels specifically motivated “bad” dialogue to counter these ingrained feelings and attitudes that wished to leave the talking body behind. Both the exhausting dialogue of *One of Our Conquerors* and the stilted dialogue of *The Inheritors* bring curiosity and attention to what happens to fictional narratives when they try to include—rather than pare away—difficult-to-translate elements of talk, from gestures to “gasp” pauses. By bringing dialogue and so-called “real life” talk into a close—if discomfiting—comparative orbit with each other, these novels also eschew the Jamesian perspective that has contributed to continuing estrangements between the two. Through their efforts to think through the difficulties that dialogue’s connection to talk poses for fiction, Meredith, Conrad, and Ford challenged conventional views of dialogue naturalized by the Victorian realist novel, pointing to the necessary partiality of dialogue’s verbal bias. In turn, this sense of conventional dialogue’s truncated form—its not-enoughness—disrupted assumptions about dialogue’s ameliorative capacities. Ultimately, I will argue that this “bad” dialogue can help us theorize the partial ways in which we still understand dialogue as a formal category. These novels, especially Meredith’s, illuminate how thinking about dialogue without talk impoverishes considerations of character and characterological embodiment—and, consequently, how aesthetic judgment emerges from negative feelings about embodied relations. In the final section of this essay, I will speculate on how some of the theoretical insights “bad” dialogue offers—about dialogue’s strained relationship with talk, verbal bias, negative feeling, and character bodies—can help us interrogate the ethics of our own assumptions about dialogue in the present. Talk’s production through unstable, decentralized, contingent, and relational embodiments, I will suggest, ultimately points to new directions for more ethically conscious approaches to the literary treatment of dialogue.

### I. Meredith’s Exhausting Dialogue

In “The Decay of Lying” (1891), Oscar Wilde describes Meredith through a perplexing set of contrasts: “Who can define him? His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything, except articulate” (976).<sup>7</sup> With a characteristic irony that overturns straightforward expressions of appreciation, Wilde’s apparent toggling between praise and censure actually expresses an apt regard for the paradoxical nature of Meredith’s art. He is right to zero in on the novelist’s “un-masterful” language and inarticulacy, which form a deliberate part of his aesthetic. This is a view that more recent scholars have shared. In particular, *One of Our Conquerors* has been singled out as exemplarily concerned with language and incoherence. Gillian Beer, for instance, argues that the novel “is self-consciously . . . about language and the limits of language” and evinces a “lost faith in language as communication” (266; emphasis original).<sup>8</sup> For Beer, it is music—especially when it is alternatively embodied in instruments—that emerges as a “liberating alternative to language,” providing a mode of expression that makes up for the inadequacy of words (275).

Yet as Beer also notes, despite his sense of verbal inadequacy as an inescapable condition, Meredith nonetheless “struggled to render the full complexity of experience into words, he worried at language” (275). I argue that this striving after “the full complexity of experience” motivates what Meredith’s contemporaries felt to be exhausting about the dialogue in *One of Our Conquerors*, which often feels more like an obsessive pursuit of talk’s rather concrete, embodied details than reaching toward the ineffable. As I have suggested above, Meredith does not shy away from calling attention to gesture and other physiological elements of talk—ultimately, he regards these trivial elements as inseparable from the words that characters say. Before turning to specific moments of dialogue, it may be worth noting briefly that *One of Our Conquerors* as a whole seems more explicitly bent toward

what David Howard calls Meredith's general "habit of concentrating on trivial incident and character" (132). The title—in its reference to just "one"—is ironic, and the plot stays close to the "trivial incidents" (i.e., parties, concerts, drunken conversation, social visits, and errands) in the life of "our conqueror," the financier Victor Radnor. Radnor has Parliamentary ambitions but can barely manage a vexing exchange with a passerby on the street, which forms the entire subject of the novel's opening chapter. *One of Our Conquerors*, in one sense, is a takedown of big action—tales of imperial romance and chauvinistic accounts of superior English character that frequented the literary scene of the 1890s. Our conqueror—on tenterhooks—awaits the death of his wife, the aging Mrs. Burman, so that he can marry his younger mistress Nataly, former attendant to Mrs. Burman, and achieve the picturesque comforts of domestic respectability. With Nataly, Radnor has a daughter, Nesta, for whom he seeks a financially sound marriage in case Mrs. Burman should bring them to ruin. He is an Englishman with romantic public and private ambitions, laid low, ultimately, by the conquering trivialities of his everyday posturing. Upon the death of the exhausted Nataly, Radnor—like Trollope's Melmotte, but without the pathos—descends into madness.

The entire first chapter relays a street encounter centered around an accidental tripping—which Meredith renders with Goffman-esque detail: Radnor crosses London Bridge, slips on a "sly strip of slipperiness" (1), receives help from a passerby (who accidentally dirties Radnor's waistcoat with his hands), and is then insulted for his "dam punctilio" after expressing displeasure at the waistcoat stains (3). In describing Radnor getting up from his fall, Meredith's slow transition into the tense moment of dialogue between characters commits a cardinal sin in the Victorian art of fiction. Meredith includes plenty of gestures:

He was unhurt, quite sound, merely astonished, he remarked, in reply to the inquiries of the first kind helper at his elbow; and it appeared an acceptable statement of his condition. He laughed, shook his coat-tails, smoothed the back of his head rather thoughtfully, thankfully received his runaway hat, nodded bright beams right and left, and making light of the muddy stigmas imprinted by the pavement, he scattered another shower of nods and smiles around, to signify, that as his good friends would wish, he thoroughly felt his legs and could walk unaided. (1)

We might observe that the speech tag "he remarked" signals that "unhurt, quite sound, merely astonished" are bits of Radnor's dialogue, though without the conventional quotation marks. For the most part, however, the rest of the passage focuses on Radnor's many small, performative uses of his body to communicate his recovery and good humor rather than his speech. For Meredith, the paralinguistic elements of Radnor's shifts in embodiment are arguably *part* of the dialogue, inseparable from the character's speech as well as his thoughts. Or, we might think of the way in which Radnor's embodied performances are focalized through the character as a form of free indirect discourse of the body.

If considered *apart* from the laughter and gestures above that hew so closely to it, dialogue feels insufficient in Meredith's novel, even when there is verbal profusion. Such forms of dialogue—which, of course, vary from character to character—overall bring attention to dialogue's estrangement from talk. The following excerpt of dialogue from Skepsey, servant to Radnor, offers a fairly typical sample that feels at once fragmentary and profuse. Here, Skepsey strings together thoughts on the state of English society, boxing, chivalry, and the journalist Mr. Durance:

'Much discouragement from Government, Society! If ladies . . . but I do not venture. They are not against Games. But these are not a protection . . . to them, when needed; to the country. The country seems asleep to its position. Mr. Durance has remarked on it:—though I would not always quote Mr. Durance . . . indeed, he says, that England has invested an Old Maid's All in the Millennium, and is ruined if it delays to come. "Old Maid," I do not see. I

do not—if I may presume to speak of myself in the same breath with so clever a gentleman, agree with Mr. Durance in everything.’ (166)

This snippet from Skepsey—a comic character, but one who is possessed of a self-sacrificing patriotism the novel implicitly sanctions by way of contrast to the more important English “conquerors”—feels “gibbeted” (in spite of his talkativeness), to borrow a word Richard Le Gallienne used to defend the novel against reviews that excerpted quotations to deride Meredith’s style.<sup>9</sup> The fuller contours of Skepsey’s talk emerge with the classed and gendered “interaction order” with Nesta: his “show of melancholy submission” (165) his “bow[ing] constrainedly” (166). A long preceding paragraph explores the mechanical complexities in the seemingly quotidian translation of thought to speech—for instance, telling us that “his mind had been too busy on the way for him to clothe in speech his impressions of the passage of incidents at the call for them” (165). The explanation directs our attention to the material and psychological influence of class on Skepsey’s conversation—his mental load too full, perhaps, with coordinating the observations of his own curious mind with the demands of the wealthy on his time and labor and with social expectations of his demeanor. The ellipses and dashes that punctuate Skepsey’s dialogue seem therefore to suggest not his inarticulacy, but that the dynamics of body and mind in mutual operation with the exigencies of Victorian sociocultural inequity are untranslatable into print.

Meredith’s insistence on either integrating or pointing to the elision of these difficult-to-translate or untranslatable elements (despite the risk of frustrating his readers) renders his particular intervention into dialogue somewhere in between Besant’s and James’s positions: namely, Meredith rejects the former’s notion of dialogue as an ameliorative record of talk but also does not quite accept the latter’s broad dismissal of their likeness in the name of artistic integrity. We might conceptualize Meredith’s understanding of literary dialogue as a “transmutation” of talk, a word that Goffman uses in the context of avoiding a mimetic or representational relationship between dialogue and talk, suggesting their mutual otherness, while yet bringing them into the proximity of likeness (*Forms of Talk* 35).<sup>10</sup> The problem with likeness is something that literary dialogue shares with microsociological transcription—specifically, writing’s verbal “recording bias” means “pinning with our ten thumbs what ought to be secured with a needle” (Goffman, *Forms of Talk* 2). *One of Our Conquerors*’s second chapter makes a broader acknowledgment about the cumbersome nature of microsociological description in the narrative, yet simultaneously defends the necessity of it. Entitled “Through the Vague to the Infinitely Little,” the chapter begins:

The fair dealing with readers demands of us, that a narrative shall not proceed at slower pace than legs of a man in motion; and we are still but little more than midway across London Bridge. But if a man’s mind is to be taken as a part of him, the likening of it, at an introduction, to an army on the opening march of a great campaign, should plead excuses for tardy forward movements, in consideration of the large amount of matter you have to review before you can at all imagine yourselves to have made his acquaintance. (10)

Meredith makes the case, in effect, that a profusion of microsociological detail is necessary for sufficient characterization of the protagonist. It is not possible, the passage suggests, to focus on a character’s mind independently of such seemingly trivial and ordinary incidents of his life. In the case of Radnor, his fall on London Bridge and his subsequent interactions with passers by informs our understanding of his character. Meredith argues for the connectedness of mind and body, and more specifically, in “likening” the mind to an army on the march, he brings attention to the mind’s connectedness to the body in motion. *One of Our Conquerors* may not be a swashbuckling tale of adventure or romance, but there is plenty of action packed into the “infinitely little.” Like the sociolinguist who notes the “recording bias” of speech transcription, the writer notes the aesthetic bias of novels that privilege big action.

Of course, the exhaustive inclusion of the microsociological sensorium is formally self-limiting. When it comes to writing dialogue that captures the experiential fullness of talk, it becomes somewhat arbitrary to say where talk begins, exactly, if we accept the premise, posed by *One of Our Conquerors*'s first scene, that not only gestures and laughter but also environmental elements like the “gale” and the “sly strip of slipperiness” together conspire to shape talk (1). If we are to follow media theorist John Durham Peters's line of thinking in his “elemental philosophy of media,” “interacting in the flesh . . . [entails] so much data on so many channels” (273). Meredith, who essentially experiments with how to conduct—in media terms—credible “remediations” of talk that attend to these other forms of “data on so many channels,” ultimately leaves us with an unresolved approach to dialogue that at once debunks assumptions about its proximity to talk and yet seeks unremittingly to yoke them together.<sup>11</sup>

## II. Conrad and Ford's “Asthmatic” Dialogue

One of the formal concerns of Conrad and Ford's *The Inheritors* is to challenge the notion that novelistic dialogue was somehow a record of talk. As I will argue below, *The Inheritors* directly connects the development of this notion of false recording to the new landscape of popular journalism and hack writing and, especially, the rise of the personal interview.<sup>12</sup> Participating in a distinct, turn-of-the-century trend (to which James also contributed) involving fiction narrated by a journalist, the setting of *The Inheritors* reflects the ways in which “talk” increasingly became a mass-market commodity during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Whether in the context of gossip journalism or more “respectable” circulations such as the *Athenaeum*'s “Literary Gossip,” the *Critic*'s “Literary World: Its Sayings and Doings,” the *Illustrated London News*'s “Town and Table Talk,” and Thackeray's middlebrow *Cornhill Magazine* (which promised its middle-class readers “what the world is talking about” in its prospectus), such developments conventionalized the sense that talk could be readily remediated into print forms.<sup>14</sup>

As with *One of Our Conquerors*, reviewers that expressed displeasure about the dialogue of *The Inheritors* missed the novel's fairly explicit resistance to accepted notions about the form character speech should take. Dialogue in *The Inheritors* could not be further from the streamlined, ameliorative record of talk that Besant idealized; Ford's memoir of his relationship with Conrad published over twenty years later chronicles a shared goal, according to Ford, of writing deliberately vague and fragmented dialogue. Ford explains that they sought to capture “the sort of indefiniteness that is characteristic of all human conversations, and particularly of all English conversations that are almost always conducted entirely by means of allusions and unfinished sentences” (143). He offers a sample conversation: “A. says, ‘What sort of fellow is . . . *you* know!’ B. replies, ‘Oh, he's a sort of a . . .’ and A. exclaims, ‘Ah, I always thought so . . .’” (143). This specimen of dialogue between Englishmen A and B indeed resembles much of the dialogue in *The Inheritors*, which, Ford notes, received a “paean of abuse for the number of dots it contained” (145). While such formal methods have not wrongly been identified as either proto-modernist or impressionistic, these designations tend to ignore the immediate fin-de-siècle journalistic contexts presented within the novel itself.

The first-person narration by the struggling writer and journalist, Arthur Etchingham Granger, acts as a filter for the novel's investigation of the Fourth Estate's outsize influence on everyday life and the fate of nations alike. Like *One of Our Conquerors*, *The Inheritors* is a story of Anglo-Imperial decline; indeed, through his work as a journalist, Granger becomes an unwitting pawn in the entire world's takeover by a new race of humans from the so-called Fourth Dimension (a spatial realm explored by both mathematicians and science fiction writers, including H.G. Wells, and seriously discussed in popular periodicals). In brief, the plot involves a takeover engineered primarily by a “Dimensionist” woman, who manipulates well-known political figures and journalists to bring about the collapse of a multinational imperial scheme in Greenland.<sup>15</sup> The geopolitical

instability that results after the scheme's collapse makes way for her race's calculated, managerial takeover of the earth.

In the novel, the cold managerialism of the Dimensionist "inheritance" is a natural extension of developments that were already penetrating all areas of English life. In the realm of journalism, the practice of marketing talk operated closely in conjunction with the managerialism of public relations, especially when it came to the personal interview, a new journalistic genre of the 1890s. Granger conducts and writes interviews of politicians and other celebrities, participating in a genre that operated almost entirely on the premise that print could offer a cleaned up record of talk. In *How to Write for the Press: A Practical Handbook for Beginners in Journalism* (1899), Arnold Bennett gives an account of the late nineteenth-century interview's codified practices, specifically recommending against verbatim transcriptions, but yet insisting, at the same time, that the interview is faithfully based in actual talk: "It requires some deftness in writing dialogue to make it appear as natural and easy running as it should be. It reports, or pretends to report, a leading question by the interviewer, and then sets down in colloquial phrasing the reply of the interviewee, with perhaps a remark as to the apparent mood of the latter in his speaking" (56). Bennett's recommendations for writing good interview dialogue tortuously strike a balance between an insistence on naturalness, reportorial transcription, and colloquial realism, on the one hand, and a knowing artifice, on the other. He signals the latter through his references to appearance, what dialogue "should be," and pretense. In recognizing artifice's necessity, Bennett notably brings the interview into close alignment with the conventions of "realistic" dialogue in the novel. But the two forms of dialogue were also aligned in how they justified the employment of pretense with the fantasy that it somehow purified talk into an idealized, original state that was "natural and easy running."

Of course, this association between naturalness and flow was everywhere contradicted. The invention of the phonograph and its use in transcription heightened the impact of these contradictions. As George Gouraud (Thomas Edison's business partner) noted in a preface to purportedly the first interview transcribed from a phonographic recording, "the phonograph is no flatterer. If your utterance be faulty or slovenly, it lets you know as much in a twinkling" (1).<sup>16</sup> To use a colloquialism of the present, we might say that the phonograph is a "less forgiving" record of print. Meredith would reject such notions, reminding us that neither print nor phonographic recording could capture even a fraction of the embodied and environmentally mediated relationships that are part and parcel of natural talk. Conrad and Ford, too, resist efforts to elide the messiness of talk by calling attention, in their dialogue, to the strain that results from the interview's insistence upon the naturalness of conversational flow.

Notably, even when not explicitly part of an interview, much of the dialogue of *The Inheritors* takes on an interview-like quality, where interlocutors jostle to obtain private knowledge about one another in highly codified ways. Similarly, in his analysis of James's *The Reverberator* (1888), Matthew Rubery describes how "the interview in James's fiction may not be a problem limited solely to interaction with the journalist but applicable to all conversation that relies on the tactics of withholding and revealing information with an audience, seen or unseen, in mind" (125). In describing the cultural climate of the 1890s, Rubery cites sociologists Paul Atkinson and David Silverman's notion of an "interview society," where "a dynamic of intrusion and revelation" applied more broadly to everyday life (119). But where, as Rubery points out, James's characters evince "virtuoso skill" as they "manipulate, misdirect, evade, and deflect questions" (125), in *The Inheritors*, interview dynamics form the testing ground upon which the notion of natural, flowing talk repeatedly fails. The opening gambit between the Dimensionist woman and Granger presents the first instance of this failure. The first thing that Granger wants his reader to know about him is that he "was a talker, proud of [his] conversational powers," and we consequently expect a controlled performance before the Dimensionist (2). But their subsequent dialogue immediately suggests

otherwise: Granger's stammering response to a silent, indescribable gesture of the Dimensionist sets up the novel's obsessive interest in talk that buckles under the strain of interview dynamics. In *The Inheritors*, ellipses and dashes that break up the dialogue call attention to a collective and highly physicalized effort under which almost all of the characters labor (except the Dimensionists) that seems a direct and ironic consequence of the interview's demands for "easy running" talk. In other words, the more the interview form insists upon the naturalness of conversational flow, the more its participants stumble.

According to Rubery, the concept of the "interview society" is especially germane to James's later fictions, including *The Reverberator* and also "The Aspern Papers" (1888), which explores how the kinds of desires attached to celebrity journalism became so systematized that they were replicated in personal relations between non-celebrities. *The Inheritors* draws on a similar set of concerns—about publicity and highly regulated patterns of self-revelation—that the interview genre coordinated. But even those characters who are the most practiced in such patterns are not exempt from "difficulty in expressing themselves," a description deployed in another disgruntled review of the novel, this time from the *Scotsman*.<sup>17</sup> In his narration, Granger mimics, for instance, "the great Callan," popular novelist and literary man about the town (and, incidentally, a none-too-kind portrait of James) who "even in the small hours of the morning . . . was ready for the kodak-wielder," describing how "[h]e—spoke—very—slowly—and—very—authoritatively" before a crowd of admirers (15).<sup>18</sup> Callan's dialogue is given with the same dashed arduousness, where authoritative regulation seems to come at the expense of his talk's speed. The precariousness of Callan's control is confirmed when the Dimensionist "plied him with compliments that he swallowed raw," after which he "made little confidences as if in spite of himself" (24-25).

An extended scene of dialogue during Granger's first major interview assignment for the "Atmospheres" series (likely a satire of Edmund Yates's interview series for *The World* called "Celebrities at Home") conducts what amounts to an explicit deconstruction of the interview's contorted naturalization of dialogue as a cleaned up but faithful record of talk. The dialogue gives "behind the curtain" access to the stilted moments of Granger and his subject, the foreign minister Churchill, as they engage in embarrassed, metapragmatic commentary on the interview process itself:<sup>19</sup>

I muttered that I feared he would find the process a bore.

"Not more for me than for you," he answered, seriously—"one has to do these things."

"Why, yes," I echoed, "one has to do these things." It struck me that he regretted it—regretted it intensely; that he attached a bitter meaning to the words.

"And . . . what is the procedure?" he asked, after a pause. "I am new to the sort of thing." (43)

An excerpt like this one typifies the stilted dialogue that the critics disliked and panned. With its indefinite recourse to "these things" and "the sort of thing"; its stops and starts; its mutterings and pauses—the passage suggests the characters' feelings of embarrassment, which evidently inspired great irritation among the novel's contemporary readers. The *Daily Chronicle's* particular "irritation" at the "asthmatic dialogue" was echoed by the *Scotsman's* complaint that characters with "singular difficulty in expressing themselves" contributed to an "obscurity" "calculated only to annoy."<sup>20</sup> These strong reactions seem to suggest a substrate of embarrassed feeling, shared by the characters and critics, formed from shared assumptions about what talk naturally ought to be. That is, halting, indefinite talk is broken and shameful, and print—whether in the form of an interview or a fictional narrative—should smooth out and restore talk to some imagined state of communicative wholeness.

The "asthmatic" dialogue gives the lie to the interview's ameliorative distillation of talk, bringing attention not only to the falsehood of such assumptions but also to how beliefs—whether

perpetuated by journalism or fiction—that idealize a print-like fluency in talk can have the opposite effect of stopping talkers as they buckle under the psychological and physiological strain of adhering to such conventions of printed talk. While *The Inheritors* does not quite proliferate (as *One of Our Conquerors* often does) “the vague and infinitely little” details of the embodied and situated relations through which talk operates, it does strive to capture, as Ford would later explain, what he perceived to be actual English conversation’s “allusions and unfinished sentences.” At the same time, the space that the ellipses open up conveys a sense of dialogue’s fragmentariness in relation to talk—that is, what dialogue will always miss. The novel’s perceived overuse of ellipses both tries to capture the reality of talk’s uneven and stilted characteristics and calls attention to limitations in dialogue’s formal conventions when it comes to capturing the overloaded “data channels” involved in the most quotidian, face-to-face interactions. As with *One of Our Conquerors*, dialogue in *The Inheritors* seems caught between the desire to bring itself closer to talk and the acknowledgment of dialogue and talk’s inevitable formal alienation from each other.

### III. Bad Dialogue and Criticism of the Present

And what can these prior turn-of-the-century instances of “bad” dialogue do for our present revisitation of dialogue? As the conveners of this special issue note, relative to forms such as free indirect discourse, dialogue has historically seemed less interesting to narratologists and novel theorists alike. With Jamesian resonance, for many, dialogue feels untenable as a distinct category and unworthy of serious critical investigation. I will add here that the lasting influence of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism in novel theory has also contributed to dialogue’s abstraction into indistinction. As Peter Womack puts it, dialogism names “a universal condition of using language” whether spoken or written (48). In other words, if—as Bakhtin argues—all language is always already implicated within systems of meaning, associations, and ideologies expressed by others and hence never monologic, dialogism becomes a universal condition about which we can observe very little, beyond examining its political effects in the novel. In Bakhtinian approaches to the novel, dialogue tends to get absorbed into dialogism’s grander liberalist concerns for articulating the novel’s inclusion of multiple and oft-competing voices.

I suggest that the attention to talk that “bad” dialogue in *One of Our Conquerors* and *The Inheritors* coordinates—generated in a moment before modernism’s movement into formalist aesthetics, and postmodernism’s suspicious preoccupation with language—can return us to a different, more concrete look at dialogue. In particular, I consider how the doubleness that dialogue in these novels confronts—that is, whether “an everlasting flood” or “gasp,” dialogue at once desires a connection to talk and disavows that very connection as pretense or impossible aspiration—might be a starting point for our own current thinking. On the one hand, as Meredith reveals in his theoretical second chapter and Ford in his memoir, the dialogue in these novels makes sincere efforts to capture talk in a manner that counters Besant’s or Bennett’s ideals. On the other hand, these novels stage their own failures to remediate the experience of talk’s microsociological sensorium in dialogue through an ironized knowingness about their own “bad” form—crystallized, especially in Meredith, through an apology to his readers about pacing that seems equal parts serious and not. In spite of the irony, a mutual inability to “get to” a perspective that entirely cleaves dialogue from talk remains strong in both of these novels—it is here that “bad” dialogue gets stuck.

It seems productive, therefore, to begin with this knotty particularity of dialogue’s double bind and consider instances in our own criticism where this bind has been met head on or at least approached.<sup>21</sup> The coupling of ethical concerns with dialogue in James Phelan’s notion of “mediated telling,” for one, has opened up new spaces for considering dialogue’s formal attributes in ways that I see as related to the present essay’s interest in talk. In Phelan’s discussion, mediated telling describes how dialogue can serve a narrative function and contribute to a novel’s diegesis. Posing an

alternative to Seymour Chatman's longstanding story/discourse distinction, Phelan argues that "[w]hile the scene of dialogue is itself an event in the story world, that dialogue is also doing a lot of mediated telling (as much as any passage of narration), and that mediated telling . . . is an integral part of the ethical dimension of the passage" (19). Specifically, dialogue's distinctive mediation through character enables changes in the ethical dimensions of narration—for instance, mediated telling might alter the balance of who gets to narrate in the text, with characters potentially crowding out other narratorial voices. In *Bleak Liberalism* (2016), Amanda Anderson briefly takes up the notion of mediated telling specifically to argue that Elizabeth Gaskell's political novels "foreground ideas and ideology" through "mediat[ing] those elements through character" (89). Character bodies, therefore, are essential to the expansion of dialogue's "telling" functions beyond the story world, even as they themselves remain locked within the storyworld. While these discussions of "mediated telling" do not inquire into dialogue's connections to talk, the way in which their particular readings depend on characterological embodiments resonates with my broader point that talk brings attention to the critical disembodiment of dialogue that has arguably persisted since the nineteenth century. In other words, in mediated telling, character almost becomes a surrogate formal category that enables an implicit acknowledgment that something is missing from our understanding of dialogue, if we cut it off entirely from talk in its embodied and environmentally mediated enactments.

I suggest that this feeling of dialogue's proximity to talk is necessary for criticism that is committed to ethical realms. Since we might still be moved to laugh or feel exhausted by Skepsey's undisciplined talk, or to raise our eyebrows—with irritation, perhaps—at Churchill and Granger's stilted interview talk, I believe that these instances of dialogue can yet challenge us to think more keenly about why we feel in these ways. We might consider, for instance, if a sense of embarrassment continues to resonate within our own judgments about aesthetic taste, and if so, whether such embarrassment arises from exclusionary thinking about language and communicative competency.<sup>22</sup> As I have been arguing, such feelings in the nineteenth century seemed to correlate with a sense of embarrassment about the body's "failures" to produce an idealized economy of fluency; dialogue therefore became an occasion for reining in the discomfiting excesses of the body. While our present critical moment tends to regard such assumptions about dialogue as part of a debate about art and realism laid to rest long ago, what "bad" dialogue in *One of Our Conquerors* and *The Inheritors* teaches us—in its striving to capture aspects of the lived, embodied experience that gives form to talk as much as the words themselves—is that we cannot and perhaps should not abandon our investment in dialogue's connection to talk. As the recent examples from Phelan and Anderson suggest, criticism on dialogue that explores extradiegetic ethical and political stakes requires an approach inclusive of embodiment—and, as well, an approach that recognizes embodied difference.

In closing, I would like to reflect briefly on the coincidence of how *One of Our Conquerors* and *The Inheritors* are both novels concerned with the decline of the British empire—and, even more specifically, the vulnerability and disintegration of the English male body, dramatized in key figures that would have been "Great Men" in a prior generation. The dialogue's attachments to talk—and the fullness of talk's production through these bodies—stubbornly points to frailty and decline; by narrating the excesses and dysfunctions of these particular bodies, these fictions refuse both the normative aesthetic of the perfectly fluent interview *and* the larger sense of formalist unity that modernists would adapt from James. We could say that talk "un-selves" the Victorian bourgeois subject and the interiority-driven modernist subject alike. It seems that elements of the latter, at least, continue their survival into the present, both in the critical avoidance of dialogue and, in a more pronounced way, aesthetic judgments in the discipline of creative writing. For instance, from Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) to David Jauss's *On Writing Fiction: Rethinking Conventional Wisdom about the Craft* (2011), the injunction "show, don't tell" remains popular in teaching the

writing of dialogue.<sup>23</sup> Citing Ernest Hemingway in conjunction with James as pioneering such aesthetics, Jauss regards the notion that dialogue (and action) must show “thought and feeling” as an uncontested principle of good writing (89). The institutionalization of “show, don’t tell” requires, importantly, an erasure of the body—that is, when we ignore the myriad ways in which embodiment can “get in the way” of dialogue, then we can free up dialogue to efficiently “show” the interior drama of “thought and feeling.” As such, although this ideal for dialogue is different from that which Besant proposed, both are premised on efficiency—whether of speech or of fictional craft—that leaves the body behind. As the work of cognitive narratologists such as Lisa Zunshine, Alan Palmer, and David Herman has recently stressed, however, both the mind and external bodily experience are important determinants of “thought and feeling,” both within and without storyworlds.<sup>24</sup>

In the world of creative writing, it is only recently that writers and scholars of color—including Junot Díaz, Namrata Poddar, and Viet Thanh Nguyen—have brought attention to the non-universalism of such aesthetic judgments as “show, don’t tell” institutionalized by the writer’s workshop model in the West.<sup>25</sup> Eric Bennett, likewise, has usefully laid out the case that such accepted aesthetic judgments were implicated within the historical milieu of midcentury American McCarthyism. Along the lines of these critiques and recent developments in narratology, I contend that our revisitation of dialogue ought also to reconsider talk as a particular way of enabling more imaginative engagements with language that are not so quick to wrest it from the mediating form of bodies. Talk, I argue, compels a confrontation with “orality” that leaves behind colonialist understandings of the spoken as an archaic repository of lost tribalism, bringing attention, instead, to the historical as well as present ways in which the oral is “inseparable from the movement of the body,” to borrow from Édouard Glissant’s meditations on the poetics of Caribbean discourse (122). By attending more closely to the body and its always unstable, relational interactions within the specific circumstances of its environment, we avoid what linguist Roy Harris has called a form of “scriptism”—naturalized by a long history of Western thinking—that imagines words can be dislodged from talk and transferred without change into print.<sup>26</sup> “Bad” dialogue—specifically in the context of the late-Victorian art of fiction debates, a key moment of literary historical becoming—compels us to reconsider the various and dynamic ways in which embodiment can “tell” about power relationships. Perhaps “bad” dialogue drives us, also, to think through to the limitations of the novel form itself, both in enduring judgments about craft and also in the critical privilege of novel theory within the broader landscape of academic inquiry.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mark Spilka discusses how the art of fiction debates reflected the broader participation of many other voices, including Robert Louis Stevenson, Andrew Lang, Vernon Lee, Paul Bourget, Edmund Gosse, and Thomas Hardy in this “era of discussion” (101-108).

<sup>2</sup> In “The Art of Fiction,” James envisions the novel’s organicism of parts “melting into each other at every breath and being intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression” (511).

<sup>3</sup> According to Alessandro Duranti, although both sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology are interested in language use in context—that is, in “speakers as more than producers of linguistic forms” (5)—the fields began to diverge in methodology and emphasis in the mid-1980s, when

sociolinguistics became more oriented toward quantitative methods and studying urban environments while linguistic anthropology maintained a greater interest in qualitative and ethnographic methods (5-8).

<sup>4</sup> Katie Gemmill's discussion of Richardson's *Clarissa* in this same issue returns us to an even earlier moment of dialogue—during the rise of the novel—also to defamiliarize its conventionalized formal features; like Gemmill's, the present discussion traces connections between dialogue and embodiment during a key moment of the novel's development.

<sup>5</sup> Oliphant's review of *The Egoist* was published in the September 1880 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*; the *Times* review of *One of Our Conquerors* is quoted in Margaret Harris's "Editor's Introduction," 3.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Appendix B of *The Inheritors*, edited by David Seed, 158.

<sup>7</sup> Here, Wilde's observation—which links novelistic craft to the social grace of articulacy—lends support to Kent Puckett's observations about the connectedness of literary and social form in the nineteenth-century novel.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Fletcher echoes Beer in describing the novel as "strikingly concerned with communication" in his editorial preface to *Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays* (1971), x.

<sup>9</sup> Le Gallienne's May 1892 article, "Meredith for the Multitude" for *Novel Review* is quoted in Mohammad Shaheen's *George Meredith: A Reappraisal of the Novels* (1981), 120.

<sup>10</sup> Goffman's *Forms of Talk* is punctuated by brief mentions of literary dialogue. In general, he collapses dialogue in fiction and drama under the umbrella category of literary dialogue; though these are, of course, distinct from the point of view of literary studies.

<sup>11</sup> Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's "remediation" describes the incorporation and refashioning of old media in new media forms in part because they were unsatisfied with poststructuralism's over-focus on language. "Remediation" tries to capture "how language interacts with other media, other technologies, and cultural artifacts" (56-57); thus, the term might also be used, in light of Peters's expansive definition of media, to refer to how in talk, language functions through richly non-linguistic elements of experience.

<sup>12</sup> The novel's hybrid generic form—as Robert Green has noted, equal parts scientific romance and political novel—also signals its immersion in end-of-century debates about novelistic art and the rise of popular genre fictions.

<sup>13</sup> See Matthew Rubery's *Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction After the Invention of News* (2009) on the rise of the journalist as fictional persona, narrator, and character later in the nineteenth century.

<sup>14</sup> See the first chapter of Patrick Leary's *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian Britain* (2010), which includes a summary account of this shift, beginning around the 1850s-1860s, toward celebrity culture and the growing demand to know celebrity "sayings and doings in private life" (57).

<sup>15</sup> The mismanaged and violent colonization of Greenland is a loose allegory for Leopold III's Belgian Congo.

<sup>16</sup> The interview, as written up in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on July 24, 1888, reveals a similar tension between pretense and faithful recording. In spite of Gouraud's comments about the phonograph as "no flatterer," the interview itself, written out as quoted dialogue between the interviewer and Gouraud, shows no evidence this "faulty or slovenly" speech, and the interviewer elides the editorial labor required to produce the print account's fluent dialogue: "The phonograph itself dictated to the typewriter all that had been spoken; and a few hours later a faithful report of the conversation, in MS. Form, was placed in the interviewer's hands" (1).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Appendix B of *The Inheritors*, edited by David Seed, 157.

<sup>18</sup> See Jeffrey Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography*, 157. While James was known for his stammering, in the novel, difficulty with speech production is a universal condition shared among all the Englishmen—as Ford would later reiterate in his memoir of Conrad.

<sup>19</sup> In linguistic anthropology, metapragmatics names language’s reflexive capabilities in referring to its own usages. See Alex Benson’s discussion of metapragmatics in conjunction with W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) in this same issue; Benson’s reference to Michael Silverstein’s “dialectical plenitude of indexicality in microcontextual realtime” (“Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life,” 227) may be helpful as another formulation for describing the conditions of talk that the novels I discuss seek to capture.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Appendix B of *The Inheritors*, edited by David Seed, 157.

<sup>21</sup> Although outside of the purview of the current essay, one area that has engaged more directly with dialogue and talk’s felt proximities is dialect studies. Whether in the context of British or American fiction, the question of authenticity (or, “the idea of authenticity,” to borrow from the focus of Taryn Hakala’s recent article on Lancashire writers) was central to negotiations of language, class, race, and power between the literary establishment and dialect writers. See, for instance, Martha Vicinus’s chapters in *The Industrial Muse* (1975) on Chartist fiction and dialect writers from the industrial north; on the American side, Eric Sundquist on late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century African American writers in *To Wake the Nations* (1993), and Gavin Jones’s *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (1999).

<sup>22</sup> See Jennifer Esmail’s important study on *Reading Victorian Deafness* (2013), which argues that when authors like Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins assign no dialogue to deaf characters who are able, in fact, to express themselves through signing, they are refusing linguistic agency that does not operate through the normative mechanisms of orality. Esmail’s focus on Victorian “oralism” also brings up still relevant questions about the limits of fiction in representing disabled bodies and embodied difference more broadly.

<sup>23</sup> To be sure, Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) tried to dislodge hierarchical thinking perpetuated by the show vs. tell binary; with the example of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and how it “order[s] various forms of telling in the service of various forms of showing,” Booth points out “the radical inadequacy of the telling-showing distinction” (16).

<sup>24</sup> See especially Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006), Palmer’s *Social Minds in the Novel* (2010), and Herman’s *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind* (2013).

<sup>25</sup> Díaz’s introduction to *Dismantle: An Anthology of Writing from the Vona/Voices Writing Workshop* (2014)—also excerpted in *The New Yorker*—comments both on the exclusion of writers and faculty of color in elite MFA programs in the 1990s and on the myth of a universalist, “pure” art that is, rather, situationally white. Poddar’s 2016 essay for *Literary Hub* directly tackles “show, don’t tell” as a “colonialist relic” that privileges visibility over orality; Nguyen’s 2017 “Critic’s Take” published in *The New York Times* briefly sums up some of these recent critiques.

<sup>26</sup> See especially Harris’s final chapter in *Rethinking Writing* (2001) titled “Mightier than the Word,” 215-42.

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