

Plan suggested for *Dossier 13* (speech / conversation)

Intro:

[Introduce the docs:] 3 docs by famous **British** authors, whose works span three centuries: a few notes jotted down towards the writing of an essay (intellectual approach, with moral, social & philosophical implications); an excerpt from a one-act play (or “sketch”) by an author belonging to the same school as Beckett (the theater of the absurd); a 19th-century painting (Victorian era) by a painter celebrated for his heart-warming or amusing depictions of rural scenes.

[Indicate what your angle of approach will be:] In spite of these obvious differences, these docs all go to prove how difficult humans find it to use what distinguishes them from animals & plants: the **speech faculty**, in other words their **alleged ability to communicate** ideas or content to others.

[Indicate the plan you’ll follow – slowly, clearly, fully:] The art of conversation is not so simply mastered; the breaking of its rules often reveals unsuspected psychological depths; just as a person’s stress or not on speaking right reveals his or her outlook (place of man & speech in society)

1) When the obvious proves treacherous.

- However **grotesque** it may seem, the simplest actions can prove problematic (**quid pro quo**, misunderstanding). Answering a simple question on a bus route, for instance, when your **deranged interlocutor** believes your response insults, or makes fun of, her, or she imagines she doesn’t get the respect she deserves. A supposedly neutral conversation thus transforms into an **inimical** exchange, and a bus stop into a war zone (Cf. the lady who gets away from the scene the first chance she gets). Allude to Pinter’s “**comedy of menace**,” and its dark implications.

- The same goes for a **declaration of love**. Telling your loved one about your feelings for her is the easiest way to go about it, but the fear of rejection, etc. can make you resort to other means, like the writing of a sonnet (need for an **intermediary**). A very different setting from Pinter’s play (rural, slightly idyllic, light of day, peace & quiet), yet some **anguish** felt too here while the maiden reads a *written* confession, instead of listening to a direct *spoken* proposal (Cf. the young man’s hunched body position).

- As Swift underlines, though conversation should come *naturally* to most of us—or be mastered after a short effort—it is seldom the case. Cf. “in every man’s power,” “a very few faults, that they might correct in half an hour,” “this simple and obvious reflection,” etc. This is presented as a **paradox** (lines 17 to 21) which affects society at large. The main consequences are “disgust,” “indignation,” and the transformation of conversation into a plight or ordeal one wishes to avoid at all cost.

2) What language really tells us.

- Thus the info derived from a conversation may be divorced from the message originally intended (presence of a **sub-text + existence of non-verbal messages like gestures**). Study the 4 kinds of **intolerable speakers** described by Swift (lines 20-39) & what the characters reveal about themselves, according to Swift, when thus treading underfoot the delicate art of conversation.

- Likewise, the woman’s mad tirade tells us volumes about her inner world, made of irrational fears (anything “strange,” i.e. uncommon scares her—Cf. fear of meeting the *small* [stage direction], innocent man in a dark alley), a feeling of inferiority, paranoia, & apparent xenophobia (“Peruvians,” “a foreigner”). Her world is also a policed world, full of courts, witnesses, docks, detectives. Study Grice’s **four “conversational maxims”** in the Pinter excerpt—**quantity, quality, relation/relevance, and manner**—and show that none are respected here (especially a certain lack of logic: in London ≠ “on a public highway,” a foreigner/Peruvian ≠ someone from the countryside!)

- If such is the case, it might be better to trust the written word more than the spoken one. Mulready’s painting makes us see **writing as a more sincere art form**, speaking directly **from the heart**. Speak here of the sonnet as an also demanding art form: conventional prosody & fixed rhyming pattern possibilities, requires time & some talent. No conversation needed here to express one’s true feelings.

3) Three diverging outlooks.

- Swift’s is the **quintessential Neo-Classic stance**: “Nature” (10) dictates the way men should behave; so man must be improved, reformed, made as social & “agreeable” as possible (an aim well within his reach if he really tries). Hence the use of **humor, irony** (39), & **satire** to castigate those who stand outside the norm. Cf. stress on “**folly**,” “faults,” “a multitude of errors,” “not so much as tolerable,” and the **moral objective** Swift pursues when writing this essay (lines 7-10). He thus describes / mocks / passes judgments on types of insufferable beings.

- The woman in Pinter’s sketch also abundantly resorts to “**types**” and “**sorts**.” Interesting to notice the similarities in the 2 texts: her intolerable attitude, she monopolizes the “conversation” (a soliloquy or monologue, actually), talks too much, reveals too much info about herself, her narrative is insipid, a plethora of legal allusions.

- Yet Pinter’s stance is the reverse of Swift’s in the sense that deranged, disturbing individuals are the results of a **corrupt society** (allude to Pinter’s political commitment). For him, the woman’s madness is symptomatic of society’s disease—a disease made manifest by the illogicalities in her speech, while Swift’s **rules of conduct** only serve to limit man’s freedom further (Cf. “maxims... regulated,” line 9).

- Mulready’s outlook has nothing to do with this. An established Victorian painter (influence of Pre-Raphaelism) with a stress on **tender emotion, not subversion**. Two characters not so “fine” or “refined” as in Swift’s description of *his* circle. Describe their rural environment in the painting (nature + light). Intimate moment of revelation. Stress on the Romantic beauty of reading & writing (Cf. book). Idea that poetry only can express certain feelings (**everyday language too trite or mundane**). Also the (**Pre-**)**Romantic idea** that vice is not to be found in the countryside (only in cities).

Conclusion: So, conversation not such an “innocent” pleasure as Swift would have us think (15): underlines the tension between individuals & society.

- The written word not necessarily less artistic & non-verbal communication (body language) can also be valuable, more sincere though less articulate.