

and "Ending"; and *How Far Can You Go?* is similarly divided into chapters, each of which begins with the word "How" — "How It Was", "How They Lost Their Virginites", "How They Lost the Fear of Hell" and so on. The verbal echoes were designed, I would say, to introduce an element of "symmetry" into the semantic level of chapter-headings, and perhaps to compensate for the fact that the chapters are very unequal in length. Symmetry, I believe, matters more to writers of fiction than readers consciously perceive.

## 37 The Telephone

He went to the telephone in the lobby outside. "Darling," he said.

"Is that Mr Last? I've got a message here, from Lady Brenda."  
"Right, put me through to her."

"She can't speak herself, but she asked me to give you this message, that she's very sorry but she cannot join you tonight. She's very tired and has gone home to bed."

"Tell her I want to speak to her."

"I can't, I'm afraid, she's gone to bed. She's very tired."

"She's very tired and she's gone to bed?"

"That's right."

"Well, I want to speak to her."

"Good night," said the voice.

"The old boy's plastered," said Beaver as he rang off.

"Oh dear. I feel rather awful about him. But what can he expect, coming up suddenly like this? He's got to be taught not to make surprise visits."

"Is he often like that?"

"No, it's quite new."

The telephone bell rang. "D'you suppose that's him again? I'd better answer it."

"I want to speak to Lady Brenda Last."

"Tony, darling, this is me, Brenda."

"Some damn fool said I couldn't speak to you."

"I left a message from where I was dining. Are you having a lovely evening?"

EVELYN WAUGH *A Handful of Dust* (1934)

THE TELEPHONE is so familiar and ubiquitous a feature of modern life that we easily forget how unnatural it would have seemed, to previous ages, to speak and listen without being able to see or touch. In normal conversation, when the interlocutors are physically present to each other, they can add all kinds of meanings and nuances to their words by facial expression and body-language, or indeed communicate by such non-verbal means alone (a shrug, a squeeze of the hand, a lift of the eyebrow). Until the recent invention of the videophone (which is still in a very early stage of development) these channels of communication have not been available to the telephone user. By the same token, the "blindness" of telephonic communication lends itself to deception, and easily generates confusion, misunderstanding and alienation between the participants. It is therefore an instrument full of narrative potential.

Evelyn Waugh belonged to a generation of novelists — Henry Green, Christopher Isherwood and Ivy Compton-Burnett are other names that come to mind — who were particularly interested in the expressive possibilities of dialogue in fiction. Their work tends towards the effect I called "staying on the surface" (see Section 25): the characters revealing, or betraying, or condemning themselves by what they say, while the narrator maintains a dry detachment, abstaining from moral comment or psychological analysis. It is not surprising therefore that Evelyn Waugh was one of the first English novelists to recognize the importance of the telephone in modern social life, and its potential for comic and dramatic effect. It figures prominently in his second novel, *Vile Bodies* (1930), one chapter of which consists entirely of two telephone conversations between the hero and heroine, presented without comment and even without speech tags, in the course of which their engagement is broken off and the heroine announces her re-engagement to the hero's best friend. The language used is banal and formulaic — they keep saying "Well?" and "I see," when in fact nothing is well, and the one thing they can't do is see each other — and the effect is both funny and sad. The same is true of this passage from *A Handful of Dust*.

Brenda Last, bored with her husband Tony and life in his hideous stately home, starts an affair with the worthless and

penniless young man-about-town, John Beaver, pretending that she needs to stay frequently in London to pursue a course in economics. One day Tony turns up in town unexpectedly, and finds she is dining out. He drowns his disappointment at his club in the company of an old chum, Jock Grant-Menzies. Then he is summoned to the telephone to receive a message from Brenda.

The first effect of the blindness of the telephone in the ensuing dialogue is a comic one: Tony's affectionate greeting, "Darling," meets with a very formal response from an unidentified third party. Tony doesn't seem to be able to grasp that this person is passing on a message, but keeps asking, with the drunk's persistence, to speak to his wife. There is pathos as well as comedy here, because the desperately lonely Tony does indeed yearn to communicate with his increasingly evasive and absent wife, and doesn't realize that she is turning away from him. The reader assumes that the third party is speaking from the place where Brenda dined — that is implied by "She . . . has gone home to bed." But we discover that this speaker is in fact Beaver, and that he is with Brenda, possibly in that very bed, though of course Tony remains ignorant of this fact. "The old boy's plastered," said Beaver as he rang off" is a quite perfect sentence, simple though it may look. The revelation of how Tony is being tricked is all the more effective for being delayed as long as possible, casually implied in the speech-tag. The words spoken, which might seem affectionately familiar in another context, here express only contempt, callousness and complete lack of compunction. Brenda does "feel rather awful about" Tony, but in her next breath she turns normal ethics upside down (a recurrent motif of the novel) by implying that it is *he* who is at fault: "what *can* he expect, coming up suddenly like this?"

The telephone rings again, and again Tony asks to speak to Brenda. "Tony, darling, this *is* me, Brenda." Comedy and treachery are deftly blended here: another misunderstanding by Tony, a doubling of Brenda's betrayal in the insincere endearment, "darling". It is illogical of Tony to ask to speak to Brenda because he is telephoning her late at night at a flat so small he is not able to share it with her (he stays at his club); so if anyone answers it must be her. Fuddled with drink, he is confusing this conversation with

the one he has just had with "some damn fool" supposedly calling from the place where Brenda had been earlier. But of course this "mistake" is no such thing. Brenda is quick to spot the danger and prop up the lie: "I left a message from where I was dining."

There is a sense in which all dialogue in prose fiction is like telephonic dialogue, because (unlike drama) it must make do without the physical presence of the speakers. Indeed, fictional dialogue is still more deprived, in being denied the expressive timbre and intonation of the human voice. Some novelists try to compensate by descriptive verbal phrases ("No," he whispered hoarsely, "Yes!" she screamed ecstatically), but Waugh has chosen to let the context comment on the speech acts of his characters, encouraging us to sound their words in our heads, and make our own assessment of their vanity, cruelty and pathos.

As I write this, a book has just been published which might reasonably be described as the Ultimate Telephone Novel. *Vox* (1992), by the American writer Nicholson Baker, author of three previous fictions of a highly original "minimalist" character, is accurately described on the cover of the British edition as "a novel about telephone sex." It consists of a long telephone conversation, rendered entirely in dialogue form apart from a few speech-tags, between a man and a woman on opposite coasts of North America, whose only connection is an adult contact line. They exchange detailed and mutually arousing information about their sexual preferences, fantasies and experiences, finally achieving simultaneous orgasm by masturbation. The unnaturalness of the telephone as a medium of communication could hardly be more strikingly epitomized than by using it as an instrument of sexual excitation and release, since it precludes what is normally considered essential to the sexual act: physical contact and penetration. Conversely one could say that telephone sex strikingly epitomizes the perversity of masturbation. Not surprisingly, *Vox* has proved a controversial novel, provoking sharply differing responses. Is it a piece of up-market pornography, or a devastating indictment of the sterility of sexual relations in the age of Aids, or a life-enhancing celebration of the ability of human beings to achieve

harmless pleasure by co-operation? By writing the novel in dialogue form, the author has left the task of answering this question entirely to the reader – though not, of course, responsibility for having posed it.