

The Dialect of the Tribe

Speech and
Community in
Modern Fiction

Margery
Sabin

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*Speech and Community
in Modern Fiction*

Margery Sabin

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For my mother
Syd Feldstein Mauser

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CONTENTS

Introduction	3
1 The Life of English Idiom, the Laws of French Cliché	10
English and French Traditions	10
The Life of Idiom in Joyce and Lawrence	25
2 The Community of Intelligence and the Avant-Garde	43
3 Competition of Intelligence in <i>The Golden Bowl</i>	65
Charlotte's Risk	65
Maggie's Method	82
4 Constructing Character: Speech and Will in <i>Women in Love</i>	106

5	Near and Far Things in Lawrence's Writing of the Twenties	139
	The Spectacle of Reality: Australia, the Sea, and Sardinia	139
	<i>St. Mawr</i> : Spectacle and Symbol	162
6	Postures and Impostures of English in <i>Ulysses</i>	179
	Dramatic Language: "Every word is so deep"	179
	The Comedy of Psychic Depth: "You ought to see yourself"	210
	The Shelter from Fact in "Eumaeus"	224
7	Signs of Life and Death in Beckett's Trilogy	241
	<i>Le bon sens</i> and Horse-Sense	241
	Molloy: <i>l'unijambiste</i>	252
	Throes and Calm in <i>Malone meurt</i> / <i>Malone Dies</i>	264
	<i>Le type respiratoire</i> / The Respiratory Type: <i>L'Innommable</i> / <i>The Unnamable</i>	278
	<i>Notes</i>	292
	<i>Index</i>	307

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Introduction

I could give all to Time except—except
What I myself have held. But why declare
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,
And what I would not part with I have kept.

—ROBERT FROST

Robert Frost likes to display his power to evade impassive authorities bent on leveling the world—even the authority of Time. He can keep what he wants to save by his way of declaring, or rather *not* declaring, his most precious possessions. The witty figuring of Time's servant as a kind of dull-witted customs official is resonant not only for Frost's bravado generally but perhaps even more for the English-language fiction that is the subject of this book. One or another kind of smuggling past the barrier of customs may be detected in all the novels I discuss, and the image even elucidates certain practices of literary criticism in this century, including perhaps my own. Certainly for F. R. Leavis, Frost's pun on "Customs" has resonance in suggesting how mere conventions—old or new—present more of an obstacle than a protection for personally cherished things. Leavis, like Frost, saw himself crossing over into an inhospitable era where those things most valued by him were being discarded by the customs of the time. The one salvageable possession might be language itself—expressive, dramatic, personal language, as Frost in his poem does so craftily manage to save it, if only by avoiding any outright declaration of what he is up to.¹

The novelists grouped together in this book—Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett—were all significantly more intrepid crossers of boundaries than Robert Frost—or F. R. Leavis. In relation to the fiction of this century, Leavis himself sometimes plays the inglorious role of a kind of customs official, examining and sorting out what foreign products should or should not be allowed into English fiction. All four novelists, by contrast, were famous venturers into foreign territories. Not content to stay at home—wherever home initially was—they also never completely crossed over into the safety of any other place where they became fully at home. For them, the activity of smuggling, in relation to language and culture, becomes an even more complex two-way traffic, crossing national as well as temporal boundaries. Some novels by Lawrence and Joyce were, in actuality, contraband for a long time in England and Ireland and America; less literally, all these novelists bring into English fiction alien things, imports from France and elsewhere. At the same time, and no less importantly, they stealthily take certain things with them out of situations willingly and even willfully left behind. And for them, too, the drama is centered intensely in language. They were all, in their separate ways, masters of that dramatic, expressive, idiomatic English so variously “kept,” in Frost’s word, by writers and readers in English since Shakespeare. If their novels present even more elusive dramas than Frost’s poetry, that is partly because they are even more indirect than he in not declaring exactly which qualities of the English tradition they have chosen to keep and which to discard—what, after all, they may in effect save, even in the midst of radical gestures of repudiation.

At our late date, the repudiations of these great modern novelists may need less new attention than their strong, if also often ambivalent, actions of holding on to what they present themselves as giving up. Their experimentation includes, even thrives on, intense, unresolved dramas of affiliation and withdrawal, especially in relation to inherited values of language. By now, modernist experimentation has passed so fully into our literary consciousness that the survival rather than the subversion of speech values in literature is what requires demonstration. Literary theory imported from France has now made a whole generation of English-language readers and critics entirely at home in decoding apparently expressive language according to the patterns of self-deception or conformity that French authorities have declared to be lurking everywhere behind the appearances of all kinds of language. The systematic “deconstruction” of verbal designs in literature flattens

out the kind of ambivalence I want to identify in James, Lawrence, Joyce, and Beckett. Even words like "ambivalence" must now be smuggled back into the language of criticism.

For James, Lawrence, Joyce, and Beckett, however, the speech forms of language now given up so impassively by critical theory escape systematic rejection because they are associated with such personal and even dangerously uncontrollable forces of life, and with forms of knowing and acting not readily contained in any system. I will argue that this association is itself handed down through identifiable habits and tendencies in the English tradition, where French-style intellectual disdain for the familiar and the illogical never entirely cancels out responsiveness to quite diverse signs in language of human energy, resourcefulness, and sheer physical vitality. Without ascribing to the expectation that language works primarily as an instrument for absolute self-manifestation or thoroughly rational knowledge, this English tradition endorses the constitutive force of language as it serves desires for self-assertion and the forging of relationship: between past and present, self and world, and even between the depths and surfaces of the individual personality. In focusing on four writers who so vigorously sought freedom from all conventional and settled wisdom, I will be dealing with this tradition in radically disrupted form—shaken up and broken down, reappropriated only after, or in the midst of, loud rejections—but present in striking form nonetheless.

The fact that James, Lawrence, Joyce, and Beckett—a good slate for the greatest modern novelists in English—cannot even be securely classified as English novelists gives an initial measure of their elusiveness. "English," as an inherited language, still more as a culture or social community, is very far from a clearly declared value for them.

To start with, Beckett: the last and in certain obvious ways the most radical. With the composition of *Molloy* in the late 1940s, Beckett transposed himself into a French novelist; the English versions of Beckett's trilogy, completed in the late fifties, are works of self-translation from French into English. They are the work, moreover, of an Irish writer who, by the very fact of his Irishness, had an eccentric relationship to his "native" English language all along. In Beckett's case, the estrangement from English culture endemic to Irish writers was further intensified by the odd intersection of his literary career with that of Joyce, his Irish predecessor in Paris and a sufficiently disorienting case in his own right. Although at the time of *Ulysses* Joyce's established distance from both Irish and English voices paradoxically freed him to allow every version of the English language to circulate in his prose without his earlier, more

rigid, irony, Joyce's development after *Ulysses* took another line. The "revolution of the word" in *Finnegans Wake* all but broke the connection with English and any other single vernacular. For Beckett, it was Joyce's last, most artificial stylistic phase which first exerted the most influence. The Paris of 1928–30 was for Beckett mainly the circle gathered in deferential service to Joyce's *Work in Progress*, later entitled *Finnegans Wake*. Beckett's expatriation thus had the doubly peculiar effect of distancing him from the ordinary voices of his English-speaking homeland, while also enclosing him in a circle of worship around the most extraordinarily denaturalized writing in English of the time. In the early thirties, whether back in Ireland or wandering in England, Germany, or again in France, the only English-language writer Beckett evidently carried with him was Joyce—except for Samuel Johnson, about whom he began a never-to-be-finished play.

Beckett got his biggest help toward a radically un-Joycean style from his reading in French—for example, from Jules Renard's long, often colloquial, and intimate journal and from Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (which he declared in 1937 to be "the greatest novel in both French and English literature").² Still, it was not until the mid-forties, with Joyce dead and Beckett himself established in an independent Parisian life, that Beckett began to grapple with his own dark truths of style. And it was only five years later that he began to translate this original achievement back into a strangely intimate, colloquial English, as if he had kept certain voices in his head all the time, along with certain models of English-Irish speech from the Joyce of *Ulysses*.

Moving from Beckett's trilogy back to *Ulysses*, however, presents but another linguistic and cultural tangle, for it is hardly more accurate—and perhaps even more politically offensive—to call Joyce's great book an *English* novel. While the language of *Ulysses* is entirely accessible, and even pleasurably familiar in idiom to any English-language reader (with a bit of help from the annotators), Joyce's language and content are also steeped in Irish (which is to say specifically anti-English) coloring. Of course Joyce is hardly less aggressive in *Ulysses* toward Irish verbal, social, and religious institutions. The systematic parodic experiments in the second half of the novel stop just short of repudiating all versions of English as instruments for any expressive purpose. Yet the humor and vitality of the book are impossible to separate from its saving as well as damning representations of familiar English speech forms.

Common English, abused and abusive as Joyce felt it to be, was still valuable enough to be among the chief possessions from home that he took with him to the Continent. Indeed, far more than Beckett, Joyce

almost superstitiously carried around a considerable collection of souvenirs as reminders of home. One of the most curious was the large portrait of his father which he took from one flat to another in Paris. More significantly, he carried in his mind very exact sound images of his father's voice. But in contrast to his fictional character, Stephen Dedalus, who is merely haunted, if not actually possessed, by hostile voices, Joyce succeeded in taking powerful possession himself. He liked to tell people how he had appropriated his father's jokes, stories, songs, and turns of phrase, distributing them among more than one character in his fictions. Richard Ellmann reports Joyce remarking in 1931, the year his father died, "The humour of *Ulysses* is his; its people are his friends. The book is his spittin' image."³ Ellmann also helps us to see how Joyce transposed whole anecdotes from his family memories into *Finnegans Wake*, where John Joyce's witty voice is not entirely suppressed even by the artificially fabricated language. By 1931 there is something excessive in Joyce's elaborate mourning for the father he had refused to visit through all the intervening years, just as there is an unnerving willfulness of performance in the extraordinary deformations of English in the style of *Finnegans Wake*. But earlier, with his father alive in Dublin and himself at a safe distance in Trieste, Rome, Zurich, and Paris, Joyce managed a delicate equilibrium which allowed him to release, in all its living indignity, the English-language voice of his father, along with the voices of his father's friends, enemies, neighbors—indeed, the whole repudiated Dublin community. Although this language is never altogether liberated from Joyce's ironic control in *Ulysses*, the authorial rein is so much looser than in his earlier (and later) fiction that we are never forced, or even allowed, to stop short in final judgments. Flight from possessive, intrusive, oppressive voices might have been a prerequisite for Joyce's personal and artistic independence, but his writing also discloses the value to him of a continuing connection to those voices: to declare absolute separation, even if it were possible, would be to risk the independence only of sterility or even death.

D. H. Lawrence, at first glance, seems a much simpler case: a genuine *English* novelist, right down to an intimacy with local dialect that affiliates him with a whole line of earlier English fiction. Indeed, as a novelist of the lesser ranks of English society, his working-class origins make him even better, more "natural," than middle-class predecessors like George Eliot. Lawrence's provincial and working-class background, however, dislocated him in relation to the English literary culture of his day almost as much as if he had been a colonial. Alienated from his

original home, never at home in London, he eventually left England altogether. Moreover, Lawrence nurtured rather than minimized his aggrieved sense of separateness even while in England. In the end, his extreme marginality was half-chosen, half-imposed by such circumstances as the banning of *The Rainbow*, tuberculosis, and the official distrust he suffered during World War I for his marriage to Frieda, a German. However the multiple reasons are sorted, the outcome is the famous Laurentian saga of self-exile, intensified (as in the case of Joyce) by brutal official acts of censorship that cut him off for most of his life from any natural relationship with an English reading public. And in Lawrence's case, too, the biographic facts of dislocation matter because they underlie bold, even violent, repudiations of conventional English language in the novels. Lawrence's aggressive physico-mystical jargon, even his wrenchings of diction and syntax, violate the norms of English prose with hardly less audacity than Joyce's pseudonarrative styles in *Ulysses*. The early British reviewers of *The Rainbow* recognized this violence in Lawrence's language and cried out against it as much as against the supposed sexual indecency.⁴ Yet Lawrence's style, even in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, also returns for crucial infusions of strength to common forms of spoken English, devised with as much dramatic and expressive force by him as by any English novelist of any period. Lawrence often goes so far as to tie the destiny of his characters to their powers of vital speech; like his characters, Lawrence both strains against the confines of common English and relies on it as a resource for sanity and survival. His fiction cannot part with English speech forms, at least not without becoming hysterical or, more simply, inert.

Finally, though chronologically first, there is Henry James, considered here in the major, last phase of his career, when the ambiguities of his relationship to the larger community of English language and culture become most acute. As an American (also a "colonial"), James's expatriation in some respects resembles that of Joyce and Beckett, except that James (and his American circle) had an entirely different cordiality toward everything English. By the time of the late novels, James was at home in England and famous both there and in America. He had attained eminence with an English-language reading public whose standards of decency he not only respected but refined almost past comprehension. It is, of course, this very push in the late James toward the outermost boundary of intelligibility that so oddly raises the question for him, too, of exactly what he wishes either to preserve or reject. Like Lawrence, Joyce, and Beckett, James radically

and, in a sense, willfully disrupted his community of understanding with both English and American readers by strange and elaborate de-formations of familiar English style. And even certain members of his own intimate circle were dismayed by this extravagance, beginning with his brother William, who complained about the obscurity of *The Golden Bowl*,⁵ and continuing through a succession of critics who “draw the line” if not before *The Golden Bowl* then between Volumes One and Two (as other, and sometimes the same, critics draw the line of acceptability down the middle of *Ulysses* or in between *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*).

In sum, I have gathered here a most trouble-making group of novelists—writers who went to considerable lengths to make many kinds of trouble both for themselves and for readers and critics. As a linguistic instrument for their modern fiction, the English language demonstrates its flexibility for the most varied individual dramas, involving all those psychological and social, as well as artistic, structures in which language participates as both substance and sign. The single choice between conformity and alienation, so often seen in the formulations of the French avant-garde since Flaubert, does not at all exhaust the possibilities that these writers enact. The very differences of verbal texture and design in the novels by James, Lawrence, Joyce, and Beckett show an astonishing variety of imaginative movements away from and also back into common English. Nostalgia for a more settled allegiance to English traditions has made conservative Anglo-American criticism balk at the extravagant inventiveness of the boldest modern writers in the language. But the equally settled categories of subversion imported from the French modernist tradition are just as inadequate to these verbal and human dramas.⁶

My selection of books and writers thus delineates a tensely charged but nevertheless free zone between competing customs: traditional Anglo-American values are subjected to sharpest skepticism in this writing, but the dramatic expressiveness so important to the English tradition is very far from entirely being given up. The terms of French modernism do partially address the revulsion against common language and life that led these writers to their strange departures, but French theoretical categories do not entirely hold them in place either. The play of forces in the language of these novelists, seen in relation to more fixed alternatives, points to their extraordinary independence of spirit, an exciting but very precarious accomplishment that can and sometimes does collapse, suggesting the difficulty of such freedom for the modern writer—and for the reader as well.

1

The Life of English Idiom, the Laws of French Cliché

English and French Traditions

It is fitting that the French contributed *cliché* to our modern repertoire of pejoratives, for it was in France, in the mid-nineteenth century, that the literary avant-garde first seized upon banality as an object of major contempt. At the start of the nineteenth century, the clatter of new typesetting machines had generated the onomatopoetic verb *clicher* for the copying process, and the noun *cliché* for the metal plate from which reproductions of print or design could be made in unending quantity. *Cliché* was a neutral technical term for this achievement of modern technology, like the English “stereotype” for the same device. Only toward the middle of the century did both English “stereotype” and French *cliché* begin to be transferred for purposes of derision to other kinds of (figuratively) mechanical molds, especially of verbal expression. *Cliché* as a derisive term entered *Larousse* in the 1860s, approximately a decade after Flaubert had launched his definitive compendium, *Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues*. After reading the *Diction-*

naire, Flaubert predicted with satisfaction that "one would be afraid to talk, for fear of using one of the phrases in it."¹

Flaubert sardonically exposed a loss of distinction between printed commonplace and so-called natural speech. The technology of copying had added to the age-old vices of the trite and the hackneyed the new features of automatic fixity and limitless reproduction. The term *cliché* gave doleful recognition to the power of machinery to press more and more language into common currency and then to make hackneyed language, like other commodities, available to an ever larger public. For the self-consciously alienated writers of mid-nineteenth century France, it was only a short step from seeing cliché as the general doom of language in bourgeois society to seeking private refuge in irony or idiosyncrasy. Hence the strong link of antipathy between cliché and the stylistic experiments of early French modernism, and the nonaccidental circumstance that the two greatest French connoisseurs of cliché—Flaubert and Proust—achieved distinction, respectively, as the most thoroughly ironic and the most elaborately idiosyncratic of French novelists. In recent years the "distrust of the stereotype" insisted upon, for example, by Roland Barthes, has attained so much official intellectual prestige that it threatens to become itself a cliché, the pivot of an ideology set against the banality of all other ideology. As Barthes asserts in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "all official institutions of language are repeating machines: schools, sports, advertising, popular songs, news, all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words: the stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology . . . Whence the present configuration of forces: on the one hand, a mass banalization (linked to the repetition of language) . . . and on the other, a (marginal, eccentric) impulse toward the New."²

Barthes's own far-from-marginal position in the "new New Criticism" has supported the authority of French imprecations against "the stereotype" on both sides of the Atlantic. Barthes does not locate his "configuration of forces" in relation to a specifically French tradition, nor do American *comparatistes* like Geoffrey Hartman, so quick to decry Anglo-American provinciality, bother much with the possibly embarrassing fact that such general theoretical pronouncements as those of Barthes depend on a very limited canon of French texts. In his recent *Criticism in the Wilderness*, Hartman berates the "prissy and defensive" Anglo-American "resistance to imported ideas" and, in his scolding condescensions, refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of op-

position based on ideas no less compelling because domestically produced.³ Barthes's antithesis between "the stereotype" and "new" or authentic expression *ought* to meet with Anglo-American resistance, not out of groundless chauvinism but because the specific terms of the antithesis are too reductive for the complexities and ambiguities found in the Anglo-American tradition of language and judgment.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that the figurative "stereotype," for example, appears in nineteenth-century English most often as an adjective—"stereotyped smile," "stereotyped epithets"—a construction which allows for discriminations of value between things equally commonplace in themselves. The degree to which there is more than redundancy in the phrase "stereotyped commonplaces" (attributed by the *OED* to Mrs. Gaskell) marks a confusing but characteristically English distinction between the contemptible and the possibly valuable, even in commonplaces. The French nouns *stéréotype* and *cliché* more sweepingly dismiss in a stroke all fixed forms of expression. Barthes gives the point aphoristic finality: "every old language is immediately compromised, and every language becomes old once it is repeated."⁴ In English, a continuing ambivalent attachment to the old and familiar—in language as in sex and politics—has kept even the most notably defiant of modernists from enlisting in the French avant-garde. The French slogan of *le Nouveau*, repeated (paradoxically) from Baudelaire to Barthes, becomes complicated, if not compromised, in the English modern tradition by deeply rooted yearnings toward the common, and by anxious intimations that to repudiate old language is to risk repudiating the life of language itself.

In current criticism this risk, for anyone in the Anglo-American tradition, is masked by the intimidating assurance with which Continental theory presents itself as no less universal than philosophy or nature or science. A good example is the determinedly objective study of cliché offered by the structuralist critic Michael Riffaterre in his *Essais de stylistique structurale*. The method of "structuralist stylistics" rests its claim to novelty on its scientific neutrality; it pretends not to evaluate style, but only to describe how elements of style function in different verbal contexts. Thus in his well-known essay "Fonction du cliché dans la prose littéraire," Riffaterre proposes to move beyond modernist prejudice by reestablishing cliché as a neutral technical term. Yet in practice, his wrenching of cliché from the derisive associations of common usage does not so much neutralize the term as cut conspicuously against the grain of ordinary language, like some of the stylistic experiments of modernism itself. Riffaterre does not discover

new value in language that has previously been disdained; he only re-presents the familiar, despised object in a new, technically striking form. The method does not so much redeem the mediocre object as reveal the merit of the analytic technique itself, part of that merit being its supposed indifference to the value of the object exhibited.

Riffaterre detaches cliché from its nineteenth-century milieu, extending it to refer to any group of words which convention has solidified into a linguistic unity. His category of cliché thus includes the formulae of neoclassical prose as well as the banalities spoken by the likes of Flaubert's Homais. In accord with his programmatic neutrality, Riffaterre observes the sheer variety rather than the varying value of the functions that fixed locutions perform in different literary styles. His taxonomy gives the name "constitutive cliché," for example, to the presence of fixed formulae within a writer's own style, a device which creates the "literariness" of the text, rather like the effect of meter in poetry.⁵ The idea of a function performed by "constitutive cliché" thereby rescues, in a very limited way, the conventional formulae of neoclassical prose from modern scorn, without claiming any interesting expressiveness for the locutions themselves. At the same time, a few examples of "constitutive cliché" from other periods contribute to the impression of a metahistorical taxonomy of stylistic functions for cliché in general.

As Riffaterre's argument unfolds, however, his structuralist analysis conforms ever more closely to postromantic French literary assumptions. Indeed, he does not try very hard to remove the structural category of "constitutive cliché" from more familiar (and dismissive) historical classifications, for he observes that formulaic language eventually all but disappears as a legitimate constitutive element of style in the nineteenth century, a decline which coincides with "la mort d'une esthétique."⁶

The typically French allegiances of Riffaterre's own *esthétique* appear most strikingly in the way his main category of cliché for prose since the mid-nineteenth century endorses without question the orthodox postromantic French antithesis between the commonplace and the authentic or original in language, especially in the language of social speech. His crucial category for the modern period is *cliché mimétique*, by which he means what I began by describing: the deliberate presentation of fixed verbal locutions in a way that underscores and mocks their banality, as in the satiric characterizations of Flaubert and Proust, two of his own leading examples.

According to Riffaterre's analysis of *cliché mimétique*, fixed verbal

locutions always degrade character because they inevitably signify the character's loss of self in one or another kind of conformity, "in the social or mental postures through which he abdicates his personality."⁷ Without arguing the point, Riffaterre assumes that personality is strongest when it is most singular; unself-conscious conformity to common social and mental categories signifies loss of power and authority in personality—an abdication. Supported by the ample evidence in Flaubert's *Dictionnaire*, Riffaterre formulates a seemingly unequivocal law of *cliché mimétique* according to which conventional language in fictional characters points the text inevitably in the direction of satire: "All realism of style which rests on the equation verbal stereotype = mental or moral ankylosis results in satire."⁸

Riffaterre's terms for the law of *cliché mimétique* oddly skirt, however, the issues that most call for scrutiny. The point that satire results from an equation between stereotyped language and mental or moral stiffness (ankylosis) seems almost too obvious to warrant restatement, even with a fancy Greek term. But what about the status of the equation itself? Its very terminology blocks speculation about the effect of conventionality in speech, because it evades the question of whether all fixed expressions in spoken language should be placed under the scarcely neutral label of "verbal stereotype" or "cliché." In other words, Riffaterre's equation allows no room for the existence of *un*stereotyped commonplaces. And it makes no provision for the ambiguous and complex relationship between conventional speech and personality that has been a subject of more than satiric interest in the English novel from its beginnings even to Joyce, the greatest English master of *cliché mimétique*, whose irony, at least in *Ulysses*, has such a strange capacity to hover between mockery and appreciation.

Relationships between conventional language and individual expressiveness are relatively simple in any structuralist account of them, but they are revealed to be more complex just as soon as the derisive concept of cliché yields to a more genuinely neutral recognition that all speech, and especially speech in novels, conforms in some degree to recognizable conventions. Novelistic dialogue artfully intensifies the patterns which may be all but imperceptible in the disorder of actual speech, as Norman Page observes in *Speech in the English Novel*.⁹ In reading novels, Page demonstrates, we more or less consciously identify and respond to "the kind and degree of convention adopted." "Dialect" and "idiolect," the two poles of speech in Page's analysis, offer a telling countermodel to Riffaterre's structuralist taxonomy of cliché, first, because these conceptual opposites are not in practice

mutually exclusive, and second, because their stylistic effects are as much a matter of verbal texture as of structure.¹⁰ "Idiolect" refers to the speech characteristics which distinguish one character from others. At its extreme, as in the great creations of Dickens, the master of idiolect in the English novel, the individualizing marks of speech serve comic characterization, as personality shows itself caught in the machinery of its own idiosyncrasy.

For Dickens, the tics of individual speech can be said to constitute a realm of private cliché, creating the impression of individual personality rigidified as well as intensified by seemingly automatic repetitions. The fixed phrases of idiolect usually appropriate material from the public domain, but so colored by private eccentricity that the speech comes to signify not the conformity of personality but the positive resistance of certain personalities to the elementary flexibility of common discourse. Thus in *Great Expectations* Wemmick's invocations of "portable property" and "the Aged P." are, like the paraphernalia of his little castle-home, "mechanical appliances" of language that only ambiguously serve character in what he calls its "private and personal capacities."

The relationship between fixed speech and personality is problematic in idiolect, at the private extreme of language, but the equally ambiguous expressiveness of dialect, at the other end, cuts even closer to the phenomenon of cliché. For dialect, in its broadest sense, refers to all the characteristics of speech which identify the individual with some recognizable social or regional grouping beyond the self. Dialect, then, represents that force in language which locates the individual within a community, as idiolect sets him apart. What I shall later call "idiom" is closely related to dialect in that both terms can mean, simply, the "vernacular," and thus refer to the entire system of language native to a particular place. Dialect, however, more usually signifies the totality of a deviant sublanguage, while idiom, among its many meanings, identifies smaller, often fixed units of expression. Idioms appear with high frequency in dialect, contributing to the traditional, conventional, and ritualistic character of regional speech. But idiomatic phrases also pass by custom into the mainstream of the vernacular, often hardly noticeable, but sometimes standing out as conspicuously as clichés—indeed, sometimes indistinguishable from the class of cliché known as "vulgarisms."

It is the complex working of vulgar (or popular) idiom in otherwise standard English that I want to distinguish as having value beyond cliché in postromantic English fiction and in Anglo-American culture

more generally. The route to that distinction requires, however, a bit more attention to the literary history of dialect, since the uses of dialect by the great masters of English realism show, sometimes inadvertently, the same ambivalent social allegiances more subtly represented by later writers through the play of idiomatic speech.

For the most part, the conspicuous vulgarity of dialect—even its funny look on the printed page—disqualified it as a serious language for the representation of personality in the nineteenth-century English novel. Dialect could provide humor or local color, but fluency in standard English was a necessary credential for a central serious character in the novels of George Eliot, Dickens, and even Hardy. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams has observed the sometimes awkward conventions of bilingualism by which Victorian novelists could, at significant moments, raise certain of their regional and humble characters to the linguistic competence presumed necessary for serious personal experience.¹¹ Variants of this bilingualism appear in the narrative representation of meditation or inner speech in standard English, another example of the assumption that serious private as well as social gestures of personality can be enacted only through language free of the fixed colorings of region or class.

The strength of this convention in English fiction provides the base for such exuberant and defiant American experiments in dialect as *Huckleberry Finn*, as it later supports D. H. Lawrence's more heavy-handed social protest in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Lawrence makes a rather dreary show of reversing the bilingual conventions of nineteenth-century fiction; his gamekeeper hero switches back and forth from dialect to standard English, depending upon his somewhat willfully alternating moods of personal ease or social constraint. Dialect becomes a paradoxically aggressive language of tenderness, the verbal weapon of Mellors (and Lawrence) against the sterile, hypocritical, and repressive formulae of "correct" society. Mellors's dialect is meant to oppose and discredit the entire language of standard English as nothing but bourgeois cliché. Yet since Mellors is the only major character who commands this privileged verbal resource, the dialect has an oddly artificial effect, more like a pastoral costume which the hero can don at will than a natural verbal medium of personal expression.

Although Lawrence's polemical subversion of novelistic speech conventions in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* only dubiously succeeds, it interestingly points back to less assertive but still conspicuous conflicts of value in earlier English fiction, conflicts noticeable often in unintended failures of style. The frequently stiff or dreary standard English of

Scott, Dickens, and Hardy can weaken the emotional crises in their novels, and inadvertently affirm the greater interest of lesser figures and events. The idea that expressive vigor appears most naturally in the special dialects that the mature personality must nevertheless transcend, figures thematically in *Great Expectations*, for example, but it is precisely this intimation that also confuses the moral design and weakens the last portion of the book.

The novelist's dilemma has a distinguished precedent, of course, in Wordsworth's division of allegiance between the "real" language of men ("purified indeed of all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust") and the elevated variants of standard English that the poet sought for heroic and visionary expression.¹² The English novelistic tradition draws on Wordsworth's ambivalent attachment to the idea of "common" language as the means of access to "elementary" passion and to the values of the historical and personal past. Norman Page notes, for example, Scott's use of dialect for heroic and tragic effects, while remarking also that Scott fails to make of standard English a spoken language equal in vigor to his dialect speech.¹³ Later examples of more or less deliberate contrasts between vigorous dialect and comparatively stilted or bland standard English appear in Emily Brontë, Robert Louis Stevenson, Dickens, Hardy, and early Lawrence himself. This list constitutes a substantial tradition throughout the great period of English realism in which there is a tension, not always acknowledged, between the conviction that serious personality must express itself within the flexible medium of standard English, and the suspicion that this medium is somehow thinner than the inherited language of the tribe—the language associated with childhood, home, and family, and with those traditional unlettered communities which the writer eagerly, necessarily, leaves behind for his great expectations of literary renown.

There is an absence in the greatest of French nineteenth-century novelists of any comparable tension between dialect and standard French. Although nineteenth-century French heroes jeopardize many virtues when they leave the provinces for Paris, the loss of vigorous and expressive speech is not one of their main risks. Indeed, for Balzac as well as for Flaubert, to enter the larger culture of standard French is in effect to acquire speech itself, with all the resources of charm, wit, desire, disappointment, sincerity, hypocrisy—and banality—that constitute the articulate personality. It is true that peasants and servants, especially in Flaubert, sometimes exemplify almost superhuman virtue and passion: there is the peasant who wins a prize for fifty years of

service in *Madame Bovary*, for example, and Félicité in *Un coeur simple*. But the sign, perhaps even the substance, of their virtue is their positively heroic silence. The sincerity and the stoicism which are the strengths of Flaubert's illiterate poor show forth as an almost inhuman muteness. To become verbal in Flaubert's fiction, as in other French literature of the nineteenth century, is to become bourgeois—and thereby exposed to all the contagion of cliché represented in the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*.

The shift of interest within the English tradition from dialect to idiom in the twentieth century, and the intensified consciousness of vitality in popular speech, show vividly in a somewhat neglected book of the 1920s called *Words and Idioms* by Logan Pearsall Smith. Smith's work impressed F. R. Leavis, who cites it in his *Scrutiny* essay on Joyce of 1933, the essay where (with some reservations) he praises *Ulysses* but excoriates the Parisian cult of Joyce for bowing before the destruction of the English language in *Work in Progress*.¹⁴ Leavis invokes *Words and Idioms* because he recognizes that Smith, though an American with a Frenchified taste for Flaubert, Proust, and late Henry James, had a definite enough allegiance to the distinctive character of the English language to give support to Leavis in his own heated attack on the Parisian avant-garde.

In *Words and Idioms* Smith lovingly gathered many hundreds of common English expressions, accompanying his lists with short essays of commentary. Smith's method is unsystematic, his tone enthusiastic, except for an elegiac and nostalgic worry that idiom, the most durable species of language, may at last be seriously endangered. For him, however, the threat to expressive language is not cliché in the French sense of mechanical repetition. Indeed, he grants idiomatic phrases an almost magical "radioactive quality," the "power to give out life and never lose it."¹⁵ The danger to living language for him, as for Leavis, is to be found not in popular commonplace, but in something nearly its opposite—in standardized education and the jargon that accompanies specialized modern knowledge.

For Smith, idiom rather than cliché offers the natural approach to the subject of conventionality in the English language. He mentions clichés, but only to observe that no rigorous technical distinction between cliché and idiom can be sustained. Cliché is the failure of language on particular occasions and thus represents a possible though not necessary outcome of speech in every form. But Smith has no French impulse to brood over the sinister threat to personality posed by speech when it evokes familiar social categories. He wants instead

to acclaim the more than natural energy held in potential by language, especially by language seasoned through long associations with commonplace social activities. In accounting for the expressiveness of idiom, Smith emphasizes its power to connect the individual to other men and women, both present and past. It is this Wordsworthian affirmation of shared experience that he regards as the social and psychological effect of common idiom in writing as well as in talk.

A writer cannot create his own language; he must take what society provides him, and in his search for sensuous and pictured speech he naturally has recourse to the rich and living material created by generations of popular and unconscious artists. Here he finds an energetic and picturesque language, rich in images and irony, and full of zest, a joy in life, which are of priceless value to him.¹⁶

Though writing in the 1920s, Smith enjoys a sense of comfortable continuity with the past that undoubtedly distances him from the struggles as well as from the innovations of his more famous literary contemporaries. Remarkable neither as an imaginative artist nor as a critic, he fails to assess the possibly ruinous cost of simply taking what society provides, nor does he sympathize with the excitement of English as well as French modernists in their experiments with new and strange creations of language. In a stunningly obtuse essay of 1927, "The Prospects of Literature," Smith pronounces (like Arnold before him) that the age is not conducive to literary greatness. The very state of the language is unpropitious, he argues, for the moderns lack "the unhackneyed freshness of an unexploited idiom" which blessed the Elizabethans, and they cannot achieve "the vigour borrowed from popular speech" which renovated the language of the Romantics.¹⁷ Smith was too old and too fixed in his tastes in the twenties to respond to the complex literary experimentation going on all around him. He stuck to the position of elegiac regret that modern social forces were undermining the strength of the language he loved. This social nostalgia starts early and runs deep in the English literary tradition, as Raymond Williams has observed, and as almost any issue of *Scrutiny* will illustrate.¹⁸ James, Lawrence, Joyce, and Beckett became great, innovative writers partly because of their eccentric relation to that tradition; they gave much less rein than a Logan Pearsall Smith to the elegiac, and they corrected nostalgia by fiercer and tougher social judgments.

The continuing value of Smith's work rests on his capacity to locate idioms still so active in the language that their appeal goes well beyond

nostalgia. What is mainly at stake for Smith is the strengthening of expressiveness available through the social inheritance of speech, and the impoverishment of language when this inheritance is neglected, whether from snobbery, fastidiousness, or simply lack of vital spirits. This view has a corollary in Lawrence, who suggests in "Daughters of the Vicar," for example, that the "balanced, abstract" speech of the dwarfish rector is as far from lively talk as his body is from manly grace or force: "There was no spontaneous exclamation, no violent assertion or expression of personal conviction, but all cold, reasonable assertion."¹⁹ Smith offers the verbal material for "spontaneous exclamation" and "personal" if not "violent" assertion in English through lists of idioms organized according to various principles, like the grammatical principles of the phrases or their social origins. Although common usage mainly ignores these origins, Smith enjoys displaying the range of social experience from which English idiom historically derives: hunting, agricultural labor, fishing, weather, houses, furniture, eating. He especially likes idioms which derive from the sea, but his list traceable to the kitchen is even richer in ingredients for cheerfully malicious, shrewd, or wry responses to the human scene: "to boil over," "to butter up," "to have other fish to fry," "to cook someone's goose," "to make hash of," "to put the lid on," "to make mincemeat of," "to have a finger in every pie," "to go to pot," "to skim off," "to be in a stew," "to stew in one's own juice," "to be half-baked," "to be in hot water."²⁰

Among the common grammatical (or ungrammatical) patterns, the most interesting is the form he calls "phrasal verbs": "to keep up," "to pull through," "to put up with." Schoolmasters, Smith explains, always want to press the particles back into earlier parts of the sentence, priggishly indifferent to how the very life of idiomatic English goes on in the phrasal combinations of abstract and simple verbs followed by particles of motion. These common and fixed phrases have the capacity, he observes, to evoke the entire range of human actions and relationships. We can take to people, take them up, take them down, take them off, take them on, or take them in! There is, he tells us, "hardly any action or attitude of one human being to another which cannot be expressed by means of these phrasal verbs."²¹

Smith's lists and commentary offer a salutary experience of the conventional character of language altogether different from anything in French writers like Flaubert, Proust, Barthes, or even Riffaterre. His compendium posits a kind of personal expressiveness not vitiated by

fixed verbal configurations, but positively reliant on them for power, wit, and even subtlety of connotation.

To move from *Words and Idioms* back to Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* is to cross a very murky channel between cultural as well as linguistic traditions. For it is not immediately apparent why such common coinage as "rotten to the core" or "dull as ditchwater" should retain "radioactive" power, while more or less equally common locutions in Flaubert's collection persuasively exemplify language in full rigor mortis. In the *Dictionnaire* under "BRAS," for example: "Pour gouverner la France, il faut un bras de fer" (p. 958) ("To govern France, one needs an arm of iron").

Elusive discriminations of verbal structure may be at stake, though they hardly require systematic linguistic analysis. *Bras de fer* as a phrase may seem flatter than English idioms involving the arm, because the first to come to mind in English are not substantives, but prepositional phrases evoking actions and relationships: "at arm's length," "up to the elbow," "head and shoulders above." Does *bras de fer* represent some linguistic inertness more common in French than in English idiom? It would be hard to prove such a contention, though Smith hints in that direction when, in citing pairs of related English and French idioms, he notes the greater vividness of the English versions.²² And Hugh Kenner, who sees Joyce partly as an ironist in the tradition of Flaubert, is nevertheless quick to notice an irrepressible "racy" life in Joyce's Dublin clichés missing from the language of his French predecessor.²³ Similarly Christopher Ricks, stressing the greater vitality of cliché in the English as compared to the French versions of Beckett's writing, has suggested the mysterious interplay between the individual imagination and characteristic linguistic structures within a particular vernacular.²⁴

Flaubert's antipathy to clichés like *bras de fer* is best understood, however, in relation to an even broader interplay between language and culture. Some of the clichés in the *Dictionnaire* fall flat because of their intrinsic verbal weakness, but that weakness is itself underlined by expectations of language embodied in the design of Flaubert's book. The very conception of an *idée reçue* focuses the problem of cliché not on linguistic form alone but on the discrepancy between a verbal formula and the intellectual purpose of language construed as the statement of *idées*. *Bras de fer*, for example, carries the burden of articulating a political idea, nothing less than a philosophy of government!

The locutions in Flaubert's *Dictionnaire* often fail mainly because

they so grossly disappoint the intellectual expectations set up by their content and even by the grammatical form of the sentences. The discrepancy between the insight promised by the syntax—"Pour gouverner la France, il faut . . ."—and the letdown of the cliché—"un bras de fer"—is the kind of contextual incongruity that Riffaterre's structuralist approach to *cliché mimétique* is so well suited to discern. The French, of course, have no monopoly on this form of cliché, neither on its practice nor on its exposure. It was precisely the steady incongruity between intellectual pretension and banality of phrase in C. P. Snow's lecture on "The Two Cultures" which led F. R. Leavis to call the whole Snow performance "a document for the study of cliché."²⁵ Leavis disliked Flaubert, but not because he was himself any more tolerant of bourgeois *idées reçues*.

Common English speech may escape the sorry fate of *idées reçues* only when it manages to stay clear of ideas altogether. It is not necessary to say that idiomatic phrases may seem most appealing in meaningless lists like those in *Words and Idioms*, in order to observe that their quality shines most brightly when they appear, as they so often do, detached from elaborate grammatical structures and therefore from any of the complex intellectual responsibilities of language. "Spontaneous exclamation" and "violent assertion," to return to Lawrence's terms, leave language almost free of intellectual burden. In his *Dictionnaire*, by contrast, Flaubert puts the most taxing intellectual demand on common language. Every entry, by the very form of the book, carries some responsibility to work as a definition of other words, ideas, or things.

Only the most brilliant aphorism or maxim could survive Flaubert's method: a successful maxim is precisely a detached sentence which, through perfection of phrasing, transforms a commonplace into a memorable definition. As Barthes remarks: "The language of the maxim always has a definitional and not a transitive activity; a collection of maxims is always more or less . . . a dictionary."²⁶ In Flaubert's *Dictionnaire*, an implicit standard of aphorism and maxim governs the entire satiric attack on *idées reçues*. He leads us to understand cliché as failed aphorism, and it is perhaps only in the light of French pride in its brilliant tradition of aphorism that the demand on language made by this implicit standard does not seem more arbitrary and limited than it does. It is likewise the oppressive authority of this same tradition that gives force to political protests like Barthes's against "the Sentence" and "the agents of the Sentence" in control of French culture since the seventeenth century. Flaubert anticipates Barthes's attack on the pre-