

A pair of black-rimmed glasses is positioned diagonally across the frame. The left lens is in the upper left, and the right lens is in the lower right. The temples of the glasses curve upwards and outwards. The background is a solid, vibrant yellow.

Lodge

Language of Fiction

Language of Fiction

'The first section of this book (dealing with theoretical matters) is something of a milestone in English criticism. . . . I regard Mr Lodge's theoretical and analytical work as an important addition to English critical writing about the genre of the novel.'

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W.J. Harvey, Essays in Criticism

David
Lodge

Language of Fiction

Essays in criticism and verbal analysis of the
English novel

With a new foreword by the author

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To Park and Jeannette

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FOREWORD TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

I am very pleased to see *Language of Fiction* in print again, and flattered by the company it keeps in the Routledge Classics series. It was my first full-length book of literary criticism, and therefore has a special place in that internal CV we all carry about with us. Unlike most first books of criticism by academics it was not based on a doctoral dissertation, which was perhaps to its advantage, for such works often have a slightly jaded air, as if the authors have grown weary of their subjects. In fact I didn't have a PhD when I wrote *Language of Fiction* (though it subsequently earned me one from the University of Birmingham, under a convenient regulation that allowed faculty to submit published work for an 'official degree' determined by external assessors). I had a Master's degree from the University of London, awarded in 1959 for a monstrously long thesis on the 'Catholic Novel in England from the Oxford Movement to the Present Day' that was unpublishable as a whole, though I published parts of it here and there. In the course of working on that thesis, I had moved from a thematic to a formalist approach to the novel. *Language of Fiction* grew directly out of my exploration of Anglo-American theorising about the novel as a literary form, and the experience of teaching classic and modern fiction, in the early 1960s. I was then a young lecturer in the English Department at Birmingham, laying the foundations of a dual career as novelist and

critic, like my colleague and contemporary, the late Malcolm Bradbury, with whom I eagerly discussed these matters.

The Language of Fiction (as it was at first called) was written mainly in 1963–64, with what now seems to me astonishing speed, especially considering all the other things I was doing at the time, first in long-hand, and then typed up with two fingers on a little Oliver portable in the corner of our living room that served as my ‘study’. While it was in progress an editor from Routledge, Colin Franklin, visited the Department scouting for new books (do academic publishers still do that, I wonder?) and expressed an interest in mine. I managed to finish it just before I took my family to America for a memorable year on a Harkness Fellowship in 1964–5. Routledge accepted the book, and so did Columbia University Press, who persuaded me and Routledge to drop the definite article from my title on the grounds that it made too big a claim for comprehensiveness. It turned out to be a rather futile gesture, and one which I regretted, because the book was invariably referred to in print and conversation with the article restored. It was published in 1966.

Looking through my file of yellowing press-cuttings (the pages of the book itself have not yellowed at all, incidentally, unlike many more recent publications of mine) I am impressed by the calibre of the critics who reviewed it. Among them were F. W. Bateson, Ralph Cohen, C. B. Cox, P. N. Furbank, W. J. Harvey, Laurence Lerner, Robert Scholes, and Tony Tanner. They didn’t all agree with the book’s theoretical argument, but they engaged with it seriously and constructively. Furthermore several reviews appeared in national newspapers and weekly magazines: for example, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator*. It is hard to imagine a book of theoretical and stylistic criticism by a young academic getting that kind of attention today. The fact that I had a modest reputation as the author of three novels may partly explain it, but there are other, less personal reasons.

In the 1960s it was still possible to write a book of literary criticism that would simultaneously satisfy qualified scholars and interest the general reader, because there was a discourse common to both; but there was not a plethora of such books on the market, and when one appeared it was received with interest. In the succeeding decades the

academic profession expanded enormously, and since advancement in it depends upon publication there has been a chronic overproduction of titles, many of which are doomed to have a tiny circulation and to be noticed only in specialised journals. Over the same period the language of academic criticism became more arcane and jargon-ridden, alienating the general reading public and the media that serve it. This was largely due to the impact on British and American scholarship of two tidal waves of theory from Continental Europe, structuralism and post-structuralism, which swamped the humanities with a bewildering variety of new analytical methods and metalanguages. Some of them, it seemed to me, had genuine explanatory power, and I assimilated them in to my own criticism; about others I had serious reservations.

In 1984 Routledge reissued *Language of Fiction* with an Afterword in which I reviewed my own book in the light of these developments, and indicated the respects in which its arguments and interpretations seemed to me flawed or inadequate. That Afterword itself now seems to me something of a historical document. It was written towards the end of my academic career, when English Departments everywhere were the scene of a fierce struggle for intellectual dominance between competing schools and methodologies—structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, neo-marxism, cultural studies, applied linguistics, the old New Criticism and traditional literary scholarship, to name a few. These differences still exist in the academy, but my impression is that the parties have settled for some kind of détente, and a guarded pluralism prevails. In 1984, however, it seemed necessary to define clearly where I stood in relation to my own early work and to the new theories.

Two years later I retired from academic life in order to devote more time to creative writing, and though I have continued to write occasional literary criticism, and to collect it into books, it is addressed to the general reader, or to students of all kinds and ages, rather than to academic specialists, and is often combined with reflection on my own ‘practice of writing’. I observe that there is hardly a sentence in *Language of Fiction* that suggests I was myself the author of three published novels, whereas the conclusion of the Afterword appeals directly to the personal experience of writing fiction. In that respect it perhaps

foreshadowed the new phase in my CV from 1986 onwards. But I still stand by everything I say in the Afterword, and have left it unchanged in this new edition of *Language of Fiction*.

David Lodge
April 2002

PREFACE

The novelist's medium is language: whatever he does, *qua* novelist, he does in and through language. That, to me, is an axiom, and will, I believe, be generally acceptable as such. But the implications of this axiom for literary criticism are not so easily determined or agreed upon. Criticism of the novel which bases its arguments on detailed reference to the language novelists use (such as the essays on English fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries presented in the second part of this book) still needs to justify itself on theoretical grounds; and the process of justification involves many interesting and important issues concerning the nature of literature and the principles of criticism. The first part of this book is devoted to an extended discussion of such issues.

In Section I of this essay, I begin by attempting to trace the sources of uncertainty in modern criticism about the function of language in prose fiction, and proceed to engage with some representative arguments which have sought to limit or deny the significance of the novelist's use of language. I state my reasons for taking the opposite view. In Section II, I discuss the usefulness and limitations, as I see them, of certain critical and analytical methods which have been applied to the language of the novel, chiefly in the field of stylistics. In Section III, I draw some tentative conclusions, and explain the guiding principles of my own criticism.

Although the purpose of this essay is partly introductory, I have deliberately extended its range beyond that of an Introduction. I have not confined myself to making promises which are kept in the studies of particular texts in Part Two, but have pursued certain lines of theoretical inquiry as far as I felt able to follow them. Most of the ideas I put forward and discuss are not new, but I have not seen them all considered together before. To have brought them together will, I hope, be considered a useful enterprise, whether my own position meets with agreement or disagreement.

I hope that the allusions and references in both Parts of this book sufficiently indicate my awareness of the valuable work that has been done on the language of the novel and the development of critical methods for dealing with it. But I should like to acknowledge a special indebtedness to the following authors: Wayne Booth, John Holloway, Mark Schorer, Dorothy Van Ghent, Ian Watt, and W. K. Wimsatt.

Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961) is primarily concerned to classify the categories of narrative method in terms of 'point of view', and in particular to challenge the post-Jamesian assumption that 'impersonal' narration, mediated through the consciousness of a created character, is necessarily superior to traditional omniscient methods. Although Booth's neo-Aristotelian principles differ from my own and lead him away from verbal analysis, his general argument that the novelist's art, whatever narrative method used, is essentially rhetorical, is very close to my own view; and I have found his book a source of encouragement and guidance in many ways. John Holloway's *The Victorian Sage* (1953)* first suggested to me how criticism might carry its study of the language of extended prose works beyond the limits of stylistic description. In approaching the novel in this way I am conscious of the influence, direct and indirect, of Mark Schorer's articles, 'Technique as Discovery' (*Hudson Review*, I (1948) pp. 67-87) and 'Fiction and the Analogical Matrix,' (*Kenyon Review*, XI (1949) pp. 539-60). Dorothy Van Ghent's *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York, 1953) is a dazzling and perpetually challenging achievement in explicatory novel-criticism. Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), although primarily a work of literary history, offers many

* The place of publication of all books cited is London, unless otherwise indicated.

invaluable insights into the formal characteristics of the novel; while his article on 'The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*' (Essays in Criticism, X (1960), pp. 250–74), is a model of close analysis applied to narrative prose, and includes a succinct and penetrating account of the present state of criticism in this field. Among the many works of critical theory which have concerned themselves with the nature of literary language, I have found W. K. Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Ky., 1954), which includes two important essays written in collaboration with Monroe C. Beardsley, the most helpful.

Tribute should be paid, also, to Vernon Lee's rather neglected pioneering book, *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (1923), which considering its date, is a remarkable achievement, full of useful insights and suggestions, and which includes what are probably the first examples in English criticism of close, methodical analysis applied to narrative prose.* Vernon Lee's work has had some influence on the criticism associated with the name of Leavis, which is itself obviously relevant to my undertaking in this book; but I postpone the consideration of this criticism to a later stage. Finally, I should like to acknowledge here my gratitude for the very useful bibliography of criticism, compiled by Harold C. Martin and Richard M. Ohmann, in *Style in Prose Fiction, English Institute Essays 1958*, ed. Harold C. Martin (New York, 1959).

In trying to elucidate critical problems, both general and specific, I have found it useful to cite and debate the opinions of other critics, including some of those listed above. I apologize in advance to anyone who feels himself or herself to have been misrepresented or invidiously distinguished in this way.

This book owes a great deal to the exchange of ideas, about novels and The Novel, with many people—teachers, colleagues, and students—over an extended period of time. I should like to thank particularly Malcolm Bradbury, Elsie Duncan-Jones, Ian Gregor, Park Honan, Richard Hoggart, and Terence Spencer, who have read part or all of this book in one form or another, and who have given generous assistance

* Vernon Lee's analysis of an extract from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is discussed in some detail in Part II, Chapter 4.

and valuable advice (which, I should add in fairness to them, I have not always followed). I am grateful to Professor J. M. Cameron for permission to quote extensively from his essay 'Poetry and Dialectic'; to the editors of *Nineteenth Century Fiction* and the *Critical Quarterly* for permission to use material which first appeared in those journals; and to the University of Birmingham Library for its services in obtaining research materials. Grateful acknowledgement is also made to the holders of copyright material from which extracts have been quoted in this book: the Executors of the Wells Estate for passages from H. G. Wells's *Tono Bungay*; The Bodley Head Ltd. for a passage from Vernon Lee's *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology*; Eyre and Spottiswoode (Publishers) Ltd. and the Houghton Mifflin Co. for a passage from John Braine's *Room at the Top*; John Farquharson Ltd. and Charles Scribner's Sons for passages from Henry James's *The Ambassadors*; Victor Gollancz Ltd. and Kingsley Amis for permission to quote passages from *Take a Girl Like You*, *That Uncertain Feeling* and *I Like It Here*; Victor Gollancz Ltd. and Doubleday & Co. Inc. for passages from *Lucky Jim* by the same author; and Macmillan & Co. Ltd. and the Trustees of the Hardy Estate for passages from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Finally, I thank my wife, Mary, for her help in the checking of references, for her valuable criticism, and for her unfailing patience and encouragement.

Part I

The Novelist's Medium and the
Novelist's Art: Problems in
Criticism



INTRODUCTORY

Literary theory and criticism concerned with the novel are much inferior in both quantity and quality to theory and criticism of poetry.*

In the modern period, as far as English studies are concerned, critical theory and practice have been dominated by what may be called the New Criticism, in the widest sense of that term—that is, the critical effort extending from T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards to, say, W. K. Wimsatt, characterized by the belief that a poem acquires its meaning and unique identity by virtue of its verbal organization, and that good critical practice depends above all on close and sensitive reading. We might say, therefore, that if what Wellek and Warren alleged in 1949 was true, it was because the New Criticism had not shown its principles and procedures to be as effective when applied to prose fiction as when applied to poetry. At that time, however, there was some disagreement about whether (to borrow Chesterton's epigram on Christianity) the application had been tried and found wanting, or simply not tried. Mark Schorer, writing in 1948, was of the latter opinion. Summarizing the principles of modern criticism, founded on the 'exacting scrutiny of literary texts', and leading to a view of form (or 'technique') and content as inseparable, he says:

* R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949), p. 219.

We are no longer able to regard as seriously intended criticism of poetry which does not assume these generalisations; but the case for fiction has not yet been established. The novel is still read as though its content has some value in itself, as though the subject matter of fiction has greater or lesser value in itself, and as though technique were not a primary but a supplementary element, capable perhaps of not unattractive embellishments upon the surface of the subject, but hardly of its essence. Or technique is thought of in blunter terms than those which one associates with poetry, as such relatively obvious matters as the arrangement of events to create plot; or, within plot, of suspense and climax; or as the means of revealing character motivation, relationship and development, or as the use of point of view. . . . As for the resources of language, these, somehow, we almost never think of as part of the technique of fiction—language as used to create a certain texture and tone which in themselves state and define themes and meanings; or language, the counters of our ordinary speech, as forced, through conscious manipulation, into all those larger meanings which our ordinary speech almost never intends.¹

Philip Rahv, however, while he agrees that criticism of the novel is in an unsatisfactory state—

20th Century criticism has as yet failed to evolve a theory and a set of practical procedures dealing with the prose-medium that are as satisfactory in their exactness, subtlety and variety as the theory and procedures worked out in the past few decades by the critics of poetry²

—argues that what has caused the trouble is the very application of neo-critical theories and procedures for which Schorer pleads:

the commanding position assumed by poetic analysis has led to the indiscriminate importation of its characteristic assumptions and approaches into a field [i.e. prose fiction] which requires generic critical terms and criteria of value that are unmistakably its own³

Rahv gives three examples of this pernicious influence: an obsession with tracing allegories, symbols, and mythic patterns in novels; the

suggestion that style is the essential activity of imaginative prose; and the attempt to reduce a novel to the sum of its techniques. This sounds like a direct counterblast to Schorer, but is in fact part of a debate with J. C. Ransom, who had said:

Let it be proposed to Mr Rahv, therefore, that we should not approve any fictionist who does not possess a prose style. Running over in our minds some memorable fiction, I believe we are likely to identify it with certain instances, or at least with certain remembered kinds, of complexes, or concentrations, which consist in linguistic manoeuvres in the first place (i.e. on the surface) and of feeling-tones or affects in the second place (when it comes to our responses); and not with gross or overall effects such as plots or ideologies. We do not make this discovery any more truly about a play by Shakespeare. And if we are challenged to defend our judgment of the work we do not take up the book in order to refresh ourselves on the plot or moral, but in order to find specific passages, the right passages, for our peculiar evidence. Can we not say that fiction, in being literature, will have style for its essential activity?⁴

Some of the characteristic postures of the debate about literary criticism and the language of prose fiction here come into focus. We see that it is a new version of the venerable form-content argument. The protagonists are agreed that form and content are inseparable in poetry, but they differ with regard to prose fiction. Rahv warns us against 'confusing the intensive speech proper to poetry with the more openly communicative, functional and extensive language proper to prose'.⁵ 'All that we can legitimately ask of a novelist in the matter of language,' he says, 'is that it be appropriate to the matter in hand. What is said must not stand in a contradictory relation to the way it is said, for that would be to dispel the illusion of life, and with it the credibility of fiction.'⁶ From this point of view it would appear that life, not language, is the novelist's medium: that it is the way he manipulates and organizes and evaluates the life or, more precisely, the imitation-life of his fictions, that constitutes his literary activity; that his language is merely a transparent window through which the reader regards this life—the writer's responsibility being merely to keep the glass clean.

The function of the critic then becomes that of discerning and assessing the quality of life in a given novel—the plausibility and interest of its characters and their actions, and the nature of its moral discriminations and values.

Since the late '40s and early '50s, when the views quoted above were first expressed, there has been a sufficiently striking shift in criticism to make one question whether the assertion of Wellek and Warren can stand unqualified. Of a growth in the quantity of novel-criticism there can be no doubt, and much of it has been of high quality. Several critics (such as those mentioned in my Preface) have made valuable contributions to the critical study of language in fiction. But it would be hard to say that we are any nearer to a resolution of the debate outlined above.

Most attempts to apply neo-critical techniques to prose fiction have taken the form of studying patterns of imagery and symbolism in novels. But too often one feels that the listing of images has not been controlled by an active engagement with the text and the wider critical challenges it presents. Such work brings the verbal analysis of fiction into disrepute, as Philip Rahv's protest indicates; and the good examples of such criticism are generally lacking in a sound theoretical defence of the method. On the whole, the tide seems to be turning against the orthodoxies of the New Criticism, and such enterprises as Northrop Frye's systematic theory of myths and genres, or Leslie Fiedler's essays in bold cultural and psychological interpretation of fiction, have been welcomed in the name of a reaction against the narrow and myopic procedures associated with those orthodoxies.⁷

It is my own opinion that we are in danger of jettisoning the principles of the New Criticism before we have fully exploited their possibilities. The temptation to do so, however, is strong, particularly in the case of the novel, where, it still seems to me as it seemed to Mark Schorer, modern criticism has never approached the general level of achievement in the close and subtle analysis of language which it attained in the case of poetry. Indeed, in some ways, it has actually inhibited the useful analysis of the function of language in fiction. It is worth inquiring why this should be so; and I believe we may obtain a partial answer by reference to two characteristic assumptions implicit or explicit in the mainstream of modern criticism: that the lyric poem is the literary norm, or the proper basis for generalizing about

literature; and that there are two quite different kinds of language, the literary and the non-literary.

MODERN CRITICISM AND LITERARY LANGUAGE

M. H. Abrams and Frank Kermode have shown clearly and perceptively (in *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Romantic Image* respectively¹) how the idea of the lyric poem as the literary norm evolved out of the theory and practice of the English Romantic poets and, later, of the French Symbolist poets, contributing to the modern critical doctrine that a poem is autotelic, non-paraphrasable, non-translatable, a verbal object in which every part is organically related to every other part and to the whole, something which 'should not mean but be'. Closely associated with this doctrine are a number of theories about the difference between literary and non-literary language. These theories also go back to the Romantics, and even earlier, but for modern criticism I. A. Richards's formulation has probably been the most influential:

A statement may be used for the sake of the reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the *scientific* use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the *emotive* use of language²

Richards's formulation is coloured by his own psychological and affective theory of literary value, which is not universally shared. But the notion of two basic types of discourse is pervasive in modern criticism. Northrop Frye, for example, despite his declared dissatisfaction with the concepts of modern criticism, is making basically the same distinction in talking of 'inward-' and 'outward-pointing structures':

Whenever we read anything, we find our attention moving in two directions at once. One direction is outward or centrifugal, in which we keep going outside our reading, from the individual words to the things they mean, or in practice to our memory of the conventional associations between them. The other direction is inward, or centripetal, in which we try to develop from the words a sense of the larger

verbal pattern they make. . . . In all literary structures the final direction of meaning is inward.³

Examples of other critics formulating similar views could be multiplied. Empson's 'ambiguity', Blackmur's 'gesture', Ransom's 'texture', Brooks's 'irony', are essentially concepts offered to define the peculiar qualities of literary language, and to distinguish it from other kinds of language.⁴

Now, none of these critics is concerned to deny prose fiction the status of literature, but its claims to be so considered can appear somewhat tenuous in the light of their poetics. Richards's distinction is valid in so far as it states that we may use language for different purposes, i.e. to assert different orders of truth. But there is a temptation, to which many critics have yielded, to look for reflections of linguistic purpose in linguistic form. Because of the dominance of the lyric in post-Romantic poetics, we then get a concentration of attention on a particular kind of verbal intensity, on paradox, irony, ambiguity, and metaphorical density. Literature which does not manifest these qualities to any striking extent tends to be subjected either to disparagement (as in the notorious case of Milton) or to a critical approach which does not concern itself closely with language (as in the case of the novel).

In Richards's scheme, 'the supreme form of emotive language is poetry',⁵ while referential language is typified by scientific description. The novel, however, comes nearer to the latter than to the former in the formal character of its language, which is prose; and this has been a source of much confusion about the genre's literary identity. It will be useful, therefore, to glance briefly at literary thinking about poetry and prose from the Romantic period to modern times.

POETRY AND PROSE

'The difference between verse and prose is self-evident, but it is a sheer waste of time to look for a definition of the difference between poetry and prose.'¹ Auden's advice is sound, but unlikely to discourage discussion of a problem which has perennial fascination.

To the Romantics, 'poetry' was a qualitative and not merely a

descriptive term. It referred to a special way of perceiving things, as well as to a special way of saying things. 'Poetry' was the rallying-cry of a campaign against the claims of scientific materialism to the sole title of knowledge. Thus Wordsworth suggests two new antitheses in place of the conventional one of poetry: prose, namely, poetry: science (a distinction much like Richards's) and metrical composition: prose (two formally differentiated kinds of 'poetry').² But he does not show much real interest in the properties of imaginative prose; in fact his anxiety to establish a united front for all imaginative writing, and his special concern to break away from 'poetic diction', lead him to minimize the differences between metrical composition and prose, and he explains his own choice of the former, rather lamely, on the grounds that it provides an added 'charm' and helps to temper the distress that can be caused by painful subject matter.³

Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, also seeks to make 'poetry' a term which will include everything of literary interest and value. The prose-writers whom he dignifies with the title of 'poet', however, tend to be discursive writers of an idealistic or revolutionary cast. The novel would appear to be, in Shelley's aesthetic, an example of prose discourse which does not deserve the title of poetry:

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds.⁴

Coleridge grapples with the same problem, as one would expect, more subtly and more obscurely. He proposes a distinction between 'poem' and 'poetry'. A poem is defined functionally: it is 'that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) [e.g. novels] it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part.'⁵ It is the special property of metre that it calls attention to each component part, and

thus requires that the latter supply the appropriate gratification. This formulation is complicated, however, by the introduction of the qualitative concept, 'poetry', which Coleridge goes on to define in terms of his well-known theory of Imagination. He acknowledges that 'poetry' is to be found in the work of prose-writers such as Plato, Bishop Taylor, Burnet, and Isaiah, of whom it can hardly be said that their immediate object was pleasure, not truth.

In short, whatever *specific* import we attach to the word, poetry, there will be found involved in it, as a necessary consequence, that a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be all poetry. Yet if an harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved *in keeping* with the poetry; and this can be no otherwise affected than by such a studied selection and artificial arrangement, as will partake of *one*, though not a *peculiar* property of poetry. And this again can be no other than the property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written.⁶

This is a puzzling passage, for several reasons, but principally because 'prose' has to stand as the antithesis of both 'poem' and 'poetry'. Taken out of context, it might appear to be concerned with the 'long poem'; but in fact it follows on from the discussion of prose-writers. If 'the studied selection and artificial arrangement' is not peculiar to poetry, but not to be found in prose, where else is it to be found? The answer seems to be: in long works which may or may not conform to the formal definition of 'poem', but which contain some 'poetry'. Novels might come into this category, for they gather themselves up into periodic surges of 'poetic' intensity, buttressed by passages of less intense but still 'studied' and 'artificial' language. There is no indication, however, that Coleridge would have allowed this. Though a sensitive descriptive critic of fiction, he placed narrative literature fairly low in his aesthetic, as is implied in another interesting observation on the subject of poetry and prose:

The definition of good prose is—proper words in their proper places; of good verse—the most proper words in their proper places.

The propriety is in either case relative. The words in prose ought to express the intended meaning, and no more; if they attract attention to themselves, it is, in general, a fault. . . . But in verse you must do more: there the words, the *media* must be beautiful, and ought to attract your notice—yet not so much and so perpetually as to destroy the unity which ought to result from the whole poem. This is the general rule, but, of course, subject to some modifications, according to the different kinds of prose or verse. Some prose may approach towards verse, as oratory, and therefore a more studied exhibition of the *media* may be proper; and some verse may border on mere narrative, and there the style should be simpler.⁷

The use of the term *verse* makes this passage much clearer than the one previously quoted. And Coleridge's reference to oratory shows that his distinction is a flexible one. This cannot be said of later exponents of the Romantic-Symbolist aesthetic, such as Paul Valéry, who has asserted the discontinuity of prose and verse in terms of an analogy with walking and dancing:

Walking, like prose, always has a definite object. It is an act directed *towards* some object that we aim to reach. The actual circumstances—the nature of the object, my need, the impulse of my desire, the state of my body and of the ground—regulate the rhythm of walking, prescribe its direction speed and termination. . . .

Dancing is quite different. It is, of course, a system of acts, but acts whose end is in themselves. It goes nowhere. Or if it pursues anything it is only an ideal object, a state, a delight, the phantom of a flower, or some transport out of oneself, an extreme of life, a summit, a supreme form of being. . . .⁸

Poetry, of course, is like dancing.

Thus understood, poetry is radically different from all prose: in particular, it is clearly opposed to the description and narration of events that tend to give the illusion of reality, that is to the novel and the tale when their aim is to give the force of truth to stories, portraits, scenes, and other representations of real life.⁹

Valéry's theories are usefully discussed by Laurence Lerner in his book *The Truest Poetry*, where he notes that for those holding theories 'of pure poetry, of emotive language, of literature as tending towards the condition of music or the dance':

The language of the novel, trying to do so many things at once, is hardly literary language at all: the cognitive interferes with the expressive, the dramatic with the lyrical, the human with the perfection of the aesthetic. The most perfect poetry is for them a spell. But this mixture of functions which they dislike is also the characteristic of man's archetypal creative act, the most basic and far-reaching, the act of speech.¹⁰

In another passage, Lerner justifiably says, 'Perhaps we should question the very idea of classifying language into two kinds, rather than describing it as a continuum, between—say—the poles of mathematics and dream.'¹¹

Another critic who has cogently questioned the critical *apartheid* which some theorists have sought to impose upon poetry and prose, is Allen Tate:

We say today that there is poetry in prose fiction and, wherever you have narrative, fiction in poetry. But it ought to be easy to see that the murk enveloping the question when we try to carry it further than this arises from a certain kind of fallacy of abstraction. We are thinking in terms of substance, or essence. Those who believe that poetry and prose fiction differ in some fundamental sense assume that poetry is a distinct essence; whether prose has an essence is irrelevant, since it could not have the essence of poetry; and therefore, prose fiction being a kind of prose, it is essentially different from poetry.¹²

Even if we avoid thinking of poetry as an essence, however, it is possible to argue that the formal differences between poetry and prose are considerable enough to suggest that they have essentially different functions. I wish now to consider two critics who have adopted this position, and applied it to the question of the literary identity of the novel: F. W. Bateson and Christopher Caudwell.

F. W. BATESON: IDEAS AND LOGIC

In his introduction to *English Poetry and the English Language* (1934),* Mr Bateson states what is now the modern critical orthodoxy: that poetry is an essentially verbal activity, and that 'it is only by observing the words that the reader can become aware of the poem's structure'.¹ What is interesting about his argument is that he follows through its implications for the criticism of prose, including prose fiction. After citing the first part of the passage last quoted from Coleridge, Mr Bateson notes:

The question that Coleridge's definition immediately raises is this: If words are the *media* of poetry, what are the *media* of prose? And the answer would seem to be, Ideas.²

Prose uses only the denotations of words; poetry exploits their connotations as well. Prose is essentially logical; poetry creates non-logical patterns by means of metre, rhythm, alliteration, etc. Prose is essentially progressive; poetry 'stands still':

The structure of prose is, in the widest sense of the word, *logical*; its statements are always ultimately reducible to a syllogistic form. A passage of prose, *any* passage, not even excluding so called 'poetic' prose, resolves itself under analysis into a series of explanations, definitions, and conclusions. It is by these means that the book progresses.³

Bateson illustrates this argument by quoting and commenting on a passage from *Persuasion*:

Captain Wentworth had no fortune. He had been lucky in his

* It should be emphasized that Mr Bateson may not still hold the views expressed in this book. As co-editor of *Essays in Criticism* he has encouraged discussion of the language of prose fiction and has made a valuable contribution of his own which is discussed below (see p. 43). I have thought it useful to engage with his earlier opinion as I believe it represents one still widely held.

profession, but spending freely what had come freely had realized nothing. But he was confident that he should soon be rich; full of life and ardour he knew that he should soon have a ship and soon be on a station that would lead to everything he wanted. He had always been lucky; he knew that he should be so still. Such confidence, powerful in its own warmth and bewitching in the wit which often expressed it, must have been enough for Anne; but Lady Russell saw it very differently. His sanguine temper and fearlessness of mind operated very differently on her. She saw in it but an aggravation of the evil. It only added a dangerous character to himself. He was brilliant, he was headstrong; Lady Russell had little taste for wit and of anything approaching to imprudence a horror. She deprecated the connection in every light.⁴

Bateson comments:

The statement that Captain Wentworth had no fortune is followed by a *definition* of 'no fortune'. He had had money but had spent it. The *explanation* of his having had money was that he had been lucky; and it was *became* he had been lucky that he expected his luck to continue. His self-confidence was the *reason* that made Anne agree and Lady Russell disagree with him. The latter *concluded* that the connection was undesirables.⁵

Bateson states his case very clearly, and there is much good sense in it. That the language of poetry calls attention to itself by virtue of its non-logical elements is a useful notion which has been further developed by other critics, notably W. K. Wimsatt.⁶ One can accept this point, however, without admitting that prose is purely logical discourse in which the words have no intrinsic interest—though this is what Bateson seems to suggest: 'In prose . . . the words tend to be submerged in the ideas or things they represent. One synonym is as good as another.'⁷

The concept of synonymy is a complicated one. It is tenable only if we think of utterances as having several different levels of meaning—'mere sense, sense and implications, feeling, the speaker's attitude to whatever it is, to his audience, the speaker's confidence and other

things', as I. A. Richards has put it.⁸ Only on the first level can synonymy exist. But does the language of the novel operate solely on the level of 'mere sense'? Bateson's commentary certainly gives us the mere sense of the paragraph from *Persuasion*. But is it an adequate critical account?

Take for example the phrase *must have been enough for Anne*. On the level of mere sense, *war* would be an acceptable synonym for *must have been*. *Was enough for Anne* would, however, create a slight but not unimportant difference of effect. It would suggest that Anne was submitting blindly and unresistingly to the charm of Captain Wentworth. *Must have been* suggests the idea of a strong, instinctive emotional response, but since *must* is a word associated with moral obligation, and since it is used by an authorial voice which speaks with authority here and throughout the novel, we sense a qualified approval or, perhaps more precisely, a lack of disapproval, of Anne's disposition towards Wentworth. This use of *must* in the past tense has rather dropped out of modern English; but it is a form which Jane Austen uses extensively in all her novels, for it enables her to convey a moral judgment of her characters without appearing to violate their independent life.

What gives the whole passage its logical character is, in the first place, its grammar, which organizes the material in antitheses, distinctions, and qualifications. The diction or 'lexis' lends support by being largely nominal and abstract. But the words of logical argument italicized in Bateson's commentary do not themselves appear in the passage. The grammar does their job, allowing the lexis to describe a wide range of attitudes, which are, however, all evoked by the same thing. The passage presents the character of Captain Wentworth from four points of view in succession: (1) the narrator's, (2) Wentworth's own, (3) Anne's, (4) Lady Russell's.

(1) The first two sentences. These seem neutral and simply informational. However, the words *fortune* and *realized* have a discreet ironic effect, which helps to place Wentworth. A lucky man without *fortune* is a paradoxical kind of creature; and much of the action of the novel turns on Wentworth's failure to *realize* certain things.

(2) The third and fourth sentences. Wentworth's slightly facile optimism about his prospects. The fourth sentence is free

indirect speech—we seem to hear him speaking to Anne, or to himself.*

(3) The fifth sentence as far as ‘Anne’. This gives us Anne’s favourable response to Wentworth: *confidence, powerful, warmth, bewitching, wit*.

(4) The whole passage turns on the second half of the fifth sentence: ‘but Lady Russell saw it very differently’. In the rest of the passage the same characteristics of Wentworth are rehearsed, but differently named and differently evaluated; particularly by words of severe disapprobation such as *aggravation, evil, dangerous, headstrong, imprudence, and horror* (this last given a special emphasis by the syntactical inversion which places it last in the sentence).

What we have in this passage is order imposed with assurance and tact upon the flux of human emotion and irrationality. The general effect is pervasive in Jane Austen: an ironic detachment combined with a carefully discriminating sympathy and understanding. It is indeed a logical passage; but such logic applied to human experience in fiction is not normative. It constitutes the special quality of Jane Austen’s vision of experience, and is communicated to us through a special kind of language, language which is more than the transparent container of Ideas.

CHRISTOPHER CAUDWELL: THE CURRENT OF MOCK REALITY

Caudwell’s argument in *Illusion and Reality* (1937) overlaps Bateson’s at several points, and it is interesting to find a Marxist freelance and a professional academic critic propounding such similar theories of poetry. Caudwell’s description of how novels work is, however, sufficiently distinct from Bateson’s to merit separate treatment. His position is neatly summarized in this sentence: ‘The poem and the

* This is not obvious, but is, I think, indicated by the word *knew*. If the narrator’s voice were speaking with full authority here, some more guarded word like *thought, supposed, believed*, would have been used. Free indirect speech is a deviation from strict grammar and strict logic, and thus perhaps comparable to the more obvious non-logical linguistic features of poetry. It is a device that has been extensively used by modern novelists from Flaubert onwards, and usefully studied in the field of stylistics. Cf. Stephen Ullmann, *Style in the French Novel* (Cambridge, 1957), Chapter II.

story both use sounds which awake images of outer reality and affective reverberations; but in poetry the affective reverberations are organized by the structure of the language, while in the novel they are organized by the structure of the outer reality portrayed.¹ But this statement is probably too cryptic without some notion of the preceding argument:

[P]oetry in its use of language continually distorts and denies the structure of reality to exalt the structure of the self. By means of rhyme, assonance or alliteration it couples together words which have no rational connection, that is, no nexus through the world of external reality. It breaks the words up into lines of arbitrary length, cutting across their logical construction. It breaks down their associations, derived from the world of external reality, by means of inversion and every variety of artificial stressing and counterpoint.

Thus the world of external reality recedes and the world of instinct, the affective emotional linkage behind the words, becomes the world of reality. . . .

In the novel, too, the subjective elements are valued for themselves, and rise to view, but in a different way. The novel blots out external reality by substituting a more or less consistent mock reality which has sufficient 'stuff' to stand between the reader and reality. This means that in the novel the emotional associations attach not to words but to the moving current of mock reality symbolised by the words. This is why rhythm, 'preciousness', and style are alien to the novel; why the novel translates so well; why novels are not composed of words. They are composed of scenes, actions, *stuff*, people, just as plays are.²

It will be noted that in the first of these two quotations, the word 'story' stands in the same relation to 'poetry' as 'novel' does in the second. This is because Caudwell subscribes to the idea of the lyric as the poetic norm. Thus he is able to discuss the distinctive qualities of poetry in terms of the differences between the lyric and the narrative or dramatic modes.

By poetry we mean modern poetry, because not only have we a special and intimate understanding of the poetry of our own age

and time, but we look at the poetry of all ages through the mist of our own. Modern poetry is poetry which is already separate from story. . . .³

There are two ways of challenging Caudwell's position. The first is to say that we are entitled to ask of any general poetics that it take account of all the available data, and that there is a good deal of traditional poetry, not to mention drama and fiction, which does not fit neatly into Caudwell's categories. The second is to say that no kind of discourse can be so detached from 'external reality' as to constitute a special and self-contained system of language—which is what Caudwell, like Valéry, implies. Wimsatt and Beardsley have argued very persuasively against this position in their essay 'The Affective Fallacy', reaching the conclusion that 'a poetry of pure emotion is an illusion. . . . Poetry is characteristically a discourse about both emotions and objects, or about the emotive quality of objects.'⁴

The importance of these two objections is that, if accepted, they encourage us, in Laurence Lerner's words, 'to question the very idea of classifying language into two kinds, rather than describing it as a continuum'.⁵ For it is the notion of a radical discontinuity between the language of poetry and the language of other kinds of discourse which has inhibited the study of the language of the novel. Once we conceive of language as a continuum in which the proportion of 'emotive' to 'referential' varies, but in which neither element is ever entirely absent, we may begin to see the novelist's medium as language rather than life.

Caudwell's argument has a certain pragmatic appeal which must be recognized. We are usually less conscious of a novelist's use of language than of a poet's. We *do* tend to experience and recall a novel, not as a system of words, images, symbols, and sounds, but as a system of actions, situations, settings, and we continue to find the terms 'plot' and 'character' indispensable. The fact remains that these latter concepts are abstractions formed from accumulated messages conveyed through language. R. A. Sayce has stated well the teasing nature of the problem: 'We are conscious of literary experiences which appear to transcend language: plot, character, personality, form in a wider sense, landscape, the sea and the stars, indeed everything that exists. Yet all

these experiences are communicated by linguistic means. This is the paradox with which we are confronted.⁶

Caudwell does not acknowledge this paradox, and does not avoid confusion. Asserting that 'in the novel, the emotional associations attach not to the words but to the moving current of mock reality symbolized by the words', he makes an artificial distinction: the 'reality' of fiction has no existence independent of the words—that is why it is 'mock' reality—and our emotional responses are directed by the words. As Caudwell himself says, 'language [i.e. all language, not just poetic language] communicates not simply a dead image of outer reality but also and simultaneously an attitude towards it'.⁷ If this is true—and it surely is—then reality is structured by the novelist not only in the particular characters, events, and objects in which he represents it, but initially in the words and arrangements of words with which he creates these characters, events, and objects. In this case a novel is made of words just as much as a poem is made of words.

Here, I think, we approach the philosophical heart of the matter: the relation of literary language to reality. But before proceeding any further I wish to consider two empirical arguments frequently used to suggest that the novelist's use of language differs radically from the poet's, and in such a way as not to merit the kind of attention we give to the poet's. I call them the argument from translation and the argument from bad writing.

THE ARGUMENT FROM TRANSLATION

That poetry is untranslatable is a basic tenet of modern criticism and appears to follow logically from any critical theory which holds that form and content are inseparable, and which accounts for the literary effects of a given work principally or exclusively in terms of its verbal organization. Like most of the ideas we have been considering, it starts with the Romantics. Shelley, for instance, talks of the 'vanity of translation':

[I]t were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transmute from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant

must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower,—and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.¹

Novels, on the other hand, are apparently translatable, in the sense that we all read translated novels with some confidence in our judgment of them and their authors. Hence, it is argued, the identity of a novel cannot be determined by the words of which it is composed—as a poem is so determined—because this identity is not changed when the novel is translated into other, different words.

This argument is found in the texts by Bateson and Caudwell discussed above. It is also used by Arnold Kettle, who takes it over from Caudwell.² Robert Liddell states it most emphatically:

If 'the way in which words are used' is the only and final criterion, then English readers who do not know Russian have no right to praise the novels of Tolstoy or Dostievsky, but only to praise the minds of Louise and Aylmer Maude or of Constance Garnett.³

Liddell professes to be attacking Mrs Leavis here, but in fact in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) she took up a position not very far removed from his own. (Indeed the significance attached to the novelist's use of language by Mrs Leavis and by the whole Leavis-Scrutiny school is somewhat equivocal, as I shall try to show later.)

[W]hile *Faust* and *Le Cimetière Marin* cannot be apprehended as works of art in English, we can get something comparable to the original experience and so make a rough guess at the value of *Anna Karenina* or *The Possessed* or *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* in another language than that in which it was written.⁴

This Mrs Leavis sees as an 'advantage' of the novel form, but one which adds to the problems of the novel-critic, since it is one of the factors which puts the novel outside the range of I. A. Richards's poetics, which otherwise she finds satisfactory.⁵

To use the argument from translation as Mr Liddell uses it is essentially unfair, because there is a much more reliable basis on which to settle the issue—the issue being whether or not the words of a novel