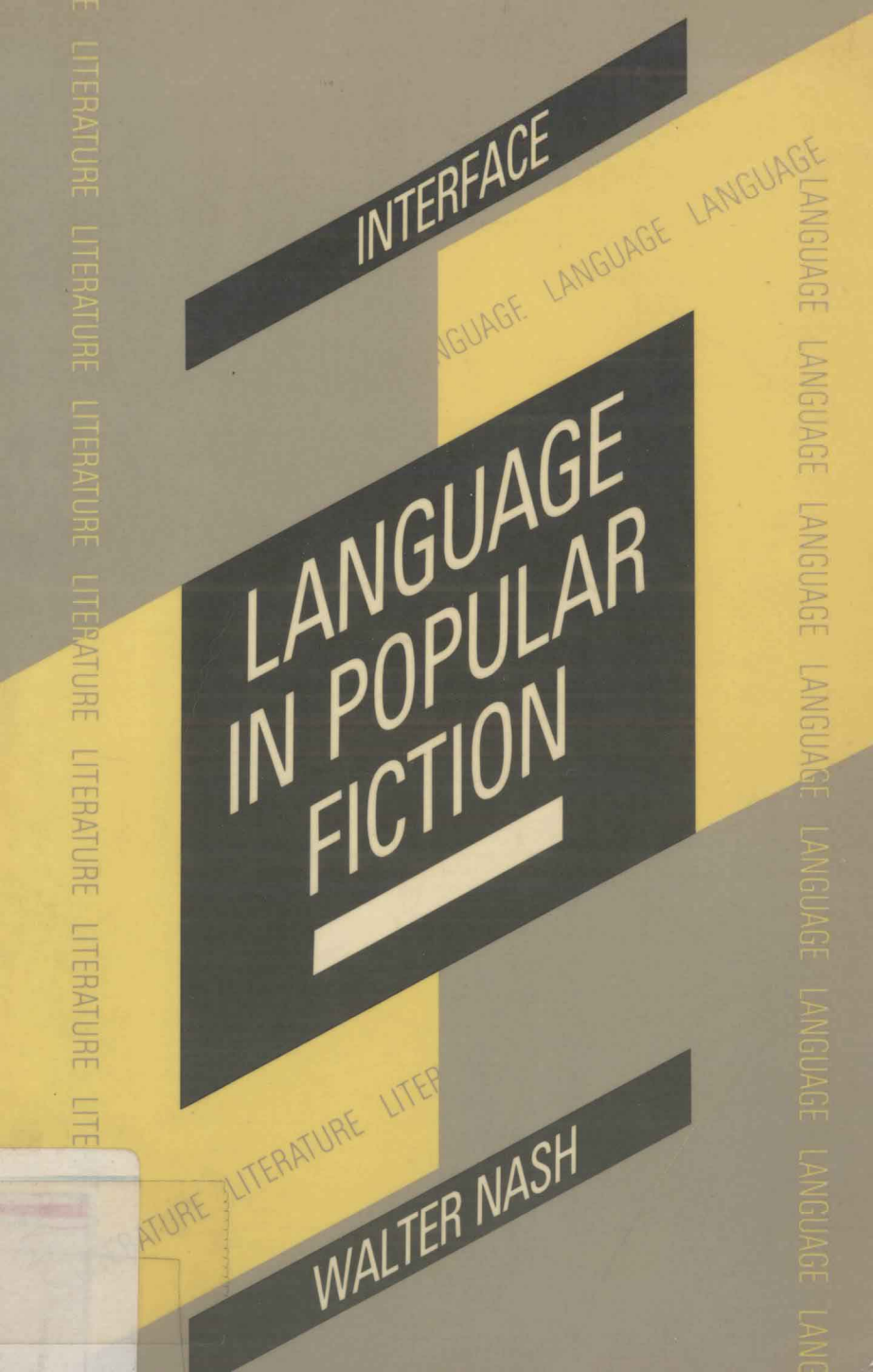
INTERFACE
LANGUAGE IN POPULAR FICTION
WALTER NASH
LITERATURE
LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE IN POPULAR FICTION

WALTER NASH

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Series editor's introduction to the Interface series

There have been many books published this century which have been devoted to the interface of language and literary studies. This is the first *series* of books devoted to this area commissioned by a major international publisher; it is the first time a *group* of writers have addressed themselves to issues at the interface of language and literature; and it is the first time an international professional association has worked closely with a publisher to establish such a venture. It is the purpose of this general introduction to the series to outline some of the main guiding principles underlying the books in the series.

The first principle adopted is one of not foreclosing on the many possibilities for the integration of language and literature studies. There are many ways in which the study of language and literature can be combined and many different theoretical, practical, and curricular objectives to be realized. Obviously, a close relationship with the aims and methods of descriptive linguistics will play a prominent part, so readers will encounter some detailed analysis of language in places. In keeping with a goal of much work in this field, writers will try to make their analysis sufficiently replicable for other analysts to see how they have arrived at the interpretive decisions they have reached and to allow others to reproduce their methods on the same or on other texts. But linguistic science does not have a monopoly in methodology and description any more than linguists can have sole possession of insights into language and its workings. Some contributors to this series adopt quite rigorous linguistic procedures; others proceed less rigorously but no less revealingly. All are, however, united by a belief that detailed scrutiny of the role of language in literary texts can be mutually enriching to language and literary studies.

Series of books are usually written to an overall formula or design. In the case of the Interface series this was considered to be not entirely appropriate. This is for the reasons given above,

but also because, as the first series of its kind, it would be wrong to suggest that there are formulaic modes by which integration can be achieved. The fact that all the books address themselves to the integration of language and literature in any case imparts a natural and organic unity to the series. Thus, some of the books in this series will provide descriptive overviews, others will offer detailed case studies of a particular topic, others will involve single author studies, and some will be more pedagogically oriented.

This variety of design and procedure means that a wide variety of audiences is envisaged for the series as a whole, though, of course, individual books are necessarily quite specifically targeted. The general level of exposition presumes quite advanced students of language and literature. Approximately, this level covers students of English language and literature (though not exclusively English) at senior high-school/upper sixth form level to university students in their first or second year of study. Many of the books in the series are designed to be *used* by students. Some may serve as course books – these will normally contain exercises and suggestions for further work as well as glossaries and graded bibliographies which point the student towards further reading. Some books are also designed to be used by teachers for their own reading and updating, and to supplement courses; in some cases, specific questions of pedagogic theory, teaching procedure, and methodology at the interface of language and literature are addressed.

From a pedagogic point of view it is the case in many parts of the world that students focus on literary texts, especially in the mother tongue, before undertaking any formal study of the language. With this fact in mind, contributors to the series have attempted to gloss all new technical terms and to assume on the part of their readers little or no previous knowledge of linguistics or formal language studies. They see no merit in not being detailed and explicit about what they describe in the linguistic properties of texts; but they recognize that formal language study can seem forbidding if it is not properly introduced.

A further characteristic of the series is that the authors engage in a direct relationship with their readers. The overall style of writing is informal and there is above all an attempt to lighten the usual style of academic discourse. In some cases this extends to the way in which notes and guidance for further work are

presented. In all cases, the style adopted by authors is judged to be that most appropriate to the mediation of their chosen subject matter.

We now come to two major points of principle which underlie the conceptual scheme for the series. One is that the term 'literature' cannot be defined in isolation from an expression of ideology. In fact, no academic study, and certainly no description of the language of texts, can be neutral and objective, for the sociocultural positioning of the analyst will mean that the description is unavoidably political. Contributors to the series recognize and, in so far as this accords with the aims of each book, attempt to explore the role of ideology at the interface of language and literature. Secondly, most writers also prefer the term 'literatures' to a singular notion of literature. Some replace 'literature' altogether with the neutral term 'text'. It is for this reason that readers will not find exclusive discussions of the literary language of canonical literary texts; instead the linguistic heterogeneity of literature and the permeation of many discourses with what is conventionally thought of as poetic or literary language will be a focus. This means that in places as much space can be devoted to examples of word play in jokes, newspaper editorials, advertisements, historical writing, or a popular thriller as to a sonnet by Shakespeare or a passage from Jane Austen. It is also important to stress how the term 'literature' itself is historically variable and how different social and cultural assumptions can condition what is regarded as literature. In this respect the role of linguistic and literary theory is vital. It is an aim of the series to be constantly alert to new developments in the description and theory of texts.

Finally, as series editor, I have to underline the partnership and co-operation of the whole enterprise of the Interface series and acknowledge the advice and assistance received at many stages from the PALA Committee and from Wendy Morris at Routledge. In turn, we are all fortunate to have the benefit of three associate editors with considerable collective depth of experience in this field in different parts of the world: Professor Roger Fowler, Professor Mary Louise Pratt, Professor Michael Halliday. In spite of their own individual orientations, I am sure that all concerned with the series would want to endorse the statement by Roman Jakobson made over twenty-five years ago but which is no less relevant today:

> A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unconversant with linguistic methods, are equally flagrant anachronisms.

In *Language in Popular Fiction* Walter Nash writes with characteristic perception about a genre of writing normally excluded from courses in literary studies, and demonstrates that within a wider definition of literary and cultural studies any such exclusion is difficult to justify. The texts examined in this book as 'women's fiction' and 'men's fiction' are popular in that they attract prodigiously large readerships and Walter Nash shows what interesting linguistic and cultural phenomena they are. He examines popular fiction at different linguistic levels from vocabulary to the larger patternings of discourse and generic organization and relates these in illuminating ways to more traditional literary concerns with theme and character. This is, however, not simply a text-immanent procedure since Walter Nash also explores popular fiction as a site for the negotiation of social meanings and for the mediation of ideologies. This contribution to the Interface series continues the genre which Professor Nash has started in the serious academic book on language and literary matters which is entertaining (and in places sidesplittingly funny) to read.

Preface

A generic study of popular fiction would exceed the limits I have set myself, and is probably beyond my capacity. This essay is the product of readings in the kinds of fiction composed with an eye on Him or Her: that is, in the main, thrillers and romances. By thus limiting the scope of the work I have perhaps denied myself full access to some important themes, and may well have presented an over-simplified account of the impact of popular fiction, its particular audiences, its inherent ideologies, its gradations of appeal. I am well aware that there is great diversity in these stories; that they are written with all sorts of motives, by all sorts of people; that some have pretensions which others do not; that they may be read by men and women alike; and that authors seeking a mass market do not penalize themselves by writing exclusively for one gender. I am, I repeat, well aware of what the subject involves, but in reducing my choice of material I have accepted the risk that some things may be omitted or passed over lightly.

My brief was, in any case, to write about style. This I have attempted to do at three levels: a level of verbal choice and organization, a level of narrative structure, and a level at which stylistic options and devices are related to the ideologies of manliness and womanliness which we either bring to our reading or derive from it. In the prevailing language of criticism 'ideology' is an important word. It does not occur very prominently or frequently in this book, though I do not think I have failed to describe the ideas and social assumptions encoded in current popular fiction. It would in fact be difficult to treat stylistic questions without some descriptive account of the ideologies inherent in the style. It seems to me, however, that the subject of ideology in popular fiction is complex and calls for a book of its own. One of the complexities is historical; ideologies change, or persist with a difference. (Thus Richard Hannay, for example, merges into James Bond.) Another kind of complexity is societal, and

involves changes of ideological pitch to court the assent of different classes or social groupings. There are still other kinds, and had I taken it upon myself to examine them all, I should have written a different book, a better one, perhaps, more useful, possibly, but at all events different. It would not have been about style incidentally touched by ideology; it would have been about ideology incidentally governing style.

Because I thought it appropriate to a subject which is not, after all, the most solemn in the world, it has suited me to frame my essay playfully, and to indulge here and there in a little stylistic fun. I suppose that there may be some significance in my use of the image of flight as a sustaining narrative device; it could suggest, perhaps, a fugitive state of mind, a wish to avoid the constraints of 'academic' discussion. That, however, is not what has disconcerted some good friends who have read the book in manuscript. Their fear is that my levity may be taken for contempt and condescension. Should the book give that impression, I can only insist that I look down on no one, that I mock nobody's taste (or if I do, I mock my own), and that I certainly do not disparage popular fiction for being popular, though I reserve the right to smile at absurdities in any style, popular or otherwise. I have not treated my authors with less respect than I would show them if their names were securely lodged in the literary canon, and wherever I have attempted criticism, I have done so with close reference to particulars. My general attitude is that of Duke Theseus, whose words I have chosen as an epigraph because they apply to this study as well as to the fictions it describes.

WN
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The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

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Contents

1 Prelude: in the airport lounge

But here we are nowhere, unrelated to day or our mother
Earth in love or in hate; our occupation
Leaves no trace on this place or each other who do not
Meet in its mere enclosure but are exposed
As object for speculation . . .

(W. H. Auden, *Air Port*)

Viola: What country, friends, is this?
Captain: This is Illyria, lady.

(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*)

Here in the airport lounge, how becalmed we voyagers are, all spellbound and dreambound! How equable this climate – this mild, well-regulated air, untouched by frost or torrid heat, or the bite of chilling wind! Suspended between Somewhere and Elsewhere, we bask in the light of Anywhere. It is a place where fantasies luxuriate. As our feet wander the mute and carpeted acres, our eyes flit speculatively among figures and faces. Look, now, at this man coming towards us. His neat blue suit proclaims the businessman, but who knows what underworlds of espionage, what services in a secret cause are implicated in that briefcase? Those policemen at the boarding gate are tensely waiting for the two drug-trafficking mafiosi to show up. That woman's elegance, ever so slightly ruffled – for her silk scarf hangs negligently, and she has just dropped a glove – tells us that she is on her way to meet her lover, the American neurosurgeon, who will never marry her as long as his demented wife (of whom she has no knowledge) still lingers on in the expensive Swiss clinic. Here we all are, in this Land of In-Between. We are characters in enjoyably bad books, it seems. We are in the right place for Popular Fiction.

And there in the corner is the very emblem of our condition – the airport bookstall, stacked with magazines and paperbacks

to keep us happy and hypnotized in our confinement. The covers are gaudy with all the emblems and personalities of the dream-world. Here a pale face framed in a nurse's cap is bedewed with one bright tear; here a lady of phenomenal endowment sustains a gown that seems about to abandon her completely; here a gentleman whose face appears to have been fashioned out of lacquered aluminium, so smooth it is and so symmetrical, holds in crossed hands a red, red rose and a big black pistol; here the *Totenkopf* and other Nazi paraphernalia – or perhaps the hammer and sickle and the insignia of the KGB – are suspended above the heroic heads of a United States naval officer and a redhead in a tight white blouse; here is a cowboy, with ten-gallon hat and leather chaps; here is a space-trekking crewman in his galactic dungarees. There is stuff here to sustain us during our flight; and when we have emerged into the weathers of our destinations and the happenings of ordinary lives, we can always leave the book of our choice in some hotel room, to beguile another traveller.

For this is one of the principal characteristics of popular fiction – its disposability. You may buy Conrad or Henry James or Fielding in paperback, but you are hardly likely to leave them intentionally in a bedroom or on a luggage rack, because they have served their turn and have nothing left to offer you. Such authors are resources on which we repeatedly draw, and when we buy one of their books we take some care to keep it by us. Popfiction, on the other hand (let us call it that for convenience' sake) has little to offer after the first absorbed reading. We do not want *again*, though we may want *more*. To one classic book we may well return times without number; our return to popfiction consists of buying more popfiction. It is well known that popfiction is marketed by the tens of thousands, whereas fiction of more elevated pretensions sells at best by the thousand and sometimes by the mere hundred. The phrase 'best seller' points to the importance of commercial success as a popular measure of value. Between the publisher and the consumer there is a tacit agreement that if a book is good it is bound to be a best seller, and if it is a best seller it is bound to be good. And as Viscount Melbourne said in quite another context, no damned merit in it.

Of course it depends what you mean by merit. Popfiction does have its merits, and they are by no means negligible. They are shown in the ability to tell a tale, to devise its episodes with

such skill that the reader often cannot bear to put the book aside, to touch on common sympathies, to understand the judgements and desires of ordinary people, to offer the keen experience of danger, of anxiety, of love, of sorrow, of triumph, but all without the intruding shadow of the actual, without obliging us to quit the Illyrian trance, so to speak, or the hermetic fold of the airport lounge. To do all this takes talent, and the money we pay for our distraction is fairly earned; we are ill-natured, and doubtless ill-informed, if we despise the arts that easily divert us.

Our deeper allegiance, nevertheless, is to a very special kind of 'merit', which we detect in the capacity of a book to illuminate our own experience, to enlarge our perceptions of human nature and conduct, and, without overt moralizing, to establish and confirm in us the knowledge of a morality. The lessons of 'serious' literature are not quickly learned. Our relationship with a book, our understanding of its themes, our view of its characters, can accrue and change over a period of many years. This is why we hold on to texts we recognize as classics, or as classic in potential. Popfiction, the disposable article, is committed to the simplest moralities, the crudest psychologies, and has few philosophical pretensions. It does not ask for careful reading or repeated reading; nor do rereadings change our understanding of its nature, our perceptions of the message it has to convey; its peculiar claim on our attentions is, in fact, that it can be quickly read and almost as quickly forgotten.

And why are we so quick about it? The source of our facility can be identified in a simple term: convention. We read the conventions of popular narrative like a map, a crude map that designates a route and a few easily recognizable landmarks. All narratives employ conventions, it is true, but there are degrees of complexity, of diversity, of originality in the management of conventional elements. If the 'maps' of novels by Graham Greene or L. P. Hartley or Iris Murdoch seem to present subtler apprehensions of the terrain than anything by Ian Fleming or Frederick Forsyth or Barbara Cartland, it is not because they employ different conventions. It is rather the case that in popfiction the conventions are simplified and more or less fixed, whereas in writing of more advanced pretension the conventional game is free, diverse, endlessly modified; so that even when such writings draw on some traditional form such as the moral fable, they may still succeed in handling convention

unconventionally. All this has one striking consequence: that while we cannot easily predict the ramifications of 'non-popular' narratives, popfiction is nothing if not predictable. And so we read it quickly – moving rapidly through the landscape, as it were, seeing little but the road.

The predictabilities of situation and style figure most obviously in two genres or subspecies of popfiction: the romantic story, as published in women's magazines and some widely-marketed paperbacks, and the male-orientated 'thriller', the action-packed chronicle of supermanly heroes and hyperdiabolical villains. As to the first of these two categories, there is probably no species of fiction that can be read more quickly, with greater assurance to the reader of being steered in the right direction – no missed signals – no blind roads or wrong turnings – or with less compulsion to renew acquaintance in a second reading. In general, these tales present a view of women so demeaning (though unintentionally) that it must be acceptable only in what might be called the Illyrian sense: it has to be allowed for the time being by anyone who wants to make something of the story. It is this very acceptance that creates the conditions for fast and unburdened reading; and what the reader must swallow or sanction is an idea of true womanliness, a notion of femininity.

The essence of this notion is its recognition – clever, winning, anxious, but always submissive – of its role, to make a marriage and a home. Homecoming, literal or figurative, is the magazine writer's greatest good, and the proper end of most romantic narratives. Jill finally nestles into the protective arms of Jack, her eyes full of happy tears, her head full of wallpaper patterns. She has come Home; and home is where she will henceforth remain, though that prospect lies beyond the terminus of the tale. There are of course illimitable variations on the theme that all roads lead to Home, but the variations are based on some elementary scenarios, readily compounded by a blending of types. Readers of women's magazines will possibly recognize the following sketches, fictive instances of fictional themes:

Sketch 1: Jill is a secretary/a nurse/a teacher-governess. She is dedicated to her work, attractively turned out, nourishes sound moral instincts, and knows her place. Although she resists the impulse, feeling in every fibre of her being that he is not for her, she is deeply drawn to her employer, Sebastian/Alex/Greg, a consultant surgeon/company director/eminent publisher. Yet he is so impatient and brusque with her, finding fault with her every