

Critical Analysis of Fiction

Essays in Discourse Stylistics

Jean Jacques Weber

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- chapter 3.2 in *Journal of Literary Semantics* 11 (1982) 90-95 ;
- chapter 3.3 in Michael Toolan (ed.) *Language, Text and Context*. London : Routledge. 1992 ;
- chapter 4.3 in Ron Carter & Paul Simpson (eds.). *Language, Discourse and Literature : An Introductory Reader in Discourse Stylistics*. London : Unwin Hyman. 1989 :95-111 ;
- chapter 5.1 in *Grazer Linguistische Studien* 26 (1986) 173-185.

All these essays have been extensively revised for inclusion in the present book.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Critical Analysis of Fiction hopes to contribute to the development of a new form of stylistics, critical discourse stylistics, which can enter into a productive complementarity with other critical theories. This new and powerful stylistics draws its inspiration from a revitalized linguistics, no longer Chomsky's generative-transformational grammar, but Halliday's theory of grammar as social semiotic and the critical linguistics which is based upon it. It makes an epistemological break with the formalist and structuralist framework of traditional stylistics: it not only relies on different tools of analysis, but it also concerns itself with a different domain of analysis and tries to achieve very different aims. Unlike structuralist stylistics, which focuses upon the foregrounded narrative structures of the literary text, discourse stylistics focuses upon the largely implicit and highly ideological "background" of the text. It deals with the ideological undercurrents of all discourse. This new domain of analysis obviously requires very different formal tools of analysis, drawn from functional theories of language, from pragmatics and discourse analysis, and from cognitive science and artificial intelligence. Moreover, the aims of discourse stylistics are very different from the aims of structuralist stylistics. The discourse stylistician no longer aims at scientific completeness and objectivity. Dealing as s/he does with largely subjective beliefs, norms and values, s/he realizes that all readings are inevitably positioned and partial. His/her aim is therefore a more modest pedagogical one: to introduce readers to a procedure of vigilance which trains them in *critical reading*.

The book provides a practical introduction to the methodology and the basic tenets of such a critical discourse stylistics, by applying them to a number of selected 19th and 20th century novels and short stories. However, one of the points of principle of discourse stylistics is that there is no linguistically identifiable distinction between literary and non-literary texts, and that "literature" is a culturally defined notion. Therefore I should like to start

with a brief analysis of five non-literary texts in order to introduce some of the basic concepts that we shall be working with.

On 4 January 1969 about 250 people, mostly students from Queen's University, Belfast, set out on the final battle-torn ten-mile walk from the village of Claudy to Derry. The 75-mile protest march across Ulster from Belfast to Derry had been organized by the People's Democracy Group of Queen's University as part of their fight for equal civil rights for Catholics in Northern Ireland, who were discriminated against by the system in such matters as voting and housing. The march was strongly opposed by the Protestant followers of the Reverend Ian Paisley and Major Bunting. Minor incidents had occurred during the first three days, but the ugliest clashes took place on the last day, Saturday 4th January 1969. Here are four randomly chosen newspaper articles reporting on the events of the day :

a) Irish newspapers :

1. *Sunday Independent*, 5 January 1969
2. *Sunday Press*, 5 January 1969

b) English newspapers :

3. *Sunday Telegraph*, 5 January 1969
4. *Sunday Express*, 5 January 1969

1. *SUNDAY INDEPENDENT* (Dublin) 05.01.69

SURPRISE AMBUSH

The marchers walked into an unexpected ambush at Burntollet Bridge, about 7 miles from Derry.

Petrol bombs were tossed and a fusillade of stones and missiles avalanched the marchers, launched by a force of about 100 Paisleyites who had taken up positions on elevated ground on either side of the marchers' route.

The marchers scattered and raced for shelter in nearby fields. Two petrol bombs exploded in a mass of flames in a field but caused no injuries.

BATON CHARGES

At the time of the ambush *the parade was spearheaded by about 25 steel-helmeted police armed with shields*, but *they were unable to afford any protection to the marchers* because of the superior force of the Paisleyites.

The police made several baton charges and the Paisleyites scattered over adjoining fields and down a laneway. The marchers later reformed and continued on their way to Derry.

One of the injured students with blood spurting from a head wound said later: "They stormed down from the fields and attacked us left, right and centre. They were armed with every conceivable type of weapon: spikes, sticks, staves and pick axe handles."

The Civil Rights students bitterly complained that *riot police and RUC men made no move to protect them*.

"Actually," the students said, "*the police moved away when the Paisleyites descended on us and got into their tenders*." Some of the injured students staggered back to Claudy, where they were given medical aid.

2. SUNDAY PRESS (Dublin) 05.01.69

PAISLEYITES USE PETROL BOMBS

At three o'clock yesterday, the battered but undaunted civil rights marchers from Queen's University entered Guildhall Square in Derry.

All the way from the village of Claudy the marchers and their sympathizers were harassed and stoned. Some marchers, including girls, were left unconscious on the road.

In a day of vicious attacks, Paisleyites used petrol bombs, stones and sticks in a desperate bid to stop the marchers.

BLEEDING

75 people were treated in Altnagelvin Hospital and minor injuries were dealt with at a special medical centre set up in the City Hotel, yards from where Paisleyites were raining bottles and stones from the top of the Derry walls on the assembled civil rights marchers.

As injured people bleeding from wounds, mainly from the head, were dragged in to the temporary casualty centre, windows in the hotel were smashed as the rampaging rioters roamed through the town. Several shops were looted, and *one senior police officer commented*: "We are on the brink of civil war in this city."

About 6 miles from Derry, *the loyalists ambushed the students and police* from a hillside along the main road. Over 100-strong, they hurled stones and sticks on top of the marching party, then blocked the road.

Riot police moved in, with steel helmets and shields, and charged the loyalists, breaking a way through the centre.

The marching students did not retaliate as stones, sticks and sods poured down on them. *The police finally broke the blockade and continued with the marchers to Derry.* Several people were injured and ambulances sped to the scene.

3. SUNDAY TELEGRAPH (London) 05.01.69

POLICE BATTLE WITH DERRY MOB: MARCH AMBUSHED

Police made baton charges and used water cannons to try and break up fights between Protestant extremists and predominantly Roman Catholic civil rights supporters in the streets of Londonderry last night. About 125 people, including 22 policemen, were treated in hospital, and 4 people were arrested.

Shortly before midnight, *the riot squad made a baton charge* on student civil rights marchers who were trying to break into the Guildhall. They bolted back to the City Hotel, where they were staying.

There were several skirmishes during the night, but biting frost and snow kept most demonstrators away.

Earlier, extremists ambushed the civil rights marchers at Killaloo, County Londonderry, 5 miles from the end of the 75-mile Belfast to Londonderry march.

Some were left lying in pools of blood after a barrage of bricks, bottles and stones were hurled over roadside hedges. The day's clashes caused some of the worst scenes of violence in Northern Ireland for many years.

4. **SUNDAY EXPRESS (London) 05.01.69**

MOB SET FIRE TO BUILDING IN ULSTER RIOT

Rioters early today set fire to a contractor's building in Londonderry. *Police stood by helpless* on the other side of barriers erected by the demonstrators as the 30-foot-long building was completely burnt out. Even a huge armour-plated water-cannon carrier was unable to break through. When it attempted to do so, *the mob stoned 200 steel-helmeted police and forced them to retreat.*

CLIMAX

It was the climax to a day in which petrol bombs, bottles, bricks and nailed clubs were hurled at Civil Rights demonstrators as they approached Londonderry at the end of their march across Ulster from Belfast.

On the final stretch 111 people, *including 12 policemen*, were injured.

And early today mobs roam the streets. *Silent, grim-faced police, sometimes 100-strong, wait* at strategic points. There is a constant wail of sirens from ambulances and *police riot trucks.*

It was just before 3pm that the 400 marchers paraded near the Guildhall, scene of the previous night's disturbances. *The procession was headed by about 40 steel-helmeted police carrying batons and shields.*

Last night the Nationalist (Catholic) quarter of Londonderry - known locally as the "Bogside" - was in a state of siege. Civil Rights supporters had erected more than half a dozen road blocks *to halt police vehicles.*

The Loyalist supporters were in particularly angry mood because of the previous night's petrol bomb attack on the car of the Protestant leader, the Reverend Ian Paisley.

More than 50 of the marchers, mostly students from Queen's University, Belfast, were injured in an ambush 6 miles from the city and taken to hospital in a fleet of ambulances, *police tenders* and private cars.

There are many significant differences between the four newspapers' accounts of the events of 4 January 1969. However, I have only space here to focus on one aspect : each newspaper's presentation of the role of the police in these events (the constructions involving the police are italicized in the texts). The *Sunday Press* and the *Sunday Telegraph* present the police in an active, agentive role. Though the first occurrence of *police* in the *Sunday Press* (article no.2) is in patient role :

the loyalists ambushed the students and police

the "backlash" is fierce and immediate, and all remaining references are in agentive role :

Riot police moved in
[riot police] charged the loyalists
[riot police broke] a way through the centre
The police finally broke the blockade
[the police] continued with the marchers to Derry

There is a definite tendency here to align the police with the Catholics (the loyalists ambushed *the students and police* ; the police continued *with the marchers to Derry*) : the police fight against the vicious Protestant aggressors (they "charged the loyalists") in order to protect the innocent Catholic victims. This is the "police as your friend and helper" ideology.

In the *Sunday Telegraph* (article no.3), a strong and determined police force is shown as restoring law and order by taking decisive action against both groups of rioters :

Police battle with Derry mob.
Police made baton charges
[police] used water cannons
the riot squad made a baton charge

The *Sunday Telegraph* focuses on the later events in Derry, which allows it to interpret everything in terms of such a "law and order" ideology.

The two other newspapers, the *Sunday Express* and the *Sunday Independent*, present the police in a very different, essentially passive or negative, light. The *Sunday Express* (article no.4), though focussing on the same later events in Derry as the *Sunday Telegraph*, yet sees the police wholly in the role of the affected :

the mob stoned 200 steel-helmeted police
[the mob] forced them to retreat

Even if *police* occurs in subject position in a sentence, it is the subject of an intransitive, non-agentive verb which shows the police to be unable to restore law and order :

Police stood by helpless
Silent, grim-faced groups of police, sometimes 100-strong, wait at strategic points.

All they can do is to try and minimize the damage by e.g. taking the injured to hospital :

[the injured marchers were] taken to hospital in a fleet of ambulances, *police* tenders and private cars.

The *Sunday Express* thus seems to espouse a version of the popular “mob rules OK in Northern Ireland” ideology (widely held in England).

Finally, the *Sunday Independent* (article no.1), which like the *Sunday Press* again focuses on the earlier events at Burntollet Bridge, is the only newspaper that questions the role of the police in a series of highly charged negative statements. The police are first said to have been “*unable* to afford any protection to the marchers because of the superior force of the Paisleyites”. Then, however, in what seems a total contradiction, they are said to have “made several baton charges and the Paisleyites scattered” Finally, the marching students are given a voice, claiming that the reason why the police did not protect them was not their inability to do so, but part of a deliberate strategy :

The Civil Rights students bitterly complained that riot police and RUC men made *no* move to protect them.
“the police moved away when the Paisleyites descended on us and got into their tenders“

Thus we have come full circle, from the *Sunday Press*’s alignment of the police with the marchers, via the English papers’ assumption of an impartial police force trying to restore law and order and either succeeding (*Sunday Telegraph*) or failing (*Sunday Express*) to the *Sunday Independent*’s suggestion of connivance between police and Protestants as an instantiation of a more general

“plot against the Catholics in Northern Ireland” ideology (widely held in Ireland).

We are left with a large area of confusion and unanswered questions concerning the role of the police during the events of 4 January 1969: did they genuinely try to protect the marchers? was the Burntollet Bridge ambush the result of either a deliberate act by the police to lead the marchers into a trap or a failure by them to reconnoitre the route? As Toolan (1988:232) puts it, “although the truth *may* be single, reports of the truth are always plural, mutually inconsistent, partial”. And there is no way of reconstructing it: studying more newspaper articles, more historical accounts of the same events will only add to the confusion, by adding more versions, more interpretations. Even if some versions seem more likely than others, we will never have a guarantee that any one particular version corresponds to the “truth”. Ultimately, the truth will forever elude us. The point is of course NOT that the truth has been packaged in different ways by different journalists in order to make it fit into their newspaper’s world-view, and that now the packages can be unwrapped and the truth can be revealed. On the contrary, the truth is so much enmeshed in ideology that it can never be recovered in its entirety: it will always be mediated, non-neutral, imbued with values. This then is what we mean when we say that to a large extent our realities are linguistically constructed.

According to Birch (1989:31), the aim of a politically aware and responsible stylistics should be to change these linguistically constructed realities in such a way as to “remove classist, sexist and racist injustices in the world”. But changing something presupposes a critical awareness, an ability to see through the surface words of a text to the ideologies hidden underneath. The basic question for a critical stylistics thus is: how can the background ideologies which inform a text be reconstructed? how can its author’s background assumptions be retrieved? Note that the question remains the same for both non-fictional texts such as newspaper articles describing a truth which remains fundamentally and ineluctably elusive, and fictional texts constructing their own truth; except that the latter often introduce extra complexity in what Clark (1987) calls “layering”. Since, typically, a fictional text is written by an author, is told by a narrator, and involves several characters, each of whom can have his or her own ideology, this layered discourse structure raises an additional question: *whose* world-view informs the construction of the fictional universe in this particular passage, the author’s, the narrator’s or one of the characters’? And the answers can range from the clear-cut to the totally indeterminate, especially in the polyphonic passages of free indirect discourse.

These are the fundamental questions which are addressed in the present work. Chapters 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 study the different aspects of what is in fact a single, but highly complex process : the linguistic construction of reality. For analytic purposes, it has been subdivided into four artificial subprocesses : what I shall refer to as the processes of schema construction, schema accommodation, schema imposition and schema liberation. Taking the newspaper articles discussed above as an example, we could say that the reporters have performed at least the following acts :

- they have constructed a particular text world, which not only reports certain real-world events, but also to a greater or lesser degree refracts their own background assumptions, norms, values and ideologies¹ (process of schema construction)
- in their construction of this ideological world, they have had to select or foreground certain events, to background or ignore others, and to integrate the selected events into a coherent world-view or cosmology (process of schema accommodation)
- at the same time, through the very act of informing the reader of certain events, they impose their schematic world-view upon the reader (process of schema imposition).

However, the reporters could also have tried to resist all schema accommodation, looking at the events in their full otherness and thus freeing themselves from the distorting effects of their own social ideologies (process of schema liberation). Similarly, of course, the reader's response to the ideological world constructed in and by the text can range from swallowing the implicit subtext whole to questioning and resisting it.

In fiction, characters, narrator, author and reader similarly inhabit cognitive worlds which are built around structures of background assumptions and which may vary from exact identity to total opposition. Part 4 explores the nature of, and the relationships between, these ideological worlds. Chapter 4.1 studies the relations between the characters' cognitive worlds in Graham Greene's *The Honorary Consul* and makes an attempt to define the notion of ideological "distance" between cognitive worlds. In chapter 4.2 this approach is extended to the notion of "inaccessibility" between worlds, which in turn is used to shed some light on what critics have called the "problem of boundaries" in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Chapter 4.3 includes a characterization of the narrator's world in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* and of how it interacts with the characters' worlds. It highlights a contradiction within the narrator's world, an inner tension between his explicitly stated

ideology and his implicit radical ideology. And chapter 4.4 studies the dialogic interaction between conflicting voices or ideologies in John Fowles' *A Maggot*.

Part 5 looks at the same issues from the point of view of cognitive interpretation. It again focuses on the process of reading as a process of schema construction, schema accommodation and schema imposition: the reader relies upon his/her own ideological assumptions in order to draw inferences about the author's, the narrator's and the characters' background ideologies. The result is a hypothetical reading formation, which is upheld as long as new fictional events can be accommodated within it. But writers often deliberately mislead their readers into traps, thus showing up the limits, dangers and pitfalls of all cognitive processing. These are highlighted in chapter 5.1 with reference to Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain" and, in much greater detail, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The latter analysis allows us to set up, in chapter 5.2, a striking parallelism between the didactic aims of John Fowles, the novelist, and the pedagogical aims of discourse stylistics. And in chapter 5.3, the discussion of cognitive manipulation is used as the foundation for a theory of value in literature.

A final question for this section may well be: what status do I claim for the following analyses? My answer is quite explicitly that critical discourse stylistics does not claim any "scientific" objectivity for its analyses, since it is based upon the premise that meaning is located in the subjective readings of the analyst. I agree with Birch (1989), who insists on the historical determinacy of all reader assumptions and hence on the inevitably subjective and ideological nature of all interpretive acts. He sees meaning as constructed by the reader, rather than hidden within the text and waiting to be unearthed by a stylistician with powerful linguistic tools at his/her disposal:

That doesn't mean that the writer/speaker has nothing to do with the text - what it means is that the only way we have of constructing a reading for a text is through our own socially determined language as reader/hearer You have to use your own language in order to get to the writer's, and in so doing you can never actually get to the writer's because your own language and the institutions which have created it get in the way. You cannot escape your own language, and you cannot stop using your own language in order to construct a reading of what you might consider to be someone else's text. What you construct is your own linguistic engagement with the text - your own language, which is itself constructed and determined by social, cultural, ideological, and institutional forces. (Birch 1989:21-22)

In other words, my only way of constructing the author's, narrator's and characters' ideologies is through my own background assumptions, which are themselves determined by my social, historical, intertextual context. The role of stylistics is thus NOT that of making the analysis more objective by providing pseudo-scientific means of discovering the hidden meaning of the text, BUT that of making one's own procedures of analysis and interpretation explicit. This may seem a rather modest goal, but it points to an important *pedagogical* advantage of stylistics. In traditional literary analyses, interpretive procedures are usually left implicit and learning is supposed to take place, "if it takes place at all, by a kind of osmosis" (Carter and Simpson 1989:14). Stylistics, on the other hand, provides us with a critical metalanguage which can be taught and learnt; it can thus help students to formulate their intuitive reactions to a text in an explicit, and more easily "replicable", way. And it is herein that its value lies.

NOTE

1. "Ideology" is used here and passim in a restricted sense of socio-cultural "norms and values" (see Uspensky 1973:8-16), a system of knowledge and beliefs, a set of assumptions used in the inferential processing of text or, in artificial intelligence terms, a structure of background schemata.