The Language of English Literature

Raymond Chapman

The Language
of English
Literature

Raymond Chapman

Introduction

The title of this book may at first sight appear almost tautological, as if one should write about the sound of music or the look of painting. In fact it is possible to discuss literature without giving full value to the fact that it is a special use of language. Critics who concentrate on characterization or imagery may perform a valuable function, but these and all other aspects of literary experience are mediated through language. There is no other way of reaching literature except through the language in which it is composed, and this language can sometimes be a source of difficulty to the reader who sees that it is different from the language to which he is accustomed in daily life. One of the aims of the book is to show that it is in fact the language of daily life which is adapted and heightened in literature. Other readers, finding less difficulty in penetrating the literary language on the level of meaning, may not achieve full appreciation of how the writer is selecting and arranging the material at his disposal.

The problem for the present-day student lies not only in the changes that have taken place in the language itself over the centuries through which literature has been written. Literature is no longer the dominant or most prestigious form of language for many people. We meet written and spoken language at many levels and through many media, so that the literary realization may seem strange and remote. In considering what is distinctive in the literary use of English, it is necessary to see it not as a special code but as a planned and skilful use of what all speakers of English can share.

Some readers will no doubt discern the critical attitude which underlies much that is said in the following chapters. While the mimetic quality of literature is regarded as an important approach, the examination of language does not depend upon any school or theory. Something is said briefly in the last chapter about recent modes of criticism, but in general the current debates are avoided. Nothing is presupposed except the ability to read English and the wish to love literature and respond to it with enthusiasm. Such critical arguments as the reader may later espouse will be strengthened by early attention to the language factor.

Most of the material is taken from the principal genres of poetry, drama and prose fiction. The comparative neglect of such forms as the essay and the

memoir is determined partly by considerations of length, but largely because these tend to present fewer difficulties of interpretation. Study of them should, however, be illuminated by what is said about other genres.

The word 'English' has been taken broadly to include literature written in what have historically been regarded as the British Isles, and narrowly to exclude other work written in the English language. One or two American examples were, however, too good to omit. Attention is given almost entirely to work written after 1500. Although the chronological dichotomy between 'language' and 'literature' is explicitly regretted later in the book, it cannot be denied that Old and Middle English literature demands special study beyond the scope of the present work.

It seemed important to include a large number of specific examples to support assertions, taken from a wide range of authors and periods. Short extracts out of context can be misleading, but substantial quotation would have made the book inordinately long. References are given so that the reader can follow up examples and see them in fuller perspective. To the same end, an index of authors quoted, with their dates, may help the study of individuals and also show the relative times of the works cited. Within this breadth of selection, some of my own preferences will probably become apparent. If so, the matter needs no apology; there is no worthwhile criticism without some personal factor of enjoyment.

I am grateful to Elisabeth Johnson and Betty Smale for their patience and efficiency in typing the manuscript.

Contents

1

Strange and Familiar Language

We cannot remember learning to speak and perhaps have only a dim recollection of learning to read and write. Our use of language is so familiar that we cannot imagine a world without it. Such a world would seem less than human, lacking one of the basic characteristics which make human beings different from the rest of the natural world. If we consider what language really adds to the life of our species, we may be inclined to say that it allows people to communicate with one another. It is easy to think of language as being the same as communication, forgetting that it does other things, and that we are able to communicate without using it.

The second point is perhaps more obvious than the first. Communication is brought about in many ways: traffic lights, mathematical formulae, maps and gestures of the body can all convey a sort of message. The messages created by these means are limited and specialized; our ability to interpret them depends on being able to learn them in the first instance through an explanation given in language. The fact that language is not always used for communication, in the sense of passing on information, opinions or ideas, is more important for the consideration of its use in literature.

It is possible to draw up a list of the uses to which language can be put. Linguists do not agree wholly on the number and division of these categories and there is no need to attempt a complete set of uses here. A few instances will be enough to remove the idea that language can always be explained in terms of what is directly 'says' from one person to another. Communication is not what is intended when someone exclaims in anger, pain or pleasure. Private notes of things to be remembered or done are not communicative beyond the person who makes them. Military commands, calls to dogs or horses, shouts at football matches, are all meant to produce some kind of action rather than to convey information. It is true that, in a sense, there is some act of communication in all these linguistic events and that an observer could use another selection of language to explain what was happening. The point remains, however, that language is used for many purposes besides that of directly passing information from one mind to another.

Language and communication are not identical. Yet language remains our principal mode of communication, and any use which we make of it must

1

depend to some extent on an agreed relationship between it and the world around us. We begin to make this relationship at a very early age; so early that our word *infant* derives from a Latin word meaning 'unable to speak'. A small child learns that *box* 'means' a particular receptacle in familiar use and comes to apply the word to an increasing variety of objects which differ a great deal in size and shape and share only the function of holding something. Later on he learns that the word also 'means' a kind of tree, and if he studies the English language closely he knows that the everyday 'box' comes from this special meaning. He will also relate the sounds and letters in the word to the idea of fighting with his fists, although this is really a different word with no relationship to the first; a different word again refers to 'boxing the compass'. Someone who learns English as a foreign language will have a different set of problems: he will see *box* as a translation of some other word which he has learned as the 'real' word to identify the object.

The relationship between words and things is in fact nothing but a convention, the result of common agreement. There is no necessary and inevitable relationship, and only the important fact that language must be used consistently if it has to have any meaning at all maintains the use of words as pointers to things. When we think of abstractions and ideas the same rule applies, but there is much more room for uncertainty and misunderstanding. We cannot point to a piece of 'beauty' or weigh out a pound of 'remorse'; we have to depend on enough approximation of shared feelings which these words describe.

As soon as we realize that the English language which we have taken for granted, and perhaps thought of as the only 'right' way of describing the world, is complex and liable to be ambiguous or doubtful, we have come a long way towards a better appreciation of English literature. The language of literature is not there primarily to convey a message that could equally well be expressed in a different arrangement of words. If language is the most advanced form of communication, literature may be seen as a special use of language, and perhaps as the highest use to which language can be put. The 'message' of social and ethical persuasion may emerge through a literary work; if it emerges too plainly, it is probably at the expense of the art.

While we may rightly ask what a poem or a novel is 'saying' to us in its totality, we do not ask whether it is true or false as if it were a newspaper report. The writer's use of imagination, a quality to be deplored in weather forecasts and scientific textbooks, is the basic making of literature. The writer takes the language which already exists and is shared with millions of other people. We do not have to learn a new language in order to find the maximum appreciation of literature. What we have to do is to develop new ways of receiving the language and understanding what it is capable of doing. Literature, like the other arts, can give us new ways of looking at the world and finding significance which the daily use of language in its more commonplace way has concealed.

Certainly the approach to English literature need not be one of anxiety. Comparatively little of it brings real difficulty in the sense of applying its language to our familiar world. At the same time, we should not take too much for granted. Here is the second paragraph of a novel first published in 1915:

> One afternoon in the beginning of October when the traffic was becoming brisk a tall man strode along the edge of the pavement with a lady on his arm. Angry glances struck upon their backs. The small agitated figures – for in comparison with this couple most people looked small – decorated with fountain pens and burdened with despatch-boxes, had appointments to keep, and drew a weekly salary, so that there was some reason for the unfriendly stare which was bestowed upon Mr. Ambrose's height and Mrs. Ambrose's cloak.
>
> (Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*)

All this seems quite straightforward; by the end of the paragraph we know the time of day and of the year, and we have the names and something of the appearance of two characters who are to be important in the story.

Ten years later, the same writer begins a novel like this:

> Mrs. Dalloway said that she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her, The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.
>
> (Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*)

This is rather different; we have no idea of time or place, of what Mrs. Dalloway looks like or why she is so excited. Knowledge that Rumpelmayer was the name of a catering firm in London may help us a little, but there is nothing inside the actual language used to give more than an impression of activity and excitement. In fact we might be tempted to say that the first extract seems 'realistic' and the second 'impressionistic'.

A full reading of the two novels in question might make this distinction more doubtful. Yet even these two short extracts can serve as a warning against supposing that literature simply makes statements which are true or false in relation to what we think of as the real world. Normally we expect a proper name to identify a real person with a birth certificate, an address and a verifiable past history. 'Ambrose', 'Dalloway' and 'Lucy' are perfectly acceptable names, but every reader knows that they are set before us with totally different expectations from their possible appearance in a telephone directory or at the end of a letter received through the post. Virginia Woolf has used our powers of recognition and acceptance to create people who never existed but who will develop their own special kind of reality. The same is true of the common nouns which are given definite articles or demonstratives in order to suggest their particularity – 'the traffic', 'the

small agitated figures', 'this couple', 'the unfriendly stare', 'the flowers. . . the doors. . . their hinges'. Normally we use such pointing-out words only when there is a reality which can be further described and shown to be different from others of the same class.

So there are really no figures or stares, no doors or hinges. If we could not drop our demand for verification and accept the author's creation of these things, we could never read literature with any enjoyment at all. We are ready to play a new sort of language-game, even to the extent of allowing these people and things to exist in the undoubtedly real world of London and Rumpelmayer's. In the second extract, the 'children on a beach' have even less reality; they are only in the imagination of Clarissa, who is herself a creature of the author's imagination. Again Virginia Woolf uses an idea and a feeling familiar to everyone to give a kind of credibility to the character who 'thinks' it. The 'as if' type of comparison is often used in ordinary thinking and conversation. It is easy to accept it on the surface level of eager expectation. The rest of the novel will take it a great deal more deeply into the world of past memories and the imagery of the sea.

So the distinction between 'realism' and 'impressionism', though important in criticism, is less vital than the difference between language used every day and language used in imaginative literature of any type. Literary language is a special usage; it generates its own rules for interpretation, the fundamental one being the need to accept the special kind of reality which is created but not empirically verifiable. Even its most elaborate devices will be found to have their equivalents in simple, spoken language used for ordinary communication. In this sense, English literature is open to all who have English as their native language or who have acquired it as a second language. To receive the best understanding and enjoyment, a certain amount of special application is required. The reader and the writer do, however, begin with a great deal of common ground, without which the whole enterprise would be pointless.

The English language has proved its worth as a medium for literature. No native speaker can be accused of undue chauvinism in claiming greatness for English literature in its range, its quality and its continuity. The last point at least is not open to dispute; our literature extends over more than a thousand years, meeting different cultures and new conventions as well as changes in the language itself. The difficulties of earlier forms of English will be considered later. The continuity of themes and attitudes gives integrity to the whole. Here is an extract from a poem written about AD 1000

> Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
> mod sceal þe mare, þe ure maegen lytlað
> (*The Battle of Maldon*)

The language is totally foreign to a modern reader who has not learned Old English, or Anglo-Saxon as it is sometimes called. The meaning of the lines

is 'The mind shall be firmer, the heart bolder, courage shall be the more, as our strength dwindles'. A poet of the twentieth century wrote a long poem about another battle of the Anglo-Saxons against the Danes, containing the lines:

> I tell you naught for your comfort,
> Yea, naught for your desire,
> Save that the sky grows darker yet,
> And the sea rises higher.
>   (G.K. Chesterton, *The Ballad of the White Horse*)

Leaving aside questions of literary quality, it is apparent that the English language has maintained, through radical changes in its own nature, the ability to express ideas common to the shared human situation.

This language indeed has certain characteristics which may help to explain its power as a medium for literature. It can never be said that any language is 'unsuitable' for literature, any more than being particularly 'difficult' or 'logical' or 'beautiful'. Communities of people develop languages suited for their needs, learned without difficulty by their babies and conveying all that the community regards as wise and beautiful. Yet it is not derogation of other languages to look more closely at some factors in English which have given particular strength to English literature.

One factor, which makes English a very unusual language, is connected with the change from Old English to present-day English. The Norman Conquest in the eleventh century brought Norman French as the dominant language of the early medieval period. Old English was a Germanic language, connected with the ancestors of modern German and Dutch and, more remotely, with the Scandinavian languages. French is a Romance language, derived from Latin, with Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and others. It was only in England that these two types of language gradually merged, to produce a language whose modern users can understand neither the Old English nor the Norman French from which it is derived.

The mixing process gave English a very large vocabulary. It is possible to find a number of words for many ideas, none of them complete synonyms but allowing for considerable range and richness of meaning. Often there are two words which had the same meaning in their original languages but which now take on special senses and are not interchangeable. For example, *boyish* and *puerile* could be said to mean the same thing (Latin *puer*, 'boy') but most men are happy to be called boyish and not at all happy to be called puerile. Again, *kingly* and *royal* both have the basic ideas of that which pertains to kingship, yet we would never say that a generous benefaction was royal, or speak of the Kingly Family in Buckingham Palace. Foreign learners of English find it absurd that an *ox* becomes *beef* and a *sheep* becomes *mutton*; that a *cygnet* grows into a *swan*; that the *moon* has a *lunar* eclipse. All these anomalies, which never bother native speakers, come from the

co-existence of the two language types. Often the more conceptual or sophisticated word is a Romance word; the speakers of Old English had *teeth*, but the Romance *dentist* is a more recent innovation; Old English *fire* is primitive but the *ignition* of a car is modern.

One of the particular beauties of English literature can come from the continual tension and reconciliation which is inherent in the English vocabulary. We accept the Old English words as more commonplace, homely, tangible, the Romance as more subtle and learned. One example from Shakespeare will illustrate a quality which most writers have developed, though some have tended to favour the Romance or Germanic element above the other. In a well-known speech, Macbeth is horrified by his murder of Duncan and feels that he will never be cleaned from the blood which he has shed:

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green one red.

<div align="right">(Macbeth II, ii)</div>

The classical allusion to Neptune prepares for the Latin polysyllables of 'multitudinous' and 'incarnadine'; the heightened tension which is on the verge of becoming artificial breaks into the stark and familiar Germanic monosyllables in the last line. It is a powerful example of how the main streams of our vocabulary can be effectively used by deliberate contrast.

The mingling of cultures and languages which gave English this mixed vocabulary also brought two traditions of poetic structure. Another look at the Old English extract above will show that it had neither the regular metre nor the rhymes which are generally found in poetry written before this century, apart from the extensive use of blank verse. The pattern of Old English poetry depended on strongly-stressed syllables in each line, with a variable number of weak syllables. The strong stresses were marked by alliteration: repetition of the same initial sound. The pattern is clearly seen in these lines: *h*ige. . . *h*eardra. . . *h*eorte, *m*od. . . *m*are. . . *m*aegen. French poetry, introduced after the Norman Conquest, had the more familiar pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in regular combinations, with end-rhymes. This form was dominant in England by the end of the Middle Ages, although a few poets more removed from the centre of literary fashion kept up a looser form of the Old English type. The appetite for alliteration never disappeared, and it is a feature which still appears in poetry that does not depend on it to mark stress.

A few examples will make the matter clear. Milton, a poet deeply committed to the classical tradition, could produce a line of regular blank verse which accommodates three alliterative stresses as clearly as any pre-Conquest poem:

> All prodigious things,
> Abominable, unutterable, and worse
> Than *f*ables yet have *f*eigned, or *f*ear conceived.
> (*Paradise Lost* bk I, line 620)

More recent poets have consciously turned to the strength of the Old English form and adapted it to modern English use. Gerard Manley Hopkins in the last century explored an adaptation of the old style which he called 'sprung rhythm' and which was influential on poets in the next century:

> Now burn, new born to the world,
> Double-natured name,
> The heaven-flung, heart-fleshed, maiden-furled
> Miracle in Mary of flame,
> Mid-numbered he in three of the thunder-throne!
> (*The Wreck of the Deutschland* 34)

This is something more sophisticated than its original inspiration, introducing double alliteration as well as word-structures and deviation of syntax, of a type that must be considered later. More recently, in 1948, W.H. Auden wrote a closer imitation of Old English poetry:

> Now the news. Night raids on
> Five cities. Fires started
> Pressure applied by pincer movement
> In threatening thrust. Third Division
> Enlarges beachhead. Lucky charm
> Saves sniper. Sabotage hinted
> In steel-mill stoppage. Strong point held . . .
> (*The Age of Anxiety*)

In this clever piece of invention, words of Romance as well as Germanic origin are incorporated into the alliterative stressed form, while the actual content is aggressively modern.

These examples of a tradition submerged but never lost will perhaps show something of the continuity of English literature within the many changes of the English language. What is written in one period rests upon what has gone before, whether the response is one of imitation or of revolt. A writer inherits a language that has already been tested and put to use by previous generations, so that a decision to use it differently is itself influenced by the contrary possibility of following the same direction. Similarly, the reader's judgement is stimulated by awareness of what the language can do and where a writer places himself in relationship to it.

The tension and reconciliation of Germanic and Romance streams in vocabulary and structure is an important element in the language of English

literature, but by no means the only one. The merging of the streams, and the adoption of other words directly from Latin and from a large number of other languages, gives the writer a wide area of choice. One of the marks of a skilful writer, not only in imaginative literature, is his ability to control his choice and not to be overwhelmed by the weight of possibilities. The reader's response depends on his ability to assess the choice of words, to consider what other words were available in the same area of meaning and to see how a single word may point beyond itself to other words and related ideas. These too are matters that need deeper consideration later, but it may well be kept in mind at all times that a critical reader of literature will himself have mastered a wide vocabulary.

It is wise not to let new words in literature escape without identification. Vague understanding from the context is seldom adequate even in ordinary writing and leaves us very far from true appreciation. A good dictionary is a valuable companion for the critic; while it is not desirable to interrupt the flow of reading with frequent and anxious references, it is good to note words that are not fully understood and to try to discover their meanings at a suitable time.

As we read work from earlier periods, the problem of changes in the meanings of words can arise. The whole question of early modern English is yet another topic for detailed examination. Here it may be enough to warn the reader to be on his guard for words which seem familiar but apparently do not make sense if their current meaning is applied. A familiar example is Hamlet's cry as he seeks to pursue the Ghost of his father:

> Still am I called; unhand me, gentlemen –
> By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me.
> *(Hamlet* I, iv)

It takes a moment's thought to realize that *lets* here means 'hinders' and not 'allows'. A recollection of the legal phrase 'without let or hindrance' or the use of 'let' in tennis may help to establish the archaic meaning, which in fact is quite a different word from *let* as it is normally used today.

Sometimes the language of literature seems strange and difficult not because words have changed their meaning but because the choice of words is unusual. The co-existence of Romance and Germanic words is again important, as some writers may favour one type against the other. Samuel Johnson is one example of a writer who loved the Latin element in English and wrote prose with an abnormally high proportion of such words:

> If the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure.
>
> (Preface to *Dictionary of the English Language*)

There is no word here that is not in use at the present day, but the fact that almost all the nouns, verbs and adjectives are of Romance origin gives a heavy and artificial sense to the modern reader, which may obscure the dignity and the splendid rhythm and balance of the sentences.

In contrast, William Morris had a great love for the Germanic tradition in our language, a love which could lead to poetry that is wonderfully simple and direct:

> For many, many days together
> The wind blew steady from the East;
> For many days hot grew the weather,
> About the time of our Lady's Feast.
> ('Riding Together')

Every word in this stanza is Germanic, with the exception of *feast*. Sometimes, however, this love could betray Morris into clumsiness, specially when he was translating old Norse or Saxon work and was trying to use no Romance words at all:

'That shall be as ye will', said Katla, and bade her cook-maid bear light before them and unlock the meat-bower, 'that is the only locked chamber in the stead'.

Now they saw, how Katla span yarn from her rock, and they searched through the house and found not Odd; and thereafter they fared away.
(*The Story of the Ere-Dwellers*)

The total exclusion of Romance words produces a language which is not really modern English and which perhaps seems more awkward than even Johnson's formal prose.

Sometimes writers delight in rare words which they appropriate and make particularly their own. W.B. Yeats does this with the word *gyre* and its derivatives, which fits into his cyclic theory of history with its idea of the continual spiralling of human destiny towards a point of catastrophe followed by reconstruction. Other writers seem simply to be having fun with their use of long words which are sure to send the reader hastening to the dictionary. T.S. Eliot was being amusingly provocative when he wrote:

> Polyphiloprogenitive
> The sapient sutlers of the Lord
> Drift across the window-panes.
> ('Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service')

The strangeness may sometimes be not in the words themselves but in the special way that they are used. One way in which literary English can differ from everyday usage is the unusual arrangement of words in sentences. What we find awkward in the passage of translation by William Morris is

not only the odd made-up word like *meat-bower* but also the careful avoidance of auxiliary verbs in the negative *found not Odd*. Morris was trying to reproduce the style of an age when such inversion without *did* was the normal way of making the negative. We are accustomed to accepting unusual bits of grammar in literature, especially in poetry where the demands of metre have often caused poets to indulge in this particular form of licence. Inversion of the normal order seldom causes trouble in understanding if it is done skilfully, but it may give the sentence an artificial feeling and set a barrier between the reader and the poet. A certain amount of tolerance for past conventions is reasonably to be expected, but not at the expense of critical judgement. The great name of Wordsworth need not make us praise such lines as:

> Few months of life has he in store
> As he to you will tell,
> For still the more he works, the more
> Do his weak ankles swell.
> ('Simon Lee the Old Huntsman')

Wordsworth's determination to get a rhyme for *swell* knocks the second line out of shape and emphasizes the banality of the fourth line.

Here are a few more examples, with suggested comments from which the reader may well like to differ.

> Then out spake Spurius Lartius;
> A Ramnian proud was he:
> 'Lo, I will stand at thy right hand,
> And keep the bridge with thee'
> (T.B. Macaulay, 'Horatius')

Again, the demands of metre and rhyme cause inversions in the first two lines. Close consideration reveals clumsiness, which is not apparent in the steady swing forward of the whole ballad. Long poems are not best judged by 'good' or 'bad' lines.

> Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest,
> Knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I.
> All of the night was quite barred out except
> An owl's cry, a most melancholy cry.
>
> Shaken out long and clear upon the hill,
> No merry note, nor cause of merriment,
> But one telling me plain what I escaped
> And others could not, that night, as in I went.
> (Edward Thomas, 'The Owl')

The inversions, 'tired was I' and 'in I went' are the more striking for their

appearance in a poem whose language is simple, almost colloquial. Yet they do not jar on the total effect; the first gives a strong emphasis to the pronoun, leading from the weakly-stressed 'I' of the first line to a culmination of the adjectives 'hungry, cold and tired'. The second would in fact be acceptable in ordinary speech and its position again gives emphasis to the personal action after the movement away from the poet to the sound of the distant owl.

> Ripeness is all; her in her cooling planet
> Revere; do not presume to think her wasted.
> Project her no projectile, plan nor man it;
> Gods cool in turn, by the sun long outlasted.
> (William Empson, 'To an Old Lady')

This is an even more 'modern' poem both in time and in language. The Shakespearean opening phrase (*King Lear* V, ii) reminds the reader of that continuity of tradition which we have noticed. The placing of the objective *her* immediately after it gives the pronoun a status equivalent to the proper name that might be expected, so that the unnamed subject of the poem enters the mind as both personal and impersonal. Its taking the position of the imperative *revere* gives the word dominance in the clause. In contrast, the closing phrase 'by the sun long outlasted' seems more strained, possibly justifiable to give the perfect eye-rhyme and imperfect ear-rhyme with *wasted*, but without other merit.

These few suggested responses may give an initial idea of how the language of literature can be examined closely and critically. The comments have been confined to the one matter of syntax-inversion, ignoring much more that could be said about even these briefs extracts. A feature easily identifiable, different from the expectations of normal language yet not unknown outside literature, is observed and its use evaluated. That, in short, is the basis of studying the language of English literature.

One last example will point the way forward.

> When I came last to Ludlow
> Amidst the moonlight pale
> Two friends kept step beside me,
> Two honest lads and hale.
>
> Now Dick lies long in the churchyard
> And Ned lies long in jail,
> And I come home to Ludlow
> Amidst the moonlight pale.
> (A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* LVIII)

The English language could hardly be used more simply or with fewer uncommon words. This short poem has nothing linguistically that could not