

# The Challenge of Linguistic Realism

## A linguist's view of one of the most enduring dilemmas in drama and literature

By MARIO PEI

**T**HIS IS THE ERA of Realism and Authenticism, both spelled with capitals. Books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and films, along with all other branches of mass education, mass information and mass entertainment, are or seem to be vitally concerned with giving their readers and viewers impressions of authenticity and reality.

If a scene is to be depicted it must be portrayed as it would occur in real life. Conversational interchanges, factual or fictional, must be reported as they actually would take place, with all the errors and improprieties of lower-class speech with which we are instructed to familiarize ourselves. (One book on linguistics, aimed at elementary and high school teachers, urges them to learn the meaning of such phrases as "Cha doon?," which stands for "What are you doing?"; another extols the merits of "Wotchagonnado?"; a third says that "Them dogs is us'uns" is good, clear native-speaker American English.) Works like Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, composed from beginning to end in the "idiolect," or individual natural speech, of the relator, stand as monuments to linguistic realism in the field of *belles lettres* and are prescribed reading in some English high school and college classes.

Writers of historical novels and editors of popular magazines spend many hours of research to assure themselves and the public that every detail is authentic and authenticated. Producers of movie spectacles put millions of dollars into making sure that they have the correct military posture and salute for Alexander's hoplites or Caesar's legionaries, the right kind of lamps for Marco Polo's China and Casanova's Venice, the authentic attire for the Cid's Spain, Elizabeth I's England and Mme. de Pompadour's France.

But how does the world of fictional writing, of stage and screen and television, react to the problem of language diversity and language difficulties, which is a very real problem in real life? Here

an illusion must be created for the benefit of readers and audience. One hundred per cent realism, the sort of thing authors and producers strive for in architecture, attire, customs and costumes, even gestures and mental attitudes, obviously won't do. If the scene of the action departs from the English-speaking world (and it has to be a fairly up-to-date English-speaking world, certainly no farther removed than the days of Elizabeth I and Shakespeare), then realism must be faked, under penalty of throwing your present-day audience into utter confusion.

One might say in passing that the perfectionism of authenticity so manfully striven for in the historical field, where there is the ever-present danger that some carping critic will remind the writer or producer that the type of beard or the style of dueling he portrays is either anachronistic or two centuries ahead of its purported period, is all too often thrown into discard in perfectly modern scenes. What man ever shaved in the six strokes and ten seconds flat devoted to it by so many of our movie and TV male stars? When did anyone ever see a starving man sit down to a meal, consume three forkfuls of whatever is spread out before him, then lay down his knife and fork and pass on to other types of action, his appetite seemingly satiated?

These inconsistencies are harmless. What is not so harmless, perhaps, is the type of slugging and other assorted forms of mayhem displayed on our screens with no seeming permanent

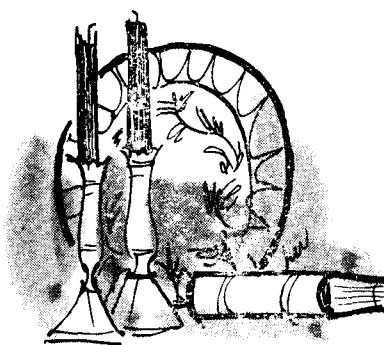
harm to the recipients, who get up, rub their chins and stomachs, and move on to further action after undergoing punishment that in real life would send its victim to a permanent niche in a cemetery or, at the very least, to a hospital ward for a month. It has even been suggested that viewing by the immature of this type of action scene may be partly responsible for our juvenile crime waves, not merely because it glorifies violence, but even more because it minimizes the physical effects of violence.

The man interested in language must be concerned about linguistic realism and its handling. Here illusion is not merely justified but necessary. What are the devices or conventions by which the producer conveys to his audience these various linguistic realities: a) when the characters he is watching are speaking a language other than the viewer's own; b) when different characters are speaking different languages, each in his own environment and to his fellow speakers; c) when the characters speak different languages and are having trouble understanding one another?

The problem of linguistic realism arose first in literature, and has been handled differently in fictional and non-fictional writing. Homer's characters are Greeks and Trojans. The Trojans, presumably, spoke Phrygian, a language quite different from Greek and thought to be of Illyrian stock. Yet in the *Iliad* there is at all times perfect communication between the two groups, with no hint of a language difference or difficulty. This situation is repeated in Vergil's *Aeneid* with the added embellishment that Aeneas, a refugee from Troy, has no trouble in giving a detailed account of his vicissitudes to Queen Dido of Carthage, who presumably spoke Punic.

**I**N contrast, non-fiction writers generally display their awareness of the language problem. Livy, Pliny, Cicero, and Caesar, to name a few, mention the need for interpreters in dealing with non-speakers of Latin. The Third-Century A.D. Ulpian Code makes it legal to draw up a will not only in Latin or Greek but in any other language. St. Augustine and St. Jerome both show in their writings that language diversity exists and must be reckoned with.

This interesting dichotomy between the chronicler of fact and the creative writer continued into the Middle Ages. While Christian missionaries were busy translating the Bible into many languages for their converts' use, and Charlemagne prescribed specifically at the Council of Tours in 813 that church sermons henceforth were to be given not in Latin but in the Teutonic or "Rustic Roman" (early Romance) tongues of the congregations, literary writers continued



merrily to ignore the language problem. In the eleventh-century *Chanson de Roland*, Arabic-speaking Moors and French-speaking Franks communicated with the greatest of ease and with never a reference to a misunderstanding or an interpreter. It is only in the bilingual *contrasto* of Raimbaut de Vaqueiras a century later that we find the Genoese heroine complaining that she does not understand her Provençal swain any more than if he were a German, a Sardinian, or an inhabitant of the Barbary Coast. Chaucer's prioress who could speak the French of Stratford but not that of Paris is further evidence of the growth of linguistic realism in literature.

**B**UT literature is only a symbolization of reality. The writer can conjure up for his readers any scene he wishes merely by the judicious use of a few words. By the same token he can take care of any linguistic situation by injecting a phrase or two into his narrative: "He spoke with a heavy German accent"; "John could barely understand what the *agent de police* was saying to him in French"; "Where language failed, they helped themselves out with gestures."

With stage and screen it is different. The entire action takes place before your eyes, as though it were real. The participants are alive or endowed with lifelike qualities. What to do?

The simplest thing, of course, is to

ignore the problem altogether. Shakespeare's actors could, and still can, pretend that their clipped British English is the Venetian form of Italian in *The Merchant of Venice* or Copenhagen Danish in *Hamlet*. The audiences go along beautifully with the unspoken convention and no one dreams of objecting. This is fine so long as all the characters are of one unified language background. In the earlier days of the screen and in the later days of television it is quite all right for everyone to pretend that Chekhov's or Tolstoy's characters are all speaking Russian, which is somehow miraculously transformed into the English of an American audience, without even the benefit of the simultaneous translators and earphones of the UN.

The real trouble starts when the characters are of different ethnic backgrounds and speak different languages, as happens so often in modern movies and TV sketches. Here at least a half-dozen devices are employed, some more ingenious than others. To my knowledge they never have been described and discussed fully.

I recall seeing not too long ago a TV-reproduced picture of vintage 1950 or thereabouts, dealing with a love affair in occupied Budapest between a Hungarian girl and a Russian officer. They and all subsidiary characters with them spoke perfect American English. This

blissful ignoring of the language problem is on a par with the *Iliad* and the *Chanson de Roland*. It flavors the proceedings with a touch of unreality which may not strike all people but is bound to strike some. "What are they supposed to be using for language?" is the question that arises in the mind of anyone who knows that language differences exist.

But some of our TV realists rise to the occasion. When the heroes of *I Spy* go after a ring of wicked Chinese Communist agents, the agents, every time they communicate among themselves, use good Peking Mandarin. The subsequent action clarifies the general meaning of their words even if it does not translate them. The sense of linguistic logic of people like me is satisfied.

**I**T is not at all satisfied, on the other hand, in other movies or sketches where a group of Hungarian refugees use broken English among themselves in the privacy of their own meeting-place as well as to American detectives who are investigating them. It stands to reason that J. Carroll Naish would not be using synthetic broken English to a fellow-Italian. Worse even than ignoring the problem of different languages is the attempt to solve it by having the characters use English flavored with a heavy accent, not merely when addressing Americans who do not know their language, but among themselves. Logic demands that if we are going to conventionalize their utterances we do so in an English as perfect as their own native tongue would be.

Another somewhat more successful attempt at linguistic realism is typified by a series such as *Combat*. Here the GI's speak American English. The Germans speak German among themselves, as they should, and the French civilians speak French. The action usually takes care of the meanings. This is fine up to a point, and the point is where French, German and American speakers have to intercommunicate. One of the GI's in Sarge Saunders' group is a French Canadian, and he does a fine job of translating from and into French whenever he's around. All the German officers, and occasionally some of the privates, speak English. This is realistic. They could have learned it in school. But their English is a trifle too perfect, as is that of too many French peasants and workers who must make themselves understood when our French Canadian friend is not in evidence. In less well done pictures of the same type one gets the impression that every inhabitant of an Italian or Japanese village speaks passable English, and this goes beyond the bounds of credibility.

An interesting if not too plausible variant of this attribution of high lin-

(Continued on page 53)



"Come alive! You're in the Pepsi generation!"



# Books

SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR

## LITERARY HORIZONS

### Where Do We Go from Wasteland?

IN 1955 Alan Harrington published a first novel called *The Revelations of Dr. Modesto*, an amusing and pointed satire on the theme of conformity. The hero, a misfit, a failure as an insurance salesman and as a lover, sends for a pamphlet written by a Dr. Modesto, which tells him exactly how to be like everyone else and transforms his personality. The trouble is that, using Modesto's techniques, the young man becomes a success, forgetting Modesto's warning against standing out from the crowd. All sorts of complications result, and the moral seems to be that even the path of conformity has its difficulties.

I have been waiting for Harrington to write another novel, and at last one has appeared, *The Secret Swinger* (Knopf, \$4.95). It, too, deals with conformity but with other and larger problems as well. There is less comedy in it than in *Dr. Modesto*, and it comes to a horrifying climax; but Harrington is as inventive as before, and the novel raises questions that cannot easily be disposed of.

The hero is George Pectin, of whom Harrington states at the outset: "He was forty-three years old and had lost his way." A member of the staff of a news magazine, he is doing reasonably well financially, but he is fed up with his job and his wife, and is determined to make a new beginning. So far, of course, George is a familiar figure, not to say a cliché; but we are to learn that his case is not a simple one.

We see him first in Shannon's Bar, where he and his associates and counterparts get soused every noon so that they can bear to return to their offices. "Determined to avoid a genteel Anglo-Saxon middle age," he considers how to tell his wife, who is about to emerge from a tuberculosis sanatorium after a year's stay, that he is through. After all, he tells himself as a reminder of his escape from domestic tranquility, he has learned to frug and do the Monkey.

Harrington takes his epigraph from Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*: "Now

there are times when a whole generation is caught . . . between two ages, between two modes of life and thus loses the feeling for itself, for the self-evident, for all morals, for being safe and innocent." Or, as Matthew Arnold wrote a century ago, "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born." Or, as Lewis Carroll said, "Jam tomorrow and jam yesterday but not ever jam today."

ONE of George Pectin's worlds, the one that is dead, is symbolized for him by his grandfather and grandmother, whose funerals he attends in the course of the story. Harrington writes of George, sitting late after lunch at Shannon's: "He had been making an odd bargain with time. He would settle for being already dead if he could have been young and happy in the time of his grandparents' youth. He would settle for already lying peacefully in a country graveyard if, at the time of his death, he had been able to believe that at the end of his long sleep there would come the day of resurrection. He would gladly accept dying if at the last instant he could embrace eternal life. As it was, the alcoholic immortality of his lunch hour was what kept him going, at the same time slowly destroyed him, which was the same thing."

When George was younger, he had spent some time in Greenwich Village, associating with writers and painters and dreaming of the novel he was going to write; but afterwards he broke with his Bohemian comrades, whom he came to regard as irresponsible bums, and settled down to his job and marriage. Then, to his bitter amazement, several of the "bums" turned out to be successes: "George Muchnik, whose trial flights of hatred and obscenity had seemed to George Pectin little more than disgusting, one year simply soared away on gigantic wings and became a great young poet, and he was talked about all over the world. Hugh Brandt sold out a one-man show on Fifty-seventh Street. Jan Crehore inspired America's young

- 29 Literary Horizons: Granville Hicks reviews "The Secret Swinger," by Alan Harrington
- 30 Letters to the Book Review Editor
- 31 The European Literary Scene, by Robert J. Clements
- 32 "The French," by Jean-François Revel
- 34 "Hammarskjöld," by Emery Kelen; "Dag Hammarskjöld: A Spiritual Portrait," by Sven Stolpe
- 35 "The Mystic in the Theatre: Eleonora Duse," by Eva Le Gallienne
- 36 "The State of the Nation," edited by David Boroff
- 37 "Freedom—When?," by James Farmer
- 45 SR's Check List of the Week's New Books
- 46 "The Challenge of Change," by Edward W. Brooke
- 48 "In Praise of Older Women," by Stephen Vizinczey
- 49 "The Sweet Birds of Gorham," by Ann Birstein
- 49 "Maori Myths and Tribal Legends," by Antony Alpers
- 50 Pick of the Paperbacks

people with a big, traveling novel that he wrote in two months."

One section of the novel is made up of random conversations that George has with strangers on trains, to whom he tells, as people will, more than he would ever reveal to intimates. He is convinced that sooner or later he will meet the perfect woman for him and that their passion will endure. He also believes that somehow he can avoid growing old. He is not merely attacking conformity; he is rebelling against the human condition itself.

George is quite serious about this. He knows that his grandparents had their share of the natural shocks that flesh is heir to, but they had a faith that enabled them to endure. He hasn't. After many misadventures, including a strange affair with a peculiarly destructive woman, he breaks down. A psychiatrist tells him that he is immature, and he replies, "Of course. So far as I'm concerned, matur-