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THE NOVELIST'S EAR

BY H. E. BATES

CALLING on an old acquaintance, S., a retired farmer, I found the butcher there, a local preacher. It was Christmas Eve, and the elderberry wine came out in an earthenware jug, bottled up and spiced, and we were as garrulous as ducks. S. is a biggish man, with ripe wheat-coloured hair and moustache, and was a shoemaker before he was a farmer, a baker before he was a shoemaker, and a soldier in India before that. His idiom is rich. His wife is a mousey cotton-haired woman, very small, with a voice like a siren, who still speaks as though her men were three fields away. Forty and fifty years ago S. was something of a rake, and likes to talk about it. But things have changed, and the point I want to make is that S. and his wife are respectable country folk, regular at chapel, friendly and warm-hearted people who would rather die on the spot than have it said that they were not, in the local phrase, decent folks. And they are, in fact, eminently decent folks. And the butcher, being a local preacher, would like it to be said of himself too. Yet as we sat there, warmed by the wine and feeling Christmassy, it suddenly struck me that if I could record the speech of that respectable household and in due course reproduce it, verbatim, in this article, I should stand a very good chance of being charged with what the authorities at any rate would call indecency, always supposing I could get the printer to set me up in the first place. In fact, here was a speech, spoken by an unremote people in an England which one sometimes thinks of as over-civilized, that was as vigorous and embarrassing as Chaucer's: the sort of speech, in short, that has rarely been put on paper except by an isolated handful of novelists since the eighteenth century.

All of which prompted me to consider the question of speech in the novel of today and in fact in the novel of yesterday; to

consider not only whether it was a good idiom for its purpose but whether it was a good idiom at all, and whether it bore any close relation to the speech of life ; or whether it was not, perhaps, a completely bogus vehicle, clumsy and artificial, that had been invented and perpetrated by generations of novelists who either could not or would not listen to the everyday speech going on about them. If it was a good idiom, and in any way realistic at all, how was it that the conversation in the average and even above-average English novel was as sad as wet dough compared with the vital crispness of its American counterpart ? It was not simply that American speech, in reality, had such vastly superior vigour and colour. The speech of S. and his household proved that. Indeed, it proved something more : that there was very much more in common between the speech of S. and the Middle-west than between S. and the speech in the average novels of contemporary life in England. Nor is S. an isolated example, a rural show-piece unearthed by me for an occasion. He is typical of his district and his kind ; a hundred thousand people, I dare say, speak an identical idiom, with less or more Chaucerian flavour according to character, in his own district. Nor have I myself, as an outsider, suddenly become what the fancy writers call intrigued by it. It happens that it is my native speech ; it comes to me far more easily than the speech I habitually use. Nor is it what I might call a picturesque speech, such a speech as is put, for instance, into the mouths of rural wiseacres in cartoons and certain plays of rural life. It is, if anything, rather an ugly speech, brusque, droll, with a lot of uncouth edges which have never got rubbed off. Recorded euphonistically, it would look very ugly and perhaps a little crazy. It might even, like the speech of Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*, be almost unintelligible. Recorded with fair realism, it has as much character and gusto and even toughness as any speech by, for instance, the characters of Mr. Erskine Caldwell or Mr. William Faulkner.

The charge, often uttered by Americans, that the language of the contemporary English novel is stilted and lifeless is clearly a charge, then, against the novelist and not against the language of the life he proposes to portray. "Life", an American critic pointed out recently, "is never in bad taste". The same is

hardly true of speech ; but one might say, it seems to me, that no spoken language is bad language. It is only the bastard speech invented by novelists—and I am not so sure we are not all guilty of it at times—that is bad language. The speech of everyday life is the novelist's raw material. The speech we finally read in ninety-nine per cent. of novels bears as much relation to it as artificial silk to pig-skin. And it has been made, like the silk, by a synthetic process, an easy process, a process generally involving no more strain on the novelist than the simple acceptance of the formula evolved by the generation of novelists before him.

When I pointed out to a famous critic recently that almost all novelists had no notion at all of how the so-called common people spoke, he replied at once : " How should they ? They don't know and they don't listen ". We went on to discuss the point, and I instanced George Moore as a prime example of a front-rank novelist whose recordings of common speech were really pathetic. So long as Moore was dealing with the sophisticated and elegant lives of his own class he was on safe ground. The language of the so-called upper classes often tends to the pretentious, and if ever Moore himself was accused of being pretentious he could always retort that he was merely recording things faithfully as he saw and heard them, just as many novelists to-day, accused of obscurity, quickly retort that they are, after all, dealing with obscure lives. But once Moore got down to what, for want of a better term, I will call the servants' level, he crashed. He began to drop his aitches, put in a few " yers " for " yours ", and some expressions like " It goes to my 'eart, it do indeed ", and the demands of the naturalistic school were satisfied. *Esther Waters* is full of this academic realism. Contrast it with Dickens, with the conversations of, for instance, the waiter in *David Copperfield*, or better still, with the supreme garrulity of Sam Weller, and Moore's naturalistic school begins to look like a school for elegant milk-sucking amateurs. Contrast it still further with the speech of the Morel family portrayed by Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers*, and Moore becomes a joke. Moore, in short, did not know and had, one presumed, never listened. He used the synthetic process and kidded himself that he was turning out the real thing. It was not at all the real thing. It

was on a precise level with the speech of high society as recorded in *Peg's Paper*. It was bogus.

I take Moore, a great writer, as a supreme example. If I tend to exaggerate his defects it is only because he, as an intelligent and infinitely sensitive writer, ought to have known better. Moore was a great observer of life, but observation in a novelist is not enough. There is, it seems to me, a novelist's ear as well as a musician's ear. A writer ought to have an ear for character just as a player has an ear for music. His mind ought to be an apparatus—as Dickens' was—for the authentic recording of the speech of all kinds of people, not only servants and waiters and Sam Wellers, but solicitors, young girls, prize-fighters, parsons, imbeciles, shop-keepers, duchesses, farmers, and people in fact from every section of life. It ought also to be able to do something more: to record not only the speech of solicitors, young girls and so on, but the speech of solicitors in anger, of young girls in love, of solicitors in love, of young girls in anger—in short, all kinds of persons in all kinds of emotional states of mind. He ought to be able to record it—and reproduce it—with such an authentic accent, moreover, that anger or tenderness or bewilderment or joy are communicated to the reader at once in an integral part of the texture of the words, so that the speech speaks for itself, needing no underlining or elaboration; so that expressions like “ he exclaimed emphatically ” or “ she pursued ” or “ with a hint of irony ” will be as superfluous and unnecessary as a builder's scaffolding after the house is finished.

Such expressions are, however, still regarded by many novelists, and many accepted front-rank novelists, as indispensable parts of the fictional machine. Americans, thanks to Ernest Hemingway, have already blown the notion to bits, with the result that the dialogue in American novels is now sparser, more expressive and more telling than ever it has been. Tradition, on the other hand, dies hard here, and there is an amusing story of a young novelist who, commissioned to write a story, wrote it and was astounded to have it returned with a list of expressions that might have been used alternatively to the expression “ he said ”, which he had considered efficient enough for his purpose. “ Why not ”, the publisher wrote, “ ‘ he exclaimed ’, ‘ he rejoined ’, ‘ he pursued ’, ‘ he answered ’,

'he remarked', 'he observed', 'he ventured to say', 'he expostulated' and so on?" The answer of the novelist is unprintable here.

This same novelist has elsewhere remarked that it is not patent to many people that the novelist must learn his craft. We can all use a pen; therefore why should we not all write novels? This easy and dangerous deduction has resulted, he thinks, in contemporary literature being surfeited with amateurs. This is only too true, and one of the signs of such amateurism is this synthetic dialogue which I have already discussed. Not that this bookish manufactured stuff is always the prerogative of the amateur. Moore is not the only novelist in his class who did not know and did not listen. And the recording of dialogue seems to me the weakest thing in the English novel of today, just as it is the strongest thing in the American. The young American novelist has not been afraid of learning his craft. Especially he has not been afraid of listening to and recording the idiom of truck-drivers, ice men, typists, boxers, and so on, just as he heard it, and not as he fancied a fiction-lover would like him to hear it. In England, on the other hand, the opposite still holds good. Speech is too often recorded as fiction lovers would like to have it recorded, picturesquely and neatly and elegantly, and not as it is spoken—as it is spoken, for instance, in the house of my acquaintance, Farmer S., crudely, untidily, blasphemously, drolly, ungrammatically, with a traditional strength and vigour, as it is spoken in the wash-rooms of shop-girls, in the tea-shacks of lorry-drivers, by lovers, by children, by the so-called respectable, by business men, by all kinds of people under stress of emotion or in the everyday casual course of life. The average novelist does not listen. Or if he listens he does not record. He shirks it. He likes to rise a little higher, to be a little finer, than life really is. He is expected to rise a little higher and be a little finer. He is expected to conform to the synthetic standards. Therein, too often, lies his hope of success.

So we get a standardized speech for servant girls or mistresses or parsons or bus-drivers, a sort of general service formula which all can safely use. Now and then a novelist like Lawrence breaks out and gives us the authentic smack of Midland English,

and the formula is made to look as crude and cheap as it is in reality, and we see that there is no standard of speech, either in life or in novels, and that, in spite of that odd committee solemnly set up by the B.B.C., there never can be. This committee, impressively headed by Mr. Shaw, who ought to have known better, strikes me as being the most comic turn in the whole show of English public life. It sits like a man in sublime cocksureness chipping away at a mountain with a cold chisel, confident of levelling it. Happily the mountain of English, defiled or undefiled, is vast enough to keep the most ardent standardizer busy for a thousand years, and this odd committee will go down into history, if it goes down at all, simply as a comic turn. For it is not to this committee or to any other committee that the generations of a future England will turn when they wish to know what kind of stuff we spoke in 1936. They will turn to the novelists and dramatists, just as we ourselves turn back to Dickens or even further back to Shakespeare. Thus the novelist has it within his power not only to create character, but to record history, the history of the speech of his own day. We are apt to forget this, to mistake the novelist for a mass purveyor of amusement. The serious novelist knows better. He knows that speech is the key to character. He knows that it may, in turn, be the key to the character of an age. And as he listens to the speech of lorry-drivers and waitresses and generals and young girls and solicitors and porters and every other kind of person, he knows that if he does not record it no one ever will. And that is a singular responsibility.