Conversation and Poetics:
A Response to Neal R. Norrick[*]

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As an advocate of increased interaction between literary scholars and language scholars, I was pleased to read Neal R. Norrick's contribution "Poetics and Conversation." Certainly, no one would disagree that "conversation illustrates many features we generally associate with poetry and literary texts" (265). However, I would contend that for a "complete, well-grounded consideration of 'the Poetics of Conversation in Twentieth-Century Literature and Criticism'" (266), we need not only a "fuller description of the structures found in spontaneous everyday talk" (*ibid.*) but also an understanding of how everyday conversation is becoming increasingly important in literature and why this is so. This will therefore form the main thrust of my response which I will try to put across in three main points.

Firstly, the issue of "literariness," as pursued by the Russian formalist tradition of literary criticism including Jakobson, as a marker of literary works has proved to be difficult to maintain. Whilst patterning in the Jakobsonian sense is prevalent in poetry, this seems to be less discernible in fiction or drama in the naturalist mode. There are exceptions of course. Dickens could make a highly patterned rhetorical narratorial voice serve his purposes, satirical and otherwise, as can be seen in this passage from the opening of *Hard Times*.

> The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve. The emphasis was

helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, over-shadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside. The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders—nay, his very neckcloth, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was—all helped the emphasis. (9)

The repetitive use of the structure "The emphasis was helped by the speaker's [...]" is easily noticed. Dickens also uses the three-adjective formula a number of times: "plain, bare, monotonous"; "wide, thin, and hard set"; and "inflexible, dry, and dictatorial." Finally, we also notice the three-part structure with the repetition of *square* in "square coat, square legs, square shoulders."

The style is highly patterned and declamatory, exposing the hollow-ness and inflexibility of Mr. Gradgrind's rhetoric. The manner of de-scribing the speaker's appearance ingeniously represents the speaker's style. Its repetitiveness, which could almost be considered a parody of Jakobson's criteria, thus becomes an effective means of characterization.

Other literary texts, however, fail to show the linguistic patterns that Jakobson deems to be the essence of literariness. This apparent lack of patterning is seen, for example, in the opening of Welsh's *Trainspotting*.

The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried tae keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme video. (3)
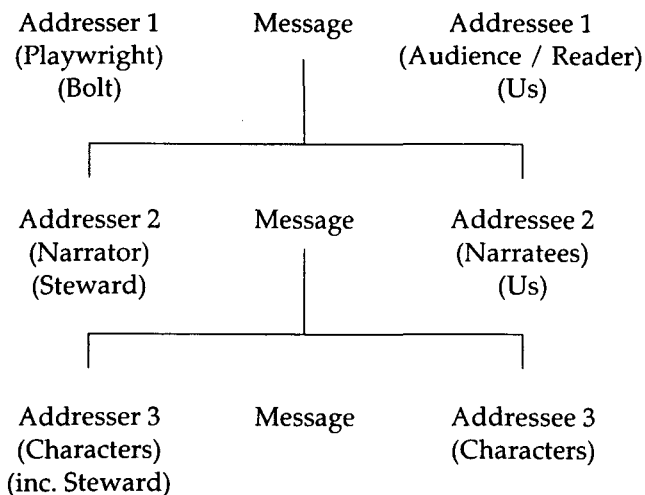
The narrator's voice is more demotic, and if there is patterning, it is certainly not as obvious as in the Dickens passage. (We might note the insistent use of the progressive aspect: *wis lashing; wis* [...] *sitting; tryin; wis bringing*.) The text does not strike one as being immediately literary. And of course what Welsh is doing is also to deliberately not conform to

the literary standard by manipulating the orthography (though not always consistently) and to suggest the Edinburgh accent (*wis* for *was*; *oafay* for *over*; and the like).

If we use the Jakobsonian notion of *literariness*, Dickens' representation of a character by imitating his style might seem *more* literary. But here is the problem: should literariness be a gradable item (there can be either more or less of it, like the quality of maturity) or an absolute quality (either it applies or it does not, like the state of being married)? Or perhaps both concepts should exist alongside of each other?

We usually have no problems distinguishing a literary work from an accident report or an advertisement; Welsh's reader would not mistake the passage as a diary entry, for example. The context in which the work was found presents a strong clue towards disambiguation. The *Trainspotting* passage on its own, presented in a decontextualised manner, would certainly be ambiguous with regard to its literary status. If, however, it is read as a paragraph from a printed book which receives the label *fiction* on its back cover, the work becomes unambiguous as literary. Notice, however, that it is only *usually* that we have no problems in identifying a work's status as literary. We can easily think of texts that pose themselves as other categories of texts (for example, advertisements disguised as drama) as exceptions.

Nonetheless, the argument that literariness could be seen as an absolute quality has strong merit. As the Dickens example shows, however, we should not simply see literariness in the kinds of tropes employed or the parallel structures used. Rather, literariness can be seen in the complex discourse situation, in the manner that Short (172), for example, describes the situation in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Here is his diagram.

Addresser 1	Message	Addressee 1
(Playwright)		(Audience / Reader)
(Bolt)		(Us)

Addresser 2	Message	Addressee 2
(Narrator)		(Narratees)
(Steward)		(Us)

Addresser 3	Message	Addressee 3
(Characters)		(Characters)
inc. Steward)		

What Short's diagram tries to get across is this: the playwright com-
municates with the audience *through* the narrator; and the narrator
communicates to his or her audience *through* the characters communi-
cating with each other. Short is talking about drama, but we could eas-
ily extend this to poetry and fiction when we consider how the persona
or the narrator cannot be easily equated with the poet or author in a
straightforward fashion.

Literariness therefore seems more usefully conceived not in terms of
linguistic patterning only but also in terms of the complex communica-
tive situation which constitutes literary discourse. Conceptualising it
thus has the added advantage of including more of what would be con-
sidered literary and excluding some other texts that contain highly pat-
terned language such as advertising jingles. (This is not to say that this
definition is completely unproblematic because one could read Col-
eridge's *Biographia Literaria* or the Bible as literary texts; indeed they are
not infrequently regarded as such. Such cases would, however, be ex-
ceptions to the norm where texts are used differently from how the
original authors intended them to be used.)

Whilst I have presented the two views of literariness—the relativist and absolutist views—as competing ones, it does not necessarily follow that one must jettison one in order to appropriate the other. Jakobson and others working in his tradition are proof of the viability of the relativist tradition. What it fails to account for, though, are literary (in the absolutist sense) texts that are not particularly literary (in the relativist sense) in nature. An account of literariness that combined Jakobson's notion of linguistic patterning with Short's notion of discourse complexity allows us to accept both *Hard Times* and *Trainspotting* as literary.

In the rest of the article I will use the shorthand *literary(a)* to refer to the absolutist notion of literariness where the focus is on the status of the text; and *literary(r)* to refer to the relativist one when the focus is on textual characteristics.

Indeed, there is a logical relationship between the two, which is why we need to take on board both definitions: literary(r) features are those features that typically or frequently occur in literary(a) texts, so that one is closely associated with the other.

In a *prototypical* literary(a,r) text, therefore, we might expect linguistic patterning and literary vocabulary (for English, typically items derived from French). Similarly, in a prototypical conversational text, we might expect loosely joined sentences, colloquial and vague vocabulary (*lousy*, *sort of*, etc.) and the like. We could even extend to non-textual situations, such as one's marital status which is an absolute state; however, a married or unmarried person can also take on fewer or more of the characteristics associated with the married state, such as the wearing of wedding rings, having children, having a joint bank account with another person and so on.

My second point is that genre distinctions are fluid rather than rigid. (I use the term *genre* in the way used by discourse analysts rather than by literary scholars and include non-literary genres. See, for example, Wales [176–78]). Ellis and Ure, for example, talked about "residual register features" some decades ago. By this they mean that linguistic features associated with particular registers (i.e., roughly, genres in the sense I use the term) could be appropriated or "borrowed" by other reg-

isters. In particular, features associated with literary(a) genres and conversation are prone to be borrowed by other genres. The tendency to "quote," sometimes unostentatiously, other texts, registers and genres fudges the clear demarcation between registers and genres.

Furthermore, as Swales points out, individual works in genres can vary in their typicality in the same way that, in biological classification, animal species which belong to a group can also vary in their typicality. Whilst individual species of birds (e.g. robin, sparrow, penguin and ostrich) are members of the same group (*Class Aves*), the atypical species (the penguin and ostrich) may contain characteristics such as flightlessness or large size that make them resemble members of another group such as mammals (*Class Mammalia*). Individual texts may therefore be typical and clear-cut exemplars of particular genres; and yet other individual texts may be less so. The boundaries are unclear and one genre might fade into another.

Norrick's original article points to the presence of literary(r) features in everyday conversation, suggesting that the two genres are allied with the latter employing features associated with the former. Another genre that seems closely allied to literature is the advertising genre. Advertisements are interesting because they can share many literary(r) features of literary(a) texts. They are particularly prone to using prosodic features of poetry (see Cook), like "Beanz Meanz Heinz" or to incorporating narratives in the manner of, say, a short story, as in the following print advertisement as part of the recruitment drive for the Royal Navy.

> After two weeks at sea the call for help came. A typhoon had hit the mainland blocking all roads to rescuers, leaving the only route in from the sea. We flew in emergency supplies with Lynx helicopters, our Medics took care of the wounded and bad cases were flown out to the ship. We restored power, erected temporary shelters and set up teams to prevent looting. A task as tough as Disaster Relief Training back at home. (Reproduced from Cook 199)

Without contextual cues, this could easily be the opening paragraph of a short story or even a novel.

Some observers and scholars have commented on how public dis-

course, including advertisements, can adopt a more colloquial style associated with conversation (Leech 75), so that it is now possible for British discourse analyst Fairclough to talk about *conversationalisation* which for him is "to do with shifting boundaries between written and spoken discourse practices" (Fairclough 260). Clearly, Fairclough's point could well be applied to literature and conversation because literature is still associated with writing and conversation with speech. Once again, advertising discourse in being open to the influence of conversation has similarities to literary(r) discourse. If we accept Fairclough's notion of conversationalisation, we must also accept that literary(r) discourse is also pulled in some way towards the conversation style. Indeed, the *Trainspotting* passage above is a case in point.

The pull of the conversational style must be particularly significant, given the fact that this is a style acquired by *all* speakers of language, and is acquired first. Other styles such as report writing, academic writing or poetic writing are only acquired by a proportion of the population, and some of them only acquired imperfectly. Conversational style, seen as the primordial style, as it were, must surely be a key element in influencing other styles. Which brings me to the third and final main point.

I have already commented on how literary(r) discourse has much in common with advertising discourse: both make use of other texts and genres. The reason for this is to do with the complex communicative situation outlined above, and the author's voice is hardly ever heard directly but filtered through the voices of narrators, personae and characters. (This is also true of advertising discourse, but the reasons are more to do with the greater distaste for hard-sell methods in today's culture.) Seen in this light, literary(r) discourse is bound to make use of the language of everyday conversation, the language of business transactions, the language of academic discourse and so on. So there are not only, as Norrick shows, so many features of literary(r) language in everyday conversation; there is also so much everyday conversation in literary(a) works. Thus, what is happening in the *Trainspotting* passage is that as readers, we are put in the position of eavesdroppers listening to Mark

Renton apparently narrating his story in an informal fashion in a strong Edinburgh accent. In the same way, readers of Richardson's *Pamela* were put in the position of reading letters not addressed to them. The *Hard Times* passage makes use of the public address genre—in the manner of, say, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address of 1863 (therefore from roughly the same period as *Hard Times*). Here is the last sentence.

> It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us— that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

This sentence is highly patterned in the Gradgrind manner; we note the three-part formula in the *that* clauses: *that from these honoured dead [...] that we here highly resolve [...] that this nation.* (I exclude *that government* because *that* functions as a determiner here and is therefore modifying the following noun rather than introducing clauses). And of course we note the well-known triple characterisation of the government as being *of the people, by the people, for the people.*

Therefore, literary(a) works take on linguistic features associated with other genres very easily; given the importance and centrality of informal conversation, I would suggest that this will be an increasingly important influence on literary(r) discourse and we will continue to see the conversationalisation of literary(r) discourse. Some of the influences that gave rise to the conversationalisation of advertising discourse— democratisation and the increased value accorded to spontaneity, informality and intimacy—could also very well be at work in literary(r) discourse. Hence my reversal of Norrick's original title "Poetics and Conversation" to "Conversation and Poetics" in my response.

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