

## THE ARTS AND THE THEORY OF LEVELS OF LANGUAGE

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THE theory of levels of language was designed for the solution of the so-called 'semantical paradoxes' in logic, and it is to this function that its uses have for the most part been confined. It is the purpose of this essay to show that the theory need not remain the exclusive property of logicians and mathematicians; on the contrary, by an analogy with the arts (and particularly the literary arts) it can be made to yield an aesthetic principle of a good deal of power and subtlety.

The chief distinction introduced by the theory of levels of language is that between object languages and metalanguages. The term 'object language' refers to any language which is an object of discussion, while the term 'metalanguage' refers to any language in which such a discussion takes place. In a German grammar written for English-speaking students, for instance, German is the object language and English is the metalanguage. If it should become necessary to talk about the metalanguage, a new metalanguage appears and the former metalanguage becomes an object language. In this way a hierarchy of language levels is constructed. The reason for the construction of the hierarchy is that paradoxes have been found to result if language be permitted to talk about itself in an unrestricted way. (An example of such a paradox is given in the notes.)<sup>1</sup> The basic principle exhibited by the theory may therefore be roughly formulated as 'No language may include itself in its own scope.'

Since language, in one form or another, is the medium of art, it is not

<sup>1</sup> The following paradox is due to J. Lukasiewicz. Take the statement:

The sentence printed on page 121, line 25 of this article is false. Since this statement asserts its own falsehood, it will be true if false, and conversely, false if true, which is a manifest contradiction. The theory of levels of language eliminates such contradictions by preventing any statement from talking about itself. (The article by A. Tarski, 'The Semantic Conception of Truth' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, IV, (1944), should be consulted for a full discussion of the theory.)

surprising that it should be possible to construct a hierarchy of artistic languages analogous to the hierarchy indicated above. Any work of art may be regarded as constituting an object language, while any language which talks about a work of art may be said to function as a metalanguage. When, however, an art employs its own medium or object language to call attention to itself *as art*, a mixture of languages results which is parallel to the situation in logic which gives rise to the semantical paradoxes. It is this possibility of *self-reference* in art which makes it amenable to an analysis in the light of the theory of levels of language.

Two preliminary points should be made before proceeding to illustrate the self-reference of language in the various arts. First of all it should be made clear that although self-reference is fallacious from the point of view of logic, this does not mean that its occurrence in art is always aesthetically displeasing. If the parallel situation occurs in logic, the proper procedure is simply to detect its existence and to take whatever steps may be necessary to avoid it. When self-reference occurs in art, however, the question is not so much how to avoid it as whether the aesthetic value of the work of art is sufficiently damaged by its presence so that it *ought* to be avoided. In other words, the application of a theory drawn from logic to a field in which value judgments appear puts us in the position of having to decide whether it is artistically desirable to resolve a situation which would ordinarily be resolved mechanically and as a matter of course. Second, it should be borne in mind that the application of the theory becomes more and more metaphorical as art becomes less and less representative. In the case of the preface to a novel, the preface is clearly in the metalanguage since it talks about the novel; the novel itself is equally clearly in the object language. The sense in which a picture-frame may be said to talk about a picture is obviously much less exact, although two distinct levels are certainly present here as well.

If we turn to consideration of the various arts, the theatre comes naturally first to mind, since the physical presence of the audience constitutes a special temptation to pass from one linguistic level to another. I begin with an example which, although it seems to me to be in regrettable taste, has at least the advantage of being striking. At the close of a Lynn Riggs comedy, *Laughter from a Cloud*, the hero and heroine are at last united in a fond embrace. The heroine, however, disentangles herself to remonstrate with her lover. 'But, darling,' she exclaims with a wave at the audience, 'there are people present!' Here is certainly a clear-cut case in which the language of the play (the object language) has suddenly been used to call our attention to the fact that the play is a play, this being rightly the function of the metalanguage. (I, for one,

felt a certain embarrassment at finding myself an unexpected intruder in someone else's drawing-room.)

The mixture of language levels in the theatre may of course come about in other ways than through an actor's reference to the presence of the audience. It happens if he comments on the structure of the play, or if he, perhaps inadvertently, calls attention to the artificiality of the scenery, or if he simply steps beyond the accepted limits of the stage. The mixture may also be initiated by a member of the audience who has so lost himself in the action of the play as to shout advice to the unwary heroine or dash upon the stage with the intention of murdering the villain. And, if there is more than one level present in the play itself, say a prologue which is metalinguistic to the main action, a mixture of levels may occur without the audience being involved, at all, by the passage of the actor between these levels. In all of these cases, a certain pattern of dramatic convention is assumed. When the picture-frame stage is used, the actors are in general supposed to remain behind the proscenium arch and to behave as if unaware of the presence of the audience. The audience, on the other hand, is supposed to enter into the spirit of the play, but not so completely as to mistake stage happenings for reality; it remains in the auditorium and keeps quiet. When other conventions are introduced (and many have met with considerable artistic success), we need to alter our conception of what constitutes the scope of the play, and hence of what constitutes self-reference of language in the theatre.

Two or three dramatic devices which might at first seem to be instances of self-reference can now be seen not to be so at all. The first of these is the prologue, epilogue, or chorus. In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, for instance, we have a chorus who not only comments on the inadequacy of the stage to represent such things as battles, changes of scene, and so forth, but actually complains of them:

Can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt? (*Prolog.* 11 14)

Here it seems that the machinery of the play is being made overt by a character addressing himself directly to the audience. But, it must be remembered, this character remains strictly outside the framework of the play; he is entirely extra-dramatic. If, after having delivered his speeches, he were to become a character in the play he had just been describing, the rule about language levels would clearly have been violated. As it is, the metalanguage and the object language are perfectly distinct; the play in question simply takes place at one further remove than would a play

which is performed without this kind of chorus character.

Again, a play within the play probably seems like a case of self-reference, but is it? After all, a play is usually meant to be a depiction of likely behaviour on the part of likely people, and one of the things people sometimes do is to act plays. Of course, the infinite regress effect may contribute to the piquancy of the situation, but self-reference cannot really be said to occur so long as there is no confusion between the levels to which each character naturally belongs. By the same token, plays about actors and playwrights, and observations about the theatre (e.g., 'All the world's a stage') do not necessarily involve self-reference, unless they are played to do so.

The soliloquy presents a much more difficult problem. The audience is apparently being addressed, yet, as far as the actors are concerned, the audience is not really supposed to exist. From the point of view of art, I would certainly defend the legitimacy of the soliloquy, for, although the audience must not be supposed to exist in the sense in which the actors exhibit an overt awareness of its physical presence, yet there is a more subtle sense in which the audience must be assumed to be present if there is to be any point in having a play at all. The entire dramatic illusion is constructed with a view to carrying the spectators into the spirit of that illusion: thus the soliloquy is merely a conventional device to make an individual's thoughts audible in the same way that the novelist has the privilege of telling us what one of his characters is thinking. Furthermore, as long as the actor remains strictly within the character he is supposed to portray, the illusion has not been broken. Sometimes, in fact, it is even heightened. This was certainly the case when Sir John Gielgud as Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* spoke these lines directly to the audience:

There have been  
 (Or I am much deceiv'd) cuckolds ere now  
 And many a man there is (even at this present,  
 Now, while I speak this) holds his wife by th'arm  
 That little thinks she has been sluic'd in 's absence  
 And his pond fish'd by next neighbour – by  
 Sir Smile, his neighbour. (I, ii, 190 ff.)

Of course, by speaking the lines in this fashion, the actor did make clear that he was conscious of the presence of the audience, so that this could be called a mixture of language levels. On the other hand, by the direct appeal to the audience to share the feelings of Leontes, the dramatic intensity was increased. Therefore, when self-reference does occur, although it is always wrong from the point of view of logic, it may at the

same time be artistically right.

It is beginning to become evident that self-reference in the theatre is usually accompanied by confusion as to the level of language to which a character or group of characters belongs. (This confusion may include the level occupied by the audience as well.) When Groucho Marx says 'This is the best joke in the play,' just whom is he meant to represent at that moment? He cannot be the character he has up to now been playing since this character does not know either that he is in a play or what jokes are likely to be perpetrated as the play goes on. Is he Groucho Marx then? If so, what is he doing in the company of all these make-believe people? Perhaps he is just a member of the audience who happened to read the script first. Then why doesn't he sit down in the auditorium with the rest of us? Again, when the cowboy in the upper gallery levels his six-shooter at the actor playing Iago, there is a like degree of confusion in his mind. Does he believe himself to be a sixteenth-century Venetian? Or are all these people twentieth century Texans in strange clothes? He may even, in a dim way, retain the idea that a play is being performed, but fancy himself as one of the actors.

It is interesting to note that self-reference, in its extreme form, is likeliest to occur at either a very naïve or a very sophisticated stage. In the cases in which a member of the audience becomes so engrossed in the action of the play as to lose track of his own or the actors' identity, the stage is obviously that of naïveté. When self-reference is employed by the playwright, the situation is somewhat more complicated. Take, for instance, the pre-Shakespearean comedy, *Fulgens and Lucrece*, in which two characters anonymously named A and B enter into the play (probably from the audience) to act as servants to persons in the story being presented. Neither pretends to be anything but a member of the audience (B is indignant when A mistakes him for a player), and the real audience comes in for a good deal of amusing by-play. Here it seems that the phenomenon of drama as such has not really solidified (no doubt this is partly due to the lack of a strict physical barrier between actor and audience) and consequently a certain looseness of linguistic structure results.<sup>2</sup> Then there is a stage at which self-reference is employed knowingly and with calculated effect; this seems generally to be the case with Shakespeare. S.L. Bethell, in his book *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*, has called attention to what he calls the 'distancing effect' sometimes achieved by Shakespeare by overt reference to the

<sup>2</sup> For further examples of this sort, see Doris Fenton, *The Extra-Dramatic Moment in Elizabethan Plays Before 1600*, Philadelphia, 1930.

play as play.<sup>3</sup> In *Twelfth Night*, for instance, Fabian's 'If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction' (III, iv, 130) is introduced at just the moment when a too lively sympathy with the misfortunes of Malvolio would upset the balance of the play. Elsewhere Bethell points out a large number of such instances in *The Winter's Tale*; the play is 'distanced' by a deliberately antiquated stage technique, with the result that its strange happenings are made more credible. 'It is a play almost mockingly represented as a play, with the stage machinery innocently visible.'<sup>4</sup> Finally there comes the over-consciousness of art; a play is embarrassed at being a play. In the last act of Anouilh's *Ring Around the Moon*, the actor playing the dual roles of Frederic and Hugo is made to comment, in the character of Frederic, on Hugo's absence. Paul Scofield, playing these parts towards the end of a long London run, made this technical difficulty quite obvious by his manner of speaking the line. At this stage there are also experiments in dramatic technique which employ self-reference so extensively that the whole structure of the play is affected. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, for instance, the play is so consciously presented as a play that we are almost persuaded to forget the fact.

The occurrence of self-reference in the theatre has been dwelt upon at some length in hopes that its extended analysis in one of the arts might make its presence in others more easily detected. It should now be clear, for instance, that levels of language are being confused if characters in a novel display awareness of the fact that they are being written about, or if the author intrudes himself into the story in his own person. In comparison with the drama, the novel is at some points less complicated, at others more so. Since there is no actor engaged in portraying a fictional character, we escape the possible confusions resulting from conflict between the person the actor represents and the person he really is. Nor are the characters in a novel confronted with the physical presence of their readers, as actors are with that of their audience.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, since the burden of exposition in a play falls almost wholly upon the actors, there is no opportunity, as in a novel, for the playwright to cut in with what might be called 'characterless exposition'. Consequently there is a more likelihood that the novelist may break through the artis-

<sup>3</sup> Westminster, 1944, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> *The Winter's Tale: A Study*, London, n.d., p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> On one extraordinary occasion a book talks back to a character in a play. This happens in the last act of Mary Chase's *Harvey*, when the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* inquires of the already bewildered sanatorium employee who consults it, 'And how are you, Mr. Wilson?' This is really so wild as quite to defy classification.

tic framework in his own person than that the playwright should.

With some authors the habit of self-intrusion is much more ingrained than with others. Percy Lubbock, in *The Craft of Fiction*, has commented upon Thackeray's compulsion to act as a continual showman in *Vanity Fair*: '... so far from trying to conceal himself, [he] comes forward and attracts attention, and nudges the reader a great deal more than he need; he likes the personal relation with the reader and insists on it.'<sup>6</sup> Whether we like it or not will probably depend on what E.M. Forster has called 'the power of the writer to bounce [us] into accepting what he says.'<sup>7</sup> In *Bleak House*, Forster thinks, Dickens bounces us so successfully that we are willing to accept the continuous shifts in point of view,<sup>8</sup> but in *The Counterfeiters*, Gide 'expatiates too much about the jolts.'<sup>9</sup> Forster is also of the opinion that the novelist is well advised to refrain from taking the reader into his confidence about his characters: 'It is dangerous, it generally leads to a drop in the temperature, to intellectual and emotional laxity, and worse still to facetiousness, and to a friendly invitation to see how the figures hook up behind... Intimacy is gained but at the expense of illusion and nobility.'<sup>10</sup>

As in the theatre, convention has a certain part to play in regulating the amount of self-reference we will put up with. The Victorians probably became so accustomed to the 'Gentle Reader' formula that they ceased to notice it; it was simply an impersonal request for an increase in im-

<sup>6</sup> New York, 1945, p.114. For a representative example of Thackeray's self-intrusive style, see *The Newcomes*, Ch. XLV, where he writes, '... I don't think, for my part, at the present stage of the tale, that Miss Ethel Newcome occupies a very dignified position... and I declare if I had another [heroine] ready to my hand (unless there were extenuating circumstances) Ethel should be deposed at this very sentence. But a novelist must go on with his heroine, as a man with his wife, for better or worse, and to the end.' Trollope is another confirmed addict to this sort of thing. Towards the end of *Barchester Towers*, he writes, 'These leavetakings in novels are as disagreeable as they are in real life... What novelist can impart an interest to the last chapter of his fictitious history? Do I not myself know that I am at this moment in want of a dozen pages, and that I am sick with cudgelling my brains to find them?' (Ch. XXIV). And a modern Victorian writer, Angela Thirkell, has a tendency to discuss the problems of authorship in the midst of a story. (See *The Duke's Daughter*, passim).

<sup>7</sup> *Aspects of the Novel*, New York, 1927, p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Shifts in the point of view from which the story is told are of course self-intrusive in a much less obvious way than those instances in which the novelist speaks to the reader in his own person. However too many shifts, if not well managed, may give an impression of the novelist's presence simply because the joints begin to creak.

<sup>9</sup> Forster, p. 122.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-24.

aginative effort. Whether the novelist should necessarily choose a point of view and stick to it is as much a question of taste as whether the playwright should keep his characters firmly within the proscenium arch. The novelist should, however, be aware that talking about a story is on a different *level* (in the technical sense) from simply telling it.

As we move away from the arts which make use of language in the cognitive sense and approach those whose language is colors, shapes, or sounds, self-reference occurs less frequently, or, at least, is more difficult to detect when it does occur. One of the chief characteristics of the mixture of language levels, it was stated earlier, is the self-consciousness of art, or art using its own medium to call attention to itself as art. A picture cannot arise and shout out 'I am a picture', since the language of painting is color, not words. Therefore it is only by the use of color that it can show itself conscious of being a picture. Any picture in which the artist has painted a frame around the edge of the canvas would be a case in point, or one in which some part of the picture escapes onto the real frame. (Mantegna's *St. James Martyred* is an excellent example of the mixture of levels, since the railing in the foreground, against which one of the figures is leaning, extends right across the picture plane and around the frame.) On the other hand, pictures of people painting pictures are not fallacious in this sense, any more than the play within the play is an example of the fallacy in drama, unless of course the artist appears in his own picture, as in Velasquez' *Las Meninas*. In a more subtle and metaphorical sense, it might be argued that the whole principle of the *trompe-l'oeil* school of painting is grounded in self-reference, since the purpose of this style of art seems to be to exhibit the adroitness of technique rather than to produce an object which is aesthetically pleasing. The same might be said of the whole phenomenon of spatial illusionism, as, for instance, in the Pozzo ceiling of S. Ignazio in Rome, where perspective has been employed to give a far greater impression of height than the building actually possesses.

In sculpture the pedestal is roughly analogous to the frame in painting, so that the question arises whether it is permissible for the pedestal to be of the same material as the work of art which it supports. Strictly speaking, no, since this would be a situation similar to the painted frame. On the other hand, we are perfectly accustomed to pedestals of this sort. (Thus convention is again a factor influencing our aesthetic, if not our logical judgment.) A really satisfying example of self-reference in sculpture would be one in which there is a mixture of languages clearly present in the work of art itself. Degas' bronze dancing girls with the cloth skirts are a good case since the bronze, which is intended to be descriptive of reality, has at this one point refused to describe; the skirt

itself is substituted.<sup>11</sup> This seems to me to be a clear example of the self-consciousness of art, since it appears a tacit admission on the part of the sculptor that his material was inadequate for this particular purpose.

Almost any analysis which attempts to run through several of the arts breaks down to some extent in the case of music. This happens because music is the least representative of the arts. It is, however, possible to detect a mixture of languages in a few instances in which music is frankly imitative of natural sounds. In Tschaikowsky's *1812 Overture*, for example, if a real cannon is used instead of a kettle drum, a mixture of languages undoubtedly results, since the cannon is on a different level from the instruments of the orchestra. The same kind of mixture would result if real sheep could be induced to take part in a performance of Strauss' *Don Quixote*. A more complicated situation occurs if the tolling of bells in music is represented by the actual tolling of real bells, since a case could be made for the bell as a musical instrument and thus it could be said to have its rightful place in the orchestra. As to the question of whether abstract music can, through its own medium, call attention to the fact that it is music, it is difficult to do more than entertain a few conjectures. Various compositions come to mind in which the music appears to be laughing at itself and thus self-conscious: Alec Templeton's musical satires or Prokofieff's *Classical Symphony*, for example. But would we have this feeling without Templeton's verbal explanations or without the knowledge that Prokofieff wrote the *Classical Symphony* as something of a stunt? A more serious possibility is Mozart's *Ein Musikalischer Spass* (K. 522), but here again we need program notes to explain that the mistakes in the piece are intended as a satire of country musicians on a village green, and are perhaps also a thrust at some current style of contrapuntal writing. In the trio which Sir Joseph Porter

<sup>11</sup>Scale is of course a factor here since the skirts are appropriate in size to the figures who wear them. However, that this mixture of materials is analogous to a mixture of languages may be seen by reference to an illustration of Tarski's (*Introduction to Logic*, New York, 1946, pp. 58-59.): 'Let us imagine... that we have a small blue stone in front of us, and that we state the following sentence: 'this stone is blue'. To none, presumably, would it occur... to replace in this sentence the words 'this stone' which together constitute the designation of the thing by the thing itself, that is to say, to blot or cut these words out and to place in their stead the stone. For, in doing so, we would arrive at a whole consisting in part of a stone and in part of words, and thus at something which would not be a linguistic expression, and far less a true sentence.' An example, from painting, which involves both a mixture of materials and an escape from the picture plane is Max Ernst's *Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale*, in which a small wooden gate is latched back over the outside frame.

presented to the crew of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, the counterpoint is due to the fact that Ralph and the Boatswain are not very good sight-readers and thus lag behind the Boatswain's Mate, but I doubt if this fact could be detected from the score alone.<sup>12</sup> The only clear cases seem to be those in which the orchestra is part instrument and part noise maker, as in the Tchaikowsky example first given.

Enough has now been said to indicate the type of problem which an analogy between the arts and the theory of levels of language might be expected to clarify. Although I feel confident that if the analogy were further developed the results would be interesting and fruitful, it seemed unwise at this stage to do more than try to point the way in which the analysis might proceed.

In the meantime, there seem to me to be three groups of people connected with the arts who might profit from an acquaintance with the theory. First, the artist himself: he might well find it of value to understand what properly belongs to the object language of his art and what is properly descriptive of it. The genuine artist is no doubt instinctively aware of this difference and will not confuse the two classes of expression, except deliberately. Therefore he may reasonably regard this suggestion as officious. Next, the critic: he should, of course, be able to detect self-reference when it occurs, but more than this: he must be able to exercise judgment as to when its employment is justified. Here his task is infinitely more difficult than that of the logician. When a mixture of languages occurs in logic, the resulting paradox is simply to be noticed and steps taken to avoid it; there is no question as to whether the paradox might or might not be aesthetically pleasing. Examples have been given above, for instance, in which the weakening of the barrier between actor and audience served to heighten rather than dispel the artistic illusion. The occasional cases of self-reference in Gilbert and Sullivan (e.g. in *Ruddigore*, 'this particularly rapid unintelligible patter isn't generally heard and if it is it doesn't matter', or *Pinafore*, 'I know the value of a kindly chorus') seem to me only to intensify the general mood of mild insanity and I would not have them otherwise. On the other hand, I do not like to have television comedians refer to their gagmen, nor novelists to the waiting publisher. But these are personal judgments, and the critic must employ all of his taste and sensitivity in passing such judgments. Finally, the aesthetician, who of all philosophers fails most beneath the censure of declining to accept the gifts which the logician has to offer: it will be his task to make the analogy more precise, so that it will be possible to determine with greater certainty just

<sup>12</sup>See Thomas F. Dunhill, *Sullivan's Comic Operas*, New York, 1929, p. 68.

when self-reference occurs and when it does not. (The critic cannot really use the theory until this basic analysis has been done.) In the process he may learn something about the structure of the beautiful or about aesthetic perception. However, I am inclined to think that it may prove easier to interest logicians in art than aestheticians in logic, so that perhaps any real study of the analogy will have to come from the side of logic. In any case, the source of study will be less important than the fact that discoveries in one field have been found to have significance in another which perhaps at first appeared alien and unrelated.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>I am indebted to Professor Hugues Leblanc, who has read this essay in detail, and to many friends who have suggested illustrations from the various arts.