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Article abstract

In opposition to logical positivism, John Maynard Keynes endorses "a language of vagueness" for economic development discourse that reflects a postmodern understanding of the limitations of language to reflect reality. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a postmodern storytelling of India's economic development during the 1975-77 Emergency; its realist framework communicates the further elaboration required by Keynes's vague language to achieve a more precise rendering of the material world. The heteroglossia of voice and carnivalesque elements present in the narrative demonstrate a resistance, subversion, and ultimate delegitimization of the monologic, authoritative discourses of economic development. The homologous relationship between Mistry's postmodern storytelling and Keynes's "language of vagueness" reveals the common epistemological ground shared by literary and economic discourse, which should inspire more dialogue between the two disciplines.

Keynes, Storytelling, and Realism: Literary and Economic Discourse in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

TYLER TOKARYK

ECONOMISTS ARE INCREASINGLY TURNING their attention to the rhetorical qualities of the language they use and the constitutive role language plays in determining the “legitimacy” of certain economic theories or models; some economists are even consulting the canonical texts of literary theory to assist them in this task.¹ In his introduction to a 1990 anthology of articles on “economics as discourse,” Warren Samuels (an economist) explains that economists have become more self-reflexive about their language and have even begun to consider economics in the following ways: “economics as a system of rhetoric, including metaphor; economics as a system of discourse *per se*; economics as a paradigm or world view or ideology; economics as a facet of intellectual history (history of ideas); and economics as a system of belief or interpretation” (Introduction 5). Scholars in the arts and humanities have not, however, made a similar effort to bridge the conceptual or discursive divide between economics and literature. Whereas literary critics have produced a number of insightful studies of historical, anthropological, sociological, and myriad cultural texts with the tools, methods, and critical theories developed for the study of literary texts, most academics labouring in English and Cultural Studies departments seem reluctant to put the tools of their trade to use for the study of the discourse of economics. Given the privileged status economics currently holds in both the academy and society at large, it seems fair to say that this is a significant oversight that demands immediate attention.

Samuels has recently written that “Language may communicate nothing, a little, or much about what the economy is all about, or it may communicate error or mislead, at either or both the ontological or experiential levels” (“Some Problems” 1); another economist has observed that

“discourse analysis of economic theory ... is not a question of ascertaining the scientific core of concepts and methods; rather it is a question of seeing how language and other discursive forms can produce the meanings that determine partly our cognitive experiences of economic reality” (Amaraglio 16). This should be a call to arms for postmodern thinkers in the arts and humanities, who have been making this claim about language’s inability to represent accurately the material world for decades and have, by now, a refined set of analytical tools for exploring the relationship between language and the so-called real world, between the sign and the referent. Literary theory can make valuable contributions to the study of economic discourse and can significantly enhance economists’ attempts to tell compelling stories to different constituencies.

While economists such as Samuels are noteworthy for their willingness to interrogate the language, method, and epistemology of economics, they are certainly in the minority among their peers. From the mid-nineteenth century through to the early years of the twenty-first century, “economic theory developed under the imprinting of scientist paradigms. In the twentieth century, most economics scholars have proved fanatical defenders of the priority of scientific language as the only admissible language of knowledge, with a few notable exceptions such as Hayek and Keynes” (Ingrao 9). Indeed, the discourse of economics has been passionately dedicated to the epistemology and methodology of what could loosely be identified as “positivism,”² and most economists only reflect on their methods in an attempt to legitimize the designation of their discipline as a science.³ Little seems to inflame the passions or inspire the indignation of a neoclassical economist more than the accusation that “economics is not a science.” To cast the issue in more familiar terms, economists such as Samuels and Deirdre McCloskey, who admonish economists to pay more attention to their language and storytelling strategies, have generated the same kind of controversy as historians such as Hayden White who use contemporary theories of narrative to problematize the distinction between history and historical fiction. In other words, the famous “linguistic turn” that has had such a profound effect on the social sciences has also occurred in the discourse of economics; just as literary theory and criticism have made valuable contributions to epistemological and methodological discussions in most of the social sciences, they can, I think, be of similar assistance to economists.

John Maynard Keynes, that celebrated rhetorician, prominent mem-

ber of the Bloomsbury Group, and accomplished student of philosophy, ethics, and international relations, is almost always cited as one of the “exceptions” to any generalization about economic discourse. Quite apart from his many accomplishments as an economist (for which he is alternately reviled and revered), Keynes is important for the fact that he seems to have anticipated much of the current discussion in the humanities and social sciences surrounding the instability of the linguistic sign and fragmented subjectivity. Anna Carabelli, Alessandra Marzola, and Francesco Silva have published excellent studies⁴ of Keynes’s language, epistemology, and method, but they do so from a decidedly philosophical rather than literary perspective and so leave much important theoretical terrain unexplored.

In this essay, I will attempt to forge a connection between the disciplines of economics and literature by comparing the work of a renowned economist, Keynes, with that of a successful contemporary novelist, Rohinton Mistry; I will argue that Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995) is able to tell a compelling “realist” story of development economics,⁵ precisely because it uses a theory of language and storytelling that strongly resembles what Keynes (somewhat vaguely) refers to as the “language of vagueness” (defined and explored below). It is this combination of the “language of vagueness” and the conventions of “literary realism” that enables *A Fine Balance* to represent believable human beings in a recognizable material world — unlike mainstream economic discourse, which has long since abandoned Keynes’s storytelling methods and persistently failed to represent those same people and that same world through its positivist language, comprising charts, formulae, mathematical figures, and models. This paper will illustrate, then, that *A Fine Balance* succeeds in telling a compelling, persuasive story of economic development because it embraces an epistemology, language, and set of storytelling practices roughly homologous to those theorized by Keynes as the necessary conditions for a functional representation of the material world. The homology then is this: just as Keynes insists that a “language of vagueness” needs to be employed within economic discourse to represent an unpredictable material world, Mistry suggests that a postmodern approach to storytelling needs to be used within the framework and conventions of realist literature to represent that same unpredictable material world. Finally, I will argue that Mistry’s attempt to negotiate the conventions of realism with a postmodern understanding of the relationship between language and the

material world is best understood vis-à-vis Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and the carnivalesque. I turn to Bakhtin at the end of this essay because his work is so well known and thus should help to illustrate my argument that a similar epistemology informs Keynes's and Mistry's representations of the economic world. Bakhtin's understanding of literary realism should convincingly demonstrate that Mistry and Keynes both believe that human agents continually (inter)act in (apparently) irrational ways that defy the predictive models of neoclassical economics and so demand alternative ways of telling the stories of economic development.

* * *

The need to interrogate the tremendous power of the discourse of economic development in India is signalled by the cataclysmic failures of its various programs and approaches over the past fifty-odd years. Regardless of their political allegiance, analysts generally agree that despite a "rate of growth of national product of 3.5 per cent per annum" (Balasubramanyam 202), the economic "development" of India during the first three decades following its independence in 1947 (i.e., the years relevant to a study of *A Fine Balance*) was characterized by "massive poverty, unemployment, and glaring disparities in incomes and levels of living" (202). While a number of different economic models⁶ have been employed over the years to expedite "development" of the so-called Third World, Arturo Escobar notes that policy makers have consistently failed to improve the lives of the poor because they privileged "cash crops (to secure foreign exchange, according to capital and technological imperatives) and not food crops"; avoided "participatory and decentralized approaches"; supported "agricultural development based on large mechanized farms and the use of chemical inputs"; and promoted "capital-intensive but not labor-intensive solutions" (Escobar 43). With reference to India specifically, the discourse of economic development has had a remarkable impact on both government policy and the quotidian lives of the population. For example, according to the *Public Interest Research Group* (an NGO based in Delhi), "India [was] the single largest borrower of WB [World Bank]" dollars and, by the early 1990s, had consumed "about 15% of total World Bank lending" (10). In his study of the relationship between the World Bank and the developing countries of Asia, Mahendra Pal observes that "no other country has been studied more

comprehensively by the World Bank than India” (210). This view is confirmed by C.P. Bhambhri, who argues that much of the Bank’s interest in India during the 1960s and 1970s was largely inspired by Cold-War politics and concludes that “India is the largest single beneficiary of the Bank’s operations because its strategy of capitalist development has created a degree of ‘convergence’ between its goals and priorities and those of the world capitalist system in the Third World” (70). So, without muddling my argument with charts, graphs, and tables of data,⁷ it seems safe to propose that the World Bank was extremely active in India throughout the period immediately preceding and during the events recounted in Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*.

Quite apart from the question of the validity of the economic prescriptions of the World Bank and other multilateral/bilateral funding agencies, the repeated failures of development plans, programs and projects in India indicate (among other things) the need for donors to adopt a new language, a new set of conventions, a different strategy for manifesting intentions, and for conceptualizing, evaluating, or telling stories about the economy in the developing world. Indeed, common criticisms of the Bank often refer to its character and communication skills rather than to its activities; more often than not, the Bank’s *attitude, language, and ways of interacting with the public* (rather than the policies it endorses and enforces) are cited by critics as reasons for rejecting its prescriptions for change. For example, the Bank has been accused of “deliver[ing] its reviews of the state of world development as if there are no alternative acceptable views” and of “instruct[ing] nations as to how they ought to tackle their economic problems, much as if [it] were less a bank and more a supra-national economic cabinet” (Arnold 70). Even in his spirited defense of the World Bank, William Ryrie admits that “the Bank has not been good at public relations. ... For many years the Bank behaved as if it was unnecessary to respond to criticism, assuming that because it was engaged in good work, for the benefit of poor countries, there must be basic public support” (169). To judge from the volumes of criticism of the Bank’s activities in India and the story Mistry tells, this “basic public support” most certainly did not and, in many constituencies today, still does not exist. This antinomy between the Bank and the general population may be, in part, a function of the discourse of economic development having abandoned the “language of vagueness” theorized and practiced by the man many refer to as the originator of the discourse of development economics, John Maynard Keynes.

* * *

What, precisely, did Keynes mean by the phrase “language of vagueness,” and how might this catachresis facilitate our attempt to understand different representations of the story of economic development? In the years immediately preceding the formation of the Bretton Woods institutions (i.e., the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, both of which Keynes is largely responsible for creating),⁸ Keynes argued that an economic term or concept “can often be vague within fairly wide limits and capable of several interpretations differing slightly from one another, and still be perfectly serviceable and free from serious risk of leading either the author or the reader into error” (XXIX 36).⁹ As John Coates points out, Keynes’s interest in the concept-metaphors of “vague” and “vagueness” was inspired by Wittgenstein’s writings on language.¹⁰ According to Coates, Wittgenstein argued that “vagueness is a characteristic feature of the habitual forms of discourse. . . . Ordinary language appears vague and tentative compared to the ideal of a canonical notation, but it is in fact more solidly grounded and more economical in serving its purposes than its putative analyzed forms” (Coates 58). For Wittgenstein and, following him, Keynes, “there is no implicit logical structure” (54) in any language;¹¹ vagueness is always present. Thus, formal logic (and, by implication, econometrics and the mathematical language preferred by neo-liberal economists) “is greatly handicapped in comparison with our actual language” (Wittgenstein qtd. in Coates 55). According to Coates, this leads Wittgenstein to conclude the following: “Once meaning is located in language games, and is found to be relative to the purpose of each linguistic activity [i.e., acknowledged as *vague*], then the notion of a primary, essentially descriptive, propositional structure is no longer seen as the only one that facilitates communication” (55). This is precisely what Keynes came to believe about the privileged use of mathematical formulae and econometrics in his discipline. Like Wittgenstein, Keynes had come to the paradoxical conclusion that “words in our natural language are inherently vague, and since this means that more goes into a word than can be made explicit in a definition, one is led to the conclusion that there is a precision in vagueness” (55). In other words, the “language of vagueness” is one which acknowledges that signs do not refer unproblematically to their referents, that a slippage of meaning is inevitable with every utterance, and so bound to be more precise than the language of positivism.

Thus, by the 1930s the word *vague* had “crept into several of Keynes’s manuscripts, and [it was then that] he began to use it in much the same way as Wittgenstein” (82). Keynes “did not think this vagueness [in language] was troublesome for he and Wittgenstein meant by the term merely that much of experience is not reducible to the primitives of mathematics or logic: they meant ‘a vagueness relative to these concepts of measurement’” (83).

I provide this brief background to the notion of “vagueness” in Keynes and Wittgenstein for heuristic and illustrative purposes. When I re-deploy this rather unusual concept-metaphor, I do so in an effort to signal an epistemology unique to Keynes and intrinsic to the Keynesian ideal of development economics. In other words, “vagueness” should be understood as a concept-metaphor that speaks of the need for a departure from the positivistic, scientific language that dominates among economists and of a concomitant privileging of a kind of postmodern, self-reflexive language that acknowledges its constitutive as well as representative properties. Of course, with the “language of vagueness” comes a rather predictable set of challenges. As Keynes and Wittgenstein acknowledged, “Misunderstandings are an everyday occurrence” (55) when vague language is used. “But the answer to these problems is not the construction of a logically perfect notation,” argues Coates; “it is rather the mundane process of clearing up actual cases of misunderstanding by approaching the point at hand from another direction, or by further elaboration” (Coates 55). I would argue that this “further elaboration” of the problems associated with development economics is precisely what Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* achieves. Mistry’s postmodern storytelling within the framework of a realist novel is the further elaboration required by vague language to achieve a more precise rendering of the material world so desired by Keynes.

* * *

So how does one go about using a “language of vagueness” to tell the stories of economic development? The answer to this question is provided by the characters in *A Fine Balance* who, quite literally, depend on their storytelling abilities to survive the effects of the economic development program foisted upon them by the economists and politicians who (supposedly) act on their behalf. Many of these characters not only develop theories of storytelling that offer valuable insight into the operations of

development economics, but they also adopt carnivalesque modes of expression as means of understanding their place in the economic world.¹² In short, Mistry's novel demonstrates that a heightened awareness of both the conventions of realism and the properties of vagueness that inhabit language itself are required in order to represent the relationship between the economy and human actors in a compelling, engaging and faithful manner. *A Fine Balance* not only presents a compelling argument for a supplementary relationship between the discourses of literature and economics, but it also captures the Keynesian spirit that has long ceased to animate the corpse of development economics.

In a recent essay, Laura Moss argues that the "primary function of the 'ordinary' characters in *A Fine Balance* is not to be synecdochic of the 'Indian citizen' in the Emergency but rather to represent possible examples of what might happen in such a state" (159). This subtle distinction helps to explain precisely how the events of the Emergency and the socio-economic activities of the characters assume such a level of plausibility. The representation of the "State of Emergency" in India is credible precisely because it is represented as a strategic conflation of political violence and economic discourse (rather than as a purely "political" event, as it may at first appear). Because the narrator and different characters define Indra Gandhi's "State of Emergency" as being synonymous, at least in part, with "development economics," their activities dramatize the likely effects of an aggressive program of economic development as envisioned by the World Bank in the mid-1970s.

A number of the characters explicitly identify the World Bank and transnational capital as the ultimate sources of the injustices they suffer. For example, "the broad vision of nation-builders and World Bank officials" (Mistry 248) is responsible for the "malevolent growth" (250) that pollutes the foothills of the Himalayas where Maneck Kohlah lives. In spite of local opposition by community groups who "signed petitions" and "lodged their protest with the authorities" (249), the Bank's "flawed development policy [and] shortsightedness" (249) establish the infrastructure and incentives for transnational corporations to move in, "sacrific[e] the country's natural beauty to the demon of progress" (249), and put local people out of work. Maneck's family owns a General Store and brews the local supply of Cola, "Kohlah's Cola," but the viability of these businesses is jeopardized by this new economic system. The World Bank provides loans and grants to transnational corporations to promote tour-

ism in this area;¹³ this in turn provides incentives for large soft drink manufacturers to move in on the Kohlah family's territory. As the narrator puts it,

Smuggled amid the goods that the loathsome lorries transported up the mountains was a deadly foe: soft drinks, to stock the new shops and hotels. ... the giant corporations had targeted the hills; they had [Kohlah's Cola] in their sights. They infiltrated Mr. Kohlah's territory with their boardroom arrogance and advertising campaigns and cut-throat techniques. (Mistry 254)

This is a literary version of W.W. Rostow's economic parable of the "Stages of Growth,"¹⁴ except that Mistry's brand of realism denies the happy ending¹⁵ Rostow's story provides. Rostow's "Stages of Growth" model argues that economic development is "an investment-driven process leading to a 'take-off to self-sustaining growth'" (Morrison 35). For decades, economists and development workers presumed that "take-off" for an economy was best achieved through "support for industrial growth through roads, railways, power and irrigation dams and other major infrastructural projects" (35). This is precisely what is represented in the "Mountains" chapter of *A Fine Balance*, only instead of "take-off to self-sustaining growth" we find "destitute encampments [on] the hillsides, the people drawn from every direction by stories of construction and wealth and employment. But the ranks of the jobless always exponentially outnumbered the jobs, and a hungry army sheltered permanently on the slopes" (Mistry 250-51). Before long, this economic program destroys the Kohlah family business and forces Maneck's parents to send their only child to the city, where he grows increasingly alienated from his family and community, and ultimately commits suicide.

This same model of development economics is also responsible for the forced migration of two other characters, Om and Ishvar, from rural India to Bombay where they suffer intolerable injustices at the hands of various "officials" acting in the name of the Indian government's "Emergency" efforts to revitalize the economy.¹⁶ In their "native place," Om and Ishvar work for a tailoring company, but their jobs are eliminated when "a ready-made clothing store opens in town" (174) and puts their employer out of business. The owner of the tailoring company realizes, however, that the source of his problem is not the ready-made clothing store, but rather the huge factories in the city that manufacture the ready-made clothes. Before long, Om and Ishvar are forced to leave home in

search of work in one of the mythical factories in the city. Not surprisingly, this migration to Bombay results in their being unemployed, homeless, crippled, and forced to make a “living” by begging on the streets. The fate of Om and Ishvar demonstrates Escobar’s point that development economics in the 1970s presumed that rural people, or “surplus labour,” could be “removed from the countryside without reducing agricultural output. . . . This ‘surplus labour’ would be hired at near-subsistence wages by the new industries set up with additional savings and foreign capital. . . . What happened to rural people (never mind what they thought) did not matter. . . . Not surprisingly, theories of this type led to regressive distributions of income that reached embarrassing proportions” (79-80).

The economic system that forces these three characters to migrate from rural to urban India is also conflated with the political “State of Emergency” through the characterization of the business people in the novel. Both Mrs. Gupta, the owner of a clothing-export company, and Nusswan Shroff, a wealthy businessman, benefit rather dramatically from the initiatives taken under the State of Emergency and so are willing to overlook its obvious faults. As Sharmani Gabriel observes, “because Mistry’s characters are represented as fully-realized beings, we see them not only in terms of their suffering and victimization, but also in how they themselves exploit others” (89). To be sure, Nusswan Shroff and Mrs. Gupta are but two examples of characters who become willing participants in the exploitative economic system imposed by the Emergency. The more civil liberties are suspended, the more favourable the economic climate is for their businesses and the more these two characters are able to take advantage of the marginalized members of society. Mrs. Gupta, for example, declares that the Emergency is “good news” because in a single day it incarcerates “most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers” (83).¹⁷ All the people put in jail are the very ones who make it more difficult for her to turn a profit on her business. Because of these Emergency measures, Mrs. Gupta can deal directly with private contractors and avoid what she refers to as “Union loafers [who] want to work less and get more money” (84).

An even less subtle indictment of the alliance forged between the discourse of development economics and the Emergency is offered in the character of Nusswan Shroff. In a particularly telling passage, Nusswan expounds at great length on the various merits of what he refers to as the

Prime Minister's "spirit of renaissance" (433) and argues that the government ought to eradicate the "pavement dwellers" who give India such a bad name. Nusswan notes that counting pavement dwellers as unemployment statistics makes the numbers look worse than they really are; according to him, "at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements [and] should be eliminated" (435) by giving them "a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is [more] cost-effective" (435). While this statement obviously functions as a parody of rationalist discourse, the narrative explicitly directs the reader to interpret Nusswan as a representative of the economic and political discourses that combine to have such a profound impact on the marginalized characters in the novel.

Clearly then, in *A Fine Balance* the phrase "State of Emergency" is more *vague* than the Indira Gandhi administration would like; it refers to both political and economic discourse and all the power relations those discourses sustain. For poor rural Indians, the phrase "State of Emergency" is primarily an economic force that first drives people into the city and then disempowers them. For wealthy urban Indians, the phrase "State of Emergency" refers more to a political program¹⁸ that grants business leaders either the liberty to exploit the abundance of surplus labour available in the cities, or the language and logic to argue for the elimination of the excess bodies altogether. In his book supporting and explaining the economics of the Emergency, J.S. Bright (wisely) notes that "an economic battle cannot be won in a Tower of Babel" (60). So, the Indira Gandhi regime put politics at the service of economics and silenced "irresponsible critics" of the new economic policies. Regardless of the methods, Bright's propaganda insisted that the "general impact of the emergency [was] to speed up the pace of economic reforms [and] streamline the distributive system" (60). Mistry's characters tell a rather different story.

* * *

As the reference to "Babel" above suggests, many voices, languages, and stories came into conflict during the State of Emergency. When asked about the importance of storytelling, Mr. Valmik — the resident philosopher and master-storyteller in *A Fine Balance* — notes, "it helps to remind yourself of who you are. Then you can go forward, without fear of losing yourself in this ever-changing world" (700). This statement makes

three claims which, when taken together, suggest a postmodern epistemology clearly resembling Keynes's notion of "vagueness." First, Mr. Valmik argues that the real world is "ever-changing" and so ultimately unknowable; second, he notes that stories have constitutive properties and inform or help define one's sense of self; third, he suggests that the "self" informed by stories should be understood in relation to the world in flux. In other words, language and stories do communicate information about the material world, but they also constitute, in part, human identity. This theory of storytelling (or, more generally, the theory of knowledge it implies) is a survival strategy for many of Mistry's characters, and it helps them endure the economic challenges of quotidian life in India during the 1970s.

Mr. Valmik would probably agree then with Keynes's contention that "we have, as a rule, only the vaguest idea of any but the most direct consequences of our acts. . . . [and] our knowledge of the future is fluctuating, vague and uncertain" (XIV 416). Like Keynes, Mr. Valmik relates the act of storytelling to the ever-changing and hence ultimately unpredictable/unknowable world outside the self; in his various capacities as lawyer, proof-reader, and speechwriter, Mr. Valmik witnesses the way stories help people define themselves and their places in the world, and understands how stories enable individuals to reflect on their past in order to realign themselves with a world constantly in flux. He experiences, first-hand, the way storytelling helps to (re)constitute and (re)situate "self." Indeed, according to Mr. Valmik, stories facilitate the personal and social negotiation of knowledge in a world that, as Keynes observes, often defies definition and comprehension.

After listening to Mr. Valmik narrate his life story, another character in Mistry's novel, Dina, observes that "although Mr. Valmik depicted life as a sequence of accidents, there was nothing accidental about his expert narration. His sentences poured out like perfect seams, holding the garment of his story together without calling attention to the stitches" (654). Wondering whether the storyteller is "aware of ordering the events for her" (654), she concludes, "perhaps the very act of telling created a natural design. Perhaps it was a knack that humans had, for cleaning up their untidy existences — a hidden survival weapon" (654). This statement implies that the material world is unordered, but that the very act of storytelling (using ordinary, non-mathematical, imprecise language) can help make sense of that world. In other words, it may be precisely

because Mr. Valmik wants to *tell his story* (in ordinary language) rather than analyze its meaning (through a specialized language) that his “sentences poured out like perfect seams” and conveyed something of importance to his interlocutor. Just as Keynes argues with regards to economic discourse that “wealth [is] a peculiarly unsuitable subject for the methods of classical economic theory” because “our knowledge of the future is fluctuating, vague and uncertain” (XIV, 113), Mr. Valmik and Dina seem to be saying that life stories are unsuitable subjects for any storytelling method that does not reflect on its lack of transparency, its constitutive properties.

Keynes insists “a more rough and ready method which preserves the original data in a more recognisable form may be safer” (XIV 289) than the language and conventions of positivist economics. The storytelling practiced by Mr. Valmik and observed by Dina constitutes one such “rough and ready method” of preserving the data required by economists. As Piero Mini observes, Keynes believes that “the *process* and *effect* of the transformation of raw data into unrecognisable means, standard deviations, second-order residual autocorrelations and assorted Greek letters” (119) often prevent economists from knowing and representing the real world; in his analysis of Keynes’s language and method, Mini insists that in all his work Keynes strongly resists the growing tendency in economics to rely on the language of econometrics because it transforms “irregularities into regularities, discontinuities into smoothness,” and ultimately “mesmerise[s] the economist into believing that the results of these artificial manipulations are reality itself” (Mini 119). Mr. Valmik shares this view of the relationship between language and the world: he represents “life as a series of accidents” in his stories and so resists the urge to transform irregularity and discontinuity into regularity and smoothness. His “expert narration” may not call attention to the stitches holding the seams of the story together, but Dina — his narratee — calls our attention to these narrative devices and urges us to appreciate both the uncertain world to which the narrative refers *and* the strategies employed to represent this world.

Mr. Valmik’s most memorable characteristic is his odd and somewhat perverse habit of touching and fondling the pens in his shirt pocket as he speaks. In discussion with Maneck, Mr. Valmik addresses his pens as his “little darlings” and repeatedly pats and feels them for the benefit of his interlocutor. He concludes his lesson on storytelling by confidently

declaring, “Ah, yes, to share the story redeems everything” (701). Not entirely following Mr. Valmik’s line of reasoning, Maneck asks “how” the act of sharing a story “redeems everything”; Mr. Valmik’s response offers an important hermeneutic signpost that helps to lay bare the model of storytelling (and attendant epistemology) theorized throughout the novel: “‘How, I don’t know exactly. But I feel it here.’ He put his hand over his shirt pocket again” (701). Maneck wonders whether this strange man “felt it [the need to share stories] in his pens,” before realizing that “the proof-reader meant his heart” (701). This exchange seems to suggest the following about storytelling: first, the strength of a story does not come only from the similarity it has to the material world to which it refers, but rather from the *act of sharing the story itself*; second, while every story is by definition textual (i.e., comes from a pen), it has an originating force, a human author, who can never be fully known or recuperated. In short, Mr. Valmik indirectly proclaims the “death of the author” even while acknowledging that author’s presence. In typically postmodern fashion, Mr. Valmik realizes that words are incapable of accurately representing the source (i.e., author) of a story, and so he supplements his language with a vague gesture to indicate that this source is present but inaccessible. In other words, the story’s origin is less relevant than the act of sharing the story and entering into a dialogue with an interlocutor. For Mistry, language and stories are about human interaction, about sharing information about the world outside the text; this act of sharing must also acknowledge the irrecusable textuality of the story, the difference between the story and the world from which it comes and to which it refers. By conflating the human heart with a pocket full of pens, Mr. Valmik suggests that the human actors in the economy cannot and must not be separated from the written record. This is a theory of storytelling Keynes would likely have embraced but which has long since been abandoned by development economics. Today, when positivist economists seize their pens and use them to represent the “vague” world of human interactions as quantifiable units of information in tables, flow-charts, and mathematical formulae, they eschew (the qualitative dimensions of) the human subjects about whom they are writing.

* * *

Recalling the homologous relation between Keynes’s use of the “language of vagueness” within the discourse of economics to represent the mate-

rial world and Mistry's use of postmodern modes of storytelling within the conventions of the realist novel to represent the material world, we need to ask an important question about the significance of the literary genre of *A Fine Balance*. If, as many critics have correctly noted, *A Fine Balance* is explicitly modelled after the nineteenth-century European realist novel,¹⁹ what is the relationship between the genre of literary realism, the "language of vagueness," and the discourse of development economics?

Mistry's appropriation of literary realism underscores the logical impossibility of re/representing the "material world" through a set of literary conventions, even while pronouncing his intention to tell a plausible story about how that real world must have been. In a paper focusing on the relationship between Mistry's diasporic identity and his representation of Indian history, Sharmani Gabriel makes a similar point to mine regarding Mistry's use of realism. She writes,

The power of detail ... and the historical specificity that realism as a mode of narrative representation entails works along with Mistry's aesthetic commitment to retrieve the social and political details of those histories glossed over by exclusionary accounts of the nation. ... However, although Mistry accedes to the representational power of the realist novel and its ability to give voice to a people in the assertion of their history and their identity, he is also aware of the inadequacies of the traditional realist novel to represent the kind of imagined community that is the nation. (87)

Gabriel goes on to attribute Mistry's adaptation of the realist novel to his sensibilities as a diasporic Indian living in Canada, and this is where she and I disagree.

Before proceeding with my analysis of Mistry's use of literary realism, I need to outline my own understanding of this notoriously catachrestical term ("realism") and defend myself in advance from those critics who insist (wrongly, I think) on realism's allegiance to positivism.²⁰ Of course, I cannot do justice here to the complexity of the many debates surrounding literary realism, but it is important, I think, to highlight a few points that are particularly relevant to my attempt to force a confrontation between the discourses of literature and economics. First, while it is clear that realism "seeks to create an imagined world that functions using the same referential materials and acting to the same laws as our own" (Shaw 49), it may not be so obvious that what "realism likes to

make vivid are systems” (49) rather than materials, objects, and details from the world around us. Granted, the realist text puts considerable emphasis on individual “objects” (and *A Fine Balance* is no exception), but as Shaw so convincingly illustrates, it does so in an effort to explore the “systems” of which the objects are a part, not because the objects are significant in and of themselves. With reference to *A Fine Balance*, the “system” that encompasses the myriad objects of the text is development economics and the discourses with which it is aligned. Second, contrary to popular belief, realism does *not* naively subscribe to the positivist notion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between words and things. Again, Shaw’s argument with regards to this point is worth quoting at length:

Realism doesn’t trade in ‘transparent’ representation, because it doesn’t need to and doesn’t want to. Realism doesn’t need to, because nothing about the nature of language requires that an attempt to make contact with the real world must involve ‘transparent reference’ to a putative world prior to language. Realism doesn’t want to, because it’s often interested in the issue of how we can best come to grips with the world, and because it’s always interested in engaging the reader, not in some sort of illusion of ‘direct’ contact with the world, but in a dialogue in which the stakes are more rhetorical than epistemological and have more to do with the will than with a certain (inadequate) model of knowing. (39)

This account of realism’s use of language to “come to grips with the world” without trying to create the illusion of transparent reference should sound rather similar to Keynes’s and Wittgenstein’s notion of the “language of vagueness.” Finally, we need to emphasize the point to which Shaw alludes above, regarding the epistemology underwriting realism. A realist author typically believes it is possible to communicate information about the material world through language.²¹ This is not to say that the act of communication is simple, straightforward, or unproblematic — but rather that it is both *possible* and *necessary*. Indeed, Lilian Furst makes it clear that realists such as George Eliot were, by the mid-1800s, well aware of their epistemological dilemma and determined to work around it. In Furst’s words, the problem for Eliot was this: “the realisation that realism saw its mission as telling the truth about ordinary life, but that it is extremely difficult, perhaps hardly possible, to achieve this aim in the medium of words” (4-5). Indeed, it is precisely *because* realism acknowl-

edges its limitations that it is able to establish a kind of contract between its readers and storytellers, a contract which presumes that an understanding of the human subject's place in the real world can be shared.

Given my (critical) focus on the neoliberal policies of development economists, it should come as no surprise that Georg Lukàcs's Marxist analysis of literary realism provides a useful lens through which to view Mistry's novel. Lukàcs's work is valuable insofar as it reminds us that a novel can be seen as the expression of a worldview rather than as a set of formal conventions. In *Realism in Our Time*, Lukàcs famously contrasts realism to what he considers its (aesthetic and epistemological) opposite, "modernism," and argues that the "essential content" of modernism is the "*angst* and chaos" (72) generated by capitalism. He goes on to note that this "vision of the world as chaos results from the lack of a humanist social perspective" (72) shared by modernist intellectuals, and insists that realist literature is best understood as a form of resistance to the modernists' dogmatic belief in "the static nature of reality, and the senselessness of its surface phenomena" (72). Thus, whereas modernist literature (and, I would argue, much of what goes by the name of "postmodernist literature" today) features characters who accept "*angst* and chaos as a permanent condition" (73) and represents "human activity [as] impotent and robbed of meaning" (36), realist literature typically focuses on a character who is "a member of a human community in which he can play a part, however small, towards its modification or reform" (81). As I demonstrate below, this is precisely how the characters in *A Fine Balance* are defined — as individuals striving above all else to be members of a community that helps them meet their basic human needs. According to Lukàcs, this faith in the human subject's concrete potentiality makes "change and development" the "proper subject of [realist] literature" (35). More specifically, the realist novel is interested in showing what the human actor *can* do, what the human actor *is capable of*. Regardless of the challenges faced by a protagonist in a realist novel, s/he has the potential to act or respond to the forces around her in a meaningful way.

Perhaps most importantly, Lukàcs distinguishes between the "modernist anti-realist" belief that the human subject "is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings" (20) and the realists' belief in "the traditional Aristotelian dictum ... Man is *zoon politikon*, a social animal" whose "ontological being ... cannot be distinguished from [his] social and historical environment" (19). In re-

alist literature, the characters' "human significance, their specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created" (19). The presumption here is that human beings are actors in history — *subjects in* and *subjected to* their social, political, and economic environment. In Lukàcs's reading, fictional characters *ought* to reflect this. In my reading, Mistry's characters theorize a world where this is possible and plausible. This is, I think, the key for understanding the relationship between Keynes's and Mistry's epistemologies.²²

* * *

Mistry provides a powerful critique of authoritarian economic and political discourses by using the realist novel as the framework for a sustained exploration of what Bakhtin has famously defined as heteroglossia and the carnivalesque; *A Fine Balance* lets a number of "lower" characters tell their (postmodernist) version of the story of the "Emergency," and in so doing reveals the "real" effects of economic discourse on the Indian people. In terms of economic discourse, Mistry employs the conventions of the realist novel to represent what Bruna Ingraio calls "the fictional image of economic behaviour" (16), and thereby helps the reader to see "a richer and deeper image of economic action ... as compared with the simpler form proposed in economic parables" (16). This "richer and deeper image" emphasizes the plurality of experience, conflicting motivations, and multiplicity of voices that are in conflict with the monologic discourse of economic development.

These conflicts between the "low" characters and monologic discourse often take the form of carnivals in which heteroglossia (or the multiplicity of languages determined by age/gender/economic position etc.) sounds forth. Whenever Indira Gandhi's political regime tries to tell a story to legitimize the Emergency, a carnival erupts that subverts its efforts. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin offers his popular definition of "carnival" as a public event involving ritual spectacles, parodies of authoritarian discourse, the celebration of the grotesque body, free and familiar contact among people normally separated by hierarchies, and so forth. Elsewhere, Bakhtin argues that "authoritative discourse demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own" and insists that it tries to bind us "quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally" ("Discourse" 342); he also notes that heteroglossia is "aimed

sharply and polemically” at the official language of authority. During the Emergency, the authoritative language of economic development and political tyranny is spoken in an effort to “bind” the people, but is immediately delegitimized by heteroglossia and different forms of carnivalesque behaviour, the combination of which constitutes something like the “language of vagueness” theorized by Keynes.

Heteroglossia and carnivalesque behaviour tell a unique story of economic development and defy the powerful will of the economic and political elite when Om, Ishvar, and twenty-five thousand other unwilling men, women, and children from Bombay’s slums, are abducted by the police and forced to attend a political rally at which the prime minister will speak (see Mistry 299-314). The intention of the rally is to generate an authoritative, monologic discourse that can give the impression of popular support for the Emergency and its efforts to revitalize the economy. The authoritative language of economic development and political tyranny cannot, however, control heteroglossia and other carnival behaviours that erupt in this situation. The rally takes on a life of its own and the participants spend most of their time cracking jokes and mocking the language and conventions used to convey the message of the Emergency. This heteroglossia is one of the ways *A Fine Balance* avoids embodying “a closed ‘totalization’” (Shaw 90) of meaning, as critics argue is so often the case with realist fiction.²³ In other words, heteroglossia inserts a “real world of recalcitrant particulars” (90) into the text and establishes these and the systems of which they are a part as the core of Mistry’s story. This heteroglossia also provides an opportunity for the characters to employ a “*language of vagueness*” to tell their stories of economic development.

In “Knowing the Subaltern,” Michael Bernard-Donals convincingly argues that the multiple voices which ridicule and decentre official languages in a literary text *do not* give the subaltern a voice, but rather help transform society’s understanding of how the body politic and the dominant discourses within it function. This seems an accurate description of the function of marginalized characters in Mistry’s realist novel. When Om, Ishvar, and Rajaram create a carnivalesque atmosphere that resists the power of Indira Gandhi’s impressive propaganda machine, the reader is provided with unique insight into how the discourses of economic development and demagogic politics operate. Consider, for example, the climax of this rally, when a giant “eighty-foot” cardboard and plywood

cut-out of the prime minister falls into the crowd of unwilling participants (311). The characters are physically affected by this event in a manner that dramatically transforms the public understanding of the discourse of the Emergency. The massive cut-out stands to the side of the stage as a representation of the prime minister's power, but is blown over by a helicopter circling the crowd to shower it with rose petals. As the cut-out topples into the crowd and people run for their lives, one of the characters sardonically observes that "Nobody wants to be caught in the Prime Minister's embrace" (311). This event seems to suggest that a combination of carnivalesque behaviour and vague language employed by the marginalized characters of the novel denies (at least for the moment) the efforts of an authority figure to tell a totalizing, univocal story. Unfortunately, however, some members of the audience become casualties of the carnival, and so we need to read this scene somewhat differently.

As Bakhtin observes, the "time of carnival" typically involves moments of death and revival simultaneously (*Rabelais* 50). In other words, the individual participant in the carnival may die or suffer bodily injury as a result of his hostility to the language of authority — in this case, the conflated and hybridized discourses of development economics and political tyranny. But, as both Bakhtin and the story of *A Fine Balance* illustrate, the individual's death/injury has implicit within it a rebirth of the community as a whole. By drawing attention to the subversion of the prime minister's power, the people trapped under the 80-foot carnivalesque image of the prime minister represent the death of the individual body and the potential rebirth of the body politic. This recalls Lukács's claim that the realist novel typically features individuals who affect the course of history through their participation in a community — here the individual pays the ultimate price and sacrifices his/her life as part of the process of revitalizing the community and creating history.

The fact that, in literary realism, death is often simultaneous with rebirth, is made clear in the following description of the grotesque but vibrant and living bodies attending a beggar's funeral:

The great number of cripples kept the [funeral] procession at a snail's pace. The deformities of some had atrophied their bodies, reducing them to a froglike squat [or] the sideways shuffle of a crab. Others, doubled over, crawled forward on their hands and feet, their behinds raised in the air like camels' humps ... but their spirits were high as

they laughed and chatted among themselves ... so that it seemed more a festival than a funeral. (585)

Later, a policeman comes to break up the funeral procession because he thinks it is some kind of political statement. The policeman understandably mistakes the beggars “for political activists in fancy dress — trouble-makers in street theatre, portraying government figures as crooks and criminals embarked on begging in the nation” (587). Bakhtin couldn’t have said it better himself — this is the politics of carnival, vague storytelling, and grotesque realism. In their celebration of their grotesque, dying bodies, the beggars change the public perception of the body politic, of how authoritarian economic discourses operate, of how we read and tell stories about the other.

Bakhtin argues that the effect of marginal characters or people upon linear history is one of rupture, dislocation, and crisis. This is, of course, what happens at the staged rally and the funeral procession: first, the circumstances in which the marginal characters live and their attempts to tell their own stories are exposed by the realist narrator; second, this exposure ruptures history and rewrites the past using something closely resembling what Keynes designated the “language of vagueness.” Here Mistry is telling the “real” story of economic development and revealing the conditions of possibility for a new story to be told in the future.

The individual “body” in *A Fine Balance* also functions as a form of vague language that helps tell an alternative story of economic development. The body in this realist novel suffers unthinkable violence; it is defined as “excessive” and “grotesque,” and is frequently subjected to torture and mutilation; sometimes the body is rendered grotesque by economic and political forces that try to eliminate it, and at other times by forces that transform it into a perverse analogue of the system of development economics. As is well known, “grotesque realism” in Bakhtin’s formulation usually involves some kind of bodily degradation to bring figures of authority “down to earth.” In Bakhtin’s words, the “grotesque conception of the body is interwoven ... with the social, utopian and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture” (*Rabelais* 324-25). This is precisely how the individual subaltern body is figured in *A Fine Balance*.

The nature of the relationship among the grotesque body, development economics, and the State of Emergency is probably best explained by looking at the novel’s representation of the begging industry. “Gro-

tesque realism” is used in *A Fine Balance* to illustrate that the economy of begging is an inevitable part of the formal economic system promoted by the State of Emergency. Like the staged rally discussed earlier, the begging industry is a form of licensed transgression where the participants employ carnivalesque behaviour and vague language as both a means of survival and as a strategy for criticizing the violence of the “legitimate” system of development economics.

The begging industry in Bombay is run entirely by one man, Beggarmaster. It is largely through the development of Beggarmaster’s character that the narrative illustrates how the same logic, language, and ethic animating development economics are embodied in the organized practice of begging; in fact, the narrative suggests that the economy of begging is not only a natural, accepted, and inevitable part of the economic system, but indeed is the “real” system of economic development imposed on the Indian people by forces from beyond.

Life is reduced to a cheap, disposable commodity by the trained, entrepreneurial eyes of both Nusswan (the businessman discussed earlier) and Beggarmaster, and so a strong correspondence is suggested between the ethics of the “legitimate businessman” and the “beggar.” Beggarmaster is the functional equivalent of Nusswan; both are motivated by the same thirst for profit, and both see the world as little more than an arbitrary place where business is carried out. The streets occupied by pavement dwellers are not free, open, or public; they are controlled by ruthless businessmen who keep detailed records of who begs where and how. The so-called “cracks” through which a few unfortunate souls fall as society moves through its Stages of Growth are so plentiful and wide that they have come to constitute a valid business opportunity for enterprising people like Beggarmaster.

Beggarmaster institutes and enforces violent laws that bring the discourse of development economics directly under his control; the novel makes it clear that his laws (such as extortion) are no different from those enforced by the state through the police, politicians, or courts. The power Beggarmaster exercises on the street is no different — in kind or degree — from that exercised by Nusswan in his factories and office buildings. In a manner of speaking, Nusswan and Beggarmaster are complementary parts of the same system: Nusswan’s day-to-day business activities create the victims, while Beggarmaster keeps them on the very cusp of existence, extracts a few more *paise* of profit from them, and earns their undying gratitude by keeping them alive. If Beggarmaster seems more brutal and

violent than his counterpart, it is only because he has no practical need to legitimize his actions in any terms other than those provided by the street itself. In other words, Beggarmaster tells a more persuasive, believable story of economic development than his counterpart because the former uses the “language of vagueness” and grotesque realism while the latter speaks in the reductive, empirical, monologic language of the Emergency.

Beggarmaster understands the genre of “grotesque realism” and the efficacy of the “language of vagueness.” For example, Beggarmaster has a sketchbook with notes and diagrams relating to what he refers to as “the dramaturgy of begging” (516). In it he has a drawing entitled “Spirit of Collaboration” that features “a lame beggar and a blind beggar, where the blind man carries the cripple on his shoulders” (516). This, according to Beggarmaster, would produce a fortune in coins because it represents what he refers to as the “living, breathing image of the ancient story about friendship and cooperation” (517). This “spirit of collaboration” is, of course, the antithesis of the “20-Point Programme” of economic initiatives introduced under the Emergency. Curiously enough, however, in its language and ethic, Beggarmaster’s dramaturgy is precisely what Keynes emphasized in his famous speech (act) that brought the Bretton Woods institutions (and so, in many respects, the discourse of economic development) into being. Keynes spoke in glowing terms of the spirit of collaboration that created and, with luck, would sustain the World Bank and the IMF:

Finally, we have perhaps accomplished here in Bretton Woods something more significant than what is embodied in this Final Act. We have shown that a concourse of 44 nations are actually able to work together at a constructive task in amity and unbroken concord. Few believed it possible. If we can continue in a larger task as we have begun in this limited task, there is hope for the world. At any rate we shall now disperse to our several homes with new friendships sealed and new intimacies formed. We have been learning to work together. If we can so continue, this nightmare [World War II] in which most of us here present have spent too much of our lives will be over. The brotherhood of man will have become more than a phrase.

Mr. President, I move to accept the Final Act. (XXVI 103)

This is an interesting example of how the “language of vagueness” is employed to create a specific kind of knowledge about what economic

development is trying to achieve. As history has shown, the “spirit of collaboration” that helped give birth to the discourse of economic development died at the level of multilateral decision-making shortly after its creation; as Mistry has shown, it is still used in conjunction with “grotesque realism” and vague language to tell the “real” story of economic development today. Indeed, the “spirit of collaboration” dominates the entirety of *A Fine Balance*. Consider the grotesque image of Om and Ishvar reduced from tailors to pavement dwellers at the end of the novel: Om is pulling Ishvar on a wheeled platform; the former is castrated against his will; the latter is an amputee, having lost his legs to blood poisoning caused by the government’s forced “sterilization program.”²⁴ They literally *embody* Beggarmaster’s and Keynes’s co-operative spirit, and tell a disturbing story about the economic forces that brought them to such a depraved state. Ultimately, grotesque bodies working together in “the spirit of cooperation” are all that remain at the end of this realist novel. Beggarmaster, the State of Emergency, and Indira Gandhi herself are all dead. The beggars use their bodies with a “realistic historic awareness . . . not [with an] abstract thought about the future but [with a] living sense that each man belongs to the immortal people who create history” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 367). Through their suffering and their bodies, the beggars use the “language of vagueness” to relate the stories that monologic economic discourse fails to tell.

* * *

In its presentation of the “begging industry” (and, indeed, of the impoverished lives of all the characters), Mistry’s novel does something that economic discourse does not, or perhaps cannot, achieve. By charting out the complex series of events that lead to the beggars’ current station in life, the novel makes it impossible to engage Beggarmaster and the unfortunate people who work for him in isolation from their political, economic, social, historical environment. This is, of course, one of the features of the realist novel that Lukàcs identifies and celebrates with such enthusiasm. Indeed, Mistry’s novel is blatant, if not pedantic, about presenting the begging industry (and even Beggarmaster himself) as the *effect* or consequence of a number of complex social, economic, and political discourses — the same discourses that generate such generous profits for Nusswan and, presumably, other members of the economic elite. As Schneller notes, Mistry’s novel makes “history visitable and visible” and should,

therefore, occupy a central place “in the ongoing postmodern debates about truth, meaning and interpretation of the past” (250). My argument here is similar to Schneller’s, but I am making a more specific claim with regards to the relationship between *A Fine Balance* and the discourse of economics (not just “history” in the more generic sense); and, whereas Schneller notes that history is made “visitable and visible” in Mistry’s text, I am suggesting that the narrator’s representation of the material world is part of an overall epistemological framework homologous to that developed by Keynes in his effort to represent the same world in his economic writings.

A Fine Balance uses carnivalesque behaviour, grotesque realism, the “language of vagueness” and the framework of the realist novel to comment on the *effects* of the discourses of development economics and the State of Emergency; it uses the language and conventions of literary realism to help identify what has rendered marginalized peoples speechless throughout history and to tell an alternative story of economic development in India. Ultimately, Mistry’s novel illustrates Bakhtin’s argument that “it is impossible to represent an alien ideological world adequately without first permitting it to sound” (“Discourse” 335). Many of these “sounds,” according to Bakhtin, are generated by the “speaking person [who] is always, to one degree or another, an ideologue” (333); Om, Ishvar and Mr. Valmik are examples of these “ideologues” insofar as they resist, subvert, and ultimately delegitimize the authoritative discourses of economic development and political tyranny. Through the characters, events, and actions of this neo-realist novel, Bakhtin’s “alien ideological world,” the world of economic development, is brought to life.

In *A Fine Balance*, the story of economic development is told in a manner similar to that advocated by Keynes in his writings on the “language of vagueness” — the characters tell stories to share their knowledge of the real world, not to represent it with absolute precision. My identification of the homologous relationship between Mistry’s use of post-modern storytelling in a realist novel and Keynes’s use of the “language of vagueness” in economic discourse is heuristic and intended to identify common epistemological ground shared by literary and economic discourse. As such, I hope this study helps inspire more dialogue between two disciplines that are not nearly so different as we might be tempted to believe. Perhaps Keynes’s famous words from the end of *The General*

Theory will help emphasize the need for literary critics to pay greater attention to the discourse of economics:

The ideas of economists are more powerful than is commonly understood. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. (VII 383)

Literary discourse and literary criticism are, I think, uniquely equipped to lay bare the storytelling strategies of these “academic scribblers” and to suggest ways of interpreting their stories.

NOTES

¹ Deirdre McCloskey’s *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985) is often credited with initiating the study of “economic discourse.” In this text and in her many subsequent studies of the language of economics, McCloskey argues that economists rely upon “metaphors about the economy” and insists that they need “to become aware of their metaphors and improve them in shared discourse” (184). Since McCloskey’s 1985 publication, a number of economists have engaged this debate, the breadth and depth of which is well represented in the following anthologies: Willie Henderson’s *Economics and Language* (1993), Warren Samuels’s *Economics as Discourse* (1990), Robert Solow’s *The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric* (1988), Arjo Klamer’s *Conversations with Economists* (1984), and Don Lavoie’s *Economics and Hermeneutics* (1990).

² As Backhouse, Dudley-Evans, and Henderson argue, the vast majority of economists today insist that economics is a discipline primarily “concern[ed] with mathematical sophistication and rigour” (2) and are dedicated to the preservation of “an uncritical positivist self-image” (2).

³ Economics is, of course, typically referred to as a “science.” In the words of Raymond Benton Jr., economics is considered a science because it

shares the general goals of science and is subject to scientific standards of verification. Science ... seeks to understand the universal processes, natural and social, in terms of which life must, of necessity, be lived. It seeks to symbolically formulate the general laws of nature, laws which remain largely hidden to ordinary observation. To the economist this means grasping the regularities of the economic process by formulating economic laws, laws of the economy that govern man’s behavior. The standard of verification is the accuracy of the predictions that the theory generates. (70)

⁴ See Carabelli’s *On Keynes’s Method* (1988) and Marzola and Silva’s collection of essays *John Maynard Keynes: Language and Method* (1994).

⁵ By “development economics” I mean that aggregate of economic theories dedicated to improving the economic health of developing countries (i.e., those countries traditionally identified as belonging to the Third World). In his Foucauldian study of the discourse of development entitled *Encountering Development*, Arturo Escobar offers a scathing critique of

how “development” functions as an instrument of power and knowledge for the donor, at the continued expense of the supposed beneficiaries in the developing world. When I employ the notoriously ambiguous, catachrestic term “development,” I am referring to the “process” as outlined in this passage from Escobar’s remarkable study:

Economic growth presupposed the existence of a continuum stretching from poor to rich countries, which would allow for the replication in the poor countries of those conditions characteristic of mature capitalist ones (including industrialization, urbanization, agricultural modernization, infrastructure, increased provision of social services, and high levels of literacy). Development was seen as the process of transition from one situation to the other. This notion conferred upon the processes of accumulation and development a progressive, orderly, and stable character that would culminate in modernization and ‘stages of economic growth’ theories. (38)

These presuppositions generated disastrous results, some of which are outlined with excruciating detail in Mistry’s novel. Leftist critics of neoliberal economics such as Escobar lay bare the theoretical foundation for Om and Ishvar’s poverty. As Escobar correctly observes, “Industrialization and urbanization were seen [in the early stages of development discourse] as the inevitable and necessarily progressive routes to modernization. Only through material advancement could social, cultural, and political progress be achieved. This view determined the belief that capital investment was the most important ingredient in economic growth and development” (39-40). Of course, that “capital” was unlikely to come from domestic savings or foreign corporations, so it was ultimately provided by multilateral and bilateral institutions such as the World Bank or USAID or CIDA. This is the model of “development” delegitimized and rewritten through the literary realism of *A Fine Balance*.

⁶ Escobar’s *Encountering Development* offers a detailed critical overview and analysis of the different models comprising development discourse. See especially Chapter Three, “Economics and the Space of Development: Tales of Growth and Capital” (56-101).

⁷ For those readers interested in such quantifiable data and the positivist mode of storytelling, the following sources confirm this close relationship between India and the World Bank: Bambhri’s *World Bank and India* (Chapters 4 and 5); Balasubramanyam’s *The Economy of India* (Chapter 8) and Pal’s *World Bank and the Third World Countries of Asia* (Chapters 8-10). These texts are all dated, but provide a historically relevant perspective for the time period in question.

⁸ The Bretton Woods Conference, held in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire in July, 1944, was established to bring the leading economic minds of the United States and Britain together to develop a plan for rebuilding Europe after the devastation of World War II and for reconstructing the economies of the colonized countries throughout the southern hemisphere. Here, the organizing concepts and guiding principles of development economics were established and instituted in the form of the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (popularly known as the World Bank).

⁹ All references to Keynes’s writing are to *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes* (1971-1980). Citations include the appropriate volume and page numbers.

¹⁰ For an overview of Keynes’s relationship to Wittgenstein and other Cambridge philosophers, see Coates’s *The Claims of Common Sense* (1996).

¹¹ Coates draws a distinction between Wittgenstein’s earlier use of “vague” in the *Tractatus* (1922) and his later usage in the *Investigations* (1953). In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein presumed “that ordinary language was in order” (Coates 54) and logically structured; in the *Investigations*, all language is vague, and is best understood as a kind of “game.” I am referring, here, to the notion of “vague language” delineated in the *Investigations*.

¹² Here, I am arguing something rather different from Bruna Ingrao in her essay “Economic Life in Nineteenth-Century Novels.” In that paper, Ingrao focuses primarily on authors’ representations of economic behaviour, *not* on how a literary text illustrates the relationship between knowledge production and economic theories. My argument differs from Ingrao’s insofar as I am focusing not only on characters’ economic behaviour but also on the common epistemology informing both Keynes’s and Mistry’s attempts to tell stories about the economy. It is worth noting, however, that Ingrao’s passing reference to Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative has great potential for the study of economic and literary discourse. Future investigations of the intersection of economics and literature would do well to consider Ricoeur’s theoretical model as a point of departure.

¹³ More specifically, the Bank created institutions such as the *Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India* (ICICI) to facilitate foreign investment in India. In his discussion of the relationship between the World Bank and the growth of capitalism in India, Bhambhri states that as early as 1954 the “World Bank recognized that the foundations of capitalism in the developing countries would be strengthened by establishing institutions for the supply of resources for investment in industrial development” (92). To pursue this goal, the Bank helped establish “a corporation to finance existing and new industries through loans and equity participation and also provide technical and managerial advice to private business ventures” (93). Ultimately, in 1955 ICICI was created to assist with the “development of private industry [such as the hotel which transforms the Kohlah family’s life] in the country” (93). It might be more accurate to say, then, that the Bank is at least *indirectly* responsible for the kinds of “development” initiatives described by the narrator of *A Fine Balance*.

¹⁴ By this I mean the model of economic development advocated by W.W. Rostow in the 1950s and adopted by bilateral and multilateral funding agencies through the 1950s until the early 1970s. Rostow’s original formulation of this thesis appeared in “The Take-Off into Self-Sustained Growth,” published in *Economic Journal* in March 1956. His famous book-length treatment of the subject was published four years later with the provocative title *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*.

¹⁵ Laura Moss explains this refusal to provide a happy ending as an example of how Mistry’s characters cannot exist in a “moderate position,” a position that is at once individual and part of a community. With reference to Homi Bhabha’s “idea of the proximate, the ‘minority position’” (160), Moss argues that Mistry refuses to allow his characters to exist in “the interstitial space of identification ... the ambivalent position of being at once one in a community (third person) and an individual in society (first person)” (160). In *A Fine Balance*, the moderate position, the position where the subject identifies herself as both first and third person, is impossible. The forces of the Emergency and, I would argue, economic development, are too strong — thus, “Mistry’s realist novel concludes with the collapse of the apartment community which, in turn, leads to Dina’s loss of independence, Ishvar’s loss of his legs, Om’s loss of his ‘manhood’ and Maneck’s loss of life” (160). As I illustrate below vis-à-vis Bahktin, the collapse of this “community” can be read in a more positive, redemptive manner, and is not necessarily an indication of the text’s fatalism.

¹⁶ In a curious book published and distributed widely throughout India at the height of the Emergency in 1976, J.S. Bright enthusiastically promotes the “Emergency” as a comprehensive set of economic policies referred to collectively as the “20-Point Economic Programme.” Directing attention away from the political crisis facing the nation, Bright insists that “Politics and economics are two wheels of social progress. It is not possible to have socialism without a planned economy” (21). In this book, economic necessity is presented as the rationale for activities which compromise political freedom. For example, Bright notes that the “emergency will keep petty politics frozen for the moment. The main effort is being directed at making the wheels of the economy move smoothly with industrialists, tech-

nocrats and trade unions meshing into productive mechanism. She [Indira Gandhi] is anxious to create a healthy climate for such a co-operative endeavour in the country's economic life by enforcing stricter discipline in various walks of life" (53). Unabashedly propagandistic, this text provides fascinating insight into the policies and initiatives that underlie the characters' many challenges in *A Fine Balance*.

¹⁷ Indeed, Mrs. Gupta seems almost to be quoting from Bright's book of Emergency propaganda. Bright writes, "The second positive aspect of the emergency is the discipline which it has introduced in the industrial and commercial life of the country. ... A welcome by-product of the present emergency has been a sharp fall in the normal crime rate all over the country, following ... increased police vigilance and the fear of quick retribution. It has been officially stated that the political personalities and others detained under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act constitute only a modest percentage of the total number of arrests made of various categories of anti-social elements" (51-52).

¹⁸ In a recent essay entitled "'Visible and Visitable': The Role of History in Gita Mehta's *Raj* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*," Beverly Schneller focuses exclusively on the representation of political discourse in the novel. I agree with her claim that the "use of history [in *A Fine Balance*] is not limited to images and metaphor as the State-of-Emergency is a violent character in the novel" (243), but I take issue with her analysis of that "character" in purely political terms. Where Schneller provides an overview of the political history of India leading up to Indira Gandhi's declaration of the State of Emergency (and links this to Mistry's realism), I am suggesting that we consider the relationship between economic discourse, the Emergency, and Mistry's realism.

¹⁹ For example, one reviewer notes that "Rohinton Mistry ... has, in 'A Fine Balance,' produced something reminiscent of a book by one of the great 19th-century European realists — Balzac, Fontane or Galdos, for example. ... Within its sprawling canvas of scenes and characters, it has tried to capture the state of mind of an entire nation, this being the India of Indira Gandhi" (Hill 106). Another insists Mistry has "the compassionate realism of Dickens and a narrative sweep worthy of Balzac" (Amazon.com). Robert Ross has observed that Mistry is "attracted to the Victorian fictional conventions" (241); Gita Viswanath, however, begs an interesting question that I will address through the rest of this paper when she notes that Mistry "attempts neither intervention nor resistance in order to reinscribe the text with the politics of change. Instead, he merely offers his text at the altar of realism" (42).

²⁰ For example, in his recent book-length analysis of Austen, Scott and Eliot, Harry Shaw notes that for many critics, realism "has become not a form that can tell us about life in the modern world, but a form that can tell us nothing useful, and doesn't even know it" (3). As "part of a revolt against the heritage of the Enlightenment," many poststructuralist critics argue that the realist novel is "Naive where it should be subtle, confident because unreflective" and, worst of all, that it "has become the form which, far from showing the way past illusion, itself perpetuates the illusions on which our blind, ideology-ridden life in society depends" (3). Shaw convincingly demonstrates the weaknesses of these kinds of superficial arguments.

²¹ On the topic of epistemology and realism, Shaw suggests that a way of getting "beyond" or "past" language to the referent might be "to recognize that language is already past any one incarnation of itself, and already past single-observer epistemology. The possibility of producing knowledge about the referent, obscured by the semiological hypothesis, follows from the potentialities of language most fully realized not in single words striving to attach themselves to single things, but in sentences and narratives" (71). In short, Shaw — following Ricoeur — argues that language is oriented beyond itself at the level of the sentence, but not at the level of the individual signifier.

²² Granted, Lukács's theoretical analysis of realism is compromised by his rather un-

sophisticated analysis of the relationship between the sign and the referent; and, granted, Lukàcs seems to have suffered from a “myopic fixation on nineteenth-century models which provide him with a set of assumptions that simply can’t prove fruitful for later fiction” (Shaw 7). Thus, in the analysis that follows, I try to use Lukàcs’s insights regarding the realist worldview tempered by Shaw’s attempt to rescue realism from the anti-Enlightenment attack, and in so doing, account for Mistry’s decision to frame his discussion of development economics and the Emergency within the framework of the realist novel.

²³ By “totalization” I simply mean “the standard case against realism” which contends that “the realist attempt to represent the complexities of a given historical moment turns out to be simply an attempt to naturalize that moment, to make its workings seem part of nature, not culture, to deny that it is a product of contingent historical forces” (Shaw 9).

²⁴ Bright argues that “Unsocial and frustrated people are spreading rumours that ration will not be issued to those not undergoing sterilization or salaries will not be paid to employees without producing a certificate of sterilization” (72). He insists that sterilization was voluntary, not mandatory, but also admits that some “elements and forces” in the country “were trying to exploit this issue” (73) and promises that accusations of “coercion or misuse of authority” (such as the kind experienced by Om and Ishvar) would be investigated. In short, he indirectly confirms the plausibility of Mistry’s account of the forced sterilization program.

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