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# “LANGUAGES FOR AMERICA”: DIALECTS, RACE, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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“LANGUAGES FOR AMERICA”: DIALECTS, RACE, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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To my God, thank you for your grace. To my beautiful wife, Tara, and family, thank you for your love. To the members of my committee, specifically Dr. Daniel Cottom, thank you for your patience.

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**Abstract**

I argue the process of institutionalizing linguistic stereotypes began as authors during the nineteenth century pursued ways of characterizing the voices of literary figures using nontraditional languages. Literary dialects became a method for visualizing perceived racial differences among various minority groups and influenced the stereotypes associated with each discourse community. In addition, several authors used dialects in literature to challenge these stereotypes and to create alternative narratives of the linguistic history of the United States. Consequently, this dissertation examines the development of a linguistic national consciousness as it evolved from the early national period to the first decade of the twentieth century. Authors such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge, James Russell Lowell, Charles Godfrey Leland, Bret Harte, and Charles W. Chesnutt contributed to the growth of the American languages in significant ways. Brackenridge, for example, although considered one of the leading advocates of genocidal racism toward the treatment of Native Americans, used a number of dialects in *Modern Chivalry*, to capture the varieties of social discourse found on the American frontier during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Lowell, in *The Biglow Papers*, used a homespun Yankee dialect to question the political correctness of the US-Mexican War of 1847. After years of studying the social nature of languages such as Shelta and Romany, Leland created a dynamic German American immigrant named Hans Breitmann to question the correlation of languages with the essence of a person or ethnic group. Both Harte and Chesnutt used dialectal humor to illustrate the similarities and differences among minority cultures and mainstream society.

Harte's Truthful James poems illuminated the racial tension between Caucasians and Asian Americans in the western frontier while Chesnutt's irony revealed the arbitrary nature of the color line that separated African Americans and white society at the turn of the twentieth century. Each of these authors used language to demonstrate that no single language, national identity, or racial stereotype could characterize the history of the American people. Dialect, as Walt Whitman said of language, is not "an abstract construction of the learn'd, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground." For Whitman and the authors in this study, language belonged to the people, and their choices to create linguistic change had a root cause in their desire to let it represent what they wanted to say and how they wanted to represent themselves.

# Introduction:

# "Languages for America":

# Dialects, Race, and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Among trends in American studies, the analysis of dialects in literature occupies a relatively minor position. While a great deal has been written about certain authors, such as Mark Twain and Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose literary dialects have left a tremendous mark on the development of American literature, very little has been said about those authors who viewed nonstandard languages as more than just a method for character development. For those authors who viewed dialects as a medium for creating a uniquely American national consciousness, very little has come in the way of understanding these dialects on their own terms and not in relation to the numerous genres popular during the nineteenth century. The rugged voices of Twain's characters and the dialects of Dunbar's poetry are often acknowledged as pre-eminent examples of an American style, but during the nineteenth century, there existed a host of other writers whose written dialects were simply considered popular fiction, unqualified to reach the ranks of true literature. There also existed a multitude of writers whose dialects were seen as characteristic traits of popular genres, and the social and historical impact of their dialects are often overlooked by the ongoing preoccupation with American realism in all of its various strands, local-color, regionalism, and so on. Thus, for many valid and complicated reasons, dialects in these particular writers are viewed as a minor trend in the shadows of much larger issues.[1]

This is not to imply that dialects have gone unnoticed in nineteenth-century American literature or that they do not deserve critical attention. Quite the opposite

[1] Holger Kersten makes the argument that dialects during the second half of the nineteenth century have been neglected because of their minor position. For further discussion, see Kersten's "The Creative Potential of Dialect Writing in Later-Nineteenth-Century America."

is true. In fact, a small field of past and present scholars has recognized the presence of dialects throughout the history of American literature. Attempting to categorize the various nineteenth-century dialects, these scholars generally agree that dialects can be organized into two separate categories – those dialects appearing before the Civil War and the post-bellum blossoming of regional and vernacular discourses. Both of these categories contain even smaller subcategories, but for the most part, American language and literary historians have accepted the Civil War as the moment of transition between two distinct trends in literary dialects.

For some critics, this transition is an important one. It recognizes that after the Civil War literary dialects became more hostile, more apt to stereotype and ridicule rather than to create a realistic or comical character. However, from the beginning of our nation's literary imagination, dialects have mattered precisely because they have been used to stereotype certain discourse communities *and* criticize those stereotypes. Dialects during the antebellum period were not used solely for humorous purposes but were an integral part in many authors' attempts to define America in contrast to other nations and their languages. Dialect authors created characters whose voices represented nontraditional ways of defining an American linguistic consciousness, and their efforts helped shape what we now consider an American literary vernacular style. Since the early National period, literary dialects have influenced the way Americans perceived the numerous discourse communities that exist within the United States. They are important to understanding later post-bellum dialects, and they help twenty-first-century critics discuss the history and politics of linguistic stereotyping.

This dissertation argues that although the writings of early national and antebellum authors such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge, James Russell Lowell, and Charles Godfrey Leland are considered comical representations of nonstandard literary languages, they are also quite political in obvious ways. Their stories illustrate the conflict among the many linguistic and ethnic communities struggling to be heard as American authors sought to create an American voice and language. Consequently, these authors and many like them created a legacy that later dialect authors continued to develop. Bret Harte and Charles Chesnutt, while considered members of the post-bellum "political" trend, also relied heavily on the comical aspects of dialect literatures. Although the political impact of their dialects is felt and seen even today, their use of humor is frequently ignored or considered secondary to the larger purposes of their writing, purposes that included arguing for racial equality among Caucasian, African, and Asian ethnic groups in the United States.

*Languages for America* explores the similarities and differences among these authors and examines the influence American literature has had on the development of linguistic stereotyping. Language differences have always existed in America, and for some people, these differences are used to justify attitudes of racism and exclusion. David Crystal explains the evolution of linguistic intolerance in *The Stories of English*. This work intertwines a sociolinguistic history of the English language with a study of the literary and cultural representation of a number of different pidgin, dialect, and nonstandard variations of English. Within this context, Crystal identifies a process of institutionalization in which personal attitudes about

language become nationalized and create a pattern of "dialect stereotyping" that influences popular beliefs about those who sound differently than the stereotypically average American person. At a moment of juncture between sociolinguistic and literary approaches, Crystal comments on the role of dialects in shaping public perception of linguistic differences. He writes,

> In modern times, accent and dialect stereotyping has grown to be a social disease, in which different groups are perceived to be, for example, of lower intelligence or higher criminality purely on the basis of how they sound… The operative word is 'nationally.' At a personal level, people have always liked or disliked the accents and dialects they hear around them, and held opinions about individual speakers. That is human nature. The problem arises when these attitudes become generalized, and lose touch with social reality… The problem becomes particularly acute when the attitudes are institutionalized in literary form. (346)

Crystal's comment illustrates the ways that attitudes about spoken languages influence attitudes behind written languages. When the "social disease" of dialect stereotyping motivates the production of literary vernacular traditions, it becomes clear why the tendency to over-generalize these traditions becomes problematic. Each instance of a dialectal representation of a character's voice that appears in a literary work instigates a new moment of conflict, so that while some patterns are recognizable, almost all dialect usage is influenced by an author's personal opinion attempting to institutionalize a specific ideology. Dialects, in this case, bridge the

gap between private and public opinion. Whether they are working against stereotypes or trying to reinforce them, literary dialects act as a medium to comment on national attitudes. Even if an author is simply using dialects to create humor and has no pre-conceived agenda, the dialects he or she uses may intentionally or unintentionally affect public opinion. Therefore, it becomes necessary to study the use of dialect in individual circumstances to understand how an author shapes and, in turn, is shaped by social influences.

Crystal continues to discuss literary dialects and the role authors play in selecting which languages to represent with dialects. "It is also authors," Crystal argues, "who decide which personalities, groups, or domains of society, whether originating within or outside the country, shall be given a nonstandard literary representation. In principle any setting or subject-matter could receive a nonstandard treatment; in practice only certain ones do" (351). This is the major question motivating this study. Why do authors subject certain communities to nonstandard literary representation knowing that this type of characterization will distort or enhance the reputation of these discourse communities? This choice on the author's part reflects a willingness to laugh at, criticize, or extol the character of groups perceived to be different, quaint, or eccentric. Questioning an author's choice not only illuminates an author's intended purpose; it also helps to reveal the prevalent social attitudes towards those groups of people considered American or un-American. Literary dialects, then, illustrate how Americans perceive themselves and those qualities that make up the historical American character.

Like Walt Whitman, who in an 1860 version of "I Hear America Singing" wrote, "Come! some of you! Still be flooding/ The States with hundreds and thousands of mouth-songs fit for the States only," this dissertation seeks out those unheard "mouth-songs" and asks why only some have been fit for the States. It interrogates the neglect of certain American linguistic roots and questions the growing intolerance toward a handful of foreign languages and the dialects that result in the interference between these disliked languages and the perceived American English. Most importantly, though, the following dissertation examines how nineteenth-century dialects have created the social disease of American dialect stereotyping.

Examples of antebellum dialects are scarce, particularly before 1830. Although they certainly existed, literary dialects tended to be read as vulgar and unbecoming of any worthwhile fictional character. Yet, in the United States, debates about both written and spoken language carried enormous consequences. For some people during this time, American English should resemble its British counterpart and remain a cultural bond that united the former colony with its mother country. This meant that the prescriptivism of Samuel Johnson provided strict guidelines to follow for the adaptation of a national language in the United States, and that if American authors wanted to enter the global arena of Anglophone culture and literature, they would abide by British standards. For all linguistic matters, the United States would remain dependent on Great Britain.[2]

[2] For a more detailed analysis of the colonial American dependence on British language standards, see Paul K. Longmore's "They…Speak Better English Than the English Do."

For those advocating American cultural and political independence, the lingua rustica of the American people presented another dilemma. On the one hand, it should be allowed to develop naturally, unhindered by any European influences. Americanisms were proof that a democratic government protected individual rights including free speech, and the freedom to develop a unique American version of the English language promoted a sense of linguistic patriotism. On the other hand, linguistic tolerance threatened to fracture the country into a multitude of discourse communities unable to effectively communicate with one another. Christopher Looby, in *Voicing America*, summarizes the arguments concerning the early development of language in the United States: "National independence and national unity both seemed dependent upon linguistic matters, and to be placed at risk therefore by the commonality of language between the United States and Great Britain, and the multiplicity of tongues in America" (217). For many Americans, dialects represented a compromise between efforts to distance the United States from Great Britain, and the need to declare America's nascent cultural identity.

Caught in the middle of this language debate, scholars, politicians, and authors defended their positions in writing. Politicians such as Benjamin Franklin and John Quincy Adams involved themselves in this argument by writing works on rhetoric and the use of spoken dialects.[3] Well known scholars such as Noah Webster compiled massive dictionaries intended to document the development of a unique strand of American English. William Thornton, a lesser known American scholar, invented what he thought would be a universal language and named it the American

[3] See Adams's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* (1810) and Franklin's *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America* (1782).

Language. Collecting the phonetic sounds of an actual language spoken by the citizens of the United States, Thornton believed this language would be appropriate in America since the New World was a place to correct old mistakes. Thornton's dissertation on the subject, addressed to the "sitiznz ov Nore Amerika," argued,

> You have already taught a race of men to reject the imposition of tyranny, and have set a brilliant example, which all will follow, when reason has assumed her sway. You have corrected the dangerous doctrines of European powers, correct now the languages you have imported, for the oppressed of various nations knock at your gates, and desire to be received as your brethren. As you admit them facilitate your intercourse, and you will mutually enjoy the benefits. The American Language will thus be as distinct as the government, free from all the follies of unphilosophical fashion, and resting upon truth as its only regulator. I perceive no difficulties: if you find any, I trust they are not without remedy. (4-7)[4]

Language was political, and for Franklin, Adams, Webster, and others, it was a chance to advocate American patriotism or its displeasure at the lack of a global reputation for this young country. More importantly, language was national. It was a chance to create and defend a national linguistic identity, one that would inform a national consciousness for centuries to come.

In literature during this time, written language was predictably standard. The Addisonian style prevailed in much of the literature of early America. Nonetheless,

[4] Thornton's dissertation, published in 1793, is written in both standard English and his newly invented alphabet.

a few examples stand out as challenges to the British way of writing. The anonymously written *Adventures of Jonathan Corncob, Loyal American Refugee. Written by Himself* (1787) tells the story of the American Revolution from the perspective of a native-born American and includes some American slang such as "blaze away" and the American invention of "bundling."[5] While the text is not entirely written in an American dialect, it does present a rare glimpse into the origins of some American dialect language and creates a sense that American culture, as well as its language, was developing a distinct style. Another author, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, provides one of the earliest examples of the various languages flourishing in the American frontier. *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815) uses several different dialects associated with characters of differing ethnic and national identities. Brackenridge's most highly acclaimed satire, *Modern Chivalry*, is one of the earliest known attempts to capture the unique voices of characters as they actually sound and not as they should appear in proper literature. Nonetheless, prior to the 1830s, dialects were, by far, outweighed by traditional literary language.

During the period between the 1830s and the Civil War, however, dialect literature started to appear more frequently in the works of American humorists. These early dialect writers paved the way for future generations of authors working with the languages of common Americans and started a trend that would take hold shortly after the Civil War. Henry Nash Smith, in Robert Spiller's edited *Literary History of the United States*, noted the emergence of dialects during this period and argued that the presence of dialect literature marked a transition away from the

[5] Although this book was published in London, the name Jonathan Corncob is assumed to be a pseudonym for an unknown, presumably American, author. The opening chapters, if they are autobiographical, tell of Corncob's birth and early life in America.

standardized languages of previous literary traditions. Smith comments, "Despite frequent exhortations by critics who urged the use of native materials, American writers during the first half of the century found it difficult to disentangle themselves from the notion that 'low' scenes and characters could appropriately be dealt with only as comic. The humorists who created Major Jack Downing and Sam Slick and the Davy Crockett of the almanacs made an important transition from the conventional contempt for illiterate characters by endowing their creatures with an engaging shrewdness and a vein of poetry growing out of the folk experience"(651). Using dialects, that "vein of poetry growing out of the folk experience," Smith argues, helped spark an interest in the common vernacular languages of average Americans. Authors such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (*Georgia Scenes* 1835), James Russell Lowell (*The Biglow Papers* 1848), and T.B. Thorpe (*The Hive of the Bee Hunter* 1854) found a way to incorporate dialect languages as comedy into their short stories in an effort to overcome the previous stigmas attached to nonstandard languages. They, along with others, initiated the use of dialects in American literature, and, consequently, dialects leading up to the Civil War are frequently assumed to be of a purely comic nature although, as Smith notes, dialects created characters with an "engaging shrewdness" that might indicate these authors intended more than just comedy for these vernacular languages.

During and after the Civil War dialects proliferated into a number of different genre traditions. From the local color movement to the high realism of William Dean Howells, dialects acted as a type of "literary capital," allowing some authors access to publishing houses that would have previously rejected any literature written

in nonstandard literary prose (Brodhead *Cultures*117). As dialects became more commonplace, previously unheard voices were admitted into the circle of American literature, and the scope of American authors broadened to include women, minorities, and those outside the literary capitals of Boston and New York. Most notably, while authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain started using dialects in their works, a number of other authors emerged who showcased dialects as a primary feature of their writing. Hamlin Garland referred to this group of writers as creating a "cult of the vernacular," and many of the authors within this group gained notoriety and popularity as local color, regionalist, and realist writers (108). Bret Harte is perhaps the best of these authors, although his fame is mostly predicated on his brief success and highly publicized demise. Those writing after and at the same time as Harte, such as Edward Eggleston, Charles Godfrey Leland, Finley Peter Dunne, Alexander Posey, Joseph Kirkland, James Whitcomb Riley, and Harold Frederic carried the torch of dialect writing into the later half of the nineteenth century. Many created fictional personas using the vernacular and regional languages appropriate to their tales of everyday life. Some used dialects to expose the multi-linguistic roots of American life. Still others found a way to use nonstandard language to satirize American culture and politics. While this is not an exhaustive list of dialect writers during this time period, it does illustrate a significant increase in those American authors who chose to reject standard English for one purpose or another. For good or bad, dialects in American literature dramatically spiked in popularity after the Civil War.

This post-bellum period in American literary history also witnessed the emergence of several major genres. A quick overview of any number of literary anthologies covering the time span from 1860 to 1920 will reveal the influence of vernacular and regional discourse on the development of these American genres. In Sacvan Bercovitch's *Cambridge History of American Literature*, for instance, dialects continually surface as an important element in several different, yet related, genres. Richard Brodhead also argues that dialect speech is the "major requirement" of both the local color movement and regionalist fiction of the 1860s (56). Nancy Bentley, discussing the major trends of the 1870s, recognizes the role of dialects in the shaping of the southern plantation tradition. Noting the "verbal dexterity" of Uncle Julius, the narrator of Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales*, Bentley suggests that Chesnutt's use of a southern negro dialect "redoubles its ironic power by making the conventions of plantation fiction, so often apologist in tone and effect, obliquely expose the violence and humiliation at the heart of southern slavery" (201). For Bentley, Chesnutt's dialects both acknowledge and rewrite the conventions of the plantation tradition. They are pivotal to Chesnutt's implied criticism of racism and southern fiction. Walter Benn Michaels also draws attention to the influence of literary dialects on the conventions of American realism. While analyzing Abraham Cahan's use of Yiddish in his novels, Michaels argues that Cahan had to work against the "prestige of dialect" during the 1890s in order to emphasize that he was actually writing in another language and not just a pidgin form of English (315). Cahan frequently italicized his Yiddish dialogue so that his readers, who were perhaps inundated with dialects in American literature, would not confuse Yiddish

with the conventional use of phonetic misspellings to represent the nonstandard use of English. Michaels's comment illustrates the pervasive nature of dialects after the Civil War and leading into the twentieth century.

Antebellum dialects are often read as comical, post-bellum dialects as examples of local color, regionalism, or realism. Consequently, these later dialects are perceived to be more political or involved in larger discussions about American culture. They are considered more relevant than their predecessors in developing American literature. However, if we accept this traditional understanding of vernacular languages in the nineteenth century, we underestimate their importance to American history and culture. Writing about the poetry of Bret Harte and John Hay in 1931, Hamlin Garland captured both the contemporary and historical attitude towards dialect literatures: "Unimportant as these poems of Harte and Hay may appear today, they were immensely significant of a new country, a new freedom, and a changing people. They were all as far from John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, and Peter Stuyvesant in thought, as the prairies of Illinois and the cañons of California were from the pavements of Boston and Manhattan" (94). In the distance between unimportant and important, between Bret Harte and Cotton Mather, Garland romanticizes the literature of the West and argues that it captured certain essential characteristics of the American people. For Garland, the subject matter of these poems made the difference, but for me, it is the languages, voices, and dialects that created an American character so in tune with the actual lives of the people that make these poems and prose significant to the study of American literature. They, as Garland later says of Harte and Hay, have a "touch of the miraculous" and should be

re-examined for their relevance to American studies. Given the obscure status of most of the authors in the following chapters, it seems necessary to evaluate once more the status of dialect literature in the nineteenth century and to investigate the impact these authors had on the growth of an American national and literary consciousness. Perhaps it is time to consider dialect literature as a major, rather than a minor, trend in the ante- as well as post-bellum periods.

Although the presence of dialects in American literature is without question, the purpose of these dialects remains unsettled, making any attempt to generalize about the role of these vernacular traditions in literature highly problematic. For instance, Richard Bridgman in his 1966 work *The Colloquial Style in America* argues that as dialects became more widely accepted in American literature, they became more conventionalized and eventually shaped the syntax and diction of most major American writers. According to Bridgman, dialects helped repudiate the myth that literature required a written language distinct from the spoken language of average people. Bridgman notes the growth of an American middle class as a primary cause for the acceptance and evolution of dialect literature. Focusing on the increasing use of dialects during the nineteenth century, Bridgman writes, "If the vernacular is not regarded as inevitably vulgar, but merely as ordinary, then it becomes clear that as the nineteenth century wore on, ordinary language became increasingly identified with an ever-broadening middle class. As the speech of that class was reproduced with greater fidelity, the basic identity of the vernacular as it appeared in literature changed" (19). Bridgman later argues that as the middle class gained cultural authority, so too did the languages of the middle class, and he finds evidence for this

change in the works of Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. By examining the evolution of American literary aesthetics, Bridgman suggests that the merger of written and spoken languages created both a unique American vernacular and an American colloquial style distinct from any European prose tradition.[6] Hence, certain dialects became institutionalized and laid the foundation for future generations of American authors.

Bridgman's argument, while certainly useful for the ways in which it recognizes the process of standardizing dialect conventions, seems to lack a definition for what he considers the middle class and the languages that are associated with this class. In other words, I am assuming that a Southern negro dialect did not standardize itself in the same manner as James Russell Lowell's Yankee dialect. In his attempt to identify a general colloquial style, Bridgman neglects the subtle nuanced differences between, for example, the work of Ambrose Bierce, who humorously wrote *The Devil's Dictionary* in 1906 as a satirical compilation of cant and slang, and the ethnographic seriousness of Charles Godfrey Leland's work in the 1889 edition of *A Dictionary of Slang*.[7] While these are not traditional fictional works, they do suggest that attitudes towards dialects varied from author to author and illustrate how Bridgman perhaps overgeneralized a single cause

[6] For Bridgman, the difference between the vernacular and the colloquial is one of grammar. The vernacular is the vocabulary of a dialect language, while the colloquial refers to the syntax and composition of a dialect. As the vernacular became more standardized and accepted, authors were able to reform their use of this vernacular and create an informal way of writing in dialect. This, in turn, influenced later American writers and began the evolution of an American style.

[7] Although it appeared in several newspapers and journals prior to 1906, Bierce's *A Devil's Dictionary* first appeared in book form as *The Cynic's Wordbook* in 1906. Perhaps more indicative of Bierce's disdain for dialects in literature, *Write it Right, A Little Blacklist* manifests Bierce's expectations for standard writing in literature. Leland contributed to Albert Barrère's edited 1889 dictionary that was officially titled *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon, and Cant Embracing English, American, and Anglo-Indian Slang, Pidgin English, and Tinker's Jargon and Other Irregular Phraseology*.

for all dialects during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By contrast with Bridgman's *The Colloquial Style in America*, I do not ascribe one cause to the rise of dialect, and I consider dialects not typically considered middle class and take into consideration the reaction against dialects in literature during this time.

Taking Bridgman's argument one step further, Gavin Jones develops a more comprehensive look at nineteenth-century dialects in *Strange Talk* (1999). Jones, who works against the perception that all dialects are created equal, considers what Nancy Glazener has termed the "production-reception cycle" of American literature (3). His argument investigates both how audiences perceived dialects and how authors intended them to be read; thus, *Strange Talk* investigates the typographical production of dialects by authors and publishing houses that consciously differentiated between dialect and standard writing within their works. Jones also incorporates how audiences read these differences and modified their expectations as a result. Doing so allows Jones to recognize the ways that dialect authors were impacted by and helped shape the public perception of nonstandard languages. While his argument closely adheres to the traditional chronology of dialects in the nineteenth century, Jones also incorporates the many ways this literature was either rejected or accepted by a general reading audience.

However, Jones, like most critics attempting to grasp the rise of nineteenth-century American dialects, argues that the difference between ante- and post-bellum dialects is one of audience expectations. The early American humorists, those such as Thomas Chandler Halliburton and David Ross Locke, first attempted to use dialects to illustrate an ethical conviction that all men, regardless of their spoken

language, were created equal. However, with no previous American dialect tradition to build from, these authors were perceived as little more than humorous, and their dialects were seen as an "orthographic buffoonery" characterized by "puns, malapropisms, and outrageous misspellings" (38). These antebellum dialect writers were read as nothing more than authors using gimmicks to capture a reading audience. The political aspects of their dialects were often ignored.

After the Civil War and with the opening of the American west, dialects began to be seen as acquiring a political dimension, according to Jones. Philologists during this time considered the vernacular traditions of those who spoke hybrid variations of the English language examples of linguistic corruption. Dialects were no longer judged according to humor and quaintness but were read as dangerous defamations of proper English. While this condemnation of nonstandard languages existed prior to the Civil War and was not unique to the American context, it did become more acute with the rise of pseudo-scientific justifications for racial differences, including justifications based on linguistic variations of the perceived standard English.[8] Dialect writers took advantage of this situation, using literary dialects to classify some spoken languages as a threat to national unity and racial purity. Jones describes the atmosphere surrounding post-Civil War dialects when he writes, "Dialects were considered dangerous by philologists after the Civil War because they combined the threat of ethnic transformation with the fear of political instability… In addition to the 'border defects' that were noticed in English when it came into contact with other-speaking races, the west was described by philologists

[8] Joseph Stocking and Stephen Gould provide excellent examples of the scientific rationale behind racism in the nineteenth century. See Stocking's *Victorian Anthropology* and Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*.

as an area where American democracy existed in its purest form, an area where the potential for anarchy was greatest. While the liberties of the west energized English, too much of this liberty was believed to disrupt national order and coherence" (55). Dialects during the latter half of the nineteenth century were used to discriminate against those threats of ethnic transformation and fears of political instability. They were also used to confront those fears and to challenge political and cultural hegemony. They were simultaneously signs of unity and disarray, democracy and anarchy. In essence, dialects became literary devices steeped in more than just comedy. Dialects became political tools used to advocate racial, economic, and social ideologies. Unlike dialects in the language debates of the colonial and early nationalist period, these dialects identified potential threats to a unified national identity from within the United States.

Because Jones considers the impact of audience expectations and cultural influences on the development of dialect literature, his argument builds upon the work of Bridgman and creates a more thorough analysis of dialects in the nineteenth century. Jones's study investigates more than just the aesthetic changes that caused a colloquial style in literature to become conventional. It accounts for the reception of those dialects as well. Yet, in his attempt to suggest that the public perception of dialects differed before and after the Civil War, from comical to political, Jones implies that audiences failed to recognize the political nature of earlier dialects. By contrast, I show that given the early praise of Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, the openly confrontational nature of James Russell Lowell's *The Biglow Papers*, and the comical nature of Charles Godfrey Leland's *Hans Breitmann's Ballads*, antebellum

dialects were recognized as political and likewise that post-bellum authors relied on dialectal humor. After reading the radically misunderstood reception of Bret Harte's "Plain Language from Truthful James" poems, it seems even more difficult to argue that audiences correctly identified an author's purpose in using dialects. Jones does acknowledge these rebuttals throughout his work, but, at times, his argument, like Bridgman's, forces nineteenth-century dialects into an organization that places what he considers "political" dialects above the purely comical.

More importantly, the distinction itself, between the "comical" and the "political," is problematic. Authors who used dialects did so to entertain a reading audience and to influence its perception of a specific discourse community. The act of creating a character's voice in a nonstandard version of the English language is inherently a political act, and although the voice could be considered humor, it cannot be detached from a political motive. Bridgman's willingness to distinguish between ante- and postbellum dialects is questionable due to this false distinction.

In order to join this conversation and to add to the works of Bridgman, Jones, and others, I turn to five specific authors who in one way or another used dialects to question or reinforce the status quo. Each chapter discusses a single author in relation to the previously mentioned categories of dialect writing – early nationalist, American humor, local color, regionalism, and realism. While each author has received attention for the use of dialects, my argument explains why these authors are relevant to American studies and why, despite their minor status, they should be considered as exemplars of American literature. More significantly, though, I address how these authors have shaped an American national consciousness and the

process of forming group identities based on racial, ethnic, or national differences. As the focus of this study, the struggle against linguistic stereotypes unite each chapter as they attempt to illustrate the development of American languages.

I begin with the work of Hugh Henry Brackenridge. Born in Scotland but raised in Pennsylvania, Brackenridge encompasses the turbulent years of early American democracy. His dialects are the result of characters who, for the most part, speak English with an Irish or Scottish accent, and although he attempts to recreate the voices of African, German, and French American immigrants, Brackenridge's familiarity with the Scottish brogue makes this dialect a recurring feature of his writing. More specifically, the role of this foreign accent in Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* presents a stark contrast to the narrator's desire to teach his readers how to act and sound like modern democrats. Language plays an important role in this epic satire and illustrates Brackenridge's critique of the inability of the United States government to balance large social needs with individual liberties. Due to its widespread popularity during the early nineteenth century and the many precedents it has been credited with establishing, *Modern Chivalry* presents a unique place to begin this study.

From the early nationalists to the American humorists, the second chapter of this dissertation examines James Russell Lowell's *The Biglow Papers*. Known for its humor, *The Biglow Papers* creates a dynamic relationship between Hosea Biglow, the average yankee farmer, and the Reverend Homer Wilbur, Hosea's local pastor. In this relationship, Lowell is able to expose several stereotypes associated with nonstandard language and create a medium for discussing American politics.

Lowell's dialect poetry, while generally considered irrelevant and forgettable in most literary circles, is openly derisive of political policies in the United States. Lowell repeatedly condemns slavery and argues that the Mexican-American conflict is simply an attempt to expand slave territory. Using Hosea as his mouthpiece, Lowell confronts the empty rhetoric of many American politicians at that time. In the opening pages of the collected works of Hosea, Lowell writes, "[Biglow] affirmed that [pastoral poetry] was to him like writing in a foreign tongue, -- that Mr. Pope's versification was like the regular ticking of one of Willard's clocks, in which one could fancy, after long listening, a certain kind of rhythm or tune, but which yet was only a poverty-stricken *tick, tick, tick,* after all" (31). Pointing to the perceived differences between poetic language and the language of an average American farmer allows Lowell to criticize political discourse.

Moving to the mid-nineteenth century and those authors writing on the western frontier, the next chapter in this study exposes misconceptions about Bret Harte's brief career as a popular short story author and poet. Although Margaret Duckett, Gary Scharnhorst, and others have worked to reclaim Harte's reputation, the general perception of Harte is that he exploited the popular imagination by creating colorful tales of the Wild West. Presumably, many of the modern clichés of western literature originated in the works of Bret Harte, making him simply the founding father of trite and overused characters, settings, and dialects. However, in a series of poems written or narrated by one of Harte's frequently used personae, Truthful James, Harte illustrates his sympathy for Asian Americans during a time when Asian immigrants were legally banned from entering the United States.

Ironically, many of these poems were used to justify hatred and discrimination towards Asian Americans, and one poem in particularly, "Plain Language From Truthful James, or the Heathen Chinee," is frequently understood as advocating the xenophobic attitudes of many western Americans. This chapter will discuss how Harte used dialects to exploit, but also to expose, the inherent racism of popular opinion.

My fourth chapter examines the work of Charles Godfrey Leland. Specifically, it analyzes the relationship between Leland as an ethnographer and Leland as a humorous poet. Leland claims that one of the best ways to truly understand a race of people is to know their language. Several of his works approach language in this way and include detailed guides to languages such as the Gypsy Romany tongue, Chinese-English Pidgin, and American slang. Leland is famous for much of his translation work, even taking credit for the discovery of Shelta, a tinker's jargon found in Great Britain. Yet in America Leland's reputation rests solely on his collection of poems featuring Hans Breitmann, a fun-loving German immigrant. Breitmann's adventures take him throughout the United States as he advocates abolition, German philosophy, and plenty of beer drinking. His dialect, while intended by Leland to be comical, creates a unique contrast between American and German perspectives on a majority of topics and presents a chance to investigate the ethnographic appeal of dialects through the use of fictional personae. In what ways does Breitmann's voice collaborate or conflict with Leland's idea that one can comprehend a person's lifestyle by understanding his or her language? How does Breitmann contradict Leland? This chapter seeks the answer to these questions.

Finally, my last chapter investigates the role of dialects in the works of Charles W. Chesnutt. While Chesnutt is well known for the dialects in his short stories, his later novels have not gained as much attention for their use of dialects. This chapter attempts to examine one specific instance of dialect in *The Colonel's Dream.* In this novel, Chesnutt uses dialects in a rather unexpected way to compare the worlds of black and white Americans. Specifically, he writes a letter from a group of prominent white men in the small southern town of Clarendon, South Carolina. The letter is written in a crude dialectal version of the English language and appears to counter the stereotype that all apologists for southern racism are articulate, a perception created by Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots*. This letter from "The Cumitty" sheds light on the harsh reality that to overcome the obstacles of racial inequality the people of the United States must recognize the similarities and differences between the two races. Language, in this case, illustrates how the self-help ideology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must be based on the mutual efforts of both black and white Americans. It is an optimistic endeavor on Chesnutt's behalf, but it is one that he recognizes faces several inherent challenges, roadblocks that make him keenly aware of the tragedy of American race relations.

"Languages for America," in its entirety, investigates the relationship between literary languages and the process of creating and overcoming linguistic stereotypes. Many of the authors using dialects during the nineteenth century did so to reaffirm or challenge the public perception of people who spoke in languages not generally associated with an American linguistic identity. The literary achievements

of these authors often did both reaffirm and challenge the stereotypes that sought to essentialize ethnic groups based on racial or national characteristics. This dissertation adds to the ongoing debate concerning the influence of nontraditional languages and seeks to strengthen the visibility of the multiethnic and multilinguistic history of the United States.

**“By Shaint Patrick”**

**Irish American Dialects in H.H. Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry***

National sovereignty, in the hands of an individual or ruling class within a large and diverse nation-state, can lead to tyranny. When used to justify the protection of individual freedoms, national sovereignty can also potentially lead to an equally destructive mob mentality. That is why, in 1815, Hugh Henry Brackenridge concluded his serially published epic satire with a few brief observations made by the narrator of the work to address the political conditions of a young United States of America.[9] In his estimation, American democracy was at a crucial point of its development and could take several paths for its continued evolution.

> An *individual* at the head of an *organization* may command millions, and keep them in subjection; but in this case, no one can be allowed a will of his own, to the smallest extent. If the *two legged thing* that calls himself a man under such a government, should attempt to *speak or act* for himself, off his head goes, scalp and all, and there is an end of the disturbance. There is one way, which is to let the multitude alone altogether, and then there is anarchy, or no government. If you let them alone, it does not suit very well, for in that case, they rob; and there being no security, there is no industry; and consequently no improvement in the arts, or amelioration in the condition of man. (764-765)

[9] One of the final chapters in the 1815 edition of *Modern Chivalry* contains excerpts either removed from previous editions or additions never included in prior publications. Simply called "Fragments," this chapter further discusses recurring themes found in the work. The passage quoted in this introduction does not directly comment on any specifically American political issue, but it implicitly summarizes the conflict between tyranny and mob rule dramatized in *Modern Chivalry*. Hence, the following passage acts as a commentary on the political conditions of the United States as the narrator perceived them.

Offering his opinion on how to most efficiently and effectively govern human beings, the narrator of *Modern Chivalry* in this passage makes a polemical distinction between tyranny and anarchy and suggests that the people of the United States have to vigilantly protect themselves from the oppression of totalitarianism or the chaos of having no government at all. Brackenridge's narrator seems to think that at this moment in American history the distribution of political power, if not proportionately balanced between these options, could lead to certain forms of government that will destroy the original intentions of the founding fathers. The narrator argues that developing national sovereignty in a nation-state recently removed from colonialism requires careful consideration.

While these remarks may seem serious enough, they come at the close of what was arguably one of the more humorous American satires written at the turn of the nineteenth century.[10] Henry Adams described *Modern Chivalry* as a work that "set an example of both [good nature and humor] once universally popular throughout the South and West" (124). Brackenridge's politics as well as his humor made this work appeal to a large reading audience, and, in reaching the masses of first-generation American citizens, he was able to poke fun at what he thought were the problematic applications of democratic principles. As a lawyer and Supreme Court Justice for the state of Pennsylvania, Brackenridge often found himself mediating between the demands of the people to protect individual rights and the regulatory efforts of a seemingly distant bureaucratic administration unfamiliar with the conditions of life on the frontier. *Modern Chivalry* depicted the competition for

[10] *Modern Chivalry* first appeared in 1792 and was later published as a complete text with chapters and revisions in 1815. See Claude Newlin's introduction to the Hafner Library of Classics edition of the work for a more detailed chronology of the publication dates.

sovereignty he observed in the United States by humorously juxtaposing opposing and often contradictory interpretations of democracy put forth by "two legged things." His satire juggles what appear to be the tyrannical implications of centralizing political authority in a large federal government and the chaos that could result from creating a government run by the people, for the people, and of the people. Meant to parody American politics, Brackenridge's satire was perceived as a spoof of contemporary political theories, including those arguments that assumed average American citizens were incapable of governing themselves.

Yet, in this satirical form, Brackenridge's political views are not clearly defined within the text. In fact, other than the narrator's occasional observations about government, it is rather hard to locate a single political ideology in *Modern Chivalry* that is not challenged by the actions of the work's characters or contradicted by further speculations made by the narrator. Critics such as Joseph Ellis and Emory Elliot find the lack of any conclusive meaning in Brackenridge's text a primary feature of the work. Ellis, for example, describes *Modern Chivalry* as the "first American novel to describe American culture as a bundle of polarities, a set of irreconcilable contradictions and tensions" (101). Elliot also suggests that although Brackenridge's satire attempts to depict an American culture unified by a common political agenda, its structure leaves some readers dissatisfied. He writes, "The overall structure of *Modern Chivalry* is based upon a balance of competing perspectives that are constantly being reconciled into dissatisfying compromises that are necessary for social intercourse and cohesion but are the source of both guilt and frustration to those who do the compromising" (185). Conflict and failed

compromises make Brackenridge's text a work with very few, if any, resolutions. Consequently, discerning between Brackenridge's sarcasm and sincerity in order to identify his political views is a rather difficult task.

Nonetheless, when one reads *Modern Chivalry* and recognizes its polarizing tendencies, certain elements of the work begin to develop greater significance. For instance, in a seemingly innocent joke about Samuel Johnson, the narrator draws his readers' attention to the relationship between national identity and language usage. "The English language," the narrator muses, "is undoubtedly written better in America than in England, especially since the time of that literary dunce, Samuel Johnson, who was totally destitute of taste for the *vrai naturelle* or simplicity of nature" (78). This derisive quip about Samuel Johnson and his prescriptivist beliefs carries more than a few assumptions about the way language can represent national identities and political agendas. Arguing that the British version of the English language is not natural or simple, Brackenridge's narrator draws the reader's attention to the discrepancies between American and British English and emphasizes that if the languages of the two countries are considered different, then it is possible to suggest that their political structures should also vary according to the needs of each populace. Language, in Brackenridge's text, is not just a means for developing characters. It is also a convention used to imply political perspectives and to illustrate the competition for sovereignty in the United States.

Although linguistic differences between British and American English were generally recognized during the decades immediately following the Revolutionary War, most arguments concerning an American English concluded that the familiar

Americanisms were merely archaic or degenerate forms of proper British linguistic norms. Very few scholars who did not share a patriotic duty to uphold an American cultural identity agreed that American English, if it did exist, was an improvement upon its mother tongue. However, Brackenridge's narrator, by claiming that written English was better in America than in England, implied that the ideological and practical differences between the two Englishes created a linguistic hierarchy in which one language was better than the other. He assumed that American English, like American democracy, would naturally develop unhindered by the influences of Great Britain and the rest of Europe. Therefore, without any cultural interference, American English would evolve properly, i.e., "naturally," and develop an identity that matched the presumed innovative nature of American democracy. Disguised as a value judgment about language, the narrator's joke about Samuel Johnson reveals his anti-Federalist opinions and implies his desire to support American cultural and political independence.[11]

The narrator's satirical insult also suggests that national identities and national languages are so interwoven that even two countries sharing the same language can separate from each other through linguistic means. As a politically motivated argument, the narrator's comment is comparable to those theories of linguistic nationalism put forth by Johannes Gottfried von Herder and the Abbè de

[11] Aaron McLean Winter discusses the role of satire in developing American humor during the early years of the nineteenth century in his article "The Laughing Doves of 1812 and the Satiric Endowment of Antiwar Rhetoric in the United States." Separating the Republicans from the Federalists, Winter writes, "'Republicans,' led by [Thomas] Jefferson, then secretary of state, believed that fidelity to the spirit of seventy-six meant *fraternité* with Revolutionary France, and Jefferson's seismic electoral victory in 1800 provided them a firm popular mandate for this position. 'Federalists' followed Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton in defining the American Revolution as a perfection of British politics rather than a repudiation of them" (1565). Brackenridge's narrator favors American independence, and his refusal to accept British English as natural implies a strong anti-British stance.

Condillac, both of whom argued that the process of nation building and linguistic evolution were bound together in an interdependent relationship. Herder, for example, wrote, "Just as there lives only a single human people on earth, likewise only a single human language; but just as this great kind has nationalized itself into so many little types specific to a land, likewise their languages no differently" (158). Read as an illustration of contemporary arguments about linguistic nationalism, the narrator's joke argues that American English is better than British English because the national character of this language better represents the democratic values of the American people and avoids the hierarchical system of classification often associated with Johnson and other British prescriptivists who were influenced by a political system based on class divisions. According to the narrator, natural language is more tasteful, more democratic, and, therefore, more American.

For these reasons and others, dialects become a matter of national politics in Brackenridge's work. They do not simply stigmatize a character by suggesting that he or she is inferior, nor are they used solely for comic purposes or even meant to represent an incongruity between country rustics and cosmopolitan city folk. While they do work to characterize each of Brackenridge's foreign-born American characters in both positive and negative ways, dialects also implicitly signify Brackenridge's views on the type of democracy needed to efficiently govern American citizens. The American language in *Modern Chivalry* acts as a litmus test used to measure the extent to which Brackenridge favored a government that either had a strong federal presence or an affiliation of loosely regulated states or a

combination of both. It was his attempt to interrogate the differences between tyranny and anarchy.

Of course, as with everything else in the satire, there is no clear or consistent example of the American language in Brackenridge's work. This lack of a definitive linguistic model causes most readers to wonder how exactly language is being used to support a political agenda or if supporting such an agenda is what Brackenridge intended to do. In *Modern Chivalry*, the concept of an American English becomes so convoluted that it becomes nearly impossible to recognize one distinct character whose voice is meant to signify a language representative of all United States citizens. In fact, from Teague O'Regan's Irish brogue to Captain John Farrago's articulate and "proper" English, languages are so diverse that some critics, such as David Simpson, have argued that Brackenridge's satire "may be thought to be exposing to scrutiny the incoherent raw materials of any possible national language" (117). Consequently, his satire seems to also question whether it is conceivable that one and only one discourse community should be allowed to claim sovereign power based on its perceived relationship to a national language. While the narrator seems to think a national language standard is possible and, perhaps, even necessary, Brackenridge's use of multiple languages and dialects to represent the sounds produced by each character's voice provides an obvious obstacle to the narrator's intentions and confronts the idea that political power should be concentrated in the individual or a ruling class. Thus, the slippery nature of the American language in Brackenridge's satire provides an opportunity to examine important political questions in a postcolonial United States of America.

Born in Scotland in 1748, Hugh Henry Brackenridge was well suited for discussing the role of language during the early years of American independence. Immigrating to America when Brackenridge was five years old, his family was one of the many immigrant families that sought a better life in the United States and faced the daunting reality of creating a new world out of the frontier wilderness of Pennsylvania. Brackenridge, disinclined to help his father on the family farm, developed at a young age an aptitude for literature, and with the help of his mother, he convinced his father that he could better provide for his family as a college-educated minister. His father eventually agreed, and with the blessings of his family, Brackenridge left the Barrens of York County, Pennsylvania for the academic environs of the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University. At Princeton Brackenridge would develop as a promising scholar and a sharp-witted defender of American independence. His immigrant background and disposition toward literature and language would eventually shape how he would represent the American voice, and through friendships he established at Princeton with men such as Phillip Freneau and James Madison, his ideas about politics and literature merged to create a literary style intended to point out what Brackenridge saw as both the positive and negative aspects of American democracy.

As a young student at Princeton, Brackenridge mimicked those past and present satirists he considered universally admired. Brackenridge used his keen wit and sardonic humor to imitate authors such as Lucian and Samuel Butler, producing works consistent with the Hudibrastic style made popular by Butler. Written with the help of Freneau, “Father Bombo’s Pilgrimmage to Mecca” was Brackenridge’s

first significant work and began his reputation as a strong supporter of American democracy. The result of a paper war between the Whigs and Tories at Princeton, "Father Bombo" displays the satirical style that made Brackenridge popular among his classmates and that, eventually, would make him a well-known literary figure in the United States. Cited by two of Brackenridge's biographers as the first work of American prose fiction, "Father Bombo" earned Brackenridge a place among all the other patriotic authors working to promote freedom from British colonial rule. [12]

Other works in Brackenridge's early career further enhanced his reputation as an American patriot. For instance, "The Rising Glory of America," a poem also written during his college years and co-authored with Freneau, justified the predestined greatness of the United States by appealing to the traditional religious rhetoric that argued America was a safe haven in which the ideals of democracy and freedom could rightfully develop. Two lesser-known dramas written by Brackenridge, *The Battle at Bunker's Hill* and *The Death of General Montgomery*, also provided a positive spin on two crucial American losses during the Revolutionary War and illustrated Brackenridge's zealous allegiance to the principles of American democracy. While these works as a whole are admirable in their support of American independence, they are generally viewed, today, as typical of the Revolutionary period. Their relevance to the American literary canon is only found in their resemblance to the propaganda-like fervor displayed by other, more influential literature written during this time.

[12] All of the biographical material here is taken from the works of Claude Newlin and Daniel Marder. Some information has also been gathered from the memoirs of Brackenridge's son, Henry Marie Brackenridge.

Other works by Brackenridge, however, capture a different perspective in which to understand the development of early American politics and complicate Brackenridge's reputation as an American patriot. Involved in both federal and regional judicial systems as a lawyer and judge, Brackenridge witnessed the practical application of democratic principles in the western territories of the United States. His *Incidents of the Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania in the year 1794* gives his account of that famous early American whiskey rebellion.[13] In his portrayal of that event, Brackenridge seems unsure who committed the greatest evil. Was it the angry mob of frontiersmen who initiated the riot or the distant bureaucratic machine that attempted to regulate the lives of its constituents without truly understanding their plight? The implied criticism in Brackenridge's account is that while federal control is necessary for the good of the country, individual freedoms should also be protected as much as possible.

In *Incidents of the Insurrection,* Brackenridge recalls a specific trial that, to him, demonstrated the problematic tendencies of a political system governed by the people. The "Trial of Mamachtaga" depicts the events surrounding the arrest, trial, and execution of Mamachtaga, a member of the Delaware Nation.[14] Mamachtaga was accused of murdering two white men in an apparent scuffle after the three had been heavily drinking alcohol. For most of the villagers, his guilt was obvious and retaliation in the form of lynching Mamachtaga was not only justifiable but necessary. To prevent this type of vigilante frontier justice, Brackenridge decided to

[13] John Dos Passos, the famous American author and historian, discusses the impact of Brackenridge's depiction of this pivotal moment in American history. See *The Men Who Made the Nation* for his analysis.
[14] "The Trial of Mamachtaga," published in 1785, is also found in *Incidents of The Insurrection*. [http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/livingrev/expansion/text4/brackenridge.pdf]

defend him in a court of law, and although Mamachtaga was eventually found guilty and hanged, Brackenridge's efforts to see to it that he received the full due process of the law challenged the popular assumption that the majority – the white male majority – was always right. Brackenridge's critique of the mob mentality, which might be seen as an extreme form of self-governance, suggested that not all aspects of American politics or the American judicial system were conducive to the peaceful coexistence of multiple communities. The American people had to find a better way to balance anarchy with tyranny, and the American government must develop stricter precautions against mob-rule.

Whether it is seen as a defense of American democracy or a harsh critique of the federal government, Brackenridge's entire oeuvre complicates his reception into the American canon. Most American literary critics, including Daniel Marder and Joseph Ellis, struggle to place Brackenridge in a single period or aesthetic movement. In *Hugh Henry Brackenridge*, Marder summarizes the dilemma faced by critics of American literature when they approach Brackenridge's career. He writes, "Because literary historians cannot accommodate the complete work of minor writers in their task of organizing the nation's literature, the stature of Brackenridge remains obscure" (131). Although Marder has spent much of his career rescuing Brackenridge from obscurity, he concedes that Brackenridge's multifaceted career prevents him from gaining widespread acceptance. Like Marder, Ellis also notes Brackenridge's delicate position within American literature. Brackenridge's literary career, in its entirety, places him, Ellis argues, "somewhere between the classical eighteenth century of the founding fathers and the modern nineteenth-century

America of the Jacksonian Democrats" (92). Stuck in an historical void, Brackenridge, Marder and Ellis suggest, made himself and his work difficult to categorize because his opinions never settled long enough to represent one single ideology. Not that this situation is unique to Brackenridge, but his career shifted from patriotic to overtly critical works, from Revolutionary to Jacksonian Democrat writings, in a way that causes many American critics to avoid his work altogether. It is this movement, though, that gives Brackenridge's most famous work, *Modern Chivalry*, the ability to analyze American culture from multiple perspectives and in ways that many early American works could not.

Claude Newlin describes *Modern Chivalry* as deserving a "high place among minor American classics" (306). According to Newlin, Brackenridge's satire was the first book published west of the Alleghenies and is America's "first back-country book [that] is the result of using classic European traditions to impart 'seasonable lessons' to the tousle-headed frontier democracy" (116). By itself, Newlin's claim that *Modern Chivalry* is the first book published in the western territories of the United States seems enough to give Brackenridge's work some historical interest, but Newlin argues it is important for other reasons. Brackenridge's use of European literary conventions, those made popular by Jonathan Swift, Miguel de Cervantes, Joseph Fielding, and others, combined with his attempts to create uniquely American characters, makes his satire a significant resource for understanding how early American authors attempted to distinguish themselves from or identify with their British counterparts. Newlin's description of *Modern Chivalry* invites the reader of Brackenridge's work to separate those European influences from the elements that

make it a "back-country" work of an American author. Whether or not the American and British literary conventions are distinguishable from one another poses an argument beyond the scope of this discussion, but asking this question does make Brackenridge's satire more relevant to American literature than most assume. *Modern Chivalry* is one of the first works to satirize American politics from a linguistic perspective. Because of this satire, *Modern Chivalry* deserves more critical attention.

Brackenridge's nineteenth-century satire deserves more attention for the way he used language to critique the process of identity formation and did so during a time when American nationalist discourse attempted to unify the country by referring to, among other things, shared cultural values, racial heritages, or common languages. Consider, for example, William Thornton, a young scholar who invented a new alphabet intended to make the "American Language" resemble a natural and universal language. When he wrote his dissertation in 1793, he justified his new language by appealing to the assumption that the American experiment provided an opportunity to unite all the various languages spoken in the United States. Addressing the preface of his treatise to the "sitiznz ov Nore Amerika," Thornton argued, "You have corrected the dangerous doctrines of European powers, correct now the languages you have imported, for the oppressed of various nations knock at your gates, and desire to be received as brethren" (4).[15] Although Thornton's treatise initially appeared sympathetic to the need for a national linguistic standard that

[15] An interesting work in and of itself, Thornton's dissertation was written and published in both traditional English and his newly invented alphabet. The juxtaposition of each version of his preface on opposite pages provides a unique model to understand how some scholars translated English into what they considered natural sounds.

would make communication across ethnic language barriers less difficult, it was actually an attempt to eradicate linguistic differences based on xenophobic desires to make all American citizens sound educated and as if they belonged to a specific race and class of people. Later in his dissertation, Thornton explained that one of the many benefits in implementing his language was that "dialects would be utterly destroyed, both among foreigners and peasants" (27). Thornton's American Language attempted to unify an American identity by creating a common linguistic heritage that would destroy almost all cultural differences.[16] He was not a sympathetic champion of the people. He was like other bigoted linguists who wanted to enforce an American linguistic consciousness in an attempt to dispel diversity. Brackenridge's satire, on the other hand, offers a different perspective.

A mixture of *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*, Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* tells the story of a middle-class farmer who decides to "saddle an old horse that he had, and ride about the world a little, with his man Teague at his heels, to see how things were going on here and there, and to observe human nature" (6). The following picaresque adventures of Captain John Farrago and his Irish bog-trotter, Teague O'Regan, are frequently interrupted by the narrator's long-winded and self-indulgent observations. These digressions allow the narrator to comment on the state of affairs of the United States and make it possible for him to make *Modern Chivalry* an allegory intended to teach its readers how to become a modern democrat. Farrago and Teague serve as the narrator's examples of appropriate and inappropriate

[16] Noting Ben Franklin's efforts to develop a new alphabet and language, Cynthia Jordan discusses the many ways politicians and scholars attempted to create an American linguistic identity during the eighteenth century. For her complete discussion of language in the New World see "Old Words, New Circumstances."

behaviors while his commentary helps guide the reader to understand why one character is more American than the other. The interaction between Farrago and Teague, paired with the observations of the narrator, helps Brackenridge to examine the assumptions behind what it means to be an American during this historical period.

To make sure the reader understands his intentions, the narrator explicitly states that the purpose of the text is to prevent more people from acting like Teague. The narrator repeatedly comments that the book's objective is to correct the "errors of ambition for place, or the mere display of powers" and adds that if *Modern Chivalry* "shall have the effect to cultivate a sense of honour in our candidates and in our voters, it will be worth while to have written the book" (803; 522). He further adds, "The great moral of this book is the evil of men seeking office for which they are not qualified. The preposterous ambition of the bog-trotter, all points to this" (611). Teague is, according to the narrator, a representative of those unfortunate traits he assumes are all too common in the people of the United States, and the narrator's intentions demonstrate how he thinks power placed in the hands of those such as Teague would lead to the ruin of the American government. Without any regard for chivalry, Teague could not restrain his greed and ambition. Everyone, the narrator assumes, should abide by his prescribed code of honor in order to make American democracy prosper and allow all citizens to enjoy life as this new type of modern democrat. The narrator's intentions for *Modern Chivalry* imply that Teague's behavior makes him essentially undemocratic and un-American.

From a linguistic perspective, Teague's character also constitutes a clear example of what one ought to avoid sounding like, according to the narrator and the Captain. Farrago describes him as a "tater-demalion, who was but a menial servant, and had so much of what is called the brogue on his tongue, as to fall short of an elegant speaker" (15). Later, the Captain says of Teague that he is "but a simple Irishman, and of a low education; his language being that spoken by the aborigines of his country" (24). The narrator's assumptions about language also implicitly condemn Teague: "Language being the vestment of thought, it comes within the rules of other dress; so that as slovenliness, on the one hand, or foppery, on the other, is to be avoided in our attire; so also in our speech, and writing" (77). The narrator's comments about the relationship between identity and the use of language assure the reader that Teague's linguistic capabilities are a clear sign of his mental deficiencies. As Teague's voice reveals itself throughout the work, it seems apparent that both the Captain and the narrator consider it the mark of an inferior person.

For the most part, Teague's voice fits the descriptions of it made by the Captain and the narrator. It resembles a corrupt language as Brackenridge renders it phonetically different from the Captain's voice. One of the first instances in which Teague speaks illustrates the character ascribed to him. When he utters his first words, Teague finds himself apologizing for accusing a priest of trying to sneak into the bed of a young woman at an inn where the Captain and Teague have settled for a night. After confessing to Farrago that he was the one sneaking into the woman's bed, Teague acknowledges his guilt in front of the other hotel guests.

> Master prastes, said he, I persave you are all prastes of the gosple, and can prach as asily as I can take a chaw of tobacco. Now de trut of de story is dis; I was slaping in my bed, and I tought vid myself it was a shame amongst Christian paple that a young crature should slape by herself, and have no one to take care of her. So I tought vid myself, to go and slape vid her. But as she was aslape, she made exclamation, and dis praste that is here before you, came in to save her shoul from the devil; and as the Captain my master, might take offence, and the devil, I am shartain that it was no better person, put it into my head to lay it on the praste. This is the trut master prastes, as I hope for shalvation in the kingdom of purgatory, shentlemen. (34)

Teague's voice in this situation frames his guilt and conveys his lack of credibility. Already presumed to have told a lie, Teague sheepishly admits to wrongfully accusing the priest, and his comparison of the priest's ability to "prach" and his own ability to "take a chaw of tobacco" underscores his base qualities. His appetite, it seems, motivates his behavior, and the corrupted nature of his language makes his voice signify a lack of education, restraint, and sophistication.

While Teague's voice may appear to be a minor detail, a mere convention used to stigmatize his character or a simple form of comic relief, it actually assumes more relevance as the narrator reveals his thoughts on the issue of language standardization. Hoping to make *Modern Chivalry* a "school book; a kind of classic of the English language," the narrator develops the notion that a person's voice is closely associated with his or her identity (77). Consequently, Brackenridge's

narrator recognizes the need to regulate how Americans represent themselves through language and suggests that there is a need to offer a good example of American English. Regarding the lack of an American voice, he comments, "The American has in fact, yet, no character; neither the clown nor the gentleman" (405). In *The Colloquial Style in America*, Richard Bridgman said of this quote, "When Brackenridge says that the American has 'no character' he means to a great extent 'no linguistic identity,' no verbal handle by which his character can be grasped" (48). Teague's dialect and the voices of each character become more significant in the text because of the way they vocalize certain American or un-American qualities. If the United States has no linguistic identity and the narrator's intentions for the work are to create that representative character who both acts and sounds like an American, then one must ask to what extent language contributes to the making of this character and to what extent a standard language will help differentiate between the clown and the gentleman, the foreigner and the American.

The narrator assumes that "fixing" the English language will help prevent fewer characters like Teague, and as with his efforts to regulate behavior, the narrator attempts to offer his version of good language.

> It has always appeared to me, that if some great master of stile should arise, and without regarding sentiment, or subject, give an example of good language in his composition, which might serve as a model to future speakers and writers, it would do more to fix the orthography, choice of words, idiom of phrase, and structure of sentence, than all the Dictionaries and Institutes that have been ever made. For

> certainly, it is much more conducive to this end, to place before the eyes what is good writing, than to suggest to the ear, which may forget in a short time all that has been said. It is for this reason, that I have undertaken this work. (3)

The narrator's bravado, marked by Brackenridge's irony, creates another standard to judge each character's voice. It is not enough to demonstrate Teague's behavior as un-American; we must now also determine whether he demonstrates good language.

The narrator's impulse to create a universal language, one that was simple, natural, or good, implicitly alludes to those early theories of nationalism that identified language as a characteristic mark of nations and nation-states. The Abbè de Condillac, for example, wrote in "An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge" (1746) that the people of a nation often speak about common interests and do so in a common tongue: "Just as the government influences the character of nations, so the character of nations influences that of languages. Always being pressed by needs and agitated by some passion, people naturally do not speak of things without revealing their interest in them… Thus everything confirms that the language of each nation expresses the character of the people who speak it" (185). According to Condillac, language reveals character, and in doing so, it communicates the accepted cultural, social, or political values of that community. Condillac's argument stresses that what a country talks about is determined by what the people of that country deem important, but it also suggests that how a country associates sounds with ideas or, in other words, how it invents language and privileges one language over another, demonstrates that country's desire to create a unified nation. The creation of a

national language not only signifies social values, according to Condillac, but also implies a type of nationalism that is zealous in its exultation of the values used to define a nation-state.

In *Modern Chivalry*, the narrator's hope of fixing the English language in the United States suggests a desire to privilege one voice as the American English. His observations about Teague assume that he is the clown of the work, and the non-traditional representation of his voice further supports the assumption that he does not belong to the nation of American citizens who speak "proper" American English. The implications of the narrator's argument again reiterate the notion that without a means for correcting Teague and those who sound like him, the people of the United States will simply regress into a number of isolated linguistic communities and prohibit a progressive development of the American nation-state. Communication would be difficult at best, and the failure to establish a national language would ruin the efficacy of a democratic government intended to protect all of its citizens. To privilege dialectal languages such as Teague's Irish brogue would result in linguistic anarchy, and, consequently, linguistic anarchy would keep American democracy in a primitive state.

To prevent this lack of growth, the narrator creates Farrago, a character who presumably plays the part of the gentleman and, according to the narrator, personifies the opposite extreme of the linguistic and political spectrum. He meets the "infallible criterion of a learned man to understand Latin and Greek" and displays a "good natural sense, and considerable reading" (581; 6). He is "in some things whimsical, owing perhaps to his greater knowledge of books than of the world" (6).

Farrago, in the narrator's description of his character, initially assumes the position of the work's role model. His education and slightly quixotic personality allow him to provide a pattern on which the frontier rustics may be molded into proper Americans, and his efforts to save Teague from his own ambition illustrate the narrator's intentions to eradicate improper behaviors from the American consciousness. Farrago is the narrator's ideal American, and his articulate voice supports the narrator's assumption that language, good language, should represent the American character and the country's progressive form of democracy.

As we can see in the implicit irony with which Brackenridge presents his narrator's pretensions to being a "great master of stile," though, matters in this novel are not so simple. The satire of *Modern Chivalry* questions the narrator's assumptions about both characters and subtly contrasts the tyranny of Farrago's belief in a code of ethics with Teague's uncontrollable desire to make something of himself. For instance, as the story unfolds, the characteristics that make Farrago the ideal American become overshadowed by his flaws. The work takes on a humorous bent as it appears that neither the Captain nor the narrator recognizes how his assumptions about culture and language blind him to the reality of living in a capitalist democracy where people are motivated not by ancient codes of conduct but by an ability to become financially successful and to exploit any circumstance that may lead to profit.

For example, Farrago's repeated attempts to save Teague from potentially embarrassing and physically dangerous situations cause him to become overly protective to the point where he hinders Teague's chances to overcome his status as a

menial servant. When asked if the Captain would allow Teague to join a group of people posing as Native American tribesmen, Farrago declines the offer. He considers immoral the actions of this group of imposters seeking illegal treaties with the American government and thinks the assumption made by the group's leader that Teague's Irish brogue would make him an ideal "King of the Kickapoos" is absurd. However, he knows Teague's ambition and greed will make him upset with this decision, so he decides to playfully lie to Teague about what might happen were he to join this group. In an effort to keep Teague away from the swindler, Farrago tells him, "Teague, I have discovered in you, for some time past, a great spirit of ambition, which is doubtless, commendable in a young person; and I have checked it only in cases where there was real danger, or apparent mischief. There is now an opportunity of advancing yourself, not so much in the way of honour as profit. But profit brings honour, and is, indeed, the most substantial support of it. There has been a man here with me, that carries on a trade with the Indians, and tells me that red-headed scalps are in great demand with them. If you could spare yours, he would give a good price for it" (58). The fib works, and Teague swears, "I would sooner trow my own head, hair and all in de fire, dan give it to dese paple to smoke wid, out of deir long pipes" (59).

Farrago's lie seems justifiable since it prevents Teague from committing an illegal act, and his ethical stance against the exploitation of the United States government is admirable. Yet Farrago's fictitious story has several ironic implications. Because the audience already knows that Teague was not really in any danger, it is able to recognize that the Captain is the only person at risk in this scene.

He is in danger of losing his servant and jeopardizing his code of honor. The relationship Farrago constructs between profit and honor suggests that a person's integrity can be measured in part by his or her reputation and that although financial success can indicate a person's reputable conduct, it can also lead people away from ethical behaviors. Farrago prevents Teague from gaining economic independence, however, because he wants to protect his own honor, not Teague's reputation or scalp, and because he still privileges an ancient form of chivalry. The irony here is that while most of Brackenridge's reading audience might have taken advantage of the opportunity to gain profit at the expense of honor, they are being warned not to do so by a narrator and a main character who are supposedly trying to make them better Americans. Farrago's benevolent intentions protect class divisions and prevent characters such as Teague from taking advantage of the bureaucratic loopholes created by democratic procedures in the United States. His intervention in these instances suggest that Teague and, consequently, American democracy is unable to develop without the aid of a ruling class.

The Captain's self-imposed standards of conduct as well as the narrator's efforts to eradicate ambition force Teague to conform to an outdated caste system, one that stereotypes him as unintelligent and un-American while also preventing him from doing anything about his social position. The assumptions about language held by Farrago and the narrator prevent them from recognizing the potential contributions Teague can make to the development of an American national consciousness. In their minds, they are protecting the representation of American culture from degenerating into anarchy. Farrago's voice and the narrator's

intentions satirize what Brackenridge saw as the short-sighted goals of those early democrats who wanted to create a centralized federal government that would regulate the behaviors of its constituents by advocating a single perception of what it meant to be an American. These two characters represent Brackenridge's arguments against tyranny.

Although Farrago frequently becomes annoyed with Teague's ambition and wishes he could simply accept his role in life, there are a few instances in which Farrago tries to help Teague establish himself as something other than a servant. Brackenridge's depiction of these occurrences, however, further shows how Farrago's prejudices prevent him from recognizing Teague's natural potential. For example, after discussing the possibility that Teague might procure a position with the federal government, Farrago decides that he will present Teague at a Presidential levee in hopes of pawning him off on the American government. The gentleman with whom Farrago discusses this plan agrees with his decision and advises the Captain to pursue employment for Teague. The Captain hesitates at first and must be convinced of Teague's worthiness. His doubts reveal his estimation of Teague's character. Farrago states, "I do not see, how it can be reasonable to suppose that he can come to any great height, in state affairs: he is totally illiterate and uncultivated" (197). Farrago's lack of confidence also emerges in his suggestion to change Teague's appearance: "But would it be necessary, said the Captain, before we undertake to present him at the levee of the President, that I should have him rubbed down, and cloathed a little better [?]" (198).

The Captain's questions in this conversation emphasize his tendency to assume a traditional approach to etiquette and show how he correlates conduct and speech with specific occupations and social castes. Farrago's doubts highlight his belief that dressing well and sounding cultivated are requisites for obtaining a government position. If one is going to belong to the elite ruling class, then one must act, sound, and dress like someone who has been granted the authority to rule over other people. The gentleman's responses, however, remind Farrago that anything is possible. To the Captain's objections based on Teague's illiteracy, the gentleman argues, "Do we not read in history of persons of the lowest education who have risen to the greatest heights both in the civil, and military line [?]" (197). The gentleman reassures the Captain of the historical precedent of people rising above their limitations through willpower and motivation rather than intelligence and education. Responding to the Captain's concern over Teague's dress, the gentleman suggests, "It will be best to present him, puris naturalibis, just as he is, without brogues; in his overalls, with that long coat and slouched hat, which you have given him to wear. The President seeing him as he is, will anticipate what he may be, when he comes to be dressed off in a suitable manner; and imagination always out-goes the reality" (198). While the gentleman admits appearances are important, his advice to leave Teague as he is implies that Farrago judges Teague based on predetermined stereotypes and cannot recognize the emerging trends in American politics. The humor of this scene again returns to Brackenridge's parody of those who believe tradition and the old way of governing are sufficient guides for American democrats. Farrago does not realize that democracy in the United States

has developed its own unique qualities. Farrago, it seems, sees nothing other than an indolent human being in Teague. He fails to recognize that Teague, in a natural state, represents the unspoiled character of the American people and the infinite possibilities for advancing humankind.

The gentleman's reference to keep Teague in a natural state and "without brogues" is important in this scene because of the several meanings associated with this phrase. On the surface, "without brogues" refers to Teague's lack of shoes. Brogues were a type of thick, leather shoe worn by the inhabitants of the Scottish highlands and became popular during the early decades of the nineteenth century. However, this phrase also alludes to Teague's accent. When one spoke with an Irish brogue, it was comically inferred that thick leather was wrapped around his or her tongue. It could also imply that a person with this type of speech impediment had a shoe in his or her mouth. Thus, when the gentleman suggests Teague should appear without brogues, he is implying that Teague should dress as naturally as possible without any accoutrements that associate him with another country. He is to be a visual blank slate, and as for his voice, the gentleman's comment implies that Teague should remain mute in front of the President in order to prevent him from hindering the President's initial reaction to him. He is to be audibly blank, a record on to which the President can impress what he wishes. In this situation, the inference of natural language is better than the connotations of a foreign language.

Farrago's failure to recognize Teague's natural potential is perhaps the first of many cracks in his armor. Presumed to be the foil to Teague's character, the Captain ends up complicating the narrator's allegorical intentions and makes the

humor of the work rely on the extent to which the narrator and Farrago refuse to accept that American culture and democracy can evolve "naturally." *Modern Chivalry*, as a satire, juxtaposes these three characters but implicitly questions the narrator's assumptions that Farrago is the ideal American and Teague is nothing more than a bog-trotting Irishman. According to one critic, the paradox of Brackenridge's satire is that while many might view the Captain as the hero of the story, Teague is actually the one who better understands the American way of life. Christopher Looby argues, "It is Teague O'Regan who is most able to maneuver socially between contexts, to imagine himself crossing boundaries and transgressing hierarchies, and to express himself intelligibly in social contexts for which his upbringing and education did not fit him. And it is Captain Farrago, paradoxically, who seems entrenched in a code that restricts him to an outmoded social order" (256). While the narrator clearly favors the Captain, Brackenridge relies on strategic ambiguities to suggest that Teague is more representative of the American democrat unhindered by traditional class differences and expectations. Farrago's inability to imagine Teague rising above his lot in life constitutes his greatest flaw and introduces Brackenridge's critique of American nationalism.

Even this interpretation, however, is not without problems. Suggesting that Teague better represents the American people because he is a member of the common masses assumes that Brackenridge entrusted the development of American democracy to the uneducated rabble that made up the majority of the American populace. While Farrago's overly protective nature implies an unfavorable depiction of national sovereignty placed in the hands of the few, Teague's comical blunderings

reveal Brackenridge's parody of those who thought that granting political authority to the masses was inherently better than developing an elite ruling class.

To illustrate the potential anarchy that could result from allowing the people to govern themselves, Brackenridge generally ended Teague's adventures in politics with dire consequences. For instance, after receiving a position as a tax collector in a small frontier town, Teague realizes that this particular job is not highly thought of by those from whom he must take money. His short tenure as an excise officer comes to an abrupt conclusion as the townspeople attempt to tar and feather him. As the crowd approaches Teague with a keg of tar and what was called a "liberty pole," he pleads with Farrago to protect him from the pending disaster: "I scorn to be choaked before I am dead; de devil burn de office for me, I'll have none of it. I can take my Bible oath, and swear upon de holy cross, dat I am no officer. By shaint Patrick, and if dere are any Irish boys amongst dem I would would rather join wid dem. What is de government with offices to a son o'd a whore dat is choaked, and cannot spake to his acquaintance in dis world. By de holy apostles, I am no officer; I just took it for a frolic as I was coming up de road, and you may be officer yourself, and good luck wid de commission, Captain; I shall have noting to do wid it" (302-303). Prior to this scene, Farrago lectured Teague extensively on the devotion and commitment needed to uphold the honor of a country when one is given a well-respected government position. Farrago's lecture was evidently lost on Teague, who when faced with the choice of life or death with honor, unquestionably chooses to save his own skin rather than abide by the demands of those he represented, those

people who as they approach Teague chant, “Liberty and no excise, liberty and no excise; down with all excise officers” (303).

Both the mob mentality that drives Teague from his position and the cowardice with which Teague shrinks from his required duties emphasize the limitations of democracy founded on the idea that average people can govern themselves. Duncan Ferguson, Farrago’s temporary Scottish replacement for Teague, voices his concern over Teague’s ability to work for the government and expresses some of the common concerns associated with the idea of allowing the people to control various aspects of a nation-state. As Farrago and Duncan make their way to visit Teague and to see how he is doing, Duncan says to the Captain, “I dinna ken how it is, …but I see they hae every thing tail foremost in this kintra, to what they hae in Scotland: a gauger a gentleman; and weavers in legislature” (282). It makes no more sense to Duncan to call a tax collector a gentleman than it does to expect a simple weaver to have the ability to help run an entire country. This state of things seems backwards to him, and to consider Teague a qualified applicant for any government position is an oddity that confuses Duncan because it is contrary to how things were done in the Old “Kintra.” The United States of America, in allowing anyone to occupy a place in its government, has placed itself at the mercy of its lowliest citizens. Consequently, many people like Duncan Ferguson question whether the threat of anarchy is any less alarming than that of tyranny.

Yet both of these critiques, of anarchy and tyranny, suggest that to Brackenridge there was very little difference between Farrago and Teague. Both characters speak different variations of the English language and both represent

equally destructive avenues for the development of American democracy. Over the course of the satire, it becomes evident that the narrator favors the Captain as the ideal American democrat, but Teague's presence in the novel and his appeal to the general reading public insinuates that Brackenridge is using him to counterbalance all that the Captain stands for. Teague and the Captain symbolize seemingly opposite definitions of democracy but also represent the contradictions inherent in each concept of government.

Nonetheless, many critics have argued that Farrago is Brackenridge's ideal American character. Describing the Captain as a "man of sense and reason," Wendy Martin argues that Farrago is a "modern chevalier and true democrat," a character who is "dedicated to piercing the veil of illusion created by rogues like Teague" (180-184). For Joseph Harkey, Farrago is not just a true democrat. He is "above all…an American." Harkey continues to argue, "[Farrago] is also the prototype of a stock American character, the quaint, somewhat eccentric man of culture who is set off from the general middle class not only by his quaintness but also by his relatively refined ways" (194). According to Harkey and Martin, Farrago is a true American because he exhibits American qualities – refinement, reason, and quaint behavior.

Both of these critics assume a certain relationship between Farrago's qualities and a level of American-ness that makes the Captain the quintessential American character of Brackenridge's day. This assumption also implies that Teague represents those negative qualities most people in the United States should strive to avoid. Calling him a rogue, Martin describes Teague as a confidence man who exploits the trust of the American people by selling them stolen goods or by tricking

them into believing he is capable of representing them in government. Harkey also argues that Teague "represents the unenlightened and impetuous majority" and, therefore, he "remains an object of disgust to Brackenridge and the butt of his cruelest satire" (194; 197). For Harkey, Teague is not just another character capable of persuading other people. He is also a character who is easily convinced by seemingly fancy rhetoric and trumped up arguments that make him think he is someone he is not. Teague is an illustration of the potential dangers of American democracy. He can simultaneously spark mob rule and be convinced by the masses that he assumes are a true representative of the people. While Teague is not un-American, his character initially appears to represent the qualities Brackenridge's narrator seems to warn could lead to the ruin of American culture and politics. Everything from his ambition to his dialect makes these critics assume Teague personifies the potential for anarchy caused by the misapplication of democratic principles in the United States.

Traditional criticism of Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* generally tends to follow similar patterns of reasoning. Because Farrago supposedly exhibits middle-class characteristics, he must be Brackenridge's choice for the ideal American character. On the other hand, since Teague represents nothing but slovenliness and selfish ambition, he is only capable of illustrating certain un-American qualities. Even in his description of satiric elements in *Modern Chivalry*, William Nance continues to perpetuate this binary reading of Brackenridge's text. Arguing that *Modern Chivalry* utilizes caricature and irony as primary strategies for its satiric effects, Nance suggests that while Teague is clearly an exaggerated character,

Captain Farrago is the voice of reason. Nance even argues that Farrago personifies Brackenridge himself. Nance supports his argument by analyzing each character's voice, particularly the dialect of Teague. He writes, "The characters of burlesque are to some extent caricatures, and the sharpness with which they are presented, both through direct description and through their words and actions, is one of the measures of success of the work. Brackenridge gives practically no concrete description of his characters. Teague is the central agent in the burlesque, the fulcrum of the satire directed against incompetent office-seekers and foolish voters. One of the strongest elements in his portrayal is his dialect…This [Teague's dialect] is caricature and, for its time, no negligible achievement" (385). Nance recognizes in the perceived corrupt nature of Teague's English an element of burlesque that suggests Brackenridge must be directing his satire at those who act and, potentially, sound like Teague.

For Nance, however, the Captain's voice makes him more realistic than Teague. In a footnote preceding the description of Teague's dialect, Nance analyzes the Captain's place in the satire: "The Captain, it should be noted, is not a caricature. He functions as the representative of reason and to some extent of irony, and enters the burlesque only as a contrast to Teague, and as the relatively neutral narrative center around which the burlesque characters revolve. Though a slight effort is made to set him apart as a character, critics commonly, and rightly, consider him equivalent to Brackenridge himself" (385). While Teague's Irish brogue, Nance assumes, allows Brackenridge's readers to recognize Teague as a caricature of Irish immigrants, the Captain's voice of reason allows those same readers to recognize

Farrago as a realistic portrayal of a common American. Nance suggests that Farrago's role in the satire is to provide a certain element of contrast and to illustrate what the ideal American character should sound like. For Nance, both of these character's voices signify their level of competency and the extent to which they are real Americans.

More importantly, Nance justifies his argument by appealing to the way he perceives each character's language. He reads Teague's dialect as being humorous while assuming Farrago's voice is a literal representation of Brackenridge's ideal American. This type of linguistic stereotyping implies that improper languages are used for nothing other than comedy and that they should have very little impact on the formation of an American linguistic consciousness. Teague's voice, according to Nance, is a joke and should not be taken seriously.

Yet, after discussing the humor of Farrago's character and the many ways in which his language illustrates the potential irony Brackenridge associated with his character, it becomes possible to suggest Brackenridge is also using Teague's dialect for something other than what Nance assumes. While it is unquestionable that Brackenridge created Teague with an intent to make people laugh, he also did so to present an alternative to Farrago's character and to analyze the ways in which tyranny poses negative consequences similar to those posed by anarchy. Brackenridge's languages, both "proper" and dialectal, are simultaneously humorous and representative of larger political issues. Neither is more significant than the other.

Reading *Modern Chivalry*, one might assume that the initial appearance of Teague's phonetically rendered voice is a minor detail or a trivial gimmick used by Brackenridge to entertain his audience. However, as the story progresses, more and more characters' voices are also written in such a manner as to represent the actual sounds of their spoken dialects. As a result, hardly any of the characters in *Modern Chivalry* speak using the same variation of the English language, and this variety perhaps emphasizes the narrator's argument that the country needs a standard language. Yet the voices of the characters subtly contrast with the narrator's objectives for the text and provide examples of what Brackenridge may have considered the vrai naturelle of American English. The improper dialects are the narrator's attempts to show how not to sound American, but they also illustrate what the American people actually sound like.

Consider, for example, one of the many foreign dialects that appear in *Modern Chivalry*, that of M. Douperie, a French dance instructor who attempts to teach Teague the art of ballroom dancing. His speech is a textual representation of a French-English hybrid language. Praising Teague's progress in distinguishing his left foot from the right, Douperie exclaims, "A la bonne huere, vous y voila, … very glad Monsieur Patrick you make so good proficiance; en peu de tems, je vous presentera a l' assemble. You danse ver well, short time" (210). Douperie then moves on to the next lesson.

> La quatrieme principe … de fort lesson est former une pas, to made de step. Voyez Monsieur Patrick, fat I do. You make step, ne pas long step, mais van little step. The Irishman attempting to obey the

> directions and to step, made a stride about an ell in length with his arms stretched out, and [mouth] gaping at the same time. Foutre, said the dancing master; quoi! Vous baillez; you ope de mout yet. Oh, diable! diable! foutre! une bête! But composing himself, he proceeded. Rangez vous a quartier; step to de van side, comme ce la; showing in what manner to step out with one foot at right angles to the other. (210)

Assuming that Teague, because he is Irish, goes by the name Patrick, M. Douperie undergoes several transformations in this scene.[17] From a patient dance instructor to a foul-mouthed, angry man insulting Teague's intelligence and back to his perseverant and calm demeanor, Douperie fluctuates rapidly. His language, also, erupts and mimics his personal behavior.

While this convention of characterizing Douperie as a stereotypical Frenchman differs from his use of Teague's voice as an indication of his presumed stupidity, Brackenridge's use of language to portray the nature of Douperie's character relies on the same basic principle. Language, in *Modern Chivalry*, reveals a person's character, and any character who relies on emotions or irrational logic, as Douperie and Teague do, will speak in a nonstandard voice signified with what appears to be a corrupt form of written English. The words of Teague and Douperie

[17] Names in Brackenridge's work have yet to be analyzed in any great detail. While some have recognized Brackenridge's repeated use of "Teague" as a conventional moniker for Scottish and Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century American literature, including several of Brackenridge's other works, no one has analyzed the implications of "farrago" as the name of Brackenridge's main character. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, farrago means "a confused group; a medley, mixture, hotchpotch of material things or of persons." Instead of assuming that the Captain signifies a specific type of American, it seems possible to argue that, based on his name, Farrago represents a conglomeration of American cultural ideals and beliefs. Other names, such as Douperie for a Frenchman and Cuff for an African slave, reveal Brackenridge's stereotyping of his characters.

not only represent a phonetic rendering of their voice; they display a flawed way of thinking. To the narrator, as a symptom of his nature, a character's voice further stigmatizes him or her based on the national stereotypes popularly associated with the language used by that character.

Nevertheless, the sheer volume of dialect languages in Brackenridge's text suggests that the author, unlike the narrator, assumed a universal American English was not even a possibility. Rather, the American Language consisted of multiple languages and dialects. This makes it easier for Brackenridge to suggest that the American people are a diverse group and a community that cannot be stifled by the imposition of a government ruled by only one perception of what it means to be an American.

For example, one of the many dialects in the story is an early example of the German influence on language spoken in Pennsylvania.[18] One of the characters who speaks a hybrid German-English, after ranting about his lack of trust in all types of education, swears that "larning ish goot for noting but to make men rogues. It ish all a contrivance to sheat people" (524). Although not expressing a typical sentiment of the German culture, this character's voice is ironic, from the narrator's viewpoint, given that his lack of book-learning presumably causes him to mispronounce the word "learning" as "larning." The narrator uses this voice to point out the character's flaws, and it appears that language not only signifies a character's education and intelligence but also the influence his national origin has on the way he perceives learning in America. Much like Teague and Douperie, this German-

[18] Brackenridge's German character in *Modern Chivalry* is perhaps one of the examples Charles Godfrey Leland used to model the voice of his popular German character, Hans Breitmann.

American character voices his concern in a dialectal version of the English language, and Brackenridge has him speak this way in order to suggest that this character's opinion is as authentically American as any of the other characters.

Other characters who represent American perspectives in dialectal languages include Cuff, the African slave who presents his discovery of what everyone thinks is a petrified moccasin to the annual meeting of a society of American philosophers. Cuff's oration, although spoken in English, is so difficult for those attending the meeting to understand that they seem to ignore what he actually says. Cuff simply repeats what his master tells him to present to the group, but the subject matter of his lecture, one would think, should have raised some questions from the audience. "Now, shentima," Cuff says, "I say, dat de first man was de black a man, and de first woman de black a woman; and get two tree children; de rain vasha dese, and de snow pleach, and de coula com brown, yella, coppa coula, and, as de last, quite fite; and de hair long; an da fal out vid van anoda; and van cash by de nose, an pull, so de nose come lang, sharp nose" (116). A farcical allusion to those theories of monogenetics in which racialized features are accounted for through environmental differences, Cuff's speech simply reverses the common nineteenth-century belief that white men inhabited the earth first and evolved into separate races over time. All of the philosophers miss the point of Cuff's speech, even asking for a transcription of it so they can publish it in their annual journal. Cuff's language ironically emphasizes his African heritage although it is because of this heritage that Cuff is considered inferior to his audience and denigrated to the conditions of human slavery. His dialect makes everyone presume he has nothing more than a childlike

state of intelligence, and, therefore, his speech does not trouble them. To the philosophers attending the meeting, Cuff's voice is a curiosity, but to Brackenridge, it seems to represent one more American version of a natural language.

In addition to the French, German, and African voices of these characters, Brackenridge also includes many humorous attempts to record Native American languages, which are constantly confused with other languages. Brackenridge frequently has fun with the notion that Native American languages are incomprehensible and nearly all the same. In a scene where the Captain describes his displeasure at the lack of authentic Indian traditions at a fake initiation ceremony, the narrator writes, "It was a new thing to the Captain, to take a seat in the wigwam, and to smoke the calumet of peace. But he was disappointed in his expectations, of seeing Indian manners, and customs introduced, and made part of the ceremony. There was some talk of *brightening* the chain, and *burying the hatchet*; but he saw no *war-dance*…The Grand Sachem made a speech to the Captain, not in Indian; but in German; which answered the end as well, for he did not understand it" (409). To the Captain, the indigenous cultures of the Americas were closely associated with a handful of words – hatchet, war-dance, Grand Sachem, and so on. These Anglicized words are as close as the Captain can come to acquainting himself with this culture because, to him, Native American languages are as foreign as the German language. Yet the inclusion of one more type of American language suggests that Brackenridge is creating a visual mash-up of audible voices. This blending of multiple languages suggests that while Brackenridge's many dialects are used for comical purposes, they

also serve to represent the American Languages and not just a single American Language.

Unlike Samuel Johnson, who tried to regulate the English language in hopes of avoiding the "corruptions of ignorance, and caprices of innovation," Brackenridge and the many voices in his text associate the way a person actually spoke with the evolution of language usage.[19] In other words, *Modern Chivalry* challenged the assumption that "proper" language should correlate with a specific formalization of written language. Instead, it recognized that the way a person spoke should represent the authentic American quality of their national language. In *The Politics of American English, 1776-1850*, David Simpson claims that the American language originated in the voice of the common people: "The national language exists in the American yeomanry in a state of preservation; they are not innovators but guardians of the authentic element of English speech" (74). Simpson is careful to note here that the American people did not invent their own language, but by acknowledging the influences of how English was spoken in the United States, the American people created a language based on orthoepy, how a word is pronounced, rather than orthography, how a word appears in print. Unlike "proper" British English, which followed the constructions of language made by admired authors such as Joseph Addison, American English used the speech patterns of common people as a foundation to represent the American voice.

[19] In the introduction to his 1755 dictionary, Samuel Johnson explained his motivation for compiling such a large collection of English words: "I have…attempted a dictionary of the English language, which, while it was employed under the cultivation of every species of literature, has itself been hitherto neglected, suffered to spread, under the direction of chance, into wild exuberance, resigned to the corruptions of ignorance, and caprices of innovation" (25). Johnson justified his dictionary by arguing that the denigration of the English language is caused by the corrupted use of it by those less skilled in the use of its written form.

In this context, then, Brackenridge's satire takes part in a larger revolution that included a political as well as social change. In his work *After the Revolution*, Joseph Ellis describes Brackenridge as an author who "happened to be one of the many Americans who regarded the Revolution as something more than a colonial war for independence from England; it was a genuinely revolutionary struggle for a new set of social arrangements" (84). Calling the American culture one of orality, Jay Fliegalman also discusses the rhetorical revolution prompted by the political one. He argues that the "rhetoric of the Revolution [participated] not only in a political revolution but in a revolution in the conceptualization of language, a revolution that sought to replace artificial language with natural language and to make writing over in the image of speaking" (24). Brackenridge's use of dialectal versions of the English language suggests that he had in mind a new concept of an American language. It was his attempt to capture the essence of a people guided by democratic principles rather than the traditional nature of European society. Brackenridge's characters in *Modern Chivalry* were meant to represent both the American clown and gentleman. By utilizing both types of characters and the voices that represented them, Brackenridge hoped his satire would question what it meant to create a true American character and a natural American language.

Some critics do agree that Brackenridge's work creates a foundation on which to consider what it means to sound American. At least one contemporary scholar has noted Brackenridge's text as one of the earliest known recordings of an African-American dialect, and many others have acknowledged his attempts to replicate the rustic speech of frontier culture and the French, Irish, Native American,

and German dialects found throughout the western portion of early nineteenth-century America.[20] Yet there is a general sense among linguists and literary critics that languages in Brackenridge's text illustrate a "simultaneity of standardization and pluralization," and, according to Christopher Looby, Brackenridge is "more interested in the contact and contest of languages than in the effort to reconcile them" (204; 224). Looby's description of the irreconcilable nature of *Modern Chivalry* implies that Brackenridge's most popular satire critiqued American democracy in ways that many early nationalist texts did not. Brackenridge's use of Teague O'Regan as the assumed foil to Farrago makes us reconsider what it means to be an American citizen and suggests that we might need to eradicate older linguistic stereotypes associated with national identities. Germans in the United States are no longer primarily German. The same goes for French, Irish, and even British Americans. Creating a cultural independence from European influences meant that Americans had to resignify and appropriate linguistic models and social identities. As a result, Brackenridge's satire creates conflict as a central theme, and the struggle between a standard language and dialectal versions of that language highlights the early struggle to reconcile linguistic diversity within the borders of the United States with a single national standard. Creating an American language meant discovering a common English vernacular unique enough to represent the American voice yet diverse enough to display an awareness of the varied language patterns of the many different American citizens. *Modern Chivalry* is a starting point in considering many of the perspectives about the issue of a national language.

[20] In *Was Huck Black?*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin claims *Modern Chivalry* is the first known attempt to use a phonetically rendered black vernacular language.

However**,** rather than seeing it as supporting anarchy or tyranny, linguistic pluralization or standardization, I would suggest that Brackenridge's satire alludes to a form of agency that many post-nationalist scholars have developed in response to those applications of national sovereignty that suggest a nation-state must chose one or more claim of authenticity that attempts to justify political authority. Jacques Derrida, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, to name a few, discuss the role of political authority in developing nation-states in their works and have identified alternative methods for balancing different levels of sovereign power rather than privileging one form over another. Much like Brackenridge, these critics suggest that tyranny and anarchy can work together in a way that simultaneously builds a more modern and cohesive network of checks and balances.

Derrida, for instance, critiques nation-state sovereignty by analyzing the negative effects of nationalism on our rational tendencies. In *Rogues*, his attack on nation-state sovereignty suggests that an acceptance of nationalist politics has created a way of thinking that limits the ability to consider multiple ideologies at once. Derrida writes that we must question, "in the name of reason," the paradigms that create hegemonic sovereignty and examine how some forms of power have become more prominent at the turn of the twenty-first century. We must analyze the "logic of nation-state sovereignty."

> It is thus no doubt necessary, in the name of reason, to call into question and to limit a logic of nation-state sovereignty…And yet, in the second place, it would be imprudent and hasty, in truth hardly *reasonable*, to oppose unconditionally, that is, head-on, a sovereignty

> that is itself unconditional and indivisible. One cannot combat *head-on*, *all* sovereignty *in general*, without threatening at the same time, beyond the nation-state figure of sovereignty, the classical principles of freedom and self-determination… Yet again, in a context that is each time singular, where the respectful attention paid to singularity is not relativist but universalizable and rational, responsibility would consist in orienting oneself without any *determinative* knowledge of the rule. To be responsible, to keep within reason, would be to invent maxims of transaction for deciding between two just as rational and universal but contradictory exigencies of reason as well as its enlightenment. (157-158)

Derrida's critique of sovereignty recognizes that while nation-state politics have provided and protected those "classical principles of freedom and self-determination," it has also caused an inability to acknowledge more than one form of sovereign power. Yet, Derrida argues, it would be unreasonable to simply replace one type of power for another. In order to overcome the challenges of building a nation-state and solely relying on nationalism, one must be rational and orient "oneself without any *determinative* knowledge of the rule." A challenge to nationalism must come from a negotiation between "two just as rational and universal but contradictory exigencies of reason." Orienting oneself in this way suggests that confronting nationalism consists of inventing ways to balance multiple forms of sovereign power.

Derrida's argument implies it is both reasonable and responsible to vigilantly deny the acceptance of only one form of sovereign power in the transition from a nation to a nation-state. His criticism is a dynamic gesture that attempts to but never truly does reconcile two opposing concepts of power – power that gives individual subjects a level of autonomy and power granted to a large group or class of people attempting to unify an entire nation-state. His deconstructive methods emphasize that there is not one answer to the dilemmas of nationalism but many and that a more inconclusive or non-definitive way of thinking should prevent or, at least, hinder both the hegemonic control of a ruling class invested with nation-state sovereignty and the surrender of all power to an anarchic mob.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also recognize the conflict of multiple ideologies in the struggle to counter nationalist movements. Confronting nationalism requires the acknowledgement of the relationships among individual agency and larger group identities. This play among individual and group associations makes their concept of the "multitudes" a complicated tool useful for political activism. For Hardt and Negri, the new proletariat gains political power and agency through a collective gathering of individual subjects associated with organizations other than nations or nation-states. They argue, "The processes of ontological constitution unfold through the collective movements of cooperation, across the new fabrics woven by the production of subjectivity. This site of ontological constitution is where the new proletariat appears as a constituent power" (402). Confronting the exclusionary logic of nationalism requires not only a new form of subjectivity but also a new form of cooperation among individual subjects. In essence, the

multitudes suggest a new way of thinking about the historical constitution of subjectivity and the political effectiveness of class organization. The multitude is a simultaneous performance of individual identity and large-scale political autonomy.

Hardt and Negri refer to this cooperation among people and classes as "absolute democracy in action" (410). In this context, action relies on a gesture of recognizing multiple sovereign organizations but also insists on the reappropriation of autonomous self-production. It implies a political structure in which national consciousness is dynamic and constantly moving rather than a stagnant set of social standards based on pre-determined ethno-cultural categories and social divisions. The multitude "is the organization of the social worker and immaterial labor, an organization of productive and political power as a biopolitical unity managed by the multitude, organized by the multitude, directed by the multitude – absolute democracy in action" (410). Hardt and Negri locate the challenge to nationalism outside any particular nation-state political formation and insist on a new method for organizing the international struggle against the many ways in which nationalism creates absolute power in a nation-state and on a global scale.

In my reading of Hardt, Negri, and Derrida, these critics question the role of classical nationalism in its systematic use of absolute identities and rigid political formations. Their critiques of nationalism suggest that there are more forms of sovereign power that can construct alternative identities besides those enforced by a national consciousness that attempts to appear universal to all members of a nation-state. While these "social containers" do not replace the already established national identity of a nation-state, they do help to expose the process in which groups of

people attempt to justify nation-state sovereignty by creating a single national consciousness.[21] Destabilizing what has already been constructed by nation-state governments, i.e. an arbitrary national consciousness, consists of creating national identities that are always vigilantly denying racial, linguistic, or geographic commonalities the ability to exclude others from gaining citizenship and subjectivity. These critiques of nationalism provide a way to discuss the multiple ways to construct a national consciousness, and, therefore, the many ways to consider the range of national identities.

By refusing to adopt a single linguistic identity for his American characters and, consequently, preventing his work from advocating a single type of democracy, Brackenridge conceptualized a linguistic nationalism that measured the relationship between national sovereignty and the autonomy of subjects within the American nation-state.[22] He questions assumptions about national sovereignty by discussing both sides of the language standardization debate. On the one hand, Teague and the rabble of voices imply granting agency to individual characters and the notion that together these characters can create a new concept of American political authority, one that is democratic and develops naturally without the influence of a dominant

[21] Arjun Appadurai stresses the importance of forming new identities in order to overcome the hegemonic control indirectly formed by nationalism. Arguing against "full attachment," the unquestioned acceptance of a single nation-state sovereign power and national identification, Appadurai writes, "Refugees, global laborers, scientists, technicians, soldiers, entrepreneurs, and many other social categories of persons constitutes large blocks of meaningful association that do not depend on the isomorphism of citizenship with cultural identity, of work with kinship, of territory with soil, or of residences with national identification. It is these delinkages which might best capture what is distinctive about *this* era of globalization" (141). Delinkages, like Derrida's responsible nationalism and Hardt and Negri's multitudes, represent a post-nationalist logic that suggests breaking already constructed "social containers" to form new identities and new ways of creating sovereign power.

[22] Although I am not using this term in the exact same way as Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, I am suggesting that Brackenridge's attempt to construct a national consciousness does rely on the way language is used in the development of the United States as a nation-state.

ruling class. On the other hand, the narrator and Farrago represent the belief that without a unified commitment to evolve based on a set standard of ideological goals and guidelines, American democracy would collapse under the weight of so many divergent interests, including those motivated by greed and ambition. However, *Modern Chivalry* uses the issue of language standardization to illustrate how a collective cooperation between Farrago and Teague produces a symbiotic relationship that can reconstruct both individual autonomy and large-scale political organization. In doing so, Brackenridge's satire offers a unique perspective on the relationship between Americans, language, and politics.

Reading *Modern Chivalry* as an example of how language intersected politics shortly after America gained its independence suggests that language was used not only to differentiate the United States from its previous colonizer, but also to illustrate the contentious nature of American democracy and the struggle for power created by nationalism. Although most Americans competed to establish their version of what it meant to be an authentic American citizen, Brackenridge seemed content to show his readers what that competition looked like. Without choosing a side, Brackenridge's languages helped to gain political authority for the multitudes while also keeping in check the demands of those politicians who promoted a single national consciousness, one that demanded its citizens to speak in a certain way. Brackenridge, Derrida might say, was responsible and reasonable when he burlesqued the development of national sovereignty in a nation-state recently removed from colonialism.

**“Ain’t Princerple Precious?”**

**Yankee Dialect in James Russell Lowell’s *The Biglow Papers***

Louis Rubin once argued that the success of the "great American joke" was caused by a desire to laugh at the differences between the "cultural ideal and the everyday fact." As the editor of *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, Rubin wrote, "Out of the incongruity between mundane circumstance and heroic ideal, material fact and spiritual hunger, democratic, middle-class society and desire for cultural definition, theory of equality and fact of social and economic inequality… between what men would be and must be, as acted out in American experience, has come much pathos, no small amount of tragedy, and also a great deal of humor" (9). A more modern version of previously accepted descriptions of American comedy, Rubin's observations rely on a theory of comical incongruity that demonstrates how and why the juxtaposition of characters such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge's Captain Farrago and Teague O'Regan epitomizes the American fascination with the contrast between two seemingly polar opposites.[23] With an abundance of examples from popular literature, Rubin's argument is rather convincing. One only has to look at the popularity and the critical acceptance of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*, for example, to recognize how the contrast between high and low culture, rural and urban communities, and a number of other comparisons create memorable and socially relevant comedy.

Yet arguments that create neatly defined categories and binary relationships that position two concepts in direct opposition to each other can be problematic.

[23] Rubin was not the first to note incongruity as a characteristic of American humor. Describing the popular features of American comedy in 1876, S.S. Cox wrote, "We laugh at incongruities, as when we see a little man walking arm-in-arm with a giant; we laugh more if the little man marches with a big bass drum and the big man with a baby drum" (27). Certainly incongruity has played a major role in the development of American humor, but as the rest of this essay will argue, there are certain ways in which American literary comedians used the juxtaposition of the ideal and the real to illustrate the similarities and not the differences between the two.

Although Rubin only describes recognizable trends found in American comedy, arguing that the contrast between high and low cultures almost always presents a humorous depiction of the differences between the two makes me question whether theories of comical incongruity can also illustrate the similarities between the ideal and the everyday fact. Can American comedy satirize the assumptions that separate disparaging aspects of different communities and show us how laughter indicates the belief that we are all in one way or another alike? What distinguishes the representations of these different communities that make them appear to be dramatically different from each other, and how do these differences produce a humorous response in all of us? Rubin's argument recognizes the role comical incongruity played in distinguishing American literary comedy from other humorous traditions, but, perhaps, if we pay attention to the way some comedians created self-reflective humor to emphasize the congruent relationship between the ideal and the real, then we can see how comical congruity, not just incongruity, has also shaped the development of nineteenth-century American literary humor.

Ambrose Bierce, the satirical journalist who followed the traditions established by many nineteenth-century American literary comedians, provides an excellent opportunity to begin this discussion, but not because he defies theories of comical incongruity. On the contrary, his many satirical definitions collected in *The Devil's Dictionary* are dependent upon his audience recognizing a sharp contrast between two opposing forces. For instance, Bierce's definition of a culprit as "the other fellow" humorously suggests that when a disagreement occurs between two people, the disputants are apt to describe each other as indignant, obstinate, morally

reprehensible, or deserving of a number of other pejorative and highly subjective adjectives (46). The joke, of course, is that while each person blames the other, both are guilty of failing to recognize how adamantly they cling to some principle or conviction that assures them of their rightful place in the innocent/culprit relationship. Bierce's definition points out the potential standstill two people can come to when compromise is not an option and implies that the differences between persons can lead to polarizing tendencies that justify how one is always placing the blame on the other.

Bierce further develops the idea that differences can validate value judgments and stereotypes associated with "other" people when he exaggerates how some people viewed foreigners during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He sarcastically claims that a foreigner is a "villain regarded with various and varying degrees of toleration, according to his conformity to the eternal standard of our conceit and the shifting of our interests" (85). Bierce makes the hypocrisy of this statement the obvious punch line. If someone conforms to *our* standards, then he or she is no longer a threat to society, but in a community as diverse as the United States, we are left wondering whose shifting interests should serve as the basis of our social values. This definition comically juxtaposes our expectations for an ideal society, one in which everyone agrees to a common set of values, with the harsh reality that no matter how much we agree on social standards, there will always be someone treated as a foreigner. This comical incongruity emphasizes that our subjective responses to reality cannot determine universal values without excluding other equally valid interpretations of the same reality. Always attributed to someone

else, these labels are very seldom turned inwards and used to examine the privileged standards of conceit and shifting interests.

At work in Bierce's humor is a rather simple theory, one that Henri Bergson would later develop and define as "mechanical inelasticity." Bergson, as well as Plato, Aristotle, and a host of other philosophers who claim comedy works on a notion of superiority, might suggest that people laugh at Bierce's jokes because of a sense that those who use these terms as Bierce has defined them are perhaps inferior to those who actually get the joke.[24] Polite readers or, one could say, educated readers see past his humor and recognize the inadequacy of the definitions. These readers of Bierce's work might think, "*I* don't act that way, but I know several people who do. *I* know better than this." In this way, then, Bierce's recognition of hypocrisy creates even more problems, some just as hypocritical as the problem he was concerned with in the first place. While Bierce's humor might implicitly advocate for equality, it also perpetuates a stubbornness that keeps intact an innocent bystander effect that allows some people to continue to assume that their principles are more correct than others and reinforces the idea that other people have it wrong. It maintains as well as critiques the illusion that there is a difference between those who consider themselves innocent and those who are labeled as culprits.

However, reading Bierce's definition with the concept of mechanical inelasticity as a heuristic device provides an opportunity to question whether this satirical approach to humor does enough to eradicate the differences between notions

[24] The superiority theory of comedy is one of many attempts to define what makes us laugh. For a more detailed discussion on the history of these philosophies of humor, see John Morreall's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*.

of innocence and guilt or to illustrate the similarities between natives and foreigners.

Describing mechanical inelasticity in humor, Bergson wrote,

> Let us try to picture to ourselves a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence, which brings it to pass that we continue to see what is no longer visible, to hear what is no longer audible, to say what is no longer to the point: in short, to adapt ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present. (121)

Bergson's concept of inelasticity implies that those we often mock or distance ourselves from fail to adapt to current trends or communal standards. Yet what we do not learn from Bergson's theory is to whose present perception of reality we should hold ourselves accountable. If we apply this theory to Bierce's satirical humor, we are left wondering for whom the joke is intended, because while it seems that he is directing his comical definitions at those who think he aptly described these terms, it is also likely that he is laughing at those who agree with his critique. In other words, he uses mechanical inelasticity to mock those who are unwilling to compromise *and* those who assume their standard of conduct is better off than that of culprits and foreigners. As the saying goes, Bierce's pot is calling the kettle black; the humor of the definitions implies that there are similarities between those who consider themselves innocent and those whom the innocent consider culprits. The irony in Bierce's humor allows his readers to laugh at other people, and, if read carefully, it also causes his audience to measure themselves against accepted social values. As a result, the hypocrisy that Bierce recognized is a general hypocrisy

rather than that of a specific group of people, leaving the exact intent of his humor difficult to pinpoint.[25] It also leaves his audience asking a few questions. Did he use hypocrisy and inelasticity to mock hypocrisy and inelasticity, or did he simply want to make fun of the other fellow whomever that might be? How can his readers know when to take him seriously and when to take him as the author of satire?[26] When is he purposely being derisive and when he is simply being humorous? Answering these questions involves understanding the traditions of literary comedy and the historical context in which Bierce constructed his satirical definitions, and asking these questions also forces one to consider some general principles of humor, fiction, and language, among other things. [27]

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" provides another example of Bergson's principle of mechanical inelasticity that can help us to further

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[25]David Schultz and S.T. Joshi, the editors of *The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary*, described Bierce's entire collection of definitions as an "unrelenting catalog of the moral failings of human beings" (xi). Their characterization of Bierce's work emphasizes the notion that most of his definitions were humorous generalizations made without a specific subject in mind.

[26]At the heart of this question is an implicit attempt to distinguish comedy and, in this case, satire, from the seriousness of canonical literature. Literature, with a capital *L*, means something. Humor, on the other hand, is just humorous. Some critics, however, argue that assuming the often flippant tone of comedy demonstrates its non-serious nature leads one to mistakenly categorize Literature and comedy as antithetical to each other. For instance, the brilliant and brilliantly funny Dan Cottom approaches the issue of defining humor and jokes in *Text and Culture: The Politics of Interpretation*. According to Cottom, any attempt to define the serious from the joking always already implies a "struggle over meaning that demands an interminable analysis" (28). Consequently, asking whether or not we can determine Bierce's level of satire is in some respects fraught with a political and cultural process of interpretation and not with the act of defining satire as comedy or as serious literature.

[27] Asking these questions of Bierce's work and others like it might help us recognize important characteristics of humor in general, and, more specifically, it could add to our current understanding of the literary humor produced in America during the early nineteenth century, a time when literary comedy was thought of as one of America's major literary exports. Critics and historians continue to debate whether or not American humor is distinguishable from the comedy of other nations during this time, and, as a consequence of this discussion, some argue that literary comedians in the United States did not contribute anything unique to world literature. Several notable critics have argued for both sides of this question, such as J. Delancey Ferguson, who suggested American humor is an extension of British satire, and Constance Rourke, who insisted that the Yankee Jonathan was an autochthonous American character created from the unique conditions of the early United States. Both wrote during the 1930s and remain key figures in this argument. See Ferguson's "The Roots of American Humor" and Rourke's "Examining the Roots of American Humor."

pursue these questions. "My Kinsman" is one of the more recognizable works of literary comedy written during the first half of the nineteenth century and one that uses the inelasticity of its protagonist to offer satirical critiques of both the author and audience. Working with conventional nineteenth-century characters, Hawthorne's humor pokes fun at the stereotypical country rube. The catch is that Robin, the main character, does not know he is the rustic whom everyone in the short story is mocking. His attempts to find his relative are thwarted at every turn, and unbeknownst to him, his repeated questioning of perfect strangers about where he can find Major Molineaux draws attention to his ignorance.

In one instance, Robin grabs the coat of a passerby, and this action almost gets him in trouble:

> "Let go my garment, fellow! I tell you, I know not the man you speak of. What! I have authority, I have – hem, hem – authority; and if this be the respect you show your betters, your feet shall be brought acquainted with the stocks, by daylight, tomorrow morning!"
>
> Robin released the old man's skirt, and hastened away, pursued by an ill-mannered roar of laughter from the barber's shop. He was at first considerably surprised by the result of his question, but, being a shrewd youth, soon thought himself able to account for the mystery.
>
> "This is some country representative," was his conclusion, "who has never seen the inside of my kinsman's door, and lacks the breeding to answer a stranger civilly. The man is old, or verily – I might be tempted to turn back and smite him on the nose. Ah, Robin, Robin! even the barber's boys laugh

at you for choosing such a guide! You will be wiser in time, friend Robin." (32)

Robin is correct in assuming the men's laughter is directed at him; however, he does not understand that they are laughing at his ineptness. He also does not understand that the men in this scene might know something he does not, like the fact that his relative is not whom Robin thinks he is. Instead, Robin merely shrugs off the laughter and insists that he will learn from his mistakes, and this naive motivation to do better helps to create the humor throughout the short story.

Robin's belief that he is a "shrewd youth" contrasts with the way his character is viewed and, consequently, treated in the story. The gentleman in this scene immediately catches on that Robin is not well acquainted with the ways of the city, and he takes advantage of Robin's gullibility by announcing that he – "hem, hem" – has authority. By having the gentleman clear his throat, Hawthorne nudges his readers into realizing that something is not quite right and makes them question the role of authority in this situation. Robin has it on good terms, his own to be exact, that he is intelligent enough to interpret the situation. His sense of authority is created from his own subjective perspective. The gentleman, on the other hand, recognizes Robin's limited perception and reacts accordingly by creating his own authority and trying to intimidate Robin into believing that he has a power granted by a civic responsibility, one that requires him to police the town in order to prevent people from acting like Robin. Exploiting Robin's perception of the moment, the gentleman's invention of power alludes to the notion that political authority is determined at best by "shifting interests" and at worst could be entirely arbitrary.

Perhaps a commentary on the distribution of political power in a caste system where sovereignty is granted to those who are in the right place or the right family at the right time, this simple cough foreshadows one of the story's many moral and political implications. The interaction of these two characters suggests that authority is based primarily on perception and that democracy is vulnerable to the manipulation of the perceptions of common people. The man puts one over on Robin, and Robin remains clueless to the joke. The gentleman's ability to adapt represents the American ideal, while Robin's inelasticity typifies the everyday fact of the American political experience, and the juxtaposition of the two creates Hawthorne's satirical commentary on the development of democracy in the United States.

Thus, Hawthorne's humor in "My Kinsman" is geared towards making his readers realize the dangers of being stuck in the past and ignoring the similarities between the ideal and the real. Major Molineaux turns out to be a British-appointed governor of the town and someone who is awarded very little respect. In fact, his position as the representative of British colonial rule gets him tarred and feathered on the night of Robin's arrival.

Once Robin discovers his relative's standing with the locals, he begins to ask another question. After laughing at his mistakes and at the spectacle of the disgraced Major, Robin pleads for someone to show him the way back to the ferry so he can return to his country home. Another gentleman who had accompanied Robin during the last half of the story responds, "No, my good friend Robin, not to-night, at least… Some few days hence, if you continue to wish it, I will speed you on your

journey. Or, if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux" (50). This subtle reshaping of the audience's understanding of the term "shrewd" allows Hawthorne to reveal the satirical humor of the story. What once was considered acceptable, relying on nepotism or family ancestry to help establish oneself, is no longer a principle governing social or political behavior. A shrewd youth, at the end of the story, is someone who can pull himself up by his own bootstraps – be elastic – and live the so-called American dream.

Bergson, were he to have critiqued Hawthorne's short story, undoubtedly would have highlighted the social significance of "My Kinsman." Suggesting that laughter is "always the laughter of a group," he most likely would have analyzed the ways in which Hawthorne uses the notion of shrewd behavior and the correlation between authority and perception to prompt his readers to laugh at Robin's dependency on how things used to be done (119). In this sense, Hawthorne's audience is in on the joke as they collectively laugh at Robin's foolishness. Norman Holland, author of *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor*, might further add that "My Kinsman" illustrates several theories of humor, including catharsis, roasting, and social purposiveness (92-94). For example, Holland argues that roasting, as at events like the annual White House Correspondent's Association dinner in our own time, serves to protect an established social structure by allowing a temporary role reversal between those who govern and their constituents. This allows for a critique of legislative executives in the name of "good fun" and assumes everything will go

back to normal after the dinner. Nothing serious is gained by this event, and very few people see mocking the government in this context as a potential threat.

While Hawthorne's short story does not participate in anything resembling a roast, it does appeal to the audience's sense of values and creates a humorous scenario in which Robin's presumptuous behavior reinforces the notion that normal behavior for an American democrat directly opposes what would be expected of a person living under a European political system. Hawthorne's audience laughs at Robin because he acts as someone he is not, and his inability to recognize the errors of his behavior allows the audience to mock his elitist assumptions. This is a shared laughter only if all readers agree that Hawthorne's political implications, not the obvious slapstick comedy of the situation, are cause for laughter. Unlike the act of roasting, which is meant to preserve order, Hawthorne's cathartic attempt to purge the influences of Europe from the American way of doing things serves to provide laughter at the expense of those who fail to see the conflict between the developing ideologies of Jacksonian Democracy and the lingering effects of Europe on American politics. Its social function is to persuade people to take a side in this conflict, and, for Hawthorne, the "correct" side appears hostile to the Old World. According to this line of reasoning, Robin is the other fellow until he learns from his previous mistakes, and we all remain foreign to Hawthorne's notion of true democracy until we understand the principles he illustrates through Robin's epiphany at the end of the story.

This type of interpretation of Hawthorne's satire, however, assumes that Robin's inelasticity emphasizes the incongruity of an American citizen continuing to

act according to European standards. Many critics do end their discussions of "My Kinsman" at the point where they think the purpose of the story is to challenge an imaginary European past, but some have complicated this reading of Hawthorne's humorous tale and suggested that Robin's affected behavior implies several parallels between American democracy and European nobility. Pascal Covici, for instance, proposes that the story is indicative of the ambivalent American attitude toward independence from all things European. Writing about the similarities between British and American literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Covici argues, "Just as Americans have praised and blamed elitist order and praised and condemned democratic chaos, so have we valued independence – theological, political, cultural, psychological – while at the same time rejecting it" (4). Discussing the specific conflict he recognizes in Hawthorne's work, he writes, "Even more strikingly subversive, independence – political independence, in any case, and by implication elements of psychological independence as well – [in "My Kinsman"] implies at least a period of transition during which the excesses of mob rule must sully members of the nobility because nobility suppresses democracy. Hawthorne, ardent Jacksonian Democrat though he was, writes with a surprisingly Hamiltonian sense of the people's beastliness" (35). For Covici, "My Kinsman" still signifies a type of social humor that asks people to choose a side in this contemporary political debate, but it does so by illustrating the undesirable qualities of both. Democratic chaos or the "sense of the people's beastliness" appears in the many scenes in which Robin is being tricked by those who want to take advantage of his ignorance, and, ultimately, Hawthorne uses the spectacle of the Major's embarrassment to capture

just how carried away mob rule can get. Describing the final scene in which Robin finally sees his relative, Hawthorne writes:

> When there was a momentary calm in the tempestuous sea of sound, the leader gave the sign, the procession resumed its march. On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery round some dead potentate, mighty no more, but majestic still in his agony. On they went, in counterfeited pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment, trampling all on an old man's heart. On swept the tumult, and left a silent street behind. (50)

Hawthorne's final word on the propriety of this protest condemns the action of the people and implies that American democracy, like European "elitist order," maintains a sense of "counterfeited pomp, senseless uproar, and frenzied merriment." Most of this short story favors relegating any European influences and their possible impact on America's sociopolitical structures to the darkest recesses of a dingy archive, yet the description of this type of vigilante justice reminds Hawthorne's readers that communities founded on nobility or democracy are frequently indistinguishable from one another. The unfavorable description of Robin's treatment and Major Molineaux's persecution suggests that Hawthorne was not entirely convinced that granting unconditional political power to the people was a better alternative to elitist order. Covici's argument reminds us that Hawthorne may have been suggesting that relying too heavily on either the past or the present could cause a blind indignation toward one or the other in which we forget the flaws of both. As a result, "My Kinsman" develops a more complicated argument than an

outright rejection of Old World politics and an uncritical acceptance of American democracy.

Covici's reading of "My Kinsman" demonstrates that the interpretation of a literary work, like any argument about what constitutes humor and other genres of fiction, is always ideological and open to question. Robin's inelasticity and the behavior of the townspeople suggest alternative and opposing meanings dependent on how one defines Hawthorne's political orientation and the impact his political agenda had on the crafting of this joke. Like Bierce's satirical definitions, "My Kinsman" ridicules culprits and foreigners while also suggesting those who consider themselves innocent are equally inelastic and, therefore, subject to ridicule. Hawthorne's comical incongruity, the humor that results from comparing two presumably opposing ideals, reminds us that similarities do exist between the everyday fact and the cultural ideal.

Yet, unlike Bierce, Hawthorne certainly had in mind a specific "eternal standard" for American politics, and although he was generally considered a Jacksonian democrat, this story suggests that he was willing to acknowledge the hypocrisy in those who relied on one and only one political principle. This acknowledgement brings us back to my original questions about Bierce's work and the nature of comical congruities while also adding a new one. How can humor critique something considered humorous when the subject of the joke or the subject position of the person making the joke is not entirely understood? The simple answer is that one cannot say definitively in Hawthorne's case either that he is making fun of those who favored a strong ruling class or that he is ridiculing all

hypocrites in general. No single context can justify one and only one interpretation of Hawthorne's story without limiting the possibility of language to create new meanings and evolve new signifying chains. One might argue that it is in the nature of comedy to leave ambiguous the source and butt of a joke so that it can be repeated over and over again. The iterability of jokes and language makes works like "My Kinsman" subject to a litany of interpretations all delicately balanced upon a reader's perspective.

Although it may be considered an exemplary work of satire, by itself Hawthorne's short story does not adequately represent the ethos of American literary comedy written during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Most readers generally do not immediately associate Hawthorne with humorous literature and for good reason. In contrast to Hawthorne's subtlety, most American literary comedians of this era chose exaggerated characters and melodramatic situations to emphasize the implications of their humor. Authors such as Seba Smith, T.B. Thorpe, and Thomas Chandler Haliburton constructed tall tales and larger-than-life characters, making exaggeration, not subtlety, a key feature of American literary humor.[28] Most of these authors, unlike Hawthorne, used a very theatrical style to capture a reading audience, and did so in order to in order to bluntly declare their intentions.

James Russell Lowell, for instance, created an emphatically indignant character by the name of Hosea Biglow to satirize the way key political issues were addressed and discussed in American society. Lowell's exaggeration of Biglow's

[28] Describing the early roots of American comedy and the development of traditions such as the Down East and Old Southwest veins of American literary comedy, William Clark and Craig Turner, editors of *Critical Essays on American Humor*, repeatedly suggest that exaggeration was a fundamental element of early American humor.

character, however, is tempered by the presence of a seemingly more realistic and conventional character, the Parson Homer Wilbur. Together these two characters initially appear to create a balanced discussion of slavery and other hot-button issues during the nineteenth century. Yet, as with my interpretations of the works of Hawthorne and Bierce, my reading of *The Biglow Papers* as an example of comical inelasticity will show that Lowell's satire is more complex than previously assumed.

Upon first reading Lowell's works in the original series of collected letters, it seems reasonable to suggest that his use of traditional conventions associated with dialect humor privileges the homespun gumption of Hosea Biglow, the Yankee farmer and author of the letters. Contrasting Biglow's written language to that of the erudite Parson Wilbur, Lowell creates the illusion that he, like many other satirists of his time, is attacking the misuse of political power by those presumed to be more intelligent and more worthy to decide the fate of the United States' government. However, when Lowell has Biglow write such lines as "Aint princerple precious? then, who's goin' to use it/ Wen there 's resk o' some chap's gittin' up to abuse it?," it becomes less obvious as to what and whose principles are being abused (83). The indignant nature of Biglow's protests make it clear that in order to stop the abuse of his principles, one must trample on the convictions of those who disagree with him, thus placing principle against "princerple." The inelasticity of Lowell's comedy in *The Biglow Papers* not only challenges the assumption that Biglow is justified in his objections to contemporary political trends but also provides an opportunity to laugh

at the notion that any individual's principles can serve as the bedrock of American democracy.

Although Lowell was not primarily known for his comical works, his political satire drew the acclaim of several critics for the way it used humor to critique the forceful expansion of the American frontier during the 1840s.[29] Lowell's two main characters in the work, Biglow and Wilbur, develop a relationship in which the Parson acts as Biglow's spiritual guardian and literary agent. Consequently, the two are usually seen as a pair of traditional comic literary characters. Biglow, the rustic, dialect-speaking simpleton, seeks the Parson's advice for many of the letters he writes to protest the U.S.-Mexican War and the expediency with which some politicians rushed to annex the western territories of the United States. Wilbur's character is a precursor to those twentieth-century clichéd stereotypes of urbane and neurotic city dwellers, characters that Woody Allen would eventually make famous. Together, these two characters put into dialogue our assumptions about characters who speak in non-standard English and those whose voices follow more traditional guidelines based on written English. *The Biglow Papers* used dialect humor to mock the association of populism with common languages but also to suggest that both Wilbur and Biglow are guilty of an unwillingness to compromise with those with whom they might have disagreed. The inelasticity of both characters demonstrates that when it comes to satirizing politics, ambiguity and irony are essential.

[29] Known more for his family heritage and his lengthy collection of poems, prose, and critical treatises on writing, Lowell is not often considered a literary comedian, although some critics have praised his contributions to the development of American comedy. W.P. Trent once called Lowell the "greatest humorist America has ever produced" (37). Found in "A Retrospect of American Humor," Trent's assessment of Lowell's comical prowess was based entirely on the popularity of his *The Biglow Papers*. See also Leon Howard's *A Victorian Knight Errant* for a more detailed biography of Lowell.

The letters found in *The Biglow Papers* offer a number of protests against what Biglow felt was the lack of moral and religious values in American culture. Originally written as letters to the editors of several popular newspapers and magazines and subsequently published in two collections, they were viewed as Lowell's attempt to criticize the unjust nature of slavery and the imperialist behavior of advocates of American expansion. In the first series, Lowell used Biglow to object to the irreligious behavior of American politicians in their advocacy for the invasion of Mexico and the extension of slave territory in the United States. These letters, written sporadically between 1846 and 1848, were published in various Boston area periodicals. The first collected edition appeared in 1848 and included all eight of Biglow's initial letters. Almost twenty years later, Lowell's second series of Biglow letters was compiled into another collected edition. This 1867 edition contained the final eleven letters and offered Lowell's satirical commentary on the politics surrounding the Civil War and Reconstruction. Most of these letters were printed in the *Atlantic* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* but did not enjoy the same success as the first series. Most of the criticism found in the second series of Biglow verses is so historically particular, and relevant only to the specific nature of the 1860s, that some later critics suggest they have very little appeal to those outside this context.[30] Regardless, both series of Lowell's *The Biglow Papers* remain pertinent to American literary studies for their development of American humor.

[30] Both Arthur Voss and Emmanuel Gnomes argue that Lowell's second series lacked the popularity and timelessness of the first series. Voss suggests, "The satire in *The Biglow Papers* that has worn the best naturally is that which most clearly has application beyond the immediate historical events with which it is concerned, and in this respect the first series is superior" (64). See Voss's "Backgrounds of Lowell's Satire in 'The Biglow Papers.'" Gnomes, in his comparison of Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Simple and Lowell's Hosea Biglow, suggests that both authors' works, while engaged in an ageless struggle to improve race relations, have become outdated: "Despite the weakness [Biglow and

Like several other works of dialect in nineteenth-century American literature, Lowell's Biglow papers follow a general framework pattern that creates a distinct relationship between the characters and their respective languages.[31] Wilbur's voice, written as a traditional literary language, frames Biglow's dialect and creates some dissonance between the two characters. This allowed Lowell to exploit the assumption that Wilbur's voice and the stereotypes associated with it provided clear evidence for his sound logic and ability to reason. In contrast, Biglow's Yankee dialect emphasized his presumably uneducated character and suggested that he relied primarily on his common sense to inform his critique of United States politics.

As pivotal as Biglow and Wilbur are to Lowell's satire, though, he also used a number of other characters to emphasize his displeasure with the direction and intention of the war between Mexico and the United States of America. Most notably, he relied on the transformation of a character named Birdofredum Sawin from a gullible Yankee farmer to a bitter veteran of war who uses his battle wounds to gain sympathy from the American public and enhance his campaigns for various political offices. Sawin's change could potentially serve as the subject of an entire analysis of Lowell's humor, a study that might suggest he is the only one capable of

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Simple] both tend to gravitate towards, that of becoming dated to the highly contemporary nature of a good deal of their subject matter, they will, on the other hand, always remain highly readable if for no other reason then the damnable longevity, and therefore constant relevance, of the problem they deal with. And in their laudable attempt to try to alter the problem for the better, they have both become classic contributions to the literature of race relations in this nation while at the same time reflecting favorably on the crackerbox tradition by skillfully depicting the gravity of theme which the genre is capable of handling" (269).

[31] According to Walter Blair, framework narratives became increasingly popular in the early 1800s as common American oral tales began appearing in print (Essays 41). These types of tales generally involved a storytelling narrator providing direct quotes or anecdotes from the actors involved, and the narrator's voice acted as the frame within which other characters' dialects could be understood. In the context of Lowell's comedy, Blair writes, "The framework language usually contrasts with the vernacular of the quoted story to stress comic aspects: Homer Wilbur's sesquipedalian words and Latin quotations incongruously introduce Hosea's Yankee doggerel" (52).

elasticity, but because Lowell writes all of Sawin's letters as they are translated into poetry by Biglow, it is not my intent to suggest Sawin is a separate character or one that speaks for himself.[32] Sawin's voice is at the mercy of Biglow's pen, and Biglow's pen is dependent on Lowell's intentions. This mediated relationship between Lowell and Sawin reminds the readers that Lowell did not always use his characters to advocate his own political or moral philosophies.

Other minor characters include Ezekiel Biglow, Increase D. O'Phace, and a number of fictional representations of politicians such as John C. Calhoun, who stands in contrast to Hosea's expectations of political savoir faire. Ezekiel is Hosea's father and, in the first letter, adds his own letter of introduction to Biglow's poem in an effort to supplement and explain Biglow's efforts. D. O'Phace, pronounced *doughface,* a name given to those northern politicians who capitulated to Southern demands, is a stereotypical representative of everything Hosea considered wrong with American politics. In one way or another, each of these characters crosses Hosea's path and prompts him to write a letter of protest urging the people of the United States to avoid making drastic mistakes or to warn them from voting for a particular candidate. All of these letters are written by Biglow and are replete with his indignant refusal to consider any alternative perspective on the issues he discusses.

This indignation makes Lowell's use of a Yankee farmer to discuss serious political topics an obvious comical incongruity. Biglow wanted to be taken seriously, but something about his character prevents the reader from doing so. His

[32] In *Horse Sense in American Humor,* Walter Blair does suggest that Sawin's character is unlike the Parson and Biglow because he is capable of change (97).

protest of the war between the United States and Mexico in 1847 was explicit in its condemnation of the use of religious principles to justify a war that he thought was being fought for no other purpose than to expand the slave territory in the United States. Biglow's letters collected in the first series of *Biglow Papers* challenged the myth that the United States was somehow destined to extend the principles of democracy and bring the religious virtues of Christianity to all nations of people then occupying the North American continent.[33] Although Biglow may have agreed with the imperialist assumptions behind this line of reasoning, he very explicitly disagreed with the tactics used by the United States government to overpower nations already occupying land west of the Mississippi. His writings are generally seen as a simple and straightforward commentary about the policies of the American federal government, but they are written with such obstinacy that it becomes difficult to suggest that Lowell unequivocally supported all of Biglow's convictions.

In fact, Biglow's character and the language he uses to voice his concern often appear as anything but serious. Referred to as uneducated, pawky, and untutored, and most frequently described as indignant, his crude personality and rough language are the biggest obstacles to his attempt to be taken seriously. The

[33] Biglow's protest of the war, marked by its simple dialect, contrasted with the more traditional rhetoric of those such as John L. O'Sullivan, John Quincy Adams, and Robert C. Winthrop, although some historians have suggested that O'Sullivan, like Biglow, did not think of the expansion of the United States as an obligation to extend European influences across the continent. In *Race and Manifest Destiny*, Reginald Horseman presents an interesting look at the origins of "manifest destiny" and the corresponding political policies associated with it. As most historians do, Horseman credits O'Sullivan as the person who coined the term but suggests that its use by those such as Adams and Winthrop eventually gave the phrase the negative connotation associated with it today. Robert Sampson also makes the argument that O'Sullivan's use of the term differs from how other politicians would assimilate it to their own causes: "Erroneously, O'Sullivan and his vision of American growth, which he coined the term 'manifest destiny' to describe, came to be associated with a violent, exploitative policy, a policy in fact opposed to his personal and public beliefs" (192). This evidence is not meant to suggest O'Sullivan and Biglow were free from any racist sentiments, but it does put the demands of some nineteenth-century protests against the annexation of Texas and other western states into a more historically accurate context.

style and tone of his writing indicate a hostile reaction to those he opposes in such a way as to make the audience question his ability to objectively rationalize and defend his opinions. For example, in the first series of letters, Biglow wrote a number of lines that could be interpreted as irreligious and highly inflammatory:

Ez fer war, I call it murder, –
    There you hev it plain an' flat;
I don't want to go no furder
    Than my Testyment fer that;
God hez sed so plump an' fairly,
    It 's ez long ez it is broad,
An' you 've gut to git up airly
    Ef you want to take in God.

'Taint your eppyletts an' feathers
    Make the thing a grain more right'
'Taint afollerin' your bell-wethers
    Will excuse ye in His sight;
Ef you take a sword an' dror it,
    An' go stick a feller thru,
Guv'ment aint to answer for it,
    God 'll send the bill to you. (51) [34]

[34] All citations unless otherwise noted will be taken from Thomas Wortham's edition of *The Biglow Papers [First Series]* or, if a quotation from the second series, the Elmwood Edition of *The Complete Writings of James Russell Lowell*.

Biglow's language is stern in its condemnation of war to the point where it becomes difficult to judge whether or not he is being entirely serious. Lowell's readers might have questioned his allusions to God and the Bible, considering them unacceptably sacrilegious. Even Lowell thought twice about the dialect he used and the incredulity that he associated to Biglow's character: "When I began to carry out my conception and to write in my assumed character [Biglow], I found myself in a strait between two perils. On the one hand, I was in danger of being carried beyond the limit of my own opinions, or at least of that temper with which every man should speak his mind in print, and on the other I feared the risk of seeming to vulgarize a deep and sacred conviction" (Elmwood 6). Lowell was aware of the risks he took in making his satire emanate from the voice of a country farmer in such a way as to make him obstinate and reckless with the expression of his opinions. Lowell's hesitancy suggests that he recognized the necessity for tempering hostile objections to the government, and it also shows that he understood that Biglow's vulgar voice might allow people to disregard his protest as the ramblings of a fool.

Nonetheless, Lowell continued to have Biglow write with such vehemence that his own credibility, not as someone who speaks the truth, but as an author who considers alternative perspectives, became questionable. For example, in the second letter of the first series, Biglow puts into verse a letter from Birdofredum Sawin, who is fighting in the US-Mexican War. Biglow's informant and fellow Yankee farmer, Sawin writes home to tell people that the war is not what he expected and that the propaganda used to recruit him as well as the training he received did not prepare him for the reality of life on the frontline, instead suggesting, "This kind o' sogerin'

aint a mite like our October trainin" (59). Relaying to his readers what Sawin is told by his commanding officer, Biglow interprets what Sawin hears, and in his own words, Biglow has "intusspussed a Few refleckshuns hear and thair" (58).

Afore I come away from hum I hed a strong persuasion
Thet Mexicans worn't human beans, - an ourang outang nation,
A sort o' folks a chap could kill an' never dream on 't arter,
No more 'n a feller 'd dream o' pigs thet he hed to slarter;
I'd an idee thet they were built arter the darkie fahion all,
An' kickin' colored folks about, you know, 's kind o' national;
But wen I jined I worn't so wise ez thet air queen o' Sheby,
Fer, come to look at 'em, they aint much diff'rent from wut we be,
An' here we air ascrougin' 'em out o' thir own dominions,
Ashelterin' 'em, ez Caleb sez, under our eagle's pinions,
Wich means to take a feller up jest by the slack o' 's trowsis
An' walk him Spanish clean right out o' all his homes an' houses;
Wal, it doos seem a curus way, but then hooraw fer Jackson!
It must be right, fer Caleb sez it 's reg'lar Anglosaxon.
The Mex'cans don't fight fair, they say, they piz'n all the water,
An' du amazin' lots o' things they is n't wut they ough' to;
Bein' they haint no lead, they make their bullets out o' copper
An' shoot the darned things at us, tu, which Caleb sez aint proper;
He sez they'd ough' to stan right up an' let us pop 'em fairly,
(Guess wen he ketches 'em at thet he'll hev to git up airly,)

Thet our nation 's bigger'n theirn an' so its rights air bigger,
An' thet it's all to make 'em free thet we air pullin' trigger,
Thet Anglo Saxondom's idees abreakin' 'em to pieces,
An' thet idee's that every man doos jest wut he damn pleases;
Ef I don't make his meaning' clear, perhaps in some respex I can,
I know thet 'every man' don't mean a nigger or Mexican. (63)

Ironically, the war changes Sawin's assumptions about the nature of people who he has been told are inferior to him. If only for a brief moment, Sawin second guesses the racist assumptions that justify the nation's faith in AngloSaxonism. However, his short-lived doubt is quickly overcome by a feeling of patriotism that makes him believe the contradictions and lies fed to him by his commanding officer, Caleb. Sawin's own sense of guilt is not enough to overcome the ethnocentric and nation-centered logic that informs Caleb's rationalization of American exceptionalism.

The irony of this letter is further developed by the linguistic conflict caused by the letter's heteroglossia as the reader has to wade through the voices of several different characters. Caleb, Sawin's superior in the military, appears as the voice of officers who were trained to convince soldiers that what they were doing was not only moral but a responsibility granted to only the biggest and, therefore, most superior countries. Yet Caleb's voice clashes with a number of co-authors, all of whom are trying to insert their own opinions into the text. From Caleb, Sawin, and Biglow to Lowell himself, these letters carry a number of different meanings,

including some that contradict and some that favor Caleb's rhetorical justification of the war.

Sawin's voice in this letter, although it appears to have some hesitancy to accept Caleb's reasoning, reinforces the opportunistic rhetoric that justified killing other human beings in the name of patriotic duty and maintaining a naturalized racial ideology, one that rationalizes a hierarchy of nations based on geographical size and the skin color of its dominant class. However, because Sawin initially questions this logic, he allows for Biglow to expose the irrational nature of this type of argument. By alluding to his own doubt as to whether or not he is repeating this propaganda correctly – "Ef I don't make his meaning' clear" – Sawin displays an ignorance caused by an unwillingness to deviate from what he is told. His inelasticity allows Biglow to make it obvious that he does not see the contradictions and blatant exaggerations about his enemies. Biglow presumably recognizes what Sawin does not and infuses the letter with comic sarcasm in order to emphasize his satirical argument. The humor that results from the presence of both characters' interpretations of the situation draws our attention to Biglow's objections to "Anglo Saxondom's idees" that reject religious belief in the equality of all human beings. It is true that Biglow's objection does not directly question the assumption that AngloSaxonism is an extension of Christian principles, but this letter does suggest that that the religion of one individual or group should not be used as an ideological standard; rather, religious principles should be understood in the same vein as Bierce's "eternal standard of our conceit and the shifting of our interests." Making Biglow interpret Sawin's report of how Caleb justified the war allows Lowell to keep

the hypocrisy of other people at a safe distance. Biglow and Sawin do not condone the killing of innocent people, but as a result of Caleb's manipulation of rhetoric, Sawin is almost convinced that the war is necessary to protect the United States and to civilize those foreign culprits while Biglow, framing Sawin's account of Caleb's words, uses them to argue that the war is contradictory to the democratic American notion that all men are created equal.

The intent of this passage is further complicated when one considers Lowell as the author of Biglow. If Biglow is making fun of Sawin, then whom is Lowell mocking – Biglow, Sawin, both, neither? Calling him the "chameleon of nineteenth-century literature," Leon Howard suggests that Lowell's familiarity with people similar to Biglow's character made him more sympathetic to them than most people in his social class (49). Howard writes, "In Cambridge, as in all villages, there existed certain arbitrary notions of what was proper and seemly, but anyone who gave assent to the common standards of speech and conduct received a considerable amount of tolerance in return; and the more sophisticated citizens cultivated a sense of humor that relieved the friction between pressure of principle and the external necessity of toleration" (8). Although Howard's comment implies that Lowell's sympathy was more of a condescending tolerance than a mutual respect and belief in equality, his sophisticated sense of humor indicated a willingness to acknowledge the similarities, as well as differences, between Lowell's convictions and Biglow's indignation. While Lowell himself most likely would have described the raw emotion of Biglow's protest as a device used to develop his character and would have rejected outright Biglow's simple and vulgar language, he

clearly disagreed with the notion that a specific people has more rights than any other simply because it belongs to a larger country, just as he disagreed with the idea that pomp and circumstance – "eppyletts an' feathers" – make a conviction more acceptable. In Lowell's relationship with Biglow, or Biglow's with other characters, we see the complexity of the humor in *The Biglow Papers*.

Biglow's indignation and Lowell's confinement of a Yankee drawl to Biglow's character causes me to question the intent of Lowell's satire. Although the general purpose of the first series of *The Biglow Papers* was to protest the xenophobic attitudes that motivated some of the arguments for westward expansion in the United States, Biglow's inelastic character makes me wonder whether Lowell used him as a representative voice for all Americans who disagreed with the war or if Lowell created Biglow's character to protest the war *and* to suggest that when it comes to defending individual principles in a diverse community, compromise is sometimes necessary. Biglow's persistently crude allusions to religion and his insistence that Anglo-Saxonism should be rooted in his version of Christianity ignites his hostile behavior, and because this argument comes from a character Lowell used for comical purposes, it appears that Lowell may have thought of Biglow as the subject of a joke as well as the comedian who tells it. Biglow's dialect affects how one interprets his character and Lowell's satirical intentions.

My argument here diverges from that of Walter Blair and Jennette Tandy, two influential critics of American comedy whose work on the role of dialect characters in the early traditions of American humor has suggested that the incongruity of a wise character speaking in a common dialect is one of the more

identifiable conventions of American humor. Their arguments tend to concede the fact that a dialect character speaks for and directly advocates the thoughts of an author who employs them. For example, Blair argues that during the nineteenth century the popularity of the rustic simpleton rested on the idea that this character privileged common sense over fancy education. Blair credits Benjamin Franklin's work, published in the "Courant," a small newspaper in the Boston area ran by Franklin's older brother, as the origin of the American version of the comical dialect character (*Horse Sense* 9).[35] Blair's research has focused on the evolution of humor in American literature, and he has argued that the linguistic simplicity found in the use of literary dialects shaped the perception of what he calls "horse sense." Blair argues that the effects of dialects in literature produced a general sense of trust among those readers who associated common sense with plain language and dialect usage. Describing Joel Chandler Harris's use of dialect characters, Blair writes, "[Harris] perhaps had in mind the fact that since Americans often distrust smart alecks, wits, or book-read men, a narrator may disqualify himself by using highfalutin language while another wins trust by using vernacular phrasings" (*Essays* 44). Dialects in literature might seem representative of how average people sounded and, therefore, how average Americans thought. Although these common vernaculars were not inherently more truthful or honest than traditional literary languages, literary dialects came to be associated with a no-nonsense and straightforward way of seeing things. As a result, dialect humor appealed to the

[35] Franklin's comical characters in the "Courant" included Widow Dogood and eventually led to Poor Richard, both of whom helped to establish American versions of the dialectal comic character, although the Brother Jonathan character of Royall Tyler's 1787 play *The Contrast* could also serve as a point of origin for the American Yankee dialect character.

American public because it challenged the notion that to appear educated one had to sound articulate; authors who used dialect characters rejected traditional wisdom, opting instead to voice their opinions in a language more representative of the average person.

Jennette Tandy also recognizes the way comical dialect literature created a new take on the relationship between practical knowledge and common languages. She defines "crackerbox philosophy" as that logic produced by those characters that privilege common sense over knowledge gained through a more traditional education. "The comic country man," Tandy argues, "had by rights the ear of many who where deaf to the ordinary appeals of editor and orator. He could insinuate many things forbidden. The rustic observer could innocently betray official double-dealing. He could poke fun wherever he chose, tell all manner of slighting stories about the great, and satirize the humble Democrat by revealing his own gullibility" (25). Characters that spoke or wrote in dialect were perceived as the straight-shooting purveyors of common knowledge. They were, in essence, individuals who did not know any better and could not use the convoluted rhetoric popularly associated with debates among the highly educated. The comic countryman spoke to, rather than at, the average person, and like Blair's arguments, Tandy's argument takes for granted that readers assumed a dialect character was a way for authors to be more honest and avoid the perception that they were manipulating language.

The rustic simpleton, therefore, is generally a character assumed to speak without the artificiality of more commonly used literary languages. These characters are often defined in relation to the agenda of the author who uses them and are rarely

discussed in terms of how they participate in the joke. For example, like Blair and Tandy, Jesse Bier argues that dialect humor works best when it measures the level of agreement between the audience and the character who speaks with an untraditional variation of the English language. Describing the evolution of American comedy, Bier writes, "[The] earliest humorists, including Franklin, are traditionally 'corrective,' aligning themselves with society against foolish deviators from custom and sense. But the course of American humor is a rapid and accelerating realignment with the non-conformists, the maladjusted even, the hypercritical antagonists of social code and self-deception" (106). Bier accounts for this change from "corrective" humor to a more intentional focus on deviant behavior by analyzing the aesthetic shift between realism and modernism that occurred during the early half of the twentieth century.[36] His argument, however, illustrates the assumption that literary comedians used characters like the rustic simpleton to produce conformity and agreement amongst their audiences. Bier assumes that these characters were advocates of the author's social message and sought to recruit other people to their own political agenda. Although this might have been the case with several of these characters, Lowell's use of comical inelasticity in Sawin and Biglow leaves open the possibility that Lowell created these characters to warn against the dangers of mistaking the shifting interests of any group of people for the foundational ideology of an entire nation. Biglow's indignation and Sawin's gullibility demonstrate that while some fall victim to the government's propaganda, others are equally guilty of protesting the government in a manner that reveals their

[36] Other critics who discuss the impact of modernism on American comedy include Sanford Pinsker ("On or About December 1910: When Human Character – and American Humor – Changed") and Hamlin Hill ("Modern American Humor: The Janus Laugh").

obstinate refusal to compromise. Biglow, in other words, is not an accurate reflection of Lowell's personal agenda. He is not a fictional representation of Lowell's political ideology. Instead, Lowell's use of the rustic simpleton character ridicules the hypocrisy of those who are inflexibly certain of their ability to discern between correct and incorrect political choices, between deviant and normal social customs.

Lowell achieves this end by highlighting the self-reflective and inelastic humor of Biglow's character. In the seventh letter of the first series, for example, Lowell provides a contrast between Biglow's own writing and a letter from an unknown presidential candidate, and this juxtaposition leads to the impression that maybe Biglow is not too different from those he seems to critique. Writing a letter to the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Biglow describes the purpose of a poem he has written. He explains, "[I] writ to 271 ginerals and gut ansers to 209. tha air called candid 8s but i don't see nothing candid about em. this here 1 wich I send wus thought satty's factory. I dunno as it's ushle to print Poscrips, but as all the ansers i gut hed the saim, I sposed it wus best" (111-112). Biglow's introduction makes it clear that he may not think this person is the best candidate for the White House, but he at least agrees the most with this person's responses to his questions. Although he mistakenly assumes political candidates should be honest and sincere, he sacrifices this notion by agreeing that this candidate is the best he could find.

After this brief explanation, the reader's attention then turns to the actual letter. This candidate initially appears to share Biglow's stubborn nature. He is a "straight-spoken kind o' creetur/ Thet blurts out wut 's in his head,/ An' ef I 've one

pecooler feetur,/ It is a nose thet wunt be led" (112). He also agrees that the "country's underpinnin'/ Is some consid'ble out o' jint" (112). The similarities between this politician and Biglow suggest that both agree that the country's principles are under attack and that a quick and decisive response is needed to maintain a sense of integrity. The indignation of both characters creates a comical relationship that suggests both men are cut from the same cloth. They both have a "nose thet wunt be led," and Lowell does not make this an admirable quality in either character. Yet, as the poem develops, a different side of the politician emerges that leads Lowell's audience to recognize that Biglow is created with as much inelasticity as Sawin or as Hawthorne's Robin character. The final three stanzas illustrate Lowell's mockery of the rustic simpleton.

Ez to my princerples, I glory
In hevin' nothin' o' the sort;
I aint a Whig, I aint a Tory,
I'm jest a canderdate, in short;
Thet's fair an' square an' perpendicler,
But, ef the Public cares a fig
To hev me an' thin' in particler,
Wy, I'm a kind o' peri-wig.

P. S.

Ez we 're a sort o' privateerin',
O' course, you know, it 's sheer an' sheer,
An' there is sutthin' worth your hearin'

I ’ll mention in *your* privit ear;
Ef you git *me* inside the White House,
Your head with ile I ’ll kin’ o’ ’nint
By gittin’ *you* inside the Light-house
Down to the eend o’ Jaalam Pint.

An’, ez the North hez took to brustlin’
At bein’ scrouged frum off the roost,
I’ll tell ye wut ’ll save all tusslin’
An’ give our side a harnsome boost,–
Tell ’em on the Slavery question
I’m RIGHT, although to speak I ’m lawth;
This gives you a safe pint to rest on,
An’ leaves me frontin’ South by North. (114-115)

The satirical critique found in Lowell’s humor in these verses is consistent with Biglow’s objections to the ambiguous nature of political discourse and the greed of some politicians. It appears to be another example of Biglow sarcastically suggesting that an ideal candidate does not exist, and this person is simply par for the course.

Yet, because the poem does not include a response from Biglow that would indicate his objection to the candidate’s proposition, we begin to wonder what this silence could possibly mean. Is it a complacent acceptance of the bribe, or, in keeping with his inelastic character, does it represent a refusal to recognize how

things have changed in American politics? In the first stanza of the postscript the emphasis on the pronouns "me" and "your" suggests that the politician considers Biglow's support a clear indication that both characters understand the way politics work. Should Biglow choose to endorse this candidate and help to get him elected, the politician will return the favor. However, this situation irritates Biglow, and his indignant sarcasm suggests a refusal to accept this logic. His reaction illustrates that he is able to criticize the way social values have shifted, but the defensive nature of his critique suggests that he is unwilling to allow this change to occur. Biglow's previously mentioned religious convictions are no longer protected by those candidates running for the offices of the American government. Rather, greed and self-serving ambition motivate the campaigns of some of the politicians who correspond with Biglow. Lowell's satire seems to pity Biglow's impotent protest, because while he is busy making fun of this candidate, Lowell is quietly mocking Biglow's stubborn behavior. Although Biglow's interpretation of the candidate's letter suggests a typical rustic simpleton pointing out the flaws of an average politician, Lowell's use of this dialect-speaking character indicates that Biglow's inelasticity is itself worth considering as a joke. Lowell illustrates in this poem that comic countrymen are equally capable of failing to recognize how their indignation blinds them to the similarities between the political culprits and their own outrageous responses to these characters.

Although Biglow's character does not fit the conventional notion of parody any more than he represents the traditional notion of the shrewd rustic, it is possible to suggest that Lowell thought of Biglow as a tragically flawed character and an

appropriate subject for satire due to his inelastic nature and his association with a tradition of comical incongruity. Lowell's critical essays on literature develop the idea that he believed all good writing should provide an organic balance between what he called the imagination and the understanding. Respectively, each concept represented an artist's representation of the "world of ideas" and the "world of facts." "Nature insists above all things upon balance," Lowell argues. "Through all changes of condition and experience man continues to be a citizen of the world of ideas as well as the world of fact, and the tax-gatherers of both are punctual" (Smith 16). And, since the "imagination is the wings of the mind; the understanding, its feet," Lowell thought that both were necessary to keep an artistic work grounded in reality while also exploring the great philosophical questions of our existence (Smith 22). Emphasizing one or the other created deficient works of art that failed to reconcile the emotional expressions of an individual with the sensory and objective empirical perceptions available to all mankind.

Lowell's theoretical assumptions about artistic representations of reality emphasize his belief that balance between the empirical and the philosophical creates objective and, therefore, good art. Arguing that one person's opinions are not sufficient enough to establish an objective truth, Lowell writes, "Let us never condescend to that vulgarity too common in this country, where half-culture is apt to be defiant rather than modest, which affirms that one thing is as good as another if only a man *thinks* it as good" (Smith 39). Although he is not directly discussing Biglow's character, Lowell's comment contextualizes his use of an indignant character who thinks he has all the answers to the country's woes. Biglow represents

a half-culture because he is not only defiant and vulgar, but also because his inelasticity keeps him entirely dependent on "common sense" and representative of only one half of Lowell's concept of balance. Lowell exaggerates his inability to reconcile what others might think of the war and any potential philosophical justifications for war in order to make hypocrisy the subject of the satire. Because Biglow is firmly entrenched in the traditions of the rustic simpleton, he becomes an ideal subject for ridicule and one that subtly redirects our assumptions that populism always reflects what the people want and not just the interests of a few outspoken rubes.

Of course, Biglow is only half of Lowell's equation in *The Biglow Papers*. His alter-ego, the Parson Wilbur, provides Lowell with the opportunity to provide balance in his satire.[37] The Parson's articulate and philosophical digressions counterbalance Biglow's rustic behavior. On the surface, the two characters and their voices are obviously different. They contrast with one another in such a drastic way that it seems Lowell forces his reader to choose which character is more deviant and which is more "corrective," or if any such distinction can be drawn.

Writing a letter to defend Biglow as the rightful author of the poems contained in *The Biglow Papers*, Wilbur finds himself debating whether he should address the "manner and kind of [his] young friend's poetry." He concludes, "But I

[37] In the same passage in which Lowell questions the use of Biglow's dialect, he also describes his purpose for giving Wilbur equal footing in the collected editions. He writes, "I needed on occasion to rise above the level of mere *patois*, and for this purpose conceived the Rev. Mr. Wilbur, who should express the more cautious element of the New England character and its pedantry, as Mr. Biglow should serve for its homely common sense vivified and heated by conscience. The parson was to be the complement rather than the antithesis of his parishioner, and I felt or fancied a certain humorous element in the real identity of the two under a seeming incongruity" (Elmwood 6). Suggesting that the two are paired in a "seeming incongruity" would acknowledge that the two share qualities that make them congruent rather than antithetical.

dubitate whether this abstruser sort of speculation (though enlivened by some apposite instances from Aristophanes) would sufficiently interest your oppidan readers" (75). Wilbur's language, packed with allusions to classical Latin and Greek poets, multisyllabic words, and often archaic forms of expression, is a satirical exaggeration of literary taste and ostentatious writing. He is a playful version of the American aristocratic elite, and Lowell comically juxtaposes evidence of Wilbur's flaws with his ostensibly cultured voice to challenge the association of wisdom with lofty rhetoric. Like Biglow, Wilbur appears to be both the subject of a joke and the one telling a joke.

Prior to his introduction to the first series of letters, Wilbur includes a section on "Notices of an Independent Press." This rather long preface includes reviews from such prestigious and entirely fictional periodicals as the "Higginbottomopolis Snapping Turtle," the "Dekay Bulwark," and the "World-Harmonic-Æolian-Attachment," as well as one review written almost entirely in Latin from the "Jalaam Independent Blunderbuss," most likely a newspaper created by Wilbur for his hometown parish. These notices of the press, Wilbur admits, are merely a conventional means to promote a work, and he tells his audience, "I have observed, reader, (bene- or male-volent, as it may happen,) that it is customary to append to the second editions of books, and to the second works of authors, short sentences commendatory of the first, under the title of *Notices of the Press*" (3). Wilbur goes on to explain that these notices are often a source of revenue for the publishing company and the newspaper issuing the review. Impatient and unwilling to wait for the second edition of these works, he instead insists on including them in this

inaugural collection of Biglow papers. He writes, "Considering these things with myself, and also that such notices are neither intended, nor generally believed, to convey any real opinions, being a purely ceremonial accompaniment of literature, and resembling certificates to the virtues of various morbiferal panaceas, I conceived that it would be not only more economical to prepare a sufficient number of such myself, but also more immediately subservient to the end in view to prefix them to this our primary edition rather than to wait the contingency of a second, when they would seem to be of small utility" (4). From the very beginning of the work, Wilbur tries to establish himself as a witty, urbane character who understands the customary approach to literature and is aware of established literary traditions. His fictional reviews effectively appear to criticize these conventions, and yet, in a hypocritical fashion, Wilbur also seems to rely on these traditions as an acceptable way to promote not only the work but also his role in the success of Biglow's writing. While he reprimands the self-serving nature of the notices of the press, he also uses them to make his work appear more valuable than it actually is. The laudatory remarks in the opening pages of *The Biglow Papers* foreshadow Wilbur's character as a mockery of the literati of his day.

Sanford Pinsker, writing about the irony of modern comedy, describes a typical Woody Allen character as someone who "reads dust jackets and reviews, rather than Real Books, and [who]…perpetrates the mythos of the sensitive New York egghead so he will remain the darling of those who also make it a point to keep up with dust jackets and the book reviews" (193).[38] While Lowell did not have

[38] Although not in the realm of discussion for this current chapter, a comparison between Wilbur's character and the modern conception of a comical character might reveal some productive parallels. It

Allen's humor as a model to develop Wilbur's character, he did create Wilbur along the same basic formula. Lowell's inclusion of book reviews in *The Biglow Papers* points toward his suggestion that some readers and authors often fail to read beyond the surface-level meaning of language and literary conventions. Wilbur's insistence that these notices do not indicate any "real opinions" indicates that he recognizes the arbitrary face value associated with book reviews. Wilbur is the perfect example of a big-city egghead caught up in maintaining appearances.[39] He wants Biglow's work to succeed not because it might provide relevant critiques of American politics but because his name is permanently linked to it. Consequently, Wilbur puts the text through the same disingenuous rigmarole most reading audiences expect from a work of "real" literature. Wilbur's pompous behavior illustrates the irony and inelasticity Lowell used to create his character and to critique social behavior that relied on protecting the status quo without questioning the assumed normative principles of such behavior.

To those who recognized the irony and contradiction in Wilbur's character, Lowell's consistent exploitation of comic conventions exaggerated Wilbur's inelastic character even more. He rarely, if ever, questions his assumption that how things used to be done is sufficient for how they should continue to be done. After the notices of the press, Lowell mocked the custom of distinguishing the author of the work on the text's title page. Wilbur, credited as the author of *The Biglow Papers*,

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might, in fact, illustrate how thoroughly modern Wilbur is and demonstrate one of the earliest uses of self-reflective and self-inflected humor.

[39] Jalaam, Wilbur's hometown, is hardly considered a big city equal to that of Boston during this time, but the regional quality of Wilbur's humor not only reminds the audience that the Parson is a minor character trying to make himself appear equivalent to the literary Brahmins of the early nineteenth century, but also that Biglow's role as a rural farmer even further removes him from the epicenter of politics and culture.

omits the usual practice of listing the degrees and honorary memberships he has received over the course of his lifetime. Instead, he simply writes, "Homer Wilbur, A.M., Pastor of the First Church in Jalaam, and (prospective) member of many literary, learned and scientific societies, (*for which see page 25*.)" (22). In case his readers have missed this act of modesty, Wilbur draws their attention to it on the following page. His "Note to Title-Page" explains his minor omission: "Finding, that, without descending to a smaller size of type that would have been compatible with the dignity of the several societies to be named, I could not compress my intended list within the limits of a single page, and thinking, moreover, that the act would carry with it an air of decorous modesty, I have chosen to take the reader aside, as it were, into my private closet, and there not only exhibit to him the diplomas which I already possess, but also to furnish him with a prophetic vision of those which I may, without undue presumption, hope for, as not beyond the reach of human ambition and attainment" (23). One can only assume that Wilbur's sincerity is genuine in this note and that his ego is ironically complicating his attempt to make *The Biglow Papers* imitate the conventions of other, more literary works. Even if Wilbur is playfully mocking this tradition, it seems that his act of modesty emphasizes the vanity of his character. Wilbur's parody, or sincerity, found on the title page suggests that Lowell will develop Wilbur as someone who, like Biglow, fails to achieve balance between common sense and the cultural ideal of good literature. Although Biglow falls short of restraining his common sense, Wilbur cannot seem to censure his fastidious belief that to appear intelligent, one must mimic the stereotypes and conventions of intelligent people.

Beyond Wilbur's exploitation of formal matters, his verbal musings also highlight the way Lowell parodies his character. For example, in the third letter of the first series, Wilbur again defends the legitimacy of Biglow's authorship of the satirical poems. Wilbur's apologia, however, catches him in a number of tight spots. Wilbur's statements in this passage are full of humor that indicates to Lowell's audience the satirical nature of his character:

> I did not see Mr. B's verses until they appeared in print, and there *is* certainly one thing in them which I consider highly improper. I allude to the personal references to myself by name. To confer notoriety on an humble individual who is laboring quietly in his vocation, and who keeps his cloth as free as he can from the dust of the political arena (though *vae mihi si non evangelizavero*), is no doubt an indecorum. The sentiments which he attributes to me I will not deny to be mine. They were embodied, though in a different form, in a discourse preached upon the last day of public fasting, and were acceptable to my entire people (of whatever political views), except the postmaster, who dissented *ex officio*. I observe that you sometimes devote a portion of your paper to a religious summary. I should be well pleased to furnish a copy of my discourse for insertion in this department of your instructive journal. (77)

Wilbur objects to Biglow's use of his name although he concedes that Biglow correctly applied his sentiments. Thus, the indecorum against Wilbur is that Biglow made his sermon vulgar. In other words, Biglow's dialectal interpretation of Wilbur's preaching minimized the dignity of his words. The only way to recoup this

loss, Wilbur thinks, is to allow him to speak for himself and publish the entire sermon.

The desire to salvage his reputation by printing his sermon seems contradictory to his intentions of humbly "laboring quietly in his vocation." The linguistic prejudice Wilbur holds for Biglow's vernacular forces him to figuratively throw his hat into the political ring, and the humility Wilbur wishes to maintain becomes secondary to his willingness to promote his supposedly apolitical religious opinions. Irony and contradiction saturate Wilbur's character as Lowell continues to draw out the hypocrisy of a character who does not recognize how his language contrasts with his own principles.

This type of contradiction and confusion is typical of Wilbur's philosophical digressions, and, as a result, most of Wilbur's meanderings create a problematic context in which to consider Biglow's satirical poems. Wilbur's rants offer a frame to Biglow's commentary that does not provide a definitive sense of right and wrong, and this ambiguity has often made Lowell's readers assume that, as the Parson's opposite, Biglow provides the moral compass for the entire work. The linguistic differences in each character imply that Biglow, although he speaks with little sense of propriety, illustrates Lowell's sentiments regarding the war and slavery.

Past critics, such as Blair and Tandy, have described Wilbur's character as "pedantic" and "long-winded" to suggest his ability to contort language. Both critics agree that in comparison to Biglow's dialect, Wilbur's educated voice represents something entirely different. Blair, for instance, says of Wilbur that he "was learned and pedantic instead of uneducated and pawky [and it] occurred to Lowell that if he

put into the book a number of bits in Wilbur's highfalutin style alongside pieces of Hosea's homely writing, there would be an amusing contrast" (*Horse Sense* 100). Wilbur's language, according to Blair, directly contrasts with Biglow's vernacular and creates an incongruous frame within which to interpret both characters. Blair concedes that Lowell's comparative approach privileges Biglow's common sense and criticizes Wilbur's elitist rhetoric, but he only bases this conclusion on the way that both languages appear to be used differently.

Similarly, Tandy concludes that Lowell's comical incongruity produces a satirical commentary on the presumed wisdom of well-educated men. She also interprets Lowell's work based on the way the two characters contrast with each other. She writes, "In preparing the *Biglow Papers* for publication, Lowell felt the need for another foil to the indignant Hosea. Consequently he prefaced the poems with comments by the village minister, the Reverend Homer Wilbur, a long-winded, prosy old divine, who edits, advances, and excuses Hosea's efforts" (58). Tandy views Lowell's framing of Biglow's dialect in Wilbur's pedantic English as typical of nineteenth-century works that emphasized the practical nature and common sense of rustic farmers. Wilbur represents the "ordinary appeals of editor and orator," and, by comparison, Biglow's rustic observations present a more realistic depiction of everyday life. The juxtaposition of these two voices allowed Lowell to take advantage of the perception that truth is more readily apparent in common language without actually having to claim that Biglow's voice is more accurate and less flawed than Wilbur's manipulation of rhetoric. Tandy's criticism implies that while Lowell's audience may have related more to the "crackerbox philosophers," authors

who used these comical figures did not always intend them to represent absolute or universal truths.

Thus, traditional readings of Lowell's comedy suggest that the linguistic differences between Biglow and Wilbur are evidence of their opposing functions within the satire and that Biglow's country drawl makes him a representative of the American people. Recent critics such as Javier Rodriguez, however, have begun to recognize how the juxtaposition of Biglow's dialect with Wilbur's exaggerated stereotype of an overly educated character produces a linguistic congruity that emphasizes the similarities as well as the conflicts between both characters and their voices. Although he describes both characters in predictable ways – Biglow is still a "truth-telling Yankee Jeremiah" while Wilbur "dwells in existentialist confusion…and [is] predisposed to anxiety and paralysis" – Rodriguez argues, "Lowell's dialogism stands resolutely against the romances of dialect. Where dialect seeks to find a single authentic voice, multi-vocality emphasizes contingent beliefs and values" (10; 19; 23). Rodriguez's argument indicates that although Lowell's use of a Yankee dialect still attempts to essentialize the American population by unifying it under a common tongue, his inclusion of Wilbur's character in the collected editions suggests that he wanted to restrain Biglow's boisterous opinions and balance his protests of the war with multiple voices and opinions.

Rodriguez's argument, while recognizing that Biglow does not represent Lowell's own personal agenda, still maintains a few assumptions that limit the role of Biglow's dialect. His critique of *The Biglow Papers* implies that without the contrast between Biglow and Wilbur's voices, the multi-vocal nature of the text

would not exist. My reading, however, is intended to show that since it is not easily determined whether Lowell parodied or conformed to the traditions of the rustic simpleton, then Biglow's voice itself is heteroglossic. Wilbur is not the only character who suffers paralysis, and Lowell's linguistic congruity, as used to demonstrate the similarities between Biglow and Wilbur, illustrates that both character's voices are capable of self-reflexive humor that mocks author and audience alike. Biglow's inelastic nature and his mediated representation of other people's opinions demonstrate that his character's voice is caught between protecting his outdated social values and doing so in a relevant way that appeals to as many Americans as possible.

For the most part, Biglow is the great American joke as he struggles to let go of his cultural ideal, realizing that it does not adequately represent the everyday fact of the American political experience. Lowell's *The Biglow Papers*, like Rubin's argument that began this chapter, emphasizes the "humor that arises out of the gap between the cultural ideal and the everyday fact, with the ideal shown to be somewhat hollow and hypocritical, and the fact crude and disgusting" (12). However, unlike Rubin's argument, which relies on theories of comical incongruity to support his claim, Lowell's satire uses linguistic congruity to suggest that all dialects are liable to be ambiguous. Although Lowell, as a member of the elite and highly literate class of New Englanders, wrote in a standard English language and, thus, helped reinforce the distinctions between "vulgar" and "proper" language, he frequently suggested that what corrupts a person's language is not the actual words spoken but the ideas represented by those words. "Properly speaking," Lowell once

wrote, “vulgarity is in the thought, and not in the word or the way of pronouncing it” (Elmwood 20).

Lowell’s use of Biglow’s dialect reveals that any voice can misrepresent the national character of the United States, and, as a result, Lowell reminds us that creating a national language is a problematic chore because no single language can distinguish itself over others and no language is inherently free from vulgarity. The dialects used in *The Biglow Papers* show us how the flaws of seemingly opposed characters make them more alike than we care to admit, and, perhaps, this demonstration is what makes us laugh even if we do so nervously, as we unwillingly recognize that principles can change and convictions can evolve.

## Cooking the “Liddle Tedails”

## German American Dialect in Charles Godfrey Leland’s *Hans Breitmann Ballads*

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Charles Godfrey Leland (1824-1903) pursued many careers – ethnography, philology, folklore, and poetry, to name a few. Above all, though, Leland considered himself a writer. From his early days studying at Princeton and traveling throughout Europe to his final days in Italy, Leland wrote on an almost daily basis. Leland's *Memoirs* (1893), a collection of his early writings, is a testament to the quantity of writing he produced and shows his life-long pursuit of language and literature. His prolific writing left an embarrassment of riches for future biographers trying to put together a seemingly coherent picture of Leland's life. It is this abundance of writing, however, that most complicates our understanding of exactly who Charles Godfrey Leland was.

Elizabeth Pennell, Leland's niece and primary biographer, is one of the few who have attempted to make sense of Leland's written works. She collected most of her uncle's unpublished letters and daily observations in her two-volume work *Charles Godfrey Leland* (1905). Calling him the "last of the letter writers," Pennell uses Leland's own words in these various notes to depict her uncle as a man keenly aware of how the written word reveals a person's character, and his memoirs show him as a believer in the way writing creates a bond between author and audience (3). A passion for language carried Leland through much of his early adulthood and established a foundation on which he would build the rest of his career. His desire to write and to study language drove him to experiment in his various occupations, and it also allowed him tell his story in many different genres. Language, for Leland,

would become more than just a method of communication; it would become a medium for expressing his interaction with a constantly changing world.

Leland's writing abilities received critical attention and popular success early on in his career. By the year 1857, the year his first Hans Breitmann ballad appeared, he was already gaining recognition as a journalist, and his efforts to translate well known German texts were drawing praise from established American authors.[40] A letter dated 1855 from George Boker, a famous American playwright and poet whose works include the play *Francesca da Rimini* (1853) and a collection of poems about the Civil War, *Poems of the War* (1864), reveals the extent to which Leland's career as a writer showed some promise:

> My Dear Charley, -- I deferred writing you until after a dinner to which Longfellow invited me; so that I might be able to give you his opinion of Heine. That event has passed. Longfellow spoke in the highest terms of your translation, both of the poetry and the prose, saying that it was a work which, in his opinion, would do you great honour. He further said that when he had completed his examination, with the care that it deserved, he would write you his views in full. I was only impressed with the idea that Longfellow regards your translation with the greatest respect. If I could have opinions made to order for works of mine, I should choose just such as

[40] Although Leland is best known for the *Hans Breitmann Ballads*, there seems to be some discrepancy as to the original publication date of the first of these dialect poems. In Pennell's biography, she claims "Hans Breitmann's Party" originally appeared in 1856 and later quotes a letter to confirm its publication in Graham's Magazine (338; 344). However, in the introduction to an 1897 edition of the complete Hans Breitmann ballads published by T.B. Peterson and Brothers, Leland writes, "'Hans Breitmann gife a barty' – the first of the poems here submitted – appeared originally in 1857, in Graham's Magazine, and soon became widely known" (13). Joseph Jackson in "The Works of Charles Godfrey Leland" also cites 1857 as the year the poem was originally published. A search on ProQuest found Leland's original Breitmann poem in the May 1857 issue of Graham's.

> Longfellow expressed of your Heine. As you well know, my own faith in the success of the translation did not need the support of another's opinion. (256-257)

Boker and Longfellow apparently saw something in Leland's work that left a favorable impression, one that helped Leland develop a reputation as a scholar and a writer, and yet this multi-faceted reputation would eventually become an obstacle to his legacy. Critics after Leland's death would attempt to reconcile his scholarship with his fictional writing and, in doing so, would usually use his writing in one of those fields to discredit the other.

Other letters in Pennell's biography chronicle the rapid growth of Leland's popularity. "Hans Breitmann's Party," the first of many poems written by Leland in a form designed to suggest a thick German accent, became virtually an overnight success with the American public. The then famous opening lines of this poem – "Hans Breitmann gife a barty;/ Vhere ish dot barty now?" – evoked a sense of gaiety and captured the attention of the American people during a time when laughter was scarce. The tense years leading up to the Civil War welcomed the distraction of a fun-loving, beer-drinking immigrant, and Leland's Breitmann occupied this role for many years both before and after the war. Leland followed "Breitmann's Party" with several other poems written in this distinct German dialect over the course of the next decade, and, in the late 1860s, he published the first collection of these poems under the title *Hans Breitmann's Ballads*. The collected works went through several editions, some with additional poems written by Leland and others with counterfeit ballads written by imposters looking to cash in on Leland's fame. The

success of the Breitmann ballads created a tremendous following for Leland, and letters in Pennell's biography show the support of James Russell Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes in Leland's ongoing development of the Breitmann character. Edward Robbins, Leland's nephew, also remembers the relationships that were formed as a result of Leland's unique personality and writing style. In "Random Recollections of 'Hans Breitmann,'" Robbins reminisces about those friends of Leland whom he considered larger than life, friends such as Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman. Leland's Breitmann ballads helped him establish these relationships and carried his fame beyond the United States. David Page, in a recent issue of the Kipling Journal, discusses Leland's global influence by analyzing Rudyard Kipling's use of a Breitmann character in several of his short stories and poems. Leland never quite understood the attention these poems received, but for better or worse, he would forever be known as the creator of Hans Breitmann. Looking back on Leland's career, Pennell says of the success of Breitmann, "The 'Breitmann Ballads' had been written, [Leland's] reputation was made" (322).

Despite the acclaim of the Breitmann poems, Leland had many interests besides poetry that would prevent him from focusing all of his attention on this one character. Not wanting to be judged solely on the merits of Breitmann, Leland also studied languages in a number of different cultures. While he did write a few other literary works, most notably *Ye book of Copperheads,* an 1863 collection of satirical poems and political cartoons rumored to have been found on Abraham Lincoln's nightstand at the time of his death, Leland's passion for philology motivated him to travel throughout the United States and Europe to record the customs, rituals, and

linguistic traditions of many nomadic cultures.[41] As an amateur folklorist and ethnographer, Leland concentrated many of his later efforts on attempts to capture previously unrecorded languages. His greatest and, perhaps, most controversial contribution to linguistic studies was his "discovery" of Shelta, a language originating from Gaelic and spoken by most Gypsy cultures throughout the world.[42] Leland also published his own informal studies on numerous dialects and pidgins. With Albert Barrère and others, Leland helped edit *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon and Cant Embracing English, American and Anglo-Indian Slang Pidgin English, Tinkers' Jargon, and Other Irregular Phraseology* (1889). On his own, Leland completed a study of Chinese-English dialects and recorded a collection of poems in this pidgin language complete with an index that included a dictionary of terms translated into English.[43] Leland also published *The Algonquin Legends of New England* (1884), a compilation of folk tales and origin stories from several Native American tribes in the United States and Canada. Late in his career, Leland studied the folklore of Italian witches and published *Aradia or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899). Although much of his work is still influential in certain fields of folklore study, Leland's reputation as a philologist and ethnographer rests primarily on his

[41] David Sloane, as well as others, has documented the appearance of *Ye Book of Copperheads* on President Lincoln's bedside table. For this and other details of Leland's literary reputation see Sloane's "Charles G. Leland" in American Humorists (260). Leland also mentions Lincoln's fondness for Hans Breitmann in his *Memoirs* (250-251).

[42] Discussing Leland's documentation of Shelta, Moritz Jagendorf writes, "One of Leland's outstanding innovations was unearthing *Shelta*, the tinker's language, thereby making an important contribution to philology…This language, based on Gaelic, was spoken by tinkers, pipers, beggars, horsedealers, and the Irish underworld" (217). Sloane also credits Leland with this discovery (265). John Sampson acknowledges Leland's pioneering work with Shelta in *The Secret Languages of Ireland with Special Reference to the Shelta Language.*

[43] The complete title of this work is *Pidgin-English Sing-Song or Songs and Stories in the China-English Dialect. With a Vocabulary* (1876).

research of the English-Gypsy culture.[44] More specifically, his study of the Romany tongue, a language familiar to nomadic cultures in Great Britain and the United States, continues to interest language historians and folklorists alike.

Leland, referred to as "Rye" by his English-Gypsy friends and objects of study, made a career out of researching this culture, often discussing his methodological approach to ethnography in these works.[45] For instance, in *English-Gipsy Songs in Rommany with Metrical English Translations* (1875), Leland insisted that his work avoided the romantic glorification of nomad life many western scholars and authors committed in their pursuits of this culture. Writing specifically about his work in *English-Gipsy Songs*, Leland argued, "The experiment was made, great care being taken to avoid anything like theatrical Gipsyism, or fanciful idealisation. With this constantly kept in mind, the writers have done their best to use simple language and to keep strictly to real English Rommany, both as regards words and expression" (vi). Leland frequently reminded his audience of his attempts to remain as faithful as possible to the languages he studied, and most of his works on this language include both English and Romany versions of Gipsy folklore. He felt that in order to understand the true nature of his subjects, he had to resist over-embellishing the Gipsy language and culture to the point where his work would resemble fiction. In fact, the only real method for studying these wandering tribes of people, according to Leland, was to join them and, thereby, write from first-hand experience.

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[44] For a complete bibliography of Leland's work see David Sloane's "Charles G. Leland" and Joseph Jackson's multi-volume work in the early twentieth-century journal The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography.

[45] The name "Rye" is a term of endearment in the Gypsy culture often given to those considered gentleman among the Gypsies and not just to intrusive ethnographers looking to complete their research. The term, according to Pennell, exemplified her uncle's sincere disposition and was an appropriate title for Leland.

Although Leland did not entirely immerse himself into the Gipsy culture, he did take great measures to learn the Romany tongue. Language, he argued, was the key to understanding any culture. In *English Gipsies and Their Language*, Leland wrote, "The book contains some remarks on that great curious centre and secret of all the nomadic and vagabond life in England, THE ROMMANY, with comments on the fact, that of the many novel and story-writers who have described the 'Travellers' of the Roads, very few have penetrated the real nature of their life" (vii). Calling the Romany tongue the "characteristic leaven of all the real tramp life and nomadic callings of Great Britain," Leland emphasized a linguistic approach to his study of Gipsy culture because, to him, an ability to communicate in this language distinguished those who actually lived and participated in the Gipsy lifestyle from those westerners who created romanticized fictional accounts of this culture (3). Unlike those who idealized Gipsy culture, Leland considered himself an insider, someone who because of his knowledge of the language could "penetrate the real nature of their life." He felt that his familiarity with Romany made him less apt to marginalize the Gipsy culture and more capable of presenting an unbiased record of their oral traditions. His work, he thought, would be accurate and, therefore, non-fictional.

Although this distinction made between writers of fiction and objective ethnographers marks one of the few times Leland acknowledged a difference between fiction and non-fiction, it was not a crucial distinction for him. He always thought of himself as recording his observations and folklore verbatim from his sources, often making declarations such as the following: "[As] author of this book, I

beg leave to observe that all which is stated in it relative to the customs or peculiarities of Gipsies *was gathered directly from Gipsies themselves*" (*The English Gipsies and Their Language* v). Leland understood the need for accuracy in his non-fiction works. He knew that in order to gain respectability in the community of ethnographers he must make his work seem transparent and unhindered by his personal agenda or interpretation of the work he collected. For the most part, his work appears to have followed these conventions used to indicate objectivity. His willingness to overcome the many linguistic barriers between himself and the cultures he researched combined with his claims that he was accurately and faithfully recording information directly from the mouths of his subjects allowed him to suggest that he understood the cultures he researched on a more intimate level than any other ethnographer could. In an age before Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the post-colonial demand to let indigenous cultures speak for themselves, Leland seemed genuine in his efforts to discover the essence of cultures unlike his own.[46] His acknowledgement of the differences between fiction and non-fiction was designed to give his readers the impression that he could separate the romantic appeal of story-telling from the more rigorous demands of ethnography.

Yet, in his attempts to recreate his own personal experiences with the Gipsy culture, Leland often fell prey to those editorial procedures that made the status of his work questionable. Leland tells his audience, "The truth is, that it is a difficult matter to hear a story among English Gipsies which is not mangled or marred in the

[46] Even in his critique of Leland's ethnographic work in *Algonquin Legends*, Thomas Parkhill admits that Leland attempted to remain sincere in his study of Native American culture: "He [Leland] was, from our perspective, simultaneously an elitist and empathetic. He seems to have genuinely liked the people he met and learned from" (*Weaving Ourselves…* 34-35). I will discuss in greater detail Parkhill's objection to Leland's editing procedures later in this chapter.

telling; so that to print it, restitution and invention become inevitable…Such fables as I have given sprang up of themselves, owing nothing to books, though they often required the influence of a better disciplined mind to guide them to a consistent termination" (*The English Gipsies.*… viii). After years of building amicable relationships with the Gypsy people, Leland still felt it necessary to provide guidance when it came to recording the folk tales of those people he reportedly admired. He understood that in order to make a book publishable and to market it towards a specific reading audience, certain nuances must be added to make the work more entertaining. Knowing that the folktales he had collected lacked these subtle details, Leland acted as the "better disciplined mind." His acts of restitution and invention are not clearly defined in much of his written accounts of Gypsy culture, making it difficult for any reader to distinguish between Leland's interventions and the stories of this culture as they were told to him. Although Leland acknowledged the differences between fact and fiction, he did not always abide by these distinctions, and his frequent neglect of these genre differences has become problematic for those critics attempting to evaluate Leland's career. As a result, his reputation balances on how one interprets the little details.

According to today's standards, Leland's editorial interventions disqualify him as an objective scientist but stop short of making his work full-blown fiction. In fact, Leland's research and editing practices have made it difficult to judge him as either an author of fiction or a self-taught ethnographer. While many have argued that he is a "neglected folklorist," others contend his *Hans Breitmann Ballads* make

him more of a "reluctant humorist."[47] Most recently, Thomas Parkhill has questioned whether or not Leland should be best remembered as an author or ethnographer. In "Of Glooskap's Birth," Parkhill investigates Leland's role in collecting a series of Native American folktales and creation stories in *The Algonquin Legends*. While Parkhill admits that Leland might have been the first to attempt to record these culturally sensitive oral traditions, he also criticizes Leland's editing. Parkhill writes, "While [Leland] is straightforward about admitting what he is doing, he often calls it something else, claiming in the preface, for example, that future ethnologists 'will be much more obliged to me for collecting raw material than for cooking it.' As well, he is not forthright about why he is editing the stories he has collected. This is a complex question, but even a superficial glance at Leland's editing principles indicates that he was concerned to make the best story possible out of the data at hand" (55). Parkhill continues this argument in *Weaving Ourselves Into the Land*, a work he uses to suggest that Leland's diffusionist ideology made him edit these Native American origin tales in such a way as to associate them with various Norse folk traditions. Leland's attempt to connect the Algonquin tribes with an Aryan past was discredited by Alfred Bailey in 1937, but, although his "cooking" of the raw material he collected is considered deeply rooted in racist assumptions and unethical procedures, Parkhill proposes the thesis that Leland's misguided

[47] Leland's work surfaces in a number of different contexts, suggesting that his extremely active career has made it difficult to classify him as an ethnographer, an author of fiction, or something entirely different. Moritz Jagendorf and Angela-Marie Joanna Varesano both argue Leland should be considered a "neglected" or "eclectic" folklorist. Holger Kersten, on the other hand, in "Culture Wrapped in Broken Speech" and "The Creative Potential of Dialect Writing in Later-Nineteenth-Century America," relies on Leland's fictional works to claim that he should be understood as an important author. Louise Pound also makes a case that Leland's poetry justifies his inclusion in the long list of American authors in her article "Dialect in American Literature." Further complicating Leland's reputation, Jeffrey L. Sammons suggests that Leland's questionable translation efforts of Heine show him to have been a novice German scholar.

ethnography stemmed from an empathetic desire to place minority cultures on the same grounds as other more dominant, mainstream cultures. Whether his intent was sympathetic or another example of the scientific racism prevalent in the nineteenth century, however, Leland never indicated that he understood the difference. To him, embellishment was part of the writing process.

Evaluating Leland's work on a scale of accuracy or fidelity to reality seems to miss the point of his entire career. Influenced by his early work as a journalist and by his passion for language, Leland was a storyteller who created versions of reality somewhere in the margins between fact and fiction. Seldom, if ever, did he claim to accept the conventions of realism or abide by the strictures of ethnographic literature. He may have acknowledged them in his attempts to market his works, but he also understood that almost every piece of writing involved a mediated representation of reality. To judge Leland according to later standards of ethnographic or editorial practice is to neglect the historical context of his work and, just as important, the theoretical consideration that there are no self-evident standards of objectivity or representational fidelity. Representations always involve interpretations. Leland's muddled reputation is the result of a failure to comprehend the nature of his writing and, one might add, the conditions of writing in general.

Joseph Jackson, writing in 1925, described Leland and his career in terms that approach those of my argument: "For more than sixty years Leland wrote on a surprising number of subjects, in all of which he had attained some mastery. He was the most versatile writer Philadelphia can boast, and it is worthwhile to note that he never wrote a book that was not entertaining" (261). Leland was the proverbial jack

of all trades. Writing, for him, involved both entertaining a reading audience and creating a portrait of a certain reality. By mixing these two aspects of writing, he appeared to have violated the canons for several literary genres. He selectively edited his ethnographic works to promote his own ideological agenda, and, as I argue for the remainder of this chapter, he created a character in Hans Breitmann whose voice showed more attention to detail than most fictional authors used in their burlesques of other dialectal characters. Leland paid such close attention to the representation of Breitmann's German-American dialect that in its lack of embellishment, it almost appears as a linguistic study of German-American culture rather than a fictional caricature of the members of this community. His cooking of the little details in *Hans Breitmann Ballads* makes his work entertaining, and, perhaps more importantly, his linguistic accuracy prevents these poems from negatively stereotyping those who spoke this particular hybrid version of the English language.

Writing during a period of American literary history when dialects were developing as either gross exaggerations of ethnic characteristics or challenges to racial stereotypes, Leland created Breitmann's German-American English as a polycultural form of expression that balanced a linguistically accurate depiction of German English speakers with a "jocose burlesque" of those speakers (4).[48] Breitmann's voice, intended as comedy, challenged the expectations of Leland's

[48] In the preface to *Hans Breitmann's Ballads*, Leland thanks his readers for not reading beyond the "jocose burlesque" of Breitmann's voice: "The opinion – entirely foreign to any intention of the author – that Hans Breitmann is an embodied satire on everything German has found very few supporters, and it is with the greatest gratification that he has learned that educated and intelligent Germans regard Hans as a jocose burlesque of a type which is every day becoming rarer" (4). Leland intended his poems as an inoffensive representation of German English speakers.

reading audience that Breitmann would speak with either an "ethnic" or "ethical" language. According to Gavin Jones, these two types of literary dialects worked against each other to shape an audience's perception of a particular group of speakers. Jones argues, "Dialect as an ethical language confronts dialects as an ethnic language: the one seeks to overturn racial boundaries, the other to confirm them" (42). Leland's dialects did neither. They were neither meant to stereotype German American culture nor to upset any derogatory assumptions about those German immigrants then entering the United States. Breitmann was not just the voice of a specific discourse community; he was also a reminder of the many ways that language could overcome racial and national boundaries without reverting to or contesting stereotypes. He was, in essence, an American character who spoke something other than standard English, and, in doing so, he acted as written proof that the history of language in the United States is a history of multiple languages and not just of a single version of English. Hans Breitmann's voice penetrated the "real nature" of American life by representing those who actually lived in the United States rather than depicting a romantic notion of an American identity.

In literary circles today, *Hans Breitmann's Ballads* is often judged according to Leland's self-declared intentions, but like his claims of ethnographic objectivity, his stated purpose for the lyrics cannot be entirely trusted. Leland said of "Hans Breitmann's Party" that it was "written only to fill up a page, and I never expected that any one would notice it" (qtd in Pennell 344). In the preface to *Hans Breitmann's Ballads*, Leland also wrote, "The lyrics were written for a laugh – without anticipating publication, so far as a number of the principal ones in the first

series were concerned, and certainly without the least idea that they would be extensively and closely criticized [sic] by eminent and able reviewers" (7-8). Leland considered humor his primary motivation for writing these poems and would maintain this argument throughout his life. On the surface, this explanation of the ballads seems perfectly reasonable considering that the poems are quite funny. Leland's justification for writing the ballads also fits with our current theoretical discussions about how literary dialects evolved over the course of the nineteenth century. If we consider the range of such dialects from the early American humorists to the highly charged political uses of racial vernaculars at the end of the century, Leland's dialect falls somewhere in the middle. The ballads did occasionally refer to political issues, such as the Civil War and American slavery, although they did so in such a way as to avoid becoming overtly polemical. The humor of the lyrics, not their politics, accounted for most of their popular success. According to Leland and others, comedy was the main reason for writing the ballads and continues to justify their relevance in discussions about nineteenth-century American literature.

Despite Leland's self-representation, though, the creation of a uniquely German-English voice did not happen by chance, and his efforts to study this hybrid language in order to transcribe the sounds of his German-American friends were not put forth merely to produce a laugh or two. His patient study and numerous observations of the ways German Americans spoke allowed him to reach a conclusion about spoken and written languages that many philologists and fiction writers fail to understand. That is, Leland's belief that no two people spoke the same language kept him from representing the German culture in the United States with a

consistent and unified voice. Inconsistency, for Leland, was the key to creating the Hans Breitmann character and not a conventional German-American stereotype or, for that matter, a conventional literary dialect.

Without question, Leland's poems were perceived first and foremost as a collection of humorous lyrics. *Hans Breitmann's Ballads* appealed to the reading public because of its comical language and colorful characters. The haphazard mixture of German and American slang made the language of the poems extremely popular, and Leland's dialectal creativity gave Hans Breitmann's voice a sense of novelty. Almost all of the poems put a new twist on familiar words. For example, in "Breitmann in Politics," Breitmann learns the importance of paying attention to the "liddle tedails" when running a political campaign because to "sheat von's own gonstituents/ Ish de pest mofe in de came" (111). Part of the humor of Breitmann's voice is found in the transposed spelling of common English words. "Liddle tedails" is a prime example of how Leland rearranged consonant sounds to make Breitmann's English appear more German, and although this technique of dialect writing was hardly new, Leland's hybridization of German-American English was relatively distinctive.

The Breitmann ballads were also entertaining for their German spin on stereotypically American attitudes and famous landmarks. There are a number of poems that emphasize the peculiarities and eccentricities of whatever location Breitmann happens to be in. From "Breitmann in Maryland" to "Breitmann in Kansas," Leland always found a way to incorporate the quaint features of American regionalism. His later poems take on a more European flair as they chronicle

Breitmann's adventures in France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, and Italy. Leland's early success, however, was mostly determined by his ability to depict the diverse nature of American life.

In "Breitmann About Town," for instance, Leland creates a version of New York City as seen through the eyes of an assimilated German immigrant. Breitmann, acting as a tour guide to his German friend Der Schwackenhammer, takes his guest to see the usual destinations. After visiting the "Opera Haus" and the "Bibilothek, vhich Mishder Astor bilt," Breitmann ventures into the local bars and pubs to find a stiff drink and fine cigar. While at one parlor, Breitmann runs into a group of locals who have taken exception to the presence of two foreigners. Leland narrates the incident in his German accent.

Dey vent indo a shpordin' crib,
   De rowdies cloostered dick,
Dey ashk him dell vot o'glock,
   Und dat infernal quick.
Der Breitmann draw'd his 'volver oud,
   Ash gool ash gool couldt pe,
'Id's shoost a goin' to shdrike six,'
   Said Breitmann, said he. (75)

In this example, Breitmann is not only well-versed in the ways of a New Yorker, but he is also able to interpret the body language and slang of a group of troublemakers. Breitmann appears as a common man who understands the local discourse and habits of a major metropolitan area. His dialect may have marked him as an outsider, but

his understanding of regional behaviors and American characteristics made him an insider almost everywhere he went. His language was not a barrier to his participation in American culture.

Breitmann's taste for German beer and rowdy behavior did not stop him from assimilating into American culture either. In perhaps his most politically motivated ballad, one in which Leland alludes to the possibility of reconciliation between the Northern and Southern factions of the United States, Breitmann uses his stereotypical German characteristics to help him become a leader in the Civil War. Breitmann does fight for the Union, but he does not do so in order to support the cause of abolition. Instead, he fights because he has not been in battle since 1848, an allusion to Leland's participation in the French Revolution of the same year. Rather than being stirred by principle, Breitmann's willingness to fight draws the reader's attention to the obstinate nature of both parties involved in the Civil War and further demonstrates his Everyman qualities. He is not a great leader because of his devotion to humanist and religious ideals; he is just the boy next door looking to pick a fight. "Breitmann in Battle" illustrates a common nature to be found in almost every American fighting in the Civil War.

The poem begins with Breitmann declaring his intention to fight. After being warned of the bravery of the Southern Cavalry, Breitmann asks,

'Who der Teufel pe's de repels und vhere dey kits deir
sass?
If dey make a run on Breitmann he'll soon let out de
gas;

I'll shplit dem like kartoffels: I'll slog em on de kop;
I'll set de plackguarts roonin so dey don't know vhere
to shtop.' (31)

Not sure of who he is fighting or exactly why he is fighting, Breitmann makes it clear in his soliloquy that he is just looking for an excuse to brandish his sword. Breitmann, according to this rationale, wants to enter the war not to free the slaves but to put the Southern army in its place. He sees no reason why his bravery and skill should not temper the Southern "sass."

As the poem continues, Breitmann encounters a young, brash Confederate officer who also happens to be German. The two exchange a few insults before commencing to fight. Breitmann gains the upper hand in the battle, but before he strikes the final blow, he gives the younger combatant a chance at a reprieve. Breitmann asks, "Peliev'st dou in Morál Ideas? If so I lets you free." To which the southern gentleman replies,

'I don't know nix apout Ideas – no more dan pout
Saint Paul,
Since I peen down in Tixey I kits no books at all;
I'm greener ash de clofer-grass; I'm shtupid as a
shpoon;
I'm ignoranter ash de nigs – for dey takes de *Tribune*.' (34)

The southerner's response sounds like obvious insult to the people of the Confederacy. His cowardice makes him shrink from Breitmann's advances, and his plea for mercy causes him to admit the lack of moral and religious ideals in the

defense of slavery. The officer's submission also forces him to declare a lack of general education in the south that keeps both master and slave in a state of ignorance. Breitmann's victory has produced the desired effect. He has taken the "sass" out of the southern rebels.

However, during the Confederate soldier's confession, the poem takes an unexpected twist as the reader learns that the two men are father and son. The revelation instantly reconciles the two combatants, and they both ask forgiveness from each other. The men then return to town where, to prove the younger's claim, they decide to have a drink together. The final two stanzas cement the bond between father and son in a fashion only possible between two Breitmann characters:

> How stately rode der Breitmann oop! – how lordly he
>
> kit down?
>
> How glorious from de great *pokal* he drink de bier so prown!
>
> But der Yunger bick der parrel oop und shwig him
>
> all at one.
>
> 'Bei Gott! dat settles all dis dings – I *know* dou art mein son!'
>
> Der one has got a fader; de oder found a child.
>
> Bote ride oopon one war-path now in pattle fierce und
>
> wild.
>
> It makes so glad our hearts to hear dat dey did so suc-
>
> ceed –
>
> Und damit hat sein' Ende DES JUNGEN BREITMANN'S

LIED. (35-36)

The conclusion of the poem suggests that reconciliation between the North and South is both possible and necessary to avoid any further strife between family members divided on the issue of slavery. The one major exception in this poem, though, is that both characters continue to fight, this time on the same "war-path." This, again, emphasizes that a Breitmann character is prone to fight for any reason and suggests that neither side of the Civil War has greater justification for its cause. The poem avoids taking a side in the dispute about slavery; instead, it is equally derisive of both the North and South.

In the end, "Breitmann in Battle" implies a common bond in both Breitmann characters' willingness to fight and illustrates how the German love of beer and adventure makes the younger and elder Breitmann average American soldiers. The rowdy behavior of both characters also assumes that both North and South share a determination to claim victory out of an innate sense of pride, rather than a principled sense of right and wrong. The Confederate Breitmann does not differ from the Union Breitmann. Determined to fight regardless of the principle, the Breitmanns have found a way to appeal to the average American reader. Leland has created an assimilated German-American character who has joined America's war, and, as a result, the Breitmanns have gained entry into American culture. They are no longer German immigrants but have successfully become German Americans.

While this and other Brietmann poems may or may not present Leland's commentary on the political atmosphere of the American people during the mid-nineteenth century, they do capture certain elements of folk humor that make it

possible to suggest Leland found a way to bring people together. Laughing at or with Breitmann, most Americans found themselves identifying with the carnivalesque appeal of the Breitmann ballads. From his repeated allusions to bodily functions such as passing gas and consuming large quantities of alcohol as well as his German translations of common American colloquial phrases, Breitmann's "low" humor made him appear to be a representative of the American people. Describing Rabelais's use of bodily images, M.M. Bahktin found a tendency for folk humor to emphasize a collective identity. Bahktin writes, "The body and bodily life have [in grotesque realism] a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized" (19). Leland's Breitmann character is certainly an individualized character, but his actions, language, and knowledge of American mannerisms make him not only representative of German culture but of American culture as well. He is simultaneously German and American, individualized and indicative of a larger group of people. His dialect further balances his Everyman characteristics with his specific German qualities, and the playful attitude caused by his alcoholic tendencies reminds everyone of their own ability for mischief. Leland's humor, rightfully considered folk humor, captures the regenerative capabilities associated with low humor and qualifies Breitmann's actions as typical of the behavior of average Americans.

Further enhancing his appeal to common Americans, Leland would generally make strategic use of a southern German dialect to enrich the humor of his poems. Leland wrote portions of the ballads in this German tongue to establish Breitmann's

identity as one who spoke a common dialect of the German language rather than what most would consider high German. Leland specifically addressed the origins of Breitmann's dialect, insisting, "The poems are written in the droll broken English (not to be confounded with the Pennsylvania German) spoken by millions of – mostly uneducated – Germans in America, immigrants to a great extent from southern Germany" (14). Breitmann's voice was not a regional dialect like the Pennsylvania Dutch developing in the nineteenth century. Instead, it represented the languages and dialects of many different German communities across the United States. Leland's dialect captured the multiple ways of pronouncing the English language as spoken by those common American immigrants. This further gave Breitmann an Everyman appeal. Rather than separate himself from mainstream culture, Breitmann's German language, at times, actually made him appear more American.

For example, the final eight lines of "De Pooty Vidder," also titled "Die Schœne Wittwe," are written entirely in German, although from the context of the poem as a whole, the meaning is relatively clear even to a reader who does not know this language. After competing for the affection of a widow with a "Yankee chap," Breitmann advises his adversary to give up the fight because in order to win her heart, one must "dalk in Dootch." The remaining lines are in German, and the final line – "Potztausend! das ist wahr." – drives home Breitmann's threat (51). *Potztausend* is an archaic expression meaning "I'll be jiggered" or "upon my soul." The use of this phrase gave Breitmann a rustic, perhaps uneducated, personality, and

this was not a negative characterization. It only added to the humor of his shenanigans and made him appear more like a regular person.

Leland also sporadically mixed common German phrases with Breitmann's hybrid English to foreshadow the conclusion of a poem or to describe the mood of the people involved. Leland's poem "Breitmann as a Bummer" uses such phrases as "das Spiel ish nicht aus" and "lustig und heiter" at times when Breitmann seems to be searching for just the right expression to convey his thoughts (43).[49] Writing these phrases in German reminds the audience of Breitmann's linguistic reference point. He is not a native English speaker, and his German language creates an anchor for Breitmann's voice. In other words, Leland did not feel obligated to translate Breitmann's German and placed the burden of interpretation on his reading audience.[50] Breitmann's reliance on the German language meant that his hybrid voice was equally divided between the two languages; one did not assume authority over the other.

In true Leland fashion, though, Breitmann's mixture of these languages always returned to comedy. The occasional appearance of German phrases almost always revolved around humor. Perhaps the most comical usage of the German language involved Leland's occasional "invention" of a new word. Alluding to the common perception that German speakers add nouns together to form a compound

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[49] "Das Spiel ist nicht aus" roughly translates to *the jig is not up*, or *the game is not over*. Leland parallels the phrase "lustig und heiter" with the German English equivalent of "loosty und merry" in a previous line of the poem.

[50] Jeffrey Sammons argues that the lack of interest in translating Heinrich Heine that made Leland's work on the German poet so popular was due to the fact that the German language was so widely known among educated Americans that translation of Heine's poetry would seem superfluous (163). However, given the general reading audience Leland anticipated for his Breitmann poems, his use of a German dialect mixed with English grammatical structures would make even those familiar with proper German struggle to interpret Breitmann's language, thereby giving Leland's use of a hybrid German English the quality of common speech.

word, making it seem outrageously long, Leland occasionally imposes such words on his readers. In "Breitmann about Town," Leland writes,

> Der Schwackenhammer coom to down,
>
> Pefore de Fall vas past,
>
> Und by der Breitmann drawed he in
>
> Ash dreimals honored gast.
>
> Led's see de sighdts! In self und worldt, -
>
> Dere's 'sighdts' for him, to see,
>
> Who Selbstanschaungsvermœgen hat,
>
> Said Breitmann, said he. (71)

And, again, in "Breitmann in Maryland," Leland emphasizes Breitmann's lust for German beer by creating a rather extravagant curse:

> Gottsdonnerkreuzschockschwerenoth!
>
> How Breitmann broked de bush!
>
> 'O let me see the lager bier!
>
> O let me at him rush!
>
> Und is mein sabre sharp und true,
>
> Und is mein war-horse goot?
>
> To get one quart of lager bier
>
> I'd shpill a sea of ploot.
>
> Gling, glang, Gloria!
>
> I'd shpill a sea of ploot. (37-38)

Both “Selbstanschaungsvermœgen” and “Gottsdonnerkreuzschockschwerenoth” can be interpreted as common German expressions, the first roughly meaning the ability to look within one’s own self and the other loosely translated as the shock and destruction of God’s thunder. Orthographically, though, the words are absurdly long and occupy almost an entire line, thus making Leland’s use of these words humorous. Leland’s combination of German and English was a major reason for both the popular success of the poems and the lasting influence of his writing.

*Hans Breitmann’s Ballads* also left many of Leland’s readers in stitches for other reasons. The poems made light of the various differences between American and German cultures, often resulting in a laugh at the expense of both. Leland’s poems exposed these cultural differences by contrasting such things as German Gemütlichkeit and metaphysical philosophy with American Puritanism and practicality. In “Wein Geist,” for instance, Breitmann wonders whether or not life is merely a dream or if it exists in the natural world of rocks, trees, and rivers. This poem ends as Breitmann passes out from drinking too much alcohol (hence the title), and as a result, Breitmann falls into a “treamless sloomper/ Vhich units de Nichts und Seyns” (95). For Breitmann, the stupor of drunkenness makes him contemplate German Idealism and, unknowingly, mock that tradition of German philosophy. On the opposite extreme, Breitmann occasionally praises the inventiveness and common sense of the American people. In his eight-part poem “Breitmann in Politics,” Leland uses Breitmann’s involvement in an election to show how the German aptitude for philosophy can complicate even the simplest of tasks and, in contrast, credits Americans for their practical nature. Brietmann admits, “Dere ish also dimes

vhen Amerigans/ Hafe ge-shown sharp-pointed sense" (122). In all their sobriety, Americans, according to Breitmann, have found a way to resourcefully adapt to the New World, and the American form of democracy is a testament to their ingenuity. Yet, this poem in its entirety is also a critique of the uninformed masses that make up the voting public of the United States.[51] Breitmann's poems remain fairly neutral in their depictions of American and German cultures.

Most of the comparisons between German and American cultures simply contrast the two to increase the comical appeal of the poems. In these comparisons, Leland develops the comic technique of incongruously placing Old World notions into New World contexts by contrasting German culture with American ideals.[52] He does so by finding rather inoffensive ways to compare the two cultures. For example, in "Breitmann and the Turners," Leland finds humor in the American reaction to German cuisine. He writes,

> Hans Breitmann choined de Toorners,
>
> Mit a Limpburg' cheese he coom;
>
> Ven he open de box it schmell so loudt
>
> It knock de musik doomb.
>
> Ven de Deutschers kit de flavor,

[51] Sabine Wienker-Piepho argues that of the handful of Breitmann poems that might criticize American culture, "Breitmann in Politics" has the closest to what could be considered a satirical motive: "Above all a possible political connotation remains nebulous: in 'Breitmann in Politics,' for example, the words form what is essentially nonsense. This allows Breitmann (and Leland) to poke fun at politics in a world where voters knew little about the candidates and were mostly immigrants fed up with politics and war in the Old World they had left behind" (163). Wienker-Piepho's argument, however, concedes that this is an unlikely interpretation since the Breitmann ballads were most likely only intended for the sake of humor.

[52] For a more detailed discussion of incongruity as a prominent nineteenth-century American comic technique, see Walter Blair and Raven McDavid's work in *The Mirth of a Nation*. The following chapter on James Russell Lowell will also feature a more thorough account of comical incongruity.

It coorl de haar on dere head;

Boot dere vas dwo Amerigans dere;

Und, py tam! It kilt dem dead! (53)

Most of Leland's poems abound with this type of comical incongruity and take the focus of the poem away from forming any value judgments about either culture.

Among past and present critics, very few have attempted to analyze the cultural and political implications of the Breitmann poems, citing instead the overwhelming humor as the main justification for Leland's popular success. To most scholars, any social commentary the poems might offer is merely the byproduct of Leland's subject matter and not the end result of any agenda Leland might have had in the lyrics. Sabine Wienker-Piepho, for example, argues, "Much of the Breitmann verse is genuinely funny, and searching for greater meaning may only cloud the enjoyment Leland intended to provide" (163). Wienker-Piepho suggests that any attempt to recover a lost meaning intended by Leland would overlook the fact that the poems were simply comical. David Sloane also contends that Leland's popularity stemmed from his humor and his aptitude for accurately recording the sounds of a German dialect. In his comparison of Leland's dialect poetry and Mark Twain's use of regional vernaculars, Sloane writes, "Leland placed less emphasis on social criticism than Twain and more on reporting customs and sociological detail, mixed with comic insertions of various sorts" (263-264). Sloane's argument provides a possible alternative motivation for Leland's poetry, one that coincides with Leland's background in ethnography, but he argues this is merely "mixed" with Leland's humor. Although these critics avoid any ideological interpretation of

Leland's work, Holger Kersten, who has perhaps done the most to reclaim Leland as an important American literary figure, has suggested a number of readings that reveal a more complex understanding of the social impact of Leland's Hans Breitmann.

In "Culture Wrapped in Broken Speech," Kersten argues, "The appreciation shown by well-read journalists and fellow writers reveals a second layer of Leland's work: Beneath the surface humor of their linguistic form, the *Breitmann Ballads* presented a host of intertextual references in the form of literary allusions" (45). Referring to the implicit and explicit references to American politics, German philosophy, and the developing trend of dialect literature, Kersten discusses the impact Leland's poetry could have had on American society, even suggesting that the "guise of the immigrant made it possible for [Leland and other dialect writers] to adopt a critical stance towards the dominant Anglo-American culture" ("Using the Immigrant's Voice" 6). Even in pursuing this argument, however, Kersten implies that the linguistic form of Leland's work has no meaning or intention other than to be comical. Yet, in reading the *Hans Breitmann's Ballads* as another example of Leland's ethnographic works, we can begin to see how Leland's representation of Breitmann's German English is significant in and of itself. Leland's dialects are more than just comedy; they are a precise measure of Leland's conception of the American language.

Elizabeth Pennell is one of the few who also argues that her uncle's success was the result of something more than just comedy. For Pennell, Leland's obsessive desire to understand the languages of other cultures not only drove him to create a

German American voice, but also forced him to transcribe the sounds of this dialect in a dynamic way, one that would not remain entirely consistent. Pennell says of Breitmann's German English, "It was clever – uncouth in itself, but pliant and rhythmical as [Leland] wrote it. And it was real, not an invention. He had the sense to realize that not only would no two Germans, new to English, speak it alike, but that 'no one individual is invariably consistent in his errors or inaccuracies'" (346). Leland's linguistic creativity made his work popular, but his attention to details allowed him to comment on the common assumption that non-standard languages indicate a person's lower level of intelligence. Using the voice of a German immigrant and representing it in such a way as to attract a popular reading audience and remain faithful to the reality of linguistic diversity in the United States, Leland conveyed a radical sense of linguistic equality across both dialects and idiolects.

Leland suggested as much in the introduction to *Hans Breitmann's Ballads*. In the 1897 edition, Leland offered a page or two of helpful hints for understanding Hans's German-sounding English. Most of these tips included word-for-word translations – "tisasder for disaster, schimnastig dricks for gymnastic tricks, let-bencil for lead-pencil, etc" (16). Leland's more general advice referred to certain "peculiarities" unique to the type of southern German dialect he put in the mouth of Hans: "One of its prominent peculiarities…is easily perceived: it consists in the constant confounding of the soft and hard consonants; and the reader must well bear it in mind when translating the language that meets his eye into one to become intelligible to his ear" (14). In great detail, Leland explains his justification of Breitmann's German English:

> When *Hans Breitmann's Party, with other Ballads*, appeared, the only claim made on its behalf was, that it constituted the first book ever written in English as imperfectly spoken by Germans. The author consequently held himself bound to give his broken English in a truthful form. So far as observation and care, aided by the suggestions of well-educated German friends, could enable him to do this, it was done. But the more extensive were his observations, the more did the fact force itself upon his mind, that there is actually no well-defined method or standard of 'German-English,' since not only do no two men speak it alike, but no one individual is invariably consistent in his errors or accuracies. Every reader who knows any foreign language imperfectly is aware that *he speaks it better at one time than another*, and it would consequently have been a grave error to reduce the broken and irregular jargon of the book to a fixed and regular language, or to require that the author should invariably write exactly the same mispronunciations with strict consistency on all occasions. (3-4)

After gathering information by listening to native German speakers pronounce and mispronounce the English language, Leland began to realize the impossible task of creating a fixed representation of this dialect.[53] Although he calls Breitmann's language a "broken and irregular jargon," Leland does acknowledge that in order to be truthful he must resist the temptation to embellish Breitmann's voice by making it

[53] Leland's interaction with German and German-American culture is extensively documented in most of the biographies of his life. Leland spent several years in Germany studying at the University of Hiedelberg, and his fondness for Germany never dissipated nor did his fond memories of traveling in this country produce anything other than admiration for the German people. His willingness to learn the languages of those groups of people he frequently studied was perhaps influenced by the kinship he felt with Germans after learning the language in its native environment. See both his *Memoirs* and Pennell's *Charles Godfrey Leland* for a more complete understanding of Leland's experiences and memories of Germany.

consistent. The end result is an aesthetic style as confusing as it is funny. Yet, whatever the consequences might be, Leland wanted to be truthful to his observations. He claimed that honesty, in this context, meant portraying Breitmann's German English with blemishes and all. Linguistic truth, for Leland, relied more on inconsistency than it did on "cooking" the raw material of Breitmann's voice.

In order to make the peculiar dialects of the nineteenth century readable, some authors chose aesthetics over accuracy or insisted on a consistency that would allow those readers unfamiliar with the phonetic sounds of regional vernaculars a chance to recognize a common pattern in pronunciation. Embellishing a dialect, in this context, meant conventionalizing certain sounds in order to aid in the comprehension of a spoken language. Richard Bridgman has argued that too much accuracy could actually hinder the marketability of literary works written in any colloquial language. Bridgman, suggesting a reason for the decline in the literary use of dialects in the late nineteenth century, wrote, "The greater the phonetic accuracy, the greater the patience needed to read it, so that the conscientious artist eventually reaches a point of seriously diminished returns in refining dialect" (51). In fact, the more inconsistent a literary dialect was, the less chance it had at popular success and the more demeaning it was intended to be to the character speaking it. Leland's dialect, in other words, worked against the genre expectations and market demands of dialect literature.

Leland chose accuracy over aesthetics in his dialect poetry. His introductory remarks and philological interests suggest that Leland was more likely to be faithful

to what he observed in the German-American dialect of his friends. As a result, Leland's Breitmann character is both a truthful representation of German- American culture and a fictional rendering of an average American person. Breitmann's voice never mutated into an invidious stereotype; rather, in its hybrid nature, his German-American dialect mirrored the heteroglot nature of the American language and provided a sympathetic perspective on the process of replacing the status of "immigrant" with that of an "American citizen." His inconsistent language made him more human.

Leland's German-American English is perhaps an early form of what Evelyn Nien-Mien Ch'ien has dubbed "Weird English." Weird English, according to Ch'ien, represents that literary use of language meant to humanize dialect speakers rather than to discriminate against characters whose voices are represented by non-standard English, and although her argument specifically discusses the postcolonial conditions that have led to the success of Salman Rushdie and others, Ch'ien recognizes in the use of hybrid languages by certain authors a desire to address linguistic stereotypes. For Ch'ien, weird English "wants to do more with English than to communicate *what* the subject is; it also wants to show *who* the speaker is and *how* the speaker can appropriate the language" (8). The voice of Leland's Breitmann character does all three of these things – addresses the what, who, and how of German-American English – by risking marketability for the sake of his perception of linguistic truth. He does this by relying on an inconsistent representation of Breitmann's dialect as a contrast to the often static nature of linguistic stereotypes.

When one first reads Leland's dialect poetry, a few recognizable patterns emerge and almost create a standard convention for representing German English. The inversion of different plosive sounds caused by the switching of certain letters is one of the primary features of Breitmann's voice, and as one of the more frequent switches, Leland frequently transposes the sounds caused by the letters *p* and *b*. These patterns, however, do not have the invariability of a stereotype. A brief overview of several Breitmann ballads can illustrate Leland's inconsistent aesthetic style. For example, in "Breitmann went to Kansas," Leland writes,

> Hans Breitmann vent to Kansas;
>
> He vent it on de loud.
>
> At Ellsvort, in de prairie land,
>
> He foundt a pully crowd.
>
> He looked for bleedin' Kansas,
>
> But dat's 'blayed out,' dey say;
>
> De whisky keg's de only dings
>
> Dat's bleedin' der to-day. (47)

This poem is written as if Hans Breitmann both composed and is reciting it to a group of people who have recognized him as the infamous Breitmann character. The implication, then, is that what appears on the page is representative of Breitmann's spoken language and his understanding of the written word. In this context, it becomes difficult to understand why he can correctly say and write "Breitmann," "prairie," "bleedin," and "but" although he can not seem to pronounce "pully" or "blayed" with the appropriate *b* or *p* sound.

Each of these words begins with a different plosive sound because of the consonant or vowel that follows the initial letter, but from a reading perspective, the *b* in bully crowd should appear similar to the *b* in bleeding Kansas or, at the very least, the mispronunciation of "pully" should correct itself in the enunciation of "played out." The inversion of these two letters and the somewhat haphazard repetition of this *p*-*b* switch never commit to a regular pattern. Leland wrote his poetry in this manner to emphasize the multiple ways in which a single speaker can pronounce the same consonant sounds. The confusion this inconsistency causes makes Leland's readers pay closer attention to the way Breitmann's voice is represented. In the light of his own comments on his work, this seeming confusion appears as a conscious effort on Leland's part to avoid creating a static German dialect; to regularize these inconsistent pronunciations would have been contrary to his aesthetics as well as to his understanding of how languages work and dialects evolve.

In other Breitmann poems, Leland continued this trend. "Hans Breitmann's Christmas," for example, exaggerates the inconsistent pronunciation of several words to the point of incomprehensibility. Almost every other line of the following stanzas seems to include an inversion of several consonant sounds – *w*, *f*, *p*, *b*, *t*, and *v*. The poem begins as a group of Germans decides to have a Christmas party and celebrates by decorating a "Musik Hall" with a few banners.

> Dey reefed de Hall 'mid pushes so nople to be seen,
> Aroundt Beethoven's buster dey on-did a garlandt creen;
> De laties vork like tyfels two days to scroob de vloor,

Und hanged a crate serenity mit Wilkomm! oop de toor!

In this stanza, the usual *p-b* switch occurs with words like "pushes," "nople," and "buster." Also, in these lines, Leland starts to mix the sound of the letter *d* with the sound of *t*. The phrase "dey on-did," for instance, provides an example of how Leland's interchanging of consonant sounds pose a problem for readers. Assuming the first word is the phonetic rendering of "they," does that mean the second word should be read as "on-tid"? Or what about "laties," "tyfels," "two days," and "toor"? Which of these words should be read with a *d* or *t*? In addition, there seems to be a switch between *w* and *f* – "vork" and "vloor." And, last but not least, one must read the phrases "garlandt creen" and "crate serenity" as mimicking the various pronunciations for the letter *g*. All of these inversions create a dilemma to those unfamiliar with the German language and for those reading Leland's dialect poetry for the first time.

Leland's inconsistency continues throughout this poem, which self-consciously dramatizes the humor and the potential confusion of its orthography. The German English of Leland's characters misleads the man painting the banners for the Christmas party:

Und vhile dere vas a Schwein-blatt whose redakteur tid say:
Dat Breitmann he vas liederlich vet antworded dis away'
Ve maked anoder serenity mid ledders plue und red:
'Our leader lick de repels! N.G.' (enof gesaid.)

Und anoder serene dransparency ve make de veller

baint,

Boot de vay he potch und vertyfeled it vas enof to
schvear a saint,

For ve vanted La Germania – boot der ardist mit a
blonder

Vent und vlorished Lager agross id – und denn poot
Mania oonder! (57-58)

Thinking that the phrase "enough said" was actually spelled "enof gesaid," the Germans celebrate Hans Brietmann's participation in the Civil War with an emphatic "N.G." and use their phonetic spelling of the phrase as the basis for the lettering on the banner. The result is an abbreviation that makes no sense in either German or English – a confusion further amplified by the unintentional anagrammatic confusion of "La Germania" with "Lager Mania." True to his inconsistent style, Leland also provides the reader with more phonetic inversion. The *w* in "while" and "was" seems to follow a typical German pronunciation, but in the second stanza, *v* becomes a substitute for *f* in "veller" and "vlorished." While some of these inversions can be read as a result of differing vowel and consonant sounds following the initial letter, this one complicates that rationale. The aspirate *e* in "veller" and the hard consonant sound caused by the *l* in "vlorished" should affect the way each word is spoken. In Leland's dialect, the two sounds are reduced to a single *v*.

In addition to the usual *p*-*b* switch – "plue," "repels," "baint," "potch," and "bloonder" – Leland, because of his inconsistency, creates a rather strange word in

the middle of the second line in the first stanza. In the German dialect, the first two lines read,

Und vhile dere was a Schwein-blatt whose redakteur tid say:

Dat Breitmann he was liederlich vet antworded dis away'

I interpret these lines in English as,

And while there was a swinish newspaper whose editor did say:

That Breitmann was disgraceful that answered this way'

The translation of the word "vet" becomes difficult when it is placed after "dat" in the same line. If Leland consistently used "dat" to represent "that," then it would seem that "vet" could not also represent "that." However, if we read the *v* in "vet" as indicating an *f, w, v,* or even *s*, the word becomes nonsensical – fet, wet, vet, or set. If the line is read figuratively, though, we get the following possible interpretations:

That Breitmann was disgraceful when he answered this way

---

That Breitmann was disgraceful with what he answered this way

---

That Breitmann was disgraceful when he said an answer this way

All of these lines fit the context of the poem, but read literally, the word "vet" complicates the meaning of the line and is nearly impossible to translate given the inconsistent nature of Leland's phonetic representation of the German-English dialect, which produces an unstable hybrid version of the English language.

Leland further draws attention to this hybridity when he strings together a series of alliterative phrases later in the same poem. Describing a game of human

bowling played by the party-goers, Leland quickly repeats a few consonant sounds to exaggerate the notable mistakes of transferring German phonetics to the English language. He writes,

> Nine vellers tressed like denpins – dey goed to der end'
> der hall,
> Und dwo Hans Wurst, shack-puddin glowns – dey rolled
> at em mit a pall.
> De palls vas painted peaudiful; dey vas vifdeen feet
> aroundt;
> Und de rule of de came: whoefer cot hidt moost doom-
> ple on de croundt. (63)

"Vellers tressed like denpins," "De palls vas painted peaudiful," and "dey vas vifdeen feet aroundt" all highlight the constantly changing sounds of similar consonants. In the first example, Leland inverts the *d* and *t*, but in "vifdeen feet," Leland replaces only one *t* with a *d* sound and keeps the final *t* as it should be. In addition to this, he replaces only one *f* with a *v* in "vifdeen feet." In "palls…painted peaudiful," he commits the typical *p*-*b* switch but only for the *b* consonant sounds. The *p* in "painted" and in "denpins" remains as the normal *p* sound. The same inversion occurs for the *w*-*v* switch in "vellers," "vas," and "whoefer." And, in this case, inversion also causes a *g*-*c* switch for "goed," "glowns," "cot," and "croundt."

The switching of consonant sounds pervades Leland's poetry. It happens so erratically, however, that it is difficult to recognize a regular pattern. In "A Ballad About de Rowdies," Leland intermixes his dialectal *p*-*b* switch with an occasional

correct English translation, causing an irregular phonetic representation of a single sound. A few stanzas can serve to illustrate this technique:

Pimepy ve become some hoonger
Katrina Bauer und I,
I openet de lit of mine pasket,
Und pringed out a cherry bie.
A cherry kooken mit pretzels,
'How goot!' Katrina said,
Ven a rowdy snatched it from her,
Und preaked it ofer mine het.

I dells him he pe a plackguart
I gifed him a biece of my mind,
I wouldt saidt it pefore a tousand,
Mit der teufel himself pehind.
Den he knocks me down mit a sloong-shot,
Und peats me plack and plue;
Und all de plackguards kick me,
Dill I vainted, und dat ish true. (92)

"By-and-by," which is traditionally spelled "bimeby" in most American literary dialects, becomes the Germanic "pimepy" and uses the typical *p*-*b* switch; however, words like "become" and "pretzels" remain in a standard English spelling. Most of the *d*'s and *t*'s are also switched but in no predictable fashion. When compared to

one another, words like "said," "het," "plackguart," "saidt," "mind," "tousand," "pehind," and "plackguard" create a cacophony of sounds, none of which keeps a consistent pronunciation of the same consonant.

The Breitmann ballads are replete with this type of phonetic inconsistency, and the end result is a German-American English that closely resembles the reality of a spoken language. Several possibilities exist that could easily explain Leland's inconsistency. Humor is perhaps the best, but as we saw with his ethnography, Leland's self-declared intentions are not always the clearest indicator of the purpose of his work. Carelessness could also justify the many mistakes present in his poetry, especially since Leland admitted to enjoying the "involuntary scholarship of the [printing] press" (qtd in Pennell 355). However, the ballads have been reprinted by a number of different publishers with the same mistakes, and the inconsistency is so frequent that it would be difficult to suggest that Leland or his publishers subjected the poems to the indifference of the press.[54] From a linguistic standpoint, the interchanging of sounds probably best represents the voice of a person who seems to be code switching or having difficulty learning a new language. Leland's inconsistent aesthetic also suggests the differences among the spoken idiolects of different speakers otherwise sharing the same cultural and linguistic standpoint. His random style could also be explained by referring to the early stages of dialect

[54] An exception to this argument is found in W.P. Trent's quotation from "Hans Breitmann's Party" in his 1901 essay "A Retrospect of American Humor." Trent cites the following lines of the poem as, "Hans Breitmann gife a Barty-/ Wo ist dot Barty now?/ Wo ist de lofely golden cloud/ Dot float on de mountain's prow?" (36). The original entry in Graham's reads, "Hans Breitmann gife a barty – vhere is dat barty now? Vhere is de lofely golden cloudt dat float on der moundains prow?" More different still, the poem appears in the collected edition as, "Hans Breitmann gife a barty-/ Where ish dat barty now!/ Where ish de lofely golden cloud/ Dat float on de moundain's prow?" (30). The differences between each version, most notably the differences between "wo," "vhere," and "where," could be accounted for discrepancies in the publisher's interpretation and printing of the original poem.

literature in America. The appearance of a German-American dialect was relatively new, and as a result, there were no standardized models for Leland to follow. He was making it up as he went along. Yet, of all these explanations, none seems as pertinent as reading Breitmann's voice to be representative of Leland's desire to inform as well as to entertain.

Like his ethnography that embellished the truth and worked against standards of scientific objectivity, Leland's dialect poems did not idealize his representation of American culture and challenged the growing trend of conventionalizing literary dialects during the nineteenth century. James Russell Lowell, a contemporary of Leland's, once wrote about his efforts to create a literary dialect that "by studying uniformity I have sometimes been obliged to sacrifice minute exactness" (73). Lowell's observation illustrates a common assumption about fictional dialects: that in order to be read and understood, they must display a conformity that ignores how these vernacular languages are actually spoken. George Krapp, an early critic of American literature and language whose 1925 work *The English Language in America* would make a lasting impression on both sociolinguistics and literary studies, echoed Lowell's sentiment when he described how producing a literary dialect often meant selectively editing out the peccadilloes of hybridized languages. "Dialects," Krapp argued, "are merely the convenient summaries of observers who bring together certain homogeneities in the speech habits of a group and thus secure for themselves a sense of unity" (226). Krapp also added, "Since it is impossible for the dialect writer to exhaust all the material, a selection he must make, and the selected details must be given a sort of arbitrary value as standing for the dialect as a

whole. The interest in the examination of literary dialects lies in seeing just what the details selected are and what the reasons were which determined the choice of them" (230-231). In the case of his German-American dialect, Leland refused to sacrifice exactness in order to preserve uniformity and homogeneity. His inclusion of every possible pronunciation Breitmann was liable to utter at one point or another showed a willingness to circumvent fictional genre conventions, not in order to confront a single German stereotype, but to suggest that all languages and, therefore, all people equally contribute to the making of an American language and culture. Doing so allowed Leland to avoid that "social disease" David Crystal recognizes in the act of conventionalizing certain features of literary dialects.

According to Crystal, "In modern times, accent and dialect stereotyping has grown to be a major social disease, in which different groups are nationally perceived to be, for example, of lower intelligence or higher criminality purely on the basis of how they sound…The problem becomes particularly acute when the attitudes are institutionalized in literary form" (346). Leland's commitment to linguistic accuracy works to prevent this process of institutionalizing dialect stereotypes, and his inconsistency helps to portray his perception not just of a German dialect but also of the evolving nature of an American society populated by speakers of many different langauges. In the "liddle tedails" of Breitmann's voice, Leland created a literature of the people, a folk humor that challenged the essentializing conventions of later dialect literature. Breitmann's German dialect was more than just a fictional stereotype; it was an early piece of the linguistic puzzle that would build the foundation of language for America.

# The “Melican Man”

## Asian American Dialect and Bret Harte’s Truthful James Poems

Racial ideologies during the nineteenth century were full of contradictions and bizarre exceptions. The critical attention garnered by Bret Harte and his short stories, plays, and poems about the frontier illustrate the complicated subtleties and nuances of the racial thought during this time.[55] For example, writing about Harte's opinion of miscegenation, Margaret Duckett argues that Harte was trapped somewhere between being a "decent" person and one who had no problem discriminating against certain people of mixed racial descent. She writes, "Harte seemed to concede the inferiority of some half-breeds. His attitude toward those who made life miserable for half-breeds because they were half-breeds, however, was the decent person's attitude toward the coward who would kick a man when he is down. And invariably Harte indicated that the ignorance and prejudice of the white who mistreats the human being of mixed blood makes that white man in his turn disgustingly inferior to the individual he abuses" ("Bret Harte's Portrayal of Half Breeds" 211). Duckett's comments emphasize the more liberal aspects of Harte's views on race although they do not deny his willingness to kick *some* half-breeds while they are down.

[55] Harte's work is particularly useful in this analysis of literature representing Asian American immigrants because of its seemingly paradoxical nature. Many biographers have applauded his liberal attitude towards the equal treatment of non-Anglo citizens, yet his most popular poem, "The Heathen Chinee," leaves some to question whether he condoned racial equality. William Wu, one of the more influential western literary historians, discusses Harte's work and the reception of it. He argues, "Because [Harte's] sympathies are with the persecuted Chinese immigrants, he often writes of them in a favorable manner. As a local colorist, however, he must also portray anti-Chinese attitudes more representative of Californian sentiment" (18). Wu insists that Harte resolved this dilemma by writing stories that dealt with white characters and their reactions to Asian immigrants rather than emphasizing any negative qualities of the Asians themselves. The paradox of Harte's work, then, indicates that although he represented "local color," he also critiqued the values and ideals it contained. Although some critics herald him as one of the originators of this movement, he actually appears to be one of its most discerning critics.

Patrick Morrow also recognizes the inconsistency of Harte's racial ideology. In "Parody and Parable," Morrow identifies the complexity of Harte's attitude toward race. "Harte became convinced," Morrow argues, "that his prejudice against California's colorful inhabitants was in direct contradiction to his broadly optimistic philosophy that however cursed by his follies, all men are ultimately good" (13). Suggesting that Harte did recognize a contradiction in his own thoughts, Morrow claims that Harte should be remembered less for the racism apparent in his works and more for his broad optimism. More specifically, Marrow argues that Harte's sympathies for the Asian American community make his satirical wit difficult to interpret as humor motivated exclusively by racism, and although his works emphasize differences among the many races on the West Coast of the United States, his comedy also displays a mockery of those who held narrow-minded racist beliefs.

Harte's use of language and dialects in a series of poems written or reported by "Truthful James" further supports Duckett's and Morrow's claims. They create a sense that language reveals more about the perspective of the audience than it does about the speaker. His "Truthful James" poems place the burden of interpretation on the reader and may be read as either comical or offensive. While not every Truthful James poem features an Asian dialect, almost all of them play with language in order to create surprise endings and twists. Hence the often used title "Plain Language From Truthful James" ironically draws the reader's attention to questions about "truth," "plain" language, and race.

Stuart Creighton Miller explains Harte's sudden rise to popularity by arguing he put before the American imagination a caricature of Asian Americans that most

American citizens wanted to believe was realistic. Miller writes, "The human mind does not see an object and then define what it has observed. Rather, it brings to any situation or object a definition and then sees what it has already defined" (8). In *The Unwelcome Immigrant*, Miller argues that both anti-Asian sentiment and a favorable opinion of Asia in general existed simultaneously in varying proportions in all regions of the country. Therefore, he disputes Mary Coolidge's theory that Harte owed his popularity to Calfornian's dears about Asian immigrants supposedly stealing jobs from American citizens, which led to the Chinese Exclusion Acts and other federal legislation against Asian immigrants.[56] Miller asserts that preconceived racial stereotypes existed well before Harte and other western local color authors brought the "strange" and "mysterious" behaviors of Asian immigrants to the attention of the entire country. Harte's frontier literature did contribute to unflattering images of Asian Americans, he maintains, but was wrongfully interpreted by his audience as representing only the negative stereotypes associated with Asian American characters. Taking a cue from Miller's argument, we can see Harte's work as revealing the internal contradictions of racist stereotypes that both joined him to and divided him from his readers.

From "The Spelling Bee at Angels, Reported by Truthful James" to "Further Language from Truthful James," Harte's complete body of poetry is expansive. Several volumes of his entire works, including his short stories, novels, plays,

[56] The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first of many attempts by the United States Congress to prohibit Asian immigration and was followed by a number of other legislative bills intended to limit the rights of Asian American immigrants. The Scott Act, passed in 1888, ended the return visa process for Asians living in the United States who wanted to leave the country and reenter. Three of the more insightful discussions of the history of Chinese immigration legislation in the United States are Charles McClain's *In Search of Equality*, Shih-Shan Henry Tsai's *The Chinese Experience in America*, and William Wu's *The Yellow Peril.*

editorial work, and published speeches, fill the shelves of most libraries.[57] Well known for short stories such as "The Luck of Roaring Camp," "Tennessee's Partner," and "The Outcasts of Poker Flats," Harte began his career as a journalist in northern California. Born in Albany, New York, Harte began receiving national attention during the mid to late 1860s for his work in The Overland Monthly, a periodical published in San Francisco. His writing became increasingly popular during this time, and, in 1871, the publishing house of James R. Osgood and Company offered him an unprecedented annual contract to write for The Atlantic Monthly for the sum of ten thousand dollars. Many biographers note this event as the beginning of Harte's decline. He never fulfilled the expectations of eastern audiences after 1871, but he continued to write for the remainder of his life, leaving behind countless works of fiction and poetry.[58]

Although "Plain Language From Truthful James" was a national success, most of Harte's poetry has received little attention. Morrow's work on Harte's poetry, "Bret Harte and the Perils of Pop Poetry," focuses mainly on his failed editorial work in an anthology of regional poets called "Outcroppings" and only briefly mentions any of Harte's poems. In a special edition of Western American Literature published in 1973 and featuring articles dedicated to Harte, only Donald Glover and Jack Scherting discuss Harte's poems, and even these articles discuss only his Civil War poems and later works. Most of the critical attention given to

[57] All citations in this chapter are taken from the *Standard Library Edition of the Writings of Bret Harte* unless otherwise noted.

[58] Donald Glover outlines Harte's career according to this chronological understanding of his success and failure. He writes, "Harte's career conveniently falls into two major periods: the brief glittering success of 1868-1872, and the long exile in England from 1880 to his death in 1902" (143). For a comprehensive biography of Harte's life, see George Stewart's *Bret Harte, Argonaut and Exile*.

Harte's poetry is directed towards the poem popularly known as "The Heathen Chinee." This poem is actually titled "Plain Language From Truthful James," and this was only one of many poems in which Harte used this recurring character. Reading the Truthful James poems as a series sheds more light on Harte's career and beliefs, allowing us to further investigate the nature of the racism most readers attribute to Harte's work.

The name "Truthful James" implies that Harte's character is by nature telling the truth, but the poems obviously call his veracity into question even as they boast of it. "The Spelling Bee at Angels," for instance, paints a colorful tale of egotistical ruffians who begin a gunfight after a spelling contest, and the first two stanzas of the poem attempt to establish James's credibility as an honest man:

> Waltz in, waltz in, ye little kinds, and gather round my knee,
> And drop them books and first pot-hooks, and hear a yarn from me.
> I kin not sling a fairy tale of Jinnys fierce and wild,
> For I hold it is unchristian to deceive a simple child;
> But as from school yer' driftin' by, I thowt ye'd like to hear
> Of a "Spelling Bee" at Angels that we organized last year.
>
> It warn't made up of gentle kids, or pretty kids, like you,
> But gents ez hed ther reg'lar growth, and some enough for two.
> There woz Lanky Jim of Sutter's Fork and Bilson of La-grange,
> And "Pistol Bob," who wore that day a knife by way of change.
> You start, you little kids, you think these are not pretty names,

But each had a man behind it, and – my name is Truthful James. (183)

The limerick rhythm and coarse vernacular language give the poem a comical, homespun, "natural" voice markedly different from the rhetorical artifice of poets such as Longfellow. James's claim that he cannot tell a lie to a child also adds to his image of his story as an honest one and not a "fierce and wild" fairy tale. Superficially, these first two stanzas create the expectation that like the names "Lanky Jim" and "Pistol Bob," James's name reveals something essential about his character. Lanky Jim is presumably tall and skinny, Pistol Bob generally carries a gun, and Truthful James tells the truth. The poem's unpretentious meter and simple language seemingly support James's assertion that he cannot lie.

This impression, however, is only superficial, and herein lies the humor of the poem. Truthful James is supposedly addressing children, but Harte's adult audience is able to see past the artifice of his ostensibly natural dialect. Truthful James, obviously, is not telling the truth in a straightforward way – and perhaps not telling the truth at all.

The remainder of the poem describes the participation of each character in the spelling bee and the subsequent events that leads to the death of most of the men involved. Stumped by the word "eider-duck," Poker Dick from Whiskey Flat takes offense to the smirk on the face of Bilson of Lagrange. Bilson then shrieks and drops to the floor, apparently due to a gunshot to the abdomen, and a riot ensues. Much like the scene of a Hollywood western, the poem captures the chaos of guns firing, men hiding behind wooden stoves, and people trying to restore order. The last two stanzas of the poem return the audience's attention to Truthful James.

O little kids, my pretty kids, down on your knees and pray!
You've got your eddication in a peaceful sort of way;
And bear in mind thar may be sharps ez slings their spellin' square,
But likewise slings their bowie-knives without a thought or care.
You wants to know the rest my dears? Thet's all! In me you see
The only gent that lived to tell about the Spellin' Bee!

He ceased and passed, that truthful man; the children went their way
With downcast heads and downcast hearts – but not to sport or play.
For when at eve the lamps were lit, and supperless to bed
Each child was sent, with tasks undone and lessons all unsaid,
No man might know the awful woe that thrilled their youthful frames,
As they dreamed of Angels Spelling Bee and thought of Truthful James.

(187)

The poem is obviously a tall tale designed to entertain the child who lives within the adult reader even as it flatters that same reader for feeling superior to his inner child.[59]

To profess one's truthfulness, then, is to display one's unreliability. Harte often used an unreliable narrator in his short stories and poems; his use of such devices, in fact, contributed to his reputation as a writer who relied on gimmicks

[59] In *Bret Harte: Literary Critic*, Morrow emphasizes Harte's opinion that good literature should illustrate more than just the particulars of a given circumstance. "[Harte] stressed," Morrow argues, "the need for a work to have integrity in style and content; that humor should strive to depict pathos in the human condition; and that realistic depiction of any region would yield universal truths" (148). Morrow supports this claim with Harte's reaction to local criticism of his short story "The Luck" found in an editorial he wrote for The Cornhill Magazine in 1899.

rather than the traditional resources of good literature. Jeffrey Thomas once said of Harte, "He was – then as now – widely regarded as a pathetic example of a minor talent that burned itself out early and produced nothing but trivial hackwork thereafter" (92). Thomas admits this is perhaps a harsh evaluation of Harte's career, but the repetitive nature of many of his poems has caused critics and readers to overlook the complex irony in his simplistic style. Patrick Morrow also suggests that Harte's formulaic writing has led to his minor status in the American canon. He argues, "[B]y writing formula stories, however innovatively, Harte frequently boxed himself into the role of satisfying a certain audience's demand for very predictable and superficial conventions. With overuse, these conventions have become hallmarks of familiar clichés – the happy ending, the melodramatic incident, the amazing coincidence, and, of course, the whore with a heart of gold" ("Bret Harte, Popular Fiction" 128). Although the popularity of his work suggests that the predictability of his humor helped characters like Truthful James find a way into the creative imaginations of thousands of reader, both Thomas and Morrow recognize that Harte's style may have prevented him from gaining critical success.

The formulaic nature of Harte's short stories and poems also caused some confusion about his intentions. Most contemporary critics thought he was merely a popular author pandering to the masses, and when scholars did recognize salient aspects of Harte's writing, they tended to ignore his purpose. Margaret Duckett, for instance, argues, "Though contemporary critics, when they notice Harte at all, comment on the influence of Dickens, they generally overlook the fact that Harte, like Dickens, had much to say against social injustices of his time and place and that

his criticism is forthright and, at times, eloquent" (212 "Plain Language"). In another essay about Harte's critical following, she also writes, "It should be remembered that Harte's fiction was directed not toward the audience 'fit though few' of Milton and Henry James but towards readers of popular magazines of the nineteenth century. And long after literary critics and former friends wrote off Bret Harte as dead and damned, his works were widely published, and read and liked by the masses...When he was writing parody or 'burlesque,' Harte sometimes achieved his most percipient criticism" (119 "The Crusade"). Following Duckett's lead, I would argue that Harte's "Truthful James" poems revealed more truth about American values than many would like to admit.

Other poems by Truthful James not only question whether he is truthful but also suggest that his language is not plain. Plain language could mean a number of different things. It could mean simple, common, or ordinary, - all terms relevant to Harte's poetry - but, for James in "His Answer to 'Her Letter,'" plain language was conceived to be artless or free of double meaning.[60] "His Answer" is one of the few poems in the "Truthful James" series in which the speaker's dialect is relatively absent. The poem is meant to be a written response from an injured and dying man to his distant romantic interest. The letter, dictated by James, reports a prospector's fidelity to his mistress back home. James explains the situation to begin the poem.

[60] The complete title of this poem is "His Answer to "Her Letter" (Reported by Truthful James)," and it is a humorous response to another of Harte's poems. "Her Letter" tells the story of the daughter of a man who struck gold and moved his family to New York in order to live a life of luxury and ease. The daughter, however, laments these fortunate circumstances because they took her away from her lover. Harte mocks her reproach of the riches her family now enjoys and humorously characterizes her as someone who would give up fortune for the hardships of frontier life. After describing her life full of travel and fancy galas, she ends the poem declaring, "But know, if you have n't got riches,/ And are poor, dearest Joe, and all that,/ That my heart's somewhere there in the ditches,/ And you've struck it, – on Poverty Flat." (159).

Being asked by an intimate party, -

Which the same I would term as a friend, -

Though his health it were vain to call hearty,

Since the mind to deceit it might lend;

For his arm it was broken quite recent,

And there's something gone wrong with his lung, -

Which is why it is proper and decent

I should write what he runs off his tongue. (160)

James is careful to place the invalid's words in quotation marks in the following stanzas, and, by doing so, he seems to differentiate between the two authors of the letter.

On the surface, the quotation marks attempt to validate James's usual claims that he is truthful and trustworthy. Although, as the poem progresses, the audience learns he is acting more as an editor than as someone transcribing the words of another person, James pretends to be accurately recording the writer's spoken words. He tells the reader, "The language that invalid uses/ At times it were vain to relate." And he later insists, "His language to me from his bunk, Miss,/ Is frequent and painful and free" (160; 161). James's supposed decency and respect for the lady receiving this letter prevents him from fully disclosing all of the language used by the person composing the letter. James, however, assures the reader that his interspersed thoughts give the invalid's words more clarity and meaning. In the third stanza of the poem, James carefully weaves his interpretations of the speaker's letter with the actual words spoken by the sick man. James writes,

And he says “that the mountains are fairer,

For once being held in your thought;”

That each rock “holds a wealth that is rarer

Than ever by gold-seeker sought.”

(Which are words he would put in these pages,

By a party not given to guile;

Though the claim not, at date, paying wages,

Might produce in the sinful a smile.) (160)

James’s aside, indicated by the parentheses, assures the recipient of the letter that James is not a person “given to guile.” His use of quotation marks around the invalid’s words gives the impression that he is dictating verbatim and is accurately relaying the sentiment and speech of the injured party.

The last two lines of this stanza, however, foreshadow James’s ulterior motive for writing the letter. While the injured man seems content to scour the foothills of California for gold as long as he has the love of this distant woman, James admits that the lack of return on his investment produces merely a smile. In other words, the gold-laden rocks once considered valuable by the miners are, in reality, value-less. The flattery used by the sick man to woo his romantic interest ironically emphasizes the fact that the mountains are worth nothing and not even then woman’s thoughts can change that. A “sinful” reader can see through James’s exploitation of romantic ideals and smile as he or she takes pleasure in laughing at the naiveté of each character.

As the poem continues, it becomes more obvious that Truthful James places little value in the romance between the two characters involved in the letter because this sentiment simply does not pay. James takes the liberty of finishing the letter after the invalid dozes off.

He's asleep, which the same might seem strange, Miss,
Were it not that I scorn to deny
That I raised his last dose, for a change, Miss,
In view that his fever was high;
But he lies there quite peaceful and pensive.
And now, my respects, Miss, to you;
Which my language, although comprehensive,
Might seem to be freedom, is true. (161)

Acknowledging that he might be taking advantage of the situation by addressing a lady to whom he has not been formally introduced, James assures the female recipient of the letter that he is not being disrespectful. The "freedom" he takes in conveying his feelings to the girl is a plot to make him appear sincere but could also be conceived as a deceitful act to steal the girl from the invalid. Again, James's language, although it gives the illusion of honesty, clearly illustrates the ironic humor of the poem. He is not being truthful, but, instead, he deceives other people to gain their trust and any advantage he might win for himself.

The rest of the poem continues to demonstrate the irony of James's supposed honesty. He writes a peculiar postscript that tells the invalid's lover that the he is not just physically harmed but also broke. James takes advantage of the situation by

asking the lady to send a few supplies that he feels are essential to the survival of the camp and sends her money to procure the supplies. His post-script reads,

P.S. – Which this same interfering
Into other folks' ways I despise;
Yet if it so be I was hearing
That it's just empty pockets as lies
Betwixt you and Joseph, it follers,
That, having no family claims,
Here's my pile, which it's six hundred dollars,
As is *yours*, with respects,
Truthful James. (162)

Harte's readers can assume the money is intended to pay for the goods he has asked for, but James's emphasis on "yours" in the last line also suggests that should the woman abandon her love for the invalid and attach herself to James, he is willing to share more money with her. His claim to her affection comes with a hefty bribe, and we are left to laugh at James's deceitful methods for gaining the young lady's attention. The postscript illustrates Harte's use of irony and the obvious ways in which he used humor to mock those readers who thought characters like Truthful James actually told the truth and did not exploit assumptions about life on the frontier.

Up to this point, the poems I have discussed have focused on James playing a prank on other people. He has not been the subject of the joke. Instead, he has been the one reporting the joke or telling it to an audience that can recognize the way he is

using the naïveté of innocent children and a vulnerable lady to produce laughter at their expense. Sigmund Freud would classify this type of humor as wit, and since James is exploiting these circumstances, one could argue that it is an aggressive tactic used to gratify the id's pleasure principle. Writing twenty years after the publication of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud elaborated on the distinctions he made when he defined wit as a sub-set of humor. He argued, "We have an instance of [wit] when a writer or narrator depicts the behavior of real or imaginary people in a humorous fashion. There is no need for the people described to display any humor; the humorous attitude only concerns the person who makes them the object of it, and the reader or hearer shares his enjoyment of the humor…To sum up, then, we may say that the humorous attitude – in whatever it consists – may have reference to the subject's self or to other people; further we may assume that it is a source of enjoyment to the person who adopts it, and, finally, a similar pleasure is experienced by observers who take no actual part in it" ("Essay" 112). Wit occurs, according to Freud, when we do not actually participate in a humorous event, but, as we listen to someone tell a joke or we see or hear a humorous event, we gratify our need to laugh at the reality of another person's misfortune.

In this context, then, we find Harte's wit humorous in the sense that we can laugh at the way Truthful James attempts to manipulate other people. In the case of "The Spelling Bee," Harte makes light of the supposedly dangerous nature of living in a lawless society. James's exaggerated depiction of an uncommon event makes us laugh because we know Harte is deceiving those naïfs who might think this type of

behavior actually takes place in the stereotypically rugged saloons of the western frontier, and we find enjoyment in his satire. Harte's audience smirks as they watch how he tries to coerce his younger audience into gaining their "eddication on the square."

Harte's wit continues in "His Answer," but, in this poem, we laugh at James as he tries to take advantage of the compassion of another human being. In this context, then, he is again exploiting the generic conventions of realism and suggesting that it shares qualities often associated with sentimentalism. If he stands accused of overusing or helping to create predictable conventions of the local color movement, then Harte's "His Answer" also indicates that those sappy love stories that rely on an overly dramatic relationship between a male protagonist and female heroine are often written with formulaic patterns and easily recognizable conclusions. Of course, not all sentimental fiction is like this, nor am I suggesting this simplistic definition of sentimental fiction is an accurate one, but Harte's poem suggests this is how he thought of sentimental fiction, and the comedy in his poetry often attempts to control the expectations of his audience so much that it would indicate he was constantly forcing them to check their assumptions about fictional representations of reality. Truthful James was not truthful, his language was not plain, and one could not read Harte's poems superficially and expect to understand his humor. As Freud would suggest, the thought content of Harte's comedy differed from the joke-work of his poems.

The following poems in Harte's "Truthful James" series take a slightly different approach than those previously mentioned. Although they do share similar

qualities and do attempt to create laughter using predictable patterns, these next poems use James as narrator who participates in the action of the poem rather than acting as a mediator who describes a humorous situation to his audience. As a result, Harte makes James and those who share his indignation at the events that unfold in the poem the subject of the joke. These poems display the characteristics that Freud uses to distinguish wit from humor, and, consequently, they can be considered tendentious jokes or jokes that serve the purpose of offering a social critique.

The final two poems in this chapter exemplify Freud's concept of humor as a psychological release and help to explain how Harte's anti-racist sentiments were often misunderstood. Like the previous poems, Harte also uses language that is supposedly without guile to make his audience recognize the truth of an event. This time, Harte relies on a more obvious hypocrisy to uncover the painful truth about the treatment of Native Americans in the west. "Truthful James to the Editor" ironically complains about the lawlessness of a Modoc Indian named Captain Jack. On the surface, the poem is intended to stir resentment towards Native Americans. In the opening lines, James declares,

> [It] is not my style
>
> To produce needless pain
>
> By statements that rile
>
> Or that go 'gin the grain,
>
> But here's Captain Jack still a-livin,' and Nye has no skelp on his brain! (146)

Bill Nye was a common character used in Harte's poems. He was generally a stereotype of the gun-slinging, poker-playing, whiskey-drinking cowboy. In this poem, he is a married man who has had an affair with a Modoc woman referred to as "Nye's other squaw" (146). Truthful James tells the audience that "folks of that stamp/ Hez no rights in the law,/ But is treacherous, sinful, and slimy, as Nye might hev well known before" (146). Not wanting to "go 'gin the grain," James seems to perpetuate the negative stereotypes of Native Americans by assuming their so-called "savage" behavior justifies their exclusion from the protection of the United States.

As the poem continues, it becomes apparent that Nye's illegal activities lead to his scalping. Nye follows his mistress into a trap set up by Captain Jack, and once he realizes he has met his match, Nye pleads with Jack for mercy. His appeal to the "law of nations" falls on deaf ears. He declares, "By the law of nations, forbear!/ I surrenders – no more:/ And I looks to be treated, - you hear me? as a pris'ner, a pris'ner of war!" Captain Jack responds, "It's too thin!/ Such statements as those/ It's too late to begin." Captain Jack then enumerates Nye's offenses.

> You stole Schonchin's squaw
>
> In the year sixty-two;
>
> It was in sixty-four
>
> That Long Jack you went through;
>
> And you burned Nasty Jim's Rancheria, and his wives and
>
> his papooses too.
>
> This gun in my hand

Was sold me by you

'Gainst the law of the land,

And I grieves it is true!"

And he buried his face in his blanket and wept as he hid it

from view. (147)

The irony of Bill asking for protection under the law of nations and his refusal to abide by them when he kills several people and illegally sells fire arms to Captain Jack is enough evidence to allow the audience to understand the intent of Harte's poem. This is a clear indictment against those settlers who only followed the law when it benefited them. Harte makes the hypocrisy of Bill's passionate plea to be treated as a prisoner of war the subject of this joke.

However, the poem does not end when the audience realizes Bill is less than a model citizen. "Truthful James to the Editor" concludes as James attempts to justify his anger at Captain Jack's vigilante justice. The final stanza repeats the opening lines and summarizes James's incredulity.

So I asks without guile

And I trusts not in vain,

If this is the style

That is going to obtain –

If here's Captain Jack still a-livin,' and Nye with no skelp

on his brain? (148)

Ostensibly, James leaves the audience focused on Captain Jack's illegal activity rather than questioning Bill's behavior. The form of this poem allows one to ignore

or, one might say, repress any guilt associated with the unequal treatment of Native Americans on the frontier of the United States.

This form, however, is at odds with the revelation with the poem of how an emphasis on form can represent hypocrisy. Harte thus uses this poem to offer a critique of race relations in the United States. Like those settlers who have exploited members of other races assumed to be inferior to their own, James has no trouble arguing against the illegal behavior of a Native American person despite the lawless actions of Nye. James is blind to the hypocrisy of the situation, and, by allowing others to laugh at Nye's predicament, James enables his audience to avoid admitting any wrongdoing on behalf of the white character. He prevents them from suffering the "arrows of reality."[61]

Harte is not only using James to voice a critique of characters such as Nye. He is also criticizing those who might share James's indignation. Criticizing people like yourself, Freud tells us, creates a positive environment for humor: "A particularly favourable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share – a collective person, that is (the subject's own nation, for instance)" (*Jokes.*… 111). Harte's comedy serves as a critical evaluation of those who do not see the hypocrisy of James's protest, and it seems likely that many readers who joined in the laughter interpreted

[61] Freud once wrote, "[H]umor has in it a *liberating* element. But it has also something fine and elevating… Obviously, what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissm, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure" (*Essay* 113). Harte's poem illustrates this characteristic of humor. It allows readers to laugh at the contradictions within the poem and to ignore the hypocrisy of blaming Nye's death on Captain Jack.

this poem as another entertainingly exaggerated depiction of life on the frontier. The "Bill Nyes" of the frontier were few and far between, according to this type of thinking, which would then deny the way minority ethnic groups were commonly treated in the United States.

Harte's most recognizable poem, "Plain Language From Truthful James" or "The Heathen Chinee," also performs this kind of social critique. The plot of the poem is simple. James and Bill Nye allow Ah Sin to play a game of cards with them while assuming that Sin's demeanor will make him an easy victim for them to swindle. The surprise ending, however, reveals that Sin is just as capable of cheating as James and Nye. Thus, Harte's irony in "Heathen Chinee" follows a comic pattern similar to that in most of his other poems while also including the audience's perception of the situation in its comedy.

As the lyric begins, Harte carefully introduces his audience to the events about to unfold and the character of Ah Sin. Describing Sin's smile as "pensive and childlike," James indicates how he assumed Sin's physical features and given name revealed a lack of intellect and moral status (129). At the same time he shows us that his assumptions, which might distract his audience from the negative qualities of the two white characters, who are luring Sin into a potentially harmful and dangerous situation, ended up rebounding upon himself. Describing the scene, James writes,

> It was August the third,
>
> And quite soft was the skies:
>
> Which it might be inferred
>
> That Ah Sin was likewise,

Yet he played it that day upon William
And me in a way I despise.

Which we had a small game,
And Ah Sin took a hand:
It was Euchre. The same
He did not understand;
But he smiled as he sat by the table,
With the smile that was childlike and bland. (129)

Nye and James think they have a situation on their hands in which they cannot lose. Sin, like the "soft skies," gives every indication that he is naïve and innocent, and the two white men rely on their preconceived stereotypes about Asian characters in their confident expectations of victory. The poem that made Harte one of the most famous writers in the country in 1870, "The Heathen Chinee" reiterates the stereotypical characteristics of Asian immigrants with which most readers were already familiar. In the opening lines, James remarks, "That for ways that are dark/ And for tricks that are vain,/ The heathen Chinee is peculiar,/ Which the same I would wish to explain" (129).

Discussing the popular reception of the poem and analyzing several of the illustrations that accompanied many of the printed copies of Harte's poem, Gary Scharnhorst comments, "Too often, rather than an ironic indictment of anti-Chinese sentiment, Harte's poem seemed to license that sentiment…On the surface, that is, the text constructs a racial Other in stereotypical terms; only when read ironically

does it resist or subvert the stereotype" (*Bret Harte: Opening* 54). The first few lines of Harte's poem indicate that James is going to justify the belief that Sin is undeserving of any special treatment and that much like other representations of John Chinaman, Sin represents another "maladjusted immigrant." Many of Harte's readers must have agreed since very few, it seems, took the time to recognize that James's observations of the card game are ironically privilege his and Nye's plans to cheat as part of their morally superior position that they supposedly occupy over the "heathen Chinee." Scharnhorst uncovers a number of different scenarios in which readers used Harte's work to justify racism against Chinese Americans. Most notably, Scharnhorst argues that Senator Eugene Casserley of California wrote a personal letter to Harte thanking him for his support of his opposition to Chinese labor. Scharnhorst also discusses the many Congressmen who quoted Harte's poem during a session in January of 1871. According to this argument, then, we might conclude that many of Harte's readers did not recognize Harte's irony because they wanted to ignore their own racist hypocrisy.

Nonetheless, Harte's poem reveals a "deceiver deceived" pattern in which Nye and James lose their attempt to hustle Sin because he has out-hustled them (Fenn 48). As a result, both of them appear to be more foolish than Sin. The poem thus suggests that stereotypes of "John Chinaman" characters were formed by projecting the negative qualities of deceitful Caucasians unto Asians. The irony of this role reversal is emphasized in the final stanzas of the poem:

> Yet the cards they were stocked
>
> In a way that I grieve,

And my feelings were shocked
    At the state of Nye's sleeve,
Which was stuffed full of aces and bowers,
    And the same with intent to deceive.

But the hands that were played
    By that heathen Chinee,
And the points that he made,
    Were quite frightful to see, –
Till at last he put down a right bower,
    Which the same Nye had dealt unto me.

Then I looked up at Nye,
    And he gazed upon me;
And he rose with a sigh,
    And said, "Can this be?
We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor," –
    And he went for that heathen Chinee. (130)

If we consider James to be truthful and we can believe that he did not know Nye was cheating, then his "shocked" reaction implies that he thought Nye would play fairly. Yet James refuses to quit playing the game, indicating that Nye's dirty tactics are nothing unusual. (One thinks of Louie in Casablanca saying that he is "shocked, shocked!" to discover that gambling has been going on in Rick's Café.) Nye is a

card shark; trickery is expected from him. On the other hand, when James discovers Sin is also cheating, he considers it "frightful" and despises it. The double standard James uses to judge Nye and Sin reveals his own prejudice, as dies his invocation of a trope – "ruined by Chinese cheap labor" – that was part of the racist rhetoric of this era.

For those among his readers, such as Senator Casserley, who proved themselves to be oblivious to Harte's irony, the stereotype overwhelmed the text that was playing with it. We might compare this poem, then, to Daniel Defoe's *Short and Easy Way With Dissenters* and Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal," whose scathing irony was lost on many contemporary readers. Among other things, this comparison will allows us to see just how powerful dialects were: so powerful that an audience hearing a particular dialect may be totally deaf to what is being said in it. Moreover, an audience not hearing a particular dialect (as with "The Heathen Chinee," in which Sin never speaks) may show that its silence speaks volumes to them.

The silence of Sin's character in this poem might initially seem to justify James's critical evaluation of his character. However, when we read this poem in relationship to Harte's other works that do include a dialectal representation of what an Asian English language would sound like, we realize that Harte is not advocating racist attitudes toward Asian immigrants. Instead, he is using Sin's silence to critique the hasty conclusions some people draw about Sin and other Asian characters. In this poem, Harte does not have to rely on the linguistic stereotypes often associated with some dialectal versions of the English language. Nye's

reaction to Sin's deception allows Harte's audience to insert their own irrational justifications of their anger towards Asian immigrants in place of Nye's anger and thus to betray themselves.

Writing about the popular reception of Harte's "Heathen Chinee" poem, Yunte Huang characterizes the poem as symptomatic of larger racial and economic issues, not necessarily a clear indictment of Harte as a racist. He argues, "The poetic irony [of "Heathen Chinee"] was completely lost on mostly white readers who embraced Harte's poem not as a satire but as an accurate depiction of the Chinese" (130). Consequently, although Harte was sympathetic to the plight of Asian Americans, he will be held responsible for a "work that would greatly enrich American racist vocabulary, particularly pertaining to the Chinese" (128). Whatever his intentions, or schemes, may have been, his dialects, ultimately, were beyond his control; the game in which he was playing was much trickier than he anticipated. He did investigate, however, at least as a question, the complex politics at play in matters of race, humor, and language.

## “Delinquents of Some Kind”

## White and Black Dialects in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Colonel’s Dream*

Resolving to "eliminate the Negro from our life and reestablish for all time the government of our fathers," Charles Gaston delivers an unapologetic defense of white supremacy to the North Carolina state Democratic convention at the end of Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (434). The "speech that made history" is an appropriate conclusion to a novel that works tirelessly to legitimize the prejudiced idea that the black and white races are incompatible and cannot coexist in the same country. Thus, what appears to be the novel's thesis – "Can you build, in a Democracy, a nation inside a nation of two hostile races?" – is a rhetorical question answered by the characters' actions and the consistent intrusion of the author's racial ideology (242). Every aspect of the novel communicates this ideology, from its plot, in which Gaston, an only child of a Confederate soldier killed in the Civil War, wins unanimous approval for his attempt to restore racial segregation in North Carolina, to its association of all things "degenerate" and "evil" with the black race. Published in 1902, Dixon's immensely popular novel calls for a simple, yet problematic, solution to an incredibly complex issue.[62] It is an unabashed romance portraying the acceptance of racial discrimination in the South during the Reconstruction era.

Chris Ruiz-Velasco argues that the text's racism is most evident in the way it marks racial identities with visual cues. In "Order Out of Chaos: Whiteness, White Supremacy, and Thomas Dixon, Jr," Ruiz-Velasco writes, "The text's racist polemic takes on a decidedly anxious tone as it seeks to assert the 'truth' of whiteness and blackness, and *The Leopard's Spots* focuses much of its racial anxiety on visual

[62] Dixon completed two more novels after *The Leopard's Spots*, *The Clansman* and *The Traitor*, both of which were widely read. Dixon's second novel sold 40,000 copies within the first week and a half of its publication, and the "Klan Trilogy," as it was later called, inspired D.W. Griffith's critically acclaimed film *The Birth of a Nation* (Ruiz-Velasco 150).

markers of race. These visual markers include racial identification by means of skin color, hair color and texture, [and] physical characteristics, as well as [by] racially stereotyped physical movement and observable behavior" (150). Most of the story's "evil" characters, those who are either black or scalawags – white southern characters who manipulate newly freed African Americans for their own political gain – are described as having lips that are "full and sensuous" or "coarse thick lips" (74; 85).[63] The white hero of the story, however, Charles Gaston, is described as having "big brown eyes and a sensitive mouth" (10). General Daniel Worth, the brigade commander of Gaston's father's regiment, is described in such a detailed manner that one can picture Dixon's version of an average Caucasian and, therefore, ideal human being.

> The General was a man to command instant attention in any crowd. An expert of anthropology would have selected his face from among a thousand as the typical man of the Caucasian race. He was above the average height, a strong muscular and well-rounded body, crowned by a heavy shock of what had once been raven black hair, now iron grey. His face was ruddy with the glow of perfect health and his full round lips and the twinkle of his eye showed him to be a lover of the good things of life. He wore a heavy moustache which seemed a fitting ballast for the lower part of his face against the heavy projecting straight eyebrows and bushy hair. (63-64)

[63] These references describe Allan McLeod and Simon Legree, respectively. McLeod is the novel's antagonist, the foil to Gaston and a character who exploits the Northern sympathies by declaring himself a union loyalist. Legree is a direct allusion to Harriet Beecher Stowe's character of the same name and is a ruthless scalawag who earns a fortune buying property from southern aristocrats who can no longer afford to pay taxes on their estates without the free labor of slaves. Legree also becomes the governor of North Carolina and extorts most of the taxes collected as well as federal funding intended to help implement policies used to insure racial equality.

The imagery Dixon uses to describe each character helps him to further argue the admixture of races is unacceptable and will lead to atavism, degeneracy, and an overall diminished capacity of the white race.[64] According to Diaz-Velasco's reading of *The Leopard's Spots*, Dixon's visual markers of race represent a clear demarcation of "whiteness" and "blackness," racial characteristics that are then associated with good and evil.

In addition to describing each character's physical appearance, Dixon also uses language as an essential marker of race. The way characters sound in *The Leopard's Spots* is as important as how they appear. It is no coincidence that Gaston is the most outspoken and articulate character. His reputation as a master rhetorician follows him throughout the novel, and even his enemies concede that he is a "man of brains, and oratorical genius" (193). Audiences often hang on his every word, and there is a tremendous amount of authority granted to his speaking abilities. Describing the effects of Gaston's final speech, the narrator writes, "He played with the heart-strings of his hearers in this close personal history as a great master touches the strings of a harp. His voice was now low and quivering with the music of passion, and then soft and caressing. He would swing them from laughter to tears in

[64] In a particularly blatant example of authorial intrusion, Gaston thinks to himself, "Amalgamation simply meant Africanisation. The big nostrils, flat nose, massive jaw, protruding lip and kinky hair will register their animal marks over the proudest intellect and the rarest beauty of any other race. The rule that had no exception was that one drop of Negro blood makes a negro" (382). Dixon's racism and his intentions in writing the three novels are well documented. In 1903, Dixon said in an interview, "I claim the book is an authentic human document and I know it is the most important moral deed of my life. It may shock the prejudice of those who have idealized or worshipped the negro as canonized in 'Uncle Tom.' Is it not time they heard the whole truth? They have heard only one side for forty years." Also known as the "Reconstruction Trilogy," Dixon's novels created a reaction that reinforced his desire to admonish those who thought of African Americans as equal to Anglo Americans. Max Nordau, in a letter to Dixon, wrote, "Man! are you conscious of your immense responsibility? You have deliberately undone the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe!" Both of these quotes illustrate the didactic purpose Dixon had in mind when he began drafting these works. (Railton)

a single sentence, and in the next, the lightning flash of a fierce invective drove into their hearts its keen blade so suddenly the vast crowd started as one man and winced at its power" (439). Gaston's voice, according to the narrator, is a powerful instrument used to convince people of the sound logic of white supremacy. His speech commands respect, and, as evident from the audience's reaction to it, Gaston's oratorical prowess proves a beacon for those who want to believe that only a race and culture with a perceived superior linguistic history can produce a speaker like Gaston. His language and voice are certainly a far cry from those of Nelse, the novel's black hero, who acts as a champion for Gaston's political platform. Dixon places into the mouth of this character lines that associate illiteracy with members of the African American race. To support the idea that the white race is superior and should be in control of state and local government, Nelse clamors, "Ain't I done tole you no kinky-headed niggers gwine ter run dis gov'ment!" (163). The difference between Nelse's dialect and Gaston's eloquent voice illustrates the author's desire to clearly distinguish between and to separate the two races.

Dixon's characters and the phonetically rendered voices he uses to illustrate their character followed conventions established by previous authors working within the plantation tradition. Authors such as George Tucker, John Pendleton Kennedy, Caroline Hentz, Thomas Nelson Page, and Joel Chandler Harris frequently used dialects to characterize the voices of many of their African American and poor white characters.[65] In some cases, the colorful voices represented a lost pre-industrial age

[65] Page and Harris are the most notable authors of the plantation tradition. Their works *In Ole Virginia, or Marse Chan and Other Stories* and *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* are the most recognizable of this tradition. Kennedy's *The Swallow Barn* began the tradition before the Civil War, but he is also known for his later support of the Union cause. Hentz, writing during the 1850s,

in the South and were an attempt to regionalize each character. More often than not, however, as in the case of Dixon's characters, the language used to represent each character's voice carried political and social implications intended to emphasize the presumed degeneracy of one race and to elevate the other. Gaston's articulate voice was one more way of declaring, as he did in his infamous speech, "This is a white man's government, conceived by white men, and maintained by white men through every year of its history, - and by the God of our Fathers it shall be ruled by white men until the Arch-angel shall call the end of time!" (442).

Many authors who wrote within and in response to the plantation tradition used language as a way of marking a character's racial identity. Dean McWilliams argues, "Language… had from the very beginning been central in white attempts to fix black identity. During slavery it was the test by which the abolitionists sought to demonstrate black membership in the human family; under Jim Crow, literacy tests would be used to withhold full American citizenship from blacks. Representations of uneducated former slaves speaking their distinctive variant of American English were abundant in post-Civil War literature and entertainment" (60). Like physical characteristics, linguistic representations of a character's speech exploited the popular sentiment that race could be defined in essentialist terms. Regardless of a person's education, if he or she was of a specific race, then his or her voice would be represented in a very specific way.

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contributed *Linda; or the Young Pilot of the Belle Creole* and *The Planter's Northern Bride* to the tradition. Amy Kaplan (*Nation, Region, and Empire*) and Kenneth Warren (*Black and White Strangers*) detail the evolution of this tradition in their discussions of nineteenth-century American literature.

Like *The Leopard's Spots*, Charles Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* portrays the dilemma facing the United States as it tries to rebuild after a bloody and costly Civil War and does so by creating a number of characters whose voices are represented with stereotypical dialects. *The Colonel's Dream*, unlike Dixon's work, offers no solutions to the country's racial turmoil. It does, however, create an alternative perspective from which to view the impact of Reconstruction-era policies on the race question by manipulating some of the conventional voices associated with the plantation tradition.

*The Colonel's Dream* contains familiar characters such as the "submissive darkie," a former slave who pines for the way things were under the old system of chattel slavery. For instance, Peter, an ex-slave of the main character's family, recalls with fondness the days he spent as a slave: "Deed dem wuz good ole times! Sho' dey wuz, suh, sho' dey wuz!" (28). The dialect used to represent Peter's voice is similar to the ones used to stereotype African Americans in works within the plantation tradition. Also, the novel's main character, Colonel Henry French, a white former Confederate soldier who left the south shortly after the Civil War to help run his uncle's manufacturing business in the north, is described in ways familiar to the plantation tradition. When he is first introduced, the narrator provides a detailed image of his physical appearance.

> Mr. French…was an older man – a safe guess would have placed him somewhere in the debatable ground between forty and fifty; of a good height, as could be seen even from the seated figure, the upper part of which was held erect with the unconscious ease which one associates with military

> training. His closely cropped brown hair had the slightest touch of gray. The spacious forehead, deep-set gray eyes, and firm chin, scarcely concealed by a light beard, marked the thoughtful man of affairs. His face indeed might have seemed austere, but for a sensitive mouth, which suggested a reserve of humour and a capacity for deep feeling. A man of well-balanced character, one would have said, not apt to undertake anything lightly, but sure to go far in whatever he took in hand. (5-6)

Described in much the same way as General Worth from *The Leopard's Spots*, French and his physical features are intended to foreshadow the resiliency of his personality and character. French's erect torso, "spacious forehead," slightly gray hair, and "sensitive mouth" indicate Chesnutt's willingness to place French in the same genetic and literary heritage as other white heroes of the plantation tradition. Published only three years after *The Leopard's Spots*, *The Colonel's Dream* uses this type of character description to build a character whose external appearance accurately conveys his internal character. He is doing so in order to build empathy for French's character. [66]

Or so it seems. The correlation between French's character and the representation of his appearance also foreshadows the colonel's major flaws. When he returns to Clarendon, South Carolina to revive himself and the health of his only child, he confronts the economic and racial problems still plaguing the south after the

[66] This is William Andrews's argument. In *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*, Andrews characterizes *The Colonel's Dream* as a "New South Trilogy." The novel, according to Andrews, has three distinct parts. The first section builds sympathy in the reader toward French. The second part deromanticizes the New South, and, finally, the third section "reports a series of setbacks which stymie the colonel's economic mission and impel him into the more unpopular and lonely role of social reformer" (241).

Civil War. Although many of the obstacles he faces when he returns to Clarendon and attempts to fix the town's economic and racial problems include direct opposition from several of his former Confederate compatriots, French's fastidious nature presents the biggest challenge to his philanthropic goals. The narrator's description of French's character seemingly emphasizes his "reserve of humour" and "capacity for deep feeling," characteristics that could potentially interfere with his intentions to help develop Clarendon's stagnant economy. As the story unfolds, readers can recognize the slight touch of irony in the narrator's description of French since Chesnutt slowly reveals that the colonel has a very limited sense of humor, and his well-intended compassion appears to many characters in the novel as misguided racial favoritism. In other words, to Chesnutt's audience, French's character may seem benevolent, but to many of the characters within the story, it closely resembles that of a carbetbagger or scalawag. The conflict of these two perceptions creates irony in the way French develops over the course of the novel, and it emphasizes the dilemma of reconciliation between the North and South. What northerners might consider good humor or "deep feeling" antagonizes the majority of the southern characters in *The Colonel's Dream*.

Consequently, irony plays an important role in Chesnutt's novel. Many critics have recognized irony as a central feature of Chesnutt's short stories, but very few have paid attention to Chesnutt's use of it in his major works. In their preface to *Passing in the Works of Charles W Chesnutt,* Susan Prothro Wright and Ernestine Pickens Glass argue that a major characteristic of Chesnutt's writing was not to reverse the racial hierarchy within America, but to question the existence of a color

line that forever fixed a person's racial identity by infusing his writing with irony. They write, "Charles Chesnutt's writing is informed by a uniquely historical perspective, one that is often mistaken for what it is not – a subordination of 'all things' African American to all things white. On the other hand, Chesnutt's imaginative historicizing is frequently dismissed as superficial when readers fail to recognize what it is – an often ironic or even harshly satiric attack on notions of white superiority balanced by an objective rendering of human qualities, good and bad, of whites and all hues of African Americans" (ix). Chesnutt's writing, particularly in *The Colonel's Dream*, uses irony and satire to make his readers question assumptions about racial inequality in the United States. Through repeated references to jokes, sallies, and humor, for instance, the narrator of Chesnutt's novel emphasizes that the ability to laugh at one's self is a useful attribute when criticizing other people.

This is not to suggest that *The Colonel's Dream* is a work of comedy. Far from it. The irony in Chesnutt's novel, as Glass and Wright suggest, is harshly satiric. However, it is not overtly critical or blatantly obvious. Often, it is merely implied in the free indirect discourse of the novel. For example, upon returning to Clarendon, French finds himself reminiscing about the charm of his former hometown. One morning, as he walks through the town's square, he witnesses a rude awakening to the more degrading aspects of race relations in the south. He watches in disbelief as African Americans are being sold into the convict labor system that has replaced chattel slavery. The narrator describes the colonel's reaction: "The unconscious reality of the proceeding grated harshly upon the

colonel's nerves. Delinquents of some kind these men must be, who were thus dealt with; but he had lived away from the South so long that so sudden an introduction to some of its customs came with a something of a shock. He had remembered the pleasant things, and these but vaguely, since his thoughts had been elsewhere; and in the sifting process of a healthy memory he had forgotten the disagreeable things altogether" (68-69). Nostalgia can and will create amnesia to the point where people often forget unpleasant memories, but to suggest that French has blocked out the "unconscious reality" of slavery or racism is problematic, especially since he fought for the Confederate army. It seems laughable that someone so closely associated with southern life, even after a long absence, could ignore or fail to remember the gross injustices perpetuated on African Americans both before and after the Civil War.

Furthermore, the narrator's description of the men being sold as "delinquents of some kind" illustrates the subtle irony of the novel. One of the men sold in the court proceedings was Peter, a former slave of the French family. Presumably, neither French nor the author considered men like Peter delinquents, and yet, in suggesting that Peter was justifiably condemned to convict labor, the narrator emphasizes the racist manner in which African American men were forced into another form of slavery. The humor of this passage relies on recognizing Chesnutt's play on the word "delinquent." When French purchases Peter's release, he unwittingly takes part in a gruesome joke. His act implicates him in the "disagreeable things" he hopes to eradicate. His money ironically reinforces the "unconscious reality" of the scene that so easily disgusts him, and he himself

becomes a “delinquent” by unwittingly supporting this new kind of slavery. French’s “deep capacity for feeling” hinders his deep-felt desire to change Clarendon.

As buying Peter’s freedom is French’s only option in this situation, spending money is his strategy for bringing social progress to Clarendon. However, French’s philanthropy cannot save Clarendon from its reluctance to change. When the colonel tries to purchase another African American convicted on vagrancy charges, he runs into William Fetters, the novel’s antagonist, and Chesnutt uses this confrontation to illustrate the irony of French’s “reserve of humour.” The colonel tries to negotiate for the release of Bud Johnson, the husband of Caroline, a former slave of French’s romantic interest, Miss Laura Treadwell. The scene is important because it heightens the conflict between French and Fetters, but before that happens, the two characters exchange what appear to be friendly introductions.

> “I am Mr. French,” he said – he never referred to himself by his military title – “and you, I believe are Mr. Fetters.”
>
> “Yes, sir, that’s my name,” replied Fetters without enthusiasm, but eyeing the colonel keenly between narrowed lashes.
>
> “I’ve been trying to see you for some time, about a matter,” continued the colonel, “but never seemed able to catch up with you before.”
>
> “Yes, I heard you were at my house, but I was asleep upstairs, and didn’t know you’d be’n there till you’d gone.”
>
> “Your man told me you had gone to the capital for two weeks.”

"My man? Oh, you mean Turner! Well, I reckon you must have riled Turner somehow, and he thought he'd have a joke on you."

"I don't quite see the joke," said the colonel, restraining his displeasure. "But that's ancient history. Can we sit down over here in the shade and talk by ourselves for a moment?" (228)

Here, too, the joke we witness is not necessarily funny. In fact, it irritates the colonel that he was manipulated and lied to by Fetters's henchman. The joke does, however, amuse Fetters, and this aspect of the passage allows the reader to see French as an outsider to the community at Clarendon. He is no longer the favorite son who courageously fought in the war. Instead, he is an interloper, someone who has forfeited his right to act on behalf of Clarendon's citizens, and because French does not "see the joke," his attempts to help change Clarendon will lack authority. Much like when he forgot the "unpleasant memories" of the south, his diminished "reserve of humour" blinds him to the fact that Fetters and others are playing him for an impotent fool.

This "joke" that French fails to see signifies that men like Fetters have evolved to meet the demands of a New South while men such as French have not. Later in this same scene, when the bartering for Bud Johnson escalates, French thinks to himself that he had "one appeal which no Southerner could resist" (229). He pleads with Fetters to release Johnson to oblige Miss Treadwell. Fetters refuses and suggests no amount of money or chivalry could steal Johnson from him. French's inability to effectively negotiate with Fetters illustrates the changing Southern environment. Chivalry and aristocracy no longer dictate a person's actions,

and Fetters represents the New Southerner, someone motivated by racial pride and the pursuit of wealth. Because French fails to acknowledge this change, he is condemned to repeat past mistakes and try to solve current problems with past solutions. The joke on French confirms that Clarendon's racial and economic problems cannot and will not be overcome through revered antebellum traditions.

Several more "jokes" appear throughout *The Colonel's Dream* that reveal the major differences between the colonel's way of thinking and the general attitudes towards race held by most southerners. Frequently, these jokes are described as "grim" and "ghastly." At one point in the novel, suffrage for African Americans is described as a "ghastly and expensive joke" (77). While the town constable is busy harassing several of the black characters arrested for vagrancy, Chesnutt's narrator says his condescending behavior is the result of a "grim sense of humour" (60). After Bud Johnson is lynched, the narrator announces that the verdict of suicide made by the coroner's jury is a "grim joke which evoked some laughter" (291). Chesnutt appears to ascribe a certain level of morbidity to these "jokes" in order to foreshadow the colonel's eventual failure to affect change in Clarendon and to illustrate the permanence of southern racism. To most of the white characters who oppose French, his efforts to encourage more progressive racial attitudes are nothing more than a laughable offense. His hope in Clarendon's future is countered by the entrenched belief that racial and political equality is next to impossible in the South. The narrator's description of these jokes remind us that the colonel's dream may become a nightmare in which he confronts an impossible task, that of convincing southerners that racism is not funny.

The final "joke" of Chesnutt's novel comes at the very climax of the story. Like Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots, The Colonel's Dream* concludes after a significant linguistic moment. In this work, however, the language Chesnutt uses does not celebrate the presumed superiority of the white race. Instead, Chesnutt's dialects illustrate the degenerate nature of those characters adamantly opposed to racial equality. In one of the final scenes, the colonel finds on his doorstep the casket of Peter, the former family slave, who died while attempting to save French's son from getting crushed between two railroad cars. The colonel's son had previously asked to have Peter buried next to him in the family plot in Clarendon's whites-only cemetery, and French fulfills his son's desire despite the disapproval of many of the town's prominent white citizens. Subsequently, a group of these men come together to unearth Peter's casket and send the colonel a stern warning to stop his attempts to integrate the town. They attach a note to the coffin.

> Kurnell French:
>
> Take notis. Berry yore ole nigger somewhar else. He can't stay in Oak Semitury. The majority of the white people of this town, who dident tend yore nigger funarl, woant have him there. Niggers by there selves, white peepul by there selves, and them that lives in our town must bide by our rules.
>
> By order of
>
> Cumitty. (294)

The scene is very traumatic, to say the least, and causes French to abandon any hope he had for improving his former hometown. A stark contrast to Gaston's

articulate defense of white supremacy in *The Leopard's Spots*, the letter written by the "Cumitty" presents an ironic, almost sarcastic, take on the idea that the white race is the only one capable of grand rhetoric or that African Americans are the only character types whose voices can appear "degenerate" or "illiterate." The orthography of the letter suggests that language, like physical features, is misleading when deterministically associated with a specific race. Not all white characters will sound like Gaston, and not all black characters will sound like Nelse. Language is a characteristic of individuals, not entire races.

Chesnutt's dialect letter performs a specific role in *The Colonel's Dream*, and much like Gaston's speech, it appears at a pivotal moment in the novel. Each linguistic performance is the climax of the work in which it appears; but although Gaston's speech acts as a way for Dixon to conveniently conclude *The Leopard's Spots*, Chesnutt's letter acknowledges that the issue of race will continue to burden the United States if people do not recognize the similarities between the two races. The linguistic irony in this final scene illustrates the ebb and flow of emotion felt by many who hoped for racial equality but also felt despair at the thought it might not ever happen. *The Colonel's Dream*, like many of Chesnutt's short stories and novels, uses traditional genre conventions to reshape the audience's reaction to what was once familiar. Initially representing pleasant memories of a bucolic south and thus evoking both the plantation tradition and what William Andrews calls the "New South" genre of fiction, Chesnutt's text reminds his readers that things were not and are not as they seem and that reconciliation between the North and South is a complicated matter not easily accomplished by creating laws that mandate it.

Criticism of Chesnutt's novel acknowledges his subversive resignification of conventional voices and characters. Houston Baker's study of African American literature argues that Chesnutt's writing is a significant example of how some authors exhibited a "mastery of form" in order to gain a large reading audience (49). For Baker, Chesnutt's allusions to the plantation tradition helped him establish his voice as an authoritative figure on race and literature. Dickson Bruce further developed this argument, suggesting that "Chesnutt's assimilation was quite radical" (173). According to Bruce, Chesnutt's ability to modify traditional genre conventions allowed him to reshape his audience's perception of racial stereotypes. More recently, in *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections*, Ishmael Reed argues that Chesnutt's writing style is "restrained but merciless" (47). Reed's argument suggests that the more readers understand the subtleties and nuances of Chesnutt's writing, the more they begin to understand that he did not simply copy previous literary conventions but used them to present an alternative interpretation of the same reality, an interpretation that condemned racial inequality.

Most critics generally agree that Chesnutt used literary precedents to advocate change in the United States. His short stories and novels did not rely on imitation but revised their respective genres by opening up possibilities for authors who held minority opinions to voice their concerns and to represent non-mainstream racial ideologies. Glenda Carpio argues, "The strategy of appropriating racist caricatures in order to redefine their purpose is familiar to Chesnutt's readers, for it is a strategy that characterizes all of his tales of conjure and transformation" (54). Carpio's argument is clearly supported by even a cursory reading of Chesnutt's short

stories, and the intention of my argument is to suggest that a more thorough reading of Chesnutt's irony in *The Colonel's Dream* reveals a similar practice of character transformation.

There are, of course, major differences. No characters in Chesnutt's novel become so dehumanized that they begin to consider themselves no different from a ham, as the main character does in "Dave's Neckliss." However, in Chesnutt's novel, French does evolve from a traditional plantation-style character who implicitly accepts the "disagreeable things" of a southern lifestyle to an adamant and indignant supporter of racial and economic equality. French then moves from hope to despair, however, after coming to terms with the idea that things will never change. In the end, his transformation is a negative one. Gary Scharnhorst recognizes this aspect of Chesnutt's writing when he argues, "More than any other turn-of-the-century novel, *The Colonel's Dream* disrupts the familiar patterns of popular fiction and disdains the comfort of a happy ending" (281).

Chesnutt also transforms our expectations of linguistic identities. Although it is true that authors before him had used negative linguistic stereotypes to represent the voices of poor white southerners, Chesnutt was unusual to suggest men of a prominent stature could also sound unintelligent. Few of the men on the "Cumitty" belonged to the old aristocracy of the South, but the vast majority of them were like Fetters, new southern men who rapidly ascended to social and economic prominence after the Civil War. Suggesting that the white leadership of the New South was no different from the stereotypical African Americans of their racist imaginations, Chesnutt's voices challenge Dixon's romantic appeal to the superiority of the white

race. Accordingly, Christopher Bundrick argues that Chesnutt's work "represents a restrained and patient, long-term attempt to develop a counter-hegemony capable of undermining the ideology of white superiority until an ideology of racial equality can take its place" (47). In direct opposition to *The Leopard's Spots, The Colonel's Dream* uses dialects to argue against the racial divisions.

The letter written by the Cumitty does represent a growing sense of futility in Chesnutt's later fiction. Matthew Wilson calls *The Colonel's Dream* a "fiction of contradictory ambitions: it is a novel of economic life that exposes the racist undergirding of the New South ideology at the same time it doubts the efficacy of fiction to affect instrumental reform" (148). The morbidity of Chesnutt's jokes and the irony of the final letter in the novel suggest a rather depressing outlook on race in the United States or, at least, in the southern portions of the country. Chesnutt's irony illustrates the deeply entrenched nature of racism, and Wilson's argument reminds us that there is no fiction, and no dialect, that by itself can prove sufficient to overcome racism.

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