

THE NARRATOR AND THE NATION-BUILDER: DIALECT, DIALOGUE, AND NARRATIVE VOICE IN MINORITY AND WORKING-CLASS FICTION

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410 The representation of social class and other forms of social centrality and marginality (race, regional identity, rurality, etc.) presents a dilemma for literature. Since in most contexts the literary language is, or is at least held to be, a monopoly of elites, to report characters from the margins speaking and thinking in such a register can seem like an egregious violation of the tenets of realism. On the other hand, to have such characters speak as they would in daily life mars the smoothness and literariness of the text's language, in way most often thought suitable only for comic effects, from Aristophanes to Dickens. The question of how to balance these issues, marking marginal characters enough to make their status legible without interfering with the expected literary qualities of the text, has been, and remains, a challenge.

Earlier periods in literary history relied on other techniques to convey differences in class and status among characters. Where noble and educated characters in Shakespeare tend to speak in verse, for example, servants and other humble characters frequently speak in prose. Similarly, in Sanskrit drama, such as that of *Kalidasa* (dating perhaps to the fifth century BC), kings spoke in Sanskrit, while other characters spoke in various registers of Prakrit—the partly regionalized, partly vernacularized languages of India that coexisted with Sanskrit (see Deshpande 113–14). Similar phenomena can be identified in other traditions, allowing for the careful demarcation of social class or status while preserving the integrity of the literary language. Modern European literary realism (and its non-European offshoots) lacks this option. Realism demands that characters speak as they would in daily life, that dialogue accurately record the thoughts of characters without unduly distorting their language. At the same time, the ancient conviction that the literary representation of uneducated, lower-class, or marginal registers of the language can have only comic effect remains surprisingly powerful even in our own time. How can the experiences

of non-elites be represented in the realist novel without either translating those experiences into a literary register that demeans their origins or inciting laughter rather than serious engagement by remaining faithful to the register in which they would have been uttered?

When a writer working from a relatively elite position describes marginalized characters, as with Harriet Beecher Stowe and African-American slaves, or Henry James and the working-class revolutionaries of *The Princess Casamassima*, or D.H. Lawrence with gamekeepers and miners, it seems perfectly natural that the potentially colloquial dialogue of those characters is framed by a soothingly elevated narrative voice, maintaining himself or herself at a cool distance from the experiences described. Any irony or tension that may be felt between the two registers of the language is a perhaps inevitable consequence of attempting to speak for the subaltern.

When the writer belongs to the marginalized group described, however, these ironies become more potent—and more problematic. How can a narrator adequately represent the experiences of marginal individuals, when he or she must speak in a language quite alien to them? How does, for example, an African-American writer, or an English writer speaking from the working classes, represent his or her characters in realist fiction in such a way as to balance linguistic integrity and literary dignity? As we shall see, an interesting compromise seems to have emerged historically, one taken for granted, perhaps, by many readers: dialogue may be represented in a vernacular register suited to the character, but narrators speak almost exclusively in the standard literary form of the language. While this pattern seems to hold very consistently for writers speaking from some kind of class or social marginality, and the hegemony of standard-language narration remains largely unchallenged even in the post-1945 era, the story is somewhat different with writers whose marginality is understood as geographic and/or ethnic (and hence as at least potentially national) in nature. Novels by the latter kind of writers do more frequently employ narrators using non-standard versions of the language, although to be sure many also do use the literary standard language.

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This observation leads me to suggest, in turn, that the voice of the narrator performs a structural role not unlike that of the nation-state itself. Contemporary intellectual interest in the cosmopolitan has had to live with the difficulties of constructing forms of allegiance and fellow-feeling outside the nation-state, which, for all its obvious difficulties, remains the most effective force yet known for generating imagined communities. Attempts to replace the nation often seem to consist of trying to create something else that looks like the nation, but which operates on a larger scale, leaving the nation-state as, at least for now, an indispensable idea. The hegemonic presence of the standard-language narrator within the subaltern novel represents, I would suggest, a literary/aesthetic manifestation of this indispensability. Just as the heteroglossia of the novelistic form seems to have to resolve itself in the monologic voice of the narrator, so, too, divergent and alternative forms of affinity seem to need to resolve themselves into the form of the nation-state. If, as Benedict

Anderson and many others would suggest, the rise of the novel is intimately tied up with the origins of the nation-state, and if our age indeed seeks alternatives to the nation-state, then the standardized voice of the narrator may be one of the fictions it proves hardest to do without.

One need only look at exceptions to my rule about the use of non-standard language to see the force with which that rule operates. One of the earliest, and most famous, of novels that possess a narrator who speaks in non-standard language is Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. While *Tom Sawyer*'s third-person narrator writes in an English more elevated than that of any of the characters he describes, Huck Finn narrates his own story, in a style that makes no concessions to literary pretension:

412 You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer"; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom's Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before. (Twain 1)

This dialectal narration seems principally chosen for its comic effects, particularly for the knowing ironies generated between Huck's uneducated narrative diction and the lurking authorial persona of Mr. Mark Twain himself. We never entirely forget that this is Mr. Twain's novel, and that one of his "stretchers" is the claim that the novel is really being narrated by its main character. The faux-naïf quality of this narration resonates with, on some level, the novel's ultimately somewhat quietistic politics: Jim, the runaway slave, is re-captured, but freed through a plot device (Miss Watson's will). The novel gives Jim the freedom that readerly sentiment demands, but without threatening the established order of slavery (already gone in reality, of course, by the time Twain is writing). Twain's vernacular narration is the exception that proves the rule, and which illustrates, on the whole, the difficulties that would beset the user of such a narration for sterner political purposes. In what follows, I will examine the linguistic choices made by writers aiming at such purposes: working-class writers from England and France, and African-American writers, to explore their common avoidance of vernacular narration.

Between 1842 and 1844, the noted Chartist writer and activist Thomas Cooper was imprisoned in Stafford Gaol after a speech of his had contributed to large-scale political riots in the Pottery Towns. Cooper was the illegitimate son of a dyer in Leicester; after his father's death, his mother went into that business for herself and apprenticed Thomas to a cobbler. Thomas Cooper was thus almost entirely self-educated, to the extent of learning French, Latin, and Greek, and he quit his work as a cobbler at the age of twenty-two to become a teacher and Methodist lay-preacher, becoming active in the Chartist politics of his era. The best-known work of his prison years is perhaps his long poem in ten books, *The Purgatory of Suicides*, which promotes Chartist ideals through a survey of famed suicides throughout history, beginning with an

invocation that paraphrases Cooper's fateful address to the striking colliers:

SLAVES, toil no more! Why delve, and moil, and pine,
To glut the tyrant-forgers of your chain?
Slaves, toil no more! Up, from the midnight mine,
Summon your swarthy thousands to the plain;
Beneath the bright sun marshalled, swell the strain
Of Liberty; and, while the lordlings view
Your banded hosts, with stricken heart and brain,
Shout, as one man,—“Toil we no more renew,
Until the Many cease their slavery to the Few!” (11)

But at the same time that he was writing *The Purgatory of Suicides*, Cooper wrote a series of short stories, in his own account “a relief from the intenser thought and feeling exercised in the building-up of my prison-rhyme” (Cooper, *Old* i). These stories, published under the title *Old Fashioned Stories* shortly after his release from prison in 1845, are, as one might expect, also in the service of Chartist causes. For example, the story “Raven Dick, The Poacher: Or, ‘Who Scratched the Bull?’” takes as its subject the debate between a poacher and the tenant-farmer who has caught him in the act. The farmer argues that the hares caught by Raven Dick belong to the landlord, Squire Anderson, since they live by eating food grown on the Squire's land. The poacher retorts that, since it is the farmer (Kiah Dobson) whose labor is responsible for the squire's crops, it hardly seems fair that the squire should claim ownership of the hares who feed on the crops. The farmer is won over by the logic of this argument, but later, when the gamekeeper catches the poacher in the act, the farmer betrays him, and the poacher serves a six-month prison term.

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The story itself is not especially remarkable in any respect, one of dozens, or hundreds, of such stories written in the era by a series of working-class intellectuals who sought to cultivate the literary expression of their radical politics. It perfectly illustrates, however, the point I am making. The writer himself, as we have seen, is of working-class origins; his characters are uneducated rural tenant farmers and poachers. The characters' dialogue is reported in a form that attempts to reproduce their rustic Leicestershire dialect, as in their first exchange, though it must be said that the dialectal transcription is maintained more consistently for the naïve farmer than for the knowing poacher:

“Farmer! how d'ye feel yoursen?” said Dick, striding up to Kiah Dobson, and looking him full in the face, as bold as a bull-dog.

“Better than thou'lt feel, scapegrace! when thou gets thy hempen collar on!” replied the farmer, snarling as angrily as a mastiff when he doesn't like you.” (Cooper, *Old* 15)

The narration, however, remains throughout in a standard, educated, register of English, making no concessions to the class or region of the characters, as the first paragraphs reveal:

KIAH DOBSON,—they always called him Kiah “for shortness sake,” as we used to say in Lincolnshire; but his full name was Hezekiah,—Kiah Dobson was a hearty buck of a

farmer, who ploughed about fifty acres, and fed sheep and bullocks on about fifty others.

He was a tenant of good old Squire Anderson, the ancestor of the Yarboroughs, who are called Lords in these new-fashioned times. Lindsey and its largest landlord presented, it need scarcely be said, very different features sixty years ago to those they present now. Squire Anderson kept a coach, but he had not three or four, like his successor, the peer: he had one good house at Manby, but he had not that and a much grander one at Brocklesby, another at Appuldercome, in the Isle of Wight, and another in town.

The farmers of Lindsey kept each a good nag, for market service, and so forth; but it was a very, very scarce thing to find a blood horse in their stables; and when their dames went to market, it was on the pillion-seat, behind the farmer himself, and not in the modern kickshaw gig. There were none of your strongholds of starvation, which famishing men called "Bastiles," a few years ago; and a horn of good humming ale, and a motherly slice of bread and cheese, awaited the acceptance of any poor man who happened to be journeying, and called either at the hall of the squire or at the cottages of any of the farmers on his extensive estates. (14)

414 The fact that the narrative voice of this story is in standard English may not strike the reader (whether in 1845 or in 2015) as particularly unusual or worthy of notice, so ubiquitous is the practice of maintaining narration in standard language even when dialogue is represented in (some version of) a dialect or alternative register of the language. And yet I believe it is worth reflecting on the strangeness of so doing: our narrator here speaks in very much the language of the squire, who, we are told at the end of the story, personally hears the case that sends Raven Dick to prison. The poacher and the tenant farmer, for all the tension that exists between them, share a register of English quite distinct from that of the narrator, and one can only imagine the lack of sympathy they could feel with that narrator for framing their story in terms they must have associated with their lords and masters.

The earliest French-language working-class literature consists mostly of memoirs of *compagnons*, itinerant journeymen-workers learning their craft from their brother-workers as they travelled the France of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The most famous of these memoirs, perhaps, is that of Agricol Perdiguier, a joiner and later member of the 1848 Constituent Assembly. Born near Avignon, and thus a native speaker of Occitan, it is nonetheless not surprising that his memoirs should be written in the standard French he mastered later in life, and which he practiced in his political life as well. Written in his later years and reflecting on his earlier life, Perdiguier naturally enough expresses himself in the idiom which had by then become usual to him, rather than in the language of his youth. An earlier *compagnon* memoir, that of Jacques-Louis Ménétra, a glazier born in 1735 in Paris, is decidedly more casual in style, lacking punctuation or consistent orthography, and violating many of the standards of French grammar—but it was never intended for publication in this form, and only published recently on its rediscovery.

Proletarian fiction in French (as opposed to the sometimes lightly fictionalized memoirs discussed above, where the preponderance of text is in the voice of the autobiographical narrator), when it emerges, follows much the same pattern we have already seen in England. One of the most significant works of French working-class

fiction, focused in this case on *métayers*, or sharecroppers, in the Auvergne, is *La vie d'un simple* (1904) by Émile Guillaumin. A native of the Auvergne himself, and a small-scale farmer who formed an early peasant's union to protect *métayers* against their landowners, Guillaumin received little formal education. The narration in his novel is, however, consistently in standard French, if sometimes simpler in syntax and certainly humbler in content than that of many other writers of his time:

Maintenant on traite les chiens comme des personnes ; on leur donne de la bonne soupe et du bon pain. Mais à cette époque on leur permettait seulement de barboter dans l'auge contenant la pâtée des cochons,—pâtée toujours fort peu riche en farine. Comme complément, on faisait sécher au four à leur intention une provision de ces âcres petites pommes que produisent les sauvageons des haies et qu'on appelle ici des *croyes*. (Guillaumin 16-17)

[Nowadays we treat dogs as we do people: we give them good soup and good bread. But in those days we allowed them only to filch from the trough containing the slop for the pigs—a slop always poor in flour. As a complement, we dried for their use in the oven a provision of those acrid little apples which wild hedges produce, and which are here called *croyes*.]

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The dialogue, as one might expect, includes dialectal elements, though more for show than as a consistent component of the narrative: after a few initial uses of dialogue in Auvergnat, which is scarcely mutually intelligible with standard French, and which needs to be glossed, the novel moves to dialogue in standard French, with occasional dialect words or phrases italicized for emphasis, and with occasional narratorial observations that a character was speaking in dialect. To continue from the passage above, the narrator describes a conversation between his father and his sister concerning why their dog has refused to hunt rats that day:

—*Ol a donc pas rata ?*

Ce qui voulait dire :

—Il n'a donc pas fait la chasse aux rats ?

Et sur la réponse négative de ma sœur :

—*Voué un feignant : si ol avait évu faim, ol aurait ben rata...* (C'est un fainéant : s'il avait eu faim, il aurait bien raté.) (17)

[—“*Ol a donc pas rata ?*”

Which means:

—“So he didn't hunt the rats?”

And when my sister replied in the negative:

—*Voué un feignant : si ol avait évu faim, ol aurait ben rata...* (“He's a slacker: if he'd been hungry, he would have ratted, all right!”).]¹

Perhaps because of the greater hegemonic position of standard French as a set of linguistic practices, as compared to the more loosely regulated English, the greater tendency in a writer such as Guillaumin to use standard French dialogue serves to minimize the distance between narrator and characters. While the texts of Cooper or Martin R. Delany, with their gaps between dialogue in dialect and standard-language

narration, seem perversely to undermine the authors' politics, the greater assimilation of Guillaumin's story to standard French, somewhat unexpectedly, brings us closer to the characters, and minimizes the difference between them and the narrator.

A similar phenomenon is found in the case of much African-American fiction, from the nineteenth century to the present day: while there is a considerable use of dialogue in dialect, narrative voices tend overwhelmingly to be in standard American English. It might seem strange to juxtapose working-class fiction of England and France with African-American fiction, and it is certainly not my intention crassly to equate the two, nor to insist on too deep or detailed a series of parallels between these quite distinct canons, other than the particular point at issue here. Nonetheless, as a strong believer in the comparative method, I believe there is value in exploring the possible benefits of such comparison. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in his political treatise *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Martin R. Delany, soon to become one of the first English-language African-American novelists, begins with an explicit comparison between the minority nationalisms of Europe and the situation of African-American slaves:

That there have been in all ages and in all countries, in every quarter of the habitable globe, especially among those nations laying the greatest claim to civilization and enlightenment, classes of people who have been deprived of equal privileges, political, religious and social, cannot be denied, and that this deprivation on the part of the ruling classes is cruel and unjust, is also equally true [...]

In past ages there were many such classes, as the Israelites in Egypt, the Gladiators in Rome, and similar classes in Greece; and in the present age, the Gipsies in Italy and Greece, the Cossacs in Russia and Turkey, the Slaves and Croats in the Germanic States, and the Welsh and Irish among the British, to say nothing of various other classes among other nations [...]

Such then is the condition of various classes in Europe; yes, nations, for centuries within nations, even without the hope of redemption among those who oppress them. And however unfavorable their condition, there is none more so than that of the colored people of the United States. (Delany, *Condition* 11-12)

Delany refers to all of these groups as "nations [...] within nations," but to identify them as such of course raises interesting challenges. Some (the "Slaves and Croats," the Irish) were later to become nations in their own right, though only at the cost of considerable violence and relocation. Other groups identified by Delany—"Gipsies," African-Americans themselves, and the "Gladiators" (these latter presumably socioeconomic rather than ethnic categories)—are so deeply enmeshed within their national contexts that full political nationalist movements have never emerged, and (in the case of socioeconomic classes) perhaps never could. Such communities, permanently marginalized within the nations that house them, yet without the recourse or dream of their own nation-state, face a distinctive set of challenges on all sorts of levels. I submit that culture is one of these levels, and that the problem of the novelistic narrator is a particularly salient and interesting example.

In other words, narrators are in some sense also nation-builders (the sentence could naturally be run the other way, with nation-builders as narrators, but my purpose here is to use the political as an allegory for the aesthetic, not the more usual other way around). Founders of nations and narrators of novels alike build imaginary worlds linking disparate individuals and their actions, creating out of these materials stories that are compelling and meaningful. Nations must each be distinct from the other, and yet must share a family resemblance: no two nations can have the same language, religion, history, and geography (although nations frequently share one or more of these things), and yet they must also be built out of these same ingredients, and their structures and practices must be homologous. Similarly, each novel must be different from every other novel, and yet must share enough of the structure and practice of the novel to be recognizable as a participant in the form. One of those practices, it seems, is the use of narration in the standard language.

A case in point is Delany's novel *Blake: Or the Huts of America* (originally published in serial form in 1861-62). Published as the Civil War was raging, Delany's novel emphasizes the complicity of Northern whites in slavery and posits a slave revolution in Cuba and the establishment of a government of ex-slaves there as the best prospect for the abolition of slavery in the United States. Delany is, in other words, a foundational figure of Black Nationalism, someone profoundly skeptical of the prospects for the peaceful coexistence of former slaves and their former masters in one nation. And yet his novel features an even more pronounced version of the narrative/dialogue diglossia we found in Cooper or Guillaumin, with the speech of the characters in a very strongly African-American dialectal register, and the narration in an elevated style. The narrator's own stylistic register is, moreover, virtually indistinguishable from that of the (uniformly evil) white characters, establishing a strange complicity between the narrator and the characters he most despises, while leaving the narrator characterizing the thoughts and emotions of more sympathetic characters in a language they would not use and might not understand:

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On their arrival at the great house, those working nearest gathered around the carriage, among whom was Daddy Joe.

"Wat a mautta wid missus?" was the general inquiry of the gang.

"Your mistress is sick, boys," replied the master.

"Maus, whah's Margot?" enquired the old man, on seeing the mistress carried into the house without the attendance of her favorite maidservant.

"She's in town, Joe," replied Franks.

"How's Judy, seh?"

"Judy is well."

"Tank'e seh!" politely concluded the old man, with a bow, turning away in the direction of his work—with a countenance expressive of anything but satisfaction—from the interview." (Delany, *Blake* 10-11)

Delany's novel has always received a mixed reception on its literary merits (quite apart from the controversy generated by its political position), yet the multiple layers of irony in a passage such as this, achieved largely through the juxtaposition of different

registers of English, are surely a considerable literary *tour de force*. The incongruity between the dialectal obsequiousness of “Tank’e seh!” and the conventional novelistic courtliness of “politely concluded the old man, with a bow, turning away in the direction of his work,” is pointed, and underscores the difference between the “work” done by politely bowing old men in other novels and that performed by the slave here, as well as the difference in the “politeness” of free men and of slaves. His countenance of dissatisfaction, at odds of course with the politeness of his inquiry, is hidden from the view of Franks, his master—but not from the view of the narrator, or from us. We have no doubt that the narrator sees into the minds of his black characters, and is forcefully on their side in all their travails—and yet his own language is that of the master, not of the slave. The narrator’s finely wrought ironies risk being lost altogether on the characters with whom he sympathizes, and his own high-flown novelistic style threatens to reenact the marginalization of their words.

418 The same phenomenon is visible in many major African-American writers: while dialogue may sometimes be in dialect, narration is almost invariably in standard English (or alternatively in some sort of Modernist art-language, which may borrow elements from African American Vernacular English while remaining wholly distinct from it). The exceptions are as illuminating as the rules: Zora Neale Hurston uses standard American English for the narration in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but dialect narration in her folkloric writing. Even here, of course, Hurston was criticized for her use of dialect, as by Richard Wright in his 1937 review of the novel:

Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that’s as far as it goes.

Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the “white folks” laugh. (25)

Such attitudes are common in the criticism, and speak to the dilemmas African-American writers have often faced: write for a primarily white audience, constructing for that audience an appealing mirror for what they consider ‘Black culture’ to be? Flatten out cultural and linguistic differences in an effort to create a more dignified representation of African-Americans, even at the expense of assimilating to the dominant culture? Or reproduce the language of African-Americans, and be accused of folklorism or of pandering to white fantasies about the “quaintness” (a word Wright uses [25]) of African-Americans? With all these competing judgments, it is little wonder that writers chose the generally safer option of writing in standard English, especially in narration.

Major contemporary African-American writers, such as Toni Morrison, continue to follow the now-traditional patterns of dialect dialogue and standard-language narration. In Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*, for example, many of the characters speak in a version of African American Vernacular English that seems to approximate that appropriate to its mid-nineteenth century setting, but the narration itself is

in a fairly normative form of American written English of the late twentieth century:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). (3)

These famous opening lines deliberately do not aim at the expansiveness or unctuousness of a nineteenth-century narrator. The narrator's voice makes room for the occasional colloquialism ("put up with"), even as it insists, rather conservatively, on "he" as the default pronoun for a female-dominated family of characters. The narrative continues in this register, with asides such as the following: "Winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for color. Sky provided the only drama, and counting on a Cincinnati horizon for life's principal joy was reckless indeed" (4). The register in which the dialogue is composed is not entirely consistent (characters wander in and out, for example, of standard English uses of the verb to be), but tend definitely toward forms of African-American vernacular, creating something of a distance between her narrator and her characters (though a distance closer to that in Guillaumin than to that in Delany; Morrison's characters tend to speak in a sufficiently formal English to bridge the distance between them and their narrator). More representative, perhaps, of Morrison's style is the kind of lightly punctuated stream-of-consciousness modernist art-language with which she represents the interiority of her characters, occasionally possessing flashes of African-American dialect, but generally sufficiently stylized as to evade racial categorization, as in this passage from her 2008 novel *A Mercy*:

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Insults had been moving back and forth to and fro for many seasons between the king of we families and the king of others. I think men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops. Everything heats up and finally the men of we families burn we houses and collect those they cannot kill or find for trade. (163)

The use of "we" for "our" in this passage is its lone gesture toward African-American vernacularism, and contrasts sharply with the comparatively formal use of the relative clause "those they cannot kill or find for trade." The language of this interior monologue, then, evades ready racial characterization. Perhaps because of these strategic benefits, many African-American novels that do not feature simple standard American English narration feature instead some sort of art-language such as this, removed from the speech of any group. I do not mean to suggest, naturally, that we never encounter the use of non-standard language in narration on the part of a writer working from a position of class or racial subalternity, as opposed to regional identity. Beginning in the postwar era, such cases do in fact become more common, beginning perhaps with the Trinidadian-born Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* of 1956:²

[T]he English people starting to make rab about how too much West Indians coming to the country: this was a time, when any corner you turn, is ten to one you bound to bounce up a spade. In fact, the boys all over London, it ain't have a place where you wouldn't find them, and big discussion going on in Parliament about the situation, though the old Brit'n too diplomatic to clamp down on the boys or to do anything drastic like stop them from coming to the Mother Country. But big headlines in the papers every day. (2)

A radical and provocative experiment of its kind, Selvon's novel powerfully indicates the possibilities inherent in dialect narration, establishing a narrative voice that is at once credible and distinctive, readable and with the patina of authenticity. Selvon's narrator speaks the language of his characters, and can act as one of them, establishing a solidarity quite distinct from the experience of reading Cooper or Delany. This experiment points, however, in a direction still surprisingly seldom followed.

420 The reluctance of minority and working-class authors to use narration in dialect is sharply different from its considerably more frequent use in the works of writers espousing a regionalist politics not specifically tied to social class (as were the examples of Cooper and Guillaumin, where regional pride was on the whole subordinated to class struggle). As a contemporary example, consider Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), narrated in a powerfully Glaswegian dialect that makes Selvon's experiment seem tame:

The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried tae keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme video.

As happens in such movies, they started oaf wi an obligatory dramatic opening. Then the next phase ay the picture involved building up the tension through introducing the dastardly villain and sticking the weak plot thegither. Any minute now though, auld Jean-Claude's ready tae git doon tae some serious swedgin. (3)

Unlike Twain, the dialect is not simply here for comic effect, or simply to represent the naïveté of Welsh's characters (though those motives are present); Welsh's first-person narration seems to suggest that there would be no other, or no other honest, means of representing this world. At the same time, and even within this short sample from the opening of the novel, the representation of dialect is far from consistent: longer and more formal words are spelled conventionally, while the more basic Anglo-Saxon vocabulary is spelled so as to reflect local custom. In reality, of course, anyone who says "wis" for *was* and "oan" for *on* will surely pronounce a word such as "dastardly" or "attention" in a manner inflected by dialect as well. Likewise, a speaker who leaves off the *g* in "tryin" or "swedgin" will almost certainly pronounce the participles "trembling," "lashing," and "building" in the same way. Welsh retains these words in their standard English form, perhaps as an aid to the reader (the longer the word, the harder it is to decipher the unconventional spelling), but also, one suspects, as a means of establishing something of an ironic inconsistency in our narrator's voice, between the harshness of his language toward his peers ("tryin no tae notice the

cunt”) and the mock-formality of his cinematic analysis (“the obligatory dramatic opening”). These subtleties aside, the Glaswegian vernacular of Welsh’s novel is not unusual in the history of regional fiction, particularly in the case of regions that lay some historic or aspirational claim to national status.

Considerably earlier in the history of consciously national Scottish literature, for example, we find Lewis Grassic Gibbon, whose trilogy of novels *A Scots Quair* deals with the life of a young woman from Kincardineshire in the early part of the twentieth century. The following passage, from the first novel in the trilogy, *Sunset Song* (1932), demonstrates the lyrical register of Scots English frequently, though not absolutely consistently, found in the novel:

And the second quean was Hope and she was near as unco as Faith, but had right bonny hair, red hair, though maybe you’d call it auburn, and in the winter-time the light in the morning service would come splashing through the yews in the kirkyard and into the wee hall through the red hair of Hope. And the third quean was Charity, with a lot of naked bairns at her feet and she looked a fine and decent-like woman, for all that she was tied about with such daft-like clouts. (Gibbon 8)

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Writers in the regional languages and *patois* of France, numerous as they are, have tended to concentrate their efforts in areas other than the novel: poetry, song, folkloric tales; all forms where the charms of regional language can be displayed in brief, easily digestible segments, without recourse to the questions of novelistic narration that interest me here. The equally numerous novelists writing *romans du terroir* in France from the early twentieth century generally wrote of their local conditions in standard language, with the exception of those writers working, for example, in Occitan (where poetry was anyway the privileged medium) or (more recently) in Caribbean creoles, with writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau. In these cases, the political and cultural consensus views these as distinct from French, as opposed to merely dialects or registers thereof. In general, the greater the acknowledged linguistic Abstand, the greater the willingness to concede narratorial authority to the linguistic register or form. Space does not permit me here to consider more complex cases, such as that of Italy, where dialectal narration is relatively common, in writers such as Andrea Camilleri (Sicilian) or the Roman dialect of Carlo Emilio Gadda’s 1957 *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*—or, for that matter, even Manzoni’s famous declaration concerning his revised edition of *I promessi sposi* (1840–42) that he had washed its sheets in the Arno, perfecting the Tuscan idiom of his novel at the expense of its Lombard location.

Further expansion of this inquiry into still more linguistic cases would be invaluable, but remains quite outside the scope of this investigation. My conclusion here, that the use of dialectal narration is rare in the case of minority-race or working-class fiction, and much more common in the case of regionalist or minority-language fiction, is thus tentative. This pattern has held across a number of contexts, in both English and French, and certainly seems to warrant further consideration. The nation, so difficult to think around in so many other contexts, seems especially

difficult to speak around in the novel, where the pressure to conform to national linguistic standards, especially in the privileged position of the narrator, seems all but irresistible. To speak a novel in anything other than the national language is, it seems, tantamount to speaking a new nation into existence.

As a brief coda, I leave again the world of contemporary literary and novelistic realism, to travel to another time and place: in this case, Archaic Greece, and the uses to which dialects were put in ancient Greek literature. In Greek Old Comedy (such as Aristophanes), dialect performs much the same function it often does in modern comedy or fiction: of rendering the slightly Other contemptible, pitiable, or simply amusing. The Spartan and Boeotian women of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, for example, speak not in an authentic transcription of the (Doric) Spartan or (Aeolic) Theban dialect but rather in something more like standard Athenian Greek, salted with shibboleths of their respective dialects, in much the way that contemporary Americans, seeking to imitate a Canadian or a Boston accent for comic effect, will invent reasons
 422 to use the phrases *out and about* or *park the car* respectively. For most audiences used to the dominant form of the language, this is what regional dialect is: standard speech altered in a few memorable and recognizable ways, usually for comic effect.

But there is another way in which the Greeks made use of dialect in literature. During the Archaic period, lyric poetry was written in a variety of dialects, with the choice of dialect often more a question of genre than of either the poet's or the audience's city of origin. Elegaic and iambic metres, thus, tend to use Ionian dialect, while choral lyric is usually in a form conventionally identified as Doric.³ In this context, dialectal forms, while somewhat stylized and adapted to metrical needs, nonetheless made it possible for a variety of forms of Greek to have literary legitimacy simultaneously. I raise Archaic Greek lyric here not to suggest that its solution is one that is viable or desirable for the modern realist novel, but rather at least to underscore what is distinctive about the novel: the fact that, for all the heteroglossia so ably documented by Mikhail Bakhtin, only one register of the language is fully acceptable for use in the novel, at least for the privileged position of the narrator. Dialectal narration, especially in dialect marked by race or class rather than by region (though to a considerable extent also in the latter case), seems to mark a text as comic, and its characters as absurd; with notable exceptions such as Selvon and Welsh, we continue to search in vain for a range of linguistic registers available for serious literary purposes that treat their speakers with equal levels of dignity.

NOTES

1. For the published English translation of this and the preceding quote, which, however, does not convey the style of the original, see Guillaumin, *The Life* 5.
2. I am grateful to the excellent discussion in a seminar on "The Desire for the Vernacular" at the 2015 meeting of the ACLA, and in particular to an excellent paper by Erik Falk of Dalarna University, for

my introduction to Selvon's novel.

3. For a recent, and quite different, view, see Maslov.

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