LITERARY DIALECT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Literary dialect is the attempt to indicate on the printed page, through spellings and mis-spellings, elisions, apostrophes, syntactical shifts, signals, etc., the speech of an ethnic, regional or racial group.

The use of literary dialect has been a characteristic of American literature from its beginnings. While it is found in many national literatures, literary dialect appears with particular frequency and variety in American literature, in part because of the great number of languages spoken by the successive waves of large immigrant groups settling here, in part perhaps because of the rapid rate of social and technological change, which tended to break up American communities once relatively isolated by geographical or social distance. This continual breakdown of the barriers separating such communities produced a constant stream of "vanishing" regional, national and racial types, and a succession of nostalgic attempts to preserve them, complete with their regional speech variations.

A major literary function of such dialect has been as a general characterizing device. That is, a speech pattern identified by one or another spelling or syntactical pattern or by a signal like "Begorra!" or "Massa" or "Mon Dieu!" as belonging to a group for which there exists a popular stereotype can be substituted for detailed characterizing through narrative action. Thus, "Begorra!" is happy-go-lucky, given to whiskey. fighting and brag; "Massa" is cheerful, trivially dishonest, faithful and childlike; "Mon Dieu!" is meticulous about honor, partial to the ladies, vivacious and so on. Further, dialect is employed to indicate the relationship of a character to the fictional community in which the narrative places him. Degrees of social relationship can be revealed by the use of conventional signals which refer the reader to existing social attitudes or simply by the distance between the normal speech and the dialect speech, the distance being expressed by the density of orthographic cues.

In both uses of dialect, its effective literary function is dependent upon the existence of certain social conventions and stereotypes. Consequently, one might expect that as such conventions and stereotypes change, there will be a corresponding alteration of the literary dialect.

The representation of Negro dialect appears to illustrate best the conventional nature of literary dialect and its responsiveness to social

change. One reason for this is that Negroes have appeared in American literature as an easily identified dialect speaking group for a considerably longer time than any other such group, and, from their first appearance, have been continuously represented, unlike those other dialect speaking groups which in the normal American pattern assimilate and disappear over the course of a few generations. Further, the Negro has long been associated, either centrally or peripherally, with a series of themes and subjects which have been extremely popular in American literature. At first, of course, the Negro was an important figure in that extensive body of popular romantic fiction, both pro- and anti-slavery, concerned with plantation life and then with the Civil War, and later he was to become important to the local colorists and the socially militant realists.

In addition, Negroes have undergone perhaps the most radical alterations in social fortune of any of the dialect speaking groups. While the rise of the Irish, the Germans and the Jews in American society has been extreme in relationship to their beginnings, those groups rather quickly achieved a relative social stability which the Negro group has yet to achieve. Finally, the Negro has been almost continuously at the center of heated social controversy, so that popular attitudes toward the Negro have been sharply divided and extreme in their expressions.

If literary dialect is a conventional response to the relationship between the fictional character and situation and certain social attitudes and stereotypes, an examination of the effect of social change on the conventions governing the presentation of Negro literary dialect should most clearly reveal this relationship.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, there occurred in the United States a significant change in the mode of indicating Negro speech on the printed page. Prior to this time, the speech of Negroes was indicated by a conventional dialect called "Guinee"; it was replaced by a dialect called "Plantation." Both are misnomers.

The "Guinee" dialect was a literary convention dating back at least to the sixteenth century, but given its broadest impact and greatest momentum by Daniel Defoe's use of it to indicate the speech of Friday in Robinson Crusoe. Friday, of course, was no Negro but a Carib Indian; however, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries one frequently discovers a persistent confusion of the races in fiction and drama. This confusion is best exemplified in George Coleman, Jr.'s Inkle and Yarico (1787) where Yarico, the heroine, is described at one point as an Indian princess and at another as a blackamoor, where her servant Wowski is described as black yet called an Indian maid and where the hero is pursued through the South American wilderness by black savages. Daniel Defoe himself was to use precisely the same dialect he had employed to indicate Indian speech in Robinson Crusoe to indicate Negro speech in his Colonel Jack.

Following Robinson Crusoe, the "Guinee" dialect was to be employed well into the nineteenth century to indicate the speech of "savages" as various as Caribs, Negroes, North American Indians, Polynesians and "heathen Chinee." This dialect, though at times differentiated by the occasional insertion of terms appropriate to the group being designated, normally remained fairly constant in all its uses, as the following examples will suggest:

"O Master! You give me te leave, me shakee te hand with him: me makee you good laugh . . . eatee me up! eatee me up!" says Friday in Robinson Crusoe, "Me eatee him up!" Here is Chicka, a North American Indian maiden in The Catawba Travelers, a musical entertainment presented at Sadlers Wells in 1797.

Chicka like Sailor Man
Tom like-a Chicka too;
He come home, he shakee hand,
And me say how dye do?

In 1850, Melville's Queequeg in Moby Dick exclaims, upon discovering Ishmael in his bed, "Who-e debel you? . . . You no speak-e, dam-me, I kill-e. . . . Speak-e! tell-ee me who-ee be, or dam-me I kill-e!" In Bret Harte's Two Men of Sandy Bar, Hop Sing, the Chinese laundry man, bitterly exclaims, "Me washee shirt, Alexandlee Molton; he no pay washee . . . Alexandlee Molton no payee. He say 'go to hellee.'" The presentation of Negro speech in "Guinee" was not distinguished from these. Here, for instance, is "the observation of a Negro" mentioned by Benjamin Franklin: "Boccarorra (meaning the white man) make de black man workee, make de Horse workee, make de Ox workee, make ebery thing workee; only de Hog. He, de hog, no workee; he eat, he drink, he walk about, he go to sleep when he please, he libb like a Gentleman."

The most obvious characteristic of this dialect is probably the addition of the extra syllable "ee" (or occasionally "a") at the end of words. We discover as well a verb that rarely alters its form, a general misuse of the pronoun, the substitution of "t" for "th," of "b" for "v"; above all, we have the use of extremely simple and short sentence structure, delivered in a very limited vocabulary. Taken together, these various characteristics produce a kind of baby-talk which if not primitive in an anthropological sense, was certainly primitive enough as an instrument of communication.

This dialect was to take its general dramatic function from its first major popular use -- the Crusoe-Friday relationship. That is, it was to become in literature the conventional speech of representatives of "inferior" peoples, regardless of race; of savages, who in relation to the white man were either humble and devoted or ferocious and bloodthirsty.

Hans Nathan in Daniel Emmett and the Rise of Negro Minstrelsy[1] comments that the music written to accompany songs in the "Guinee" dialect was written to correspond to what the composers believed to be the

Negro's mentality. "In expressing his child-like mind, they used brief phrases, repeated tones, a narrow range, and simple rhythmic patterns, thus approaching the idiom of nursery rhymes."

Both Melville and Bret Harte were to employ this dialect ironically, playing its conventional implications of savagery and simplicity against the actual natures of the characters who spoke it. Friday, the savage plucked from the burning by the Christian European Crusoe, was to prefigure almost two centuries of similar literary savages, and his speech was to become the conventional literary dialect employed to indicate this role.

When the Negro slave began to appear as a character in fiction written in America, this conventional speech pattern required little adaptation. All that was necessary was the addition of a few signal words such as "buckra" and "pickaninny," and the sentence structure, the sound substitutions and additions, the peculiarities of verb and pronoun all could be retained. Above all, the cultural, social and racial values implicit in the dialect were perfectly appropriate to the presentation of the Negro slave. The "childlike" implications of the dialect, of course, were particularly appropriate to the way in which the white man construed his relation to the slave. This dialect came to be known as "Guinee," since the Guinea coast was the debarkation point for most of the African slaves transported to America. The mass of slaves, however, came from a great variety of tribes speaking different languages, and, within those language groups, different dialects; the slave coffles brought slaves from as far as a thousand miles from the Guinea coast. Consequently, for most of the slaves there was no common language until they learned the pidgin taught them by their enslavers.

The "Guinee" dialect was the conventional mode of indicating Negro speech in literature until approximately 1840, when it was replaced by a new literary convention, the "plantation" dialect. This dialect still remains what we normally think of today as "Negro" speech. The new convention differs in a number of significant ways from the older "Guinee" form. First of all, it drops the added "ee" sound that was "Guinee's" outstanding characteristic. Further, its verb is usually conjugated and alters to indicate tense, and its use of pronouns is considerably more correct than in "Guinee." The sentence structure and especially the vocabulary are much more complex and various than in the older form. Certain of the older characteristics are retained, however, the most obvious being the sound substitutions of "b" for "v" and of "d" or "f" for "th." In spite of this, the general effect of "plantation" dialect is considerably more adult and more sophisticated than that of "Guinee." One has only to compare a song like:

> Me be one poor slave, brought into Barbado,
> Ven one pickaninny, such de cruel trado,
> Now me vetch and carry, no go here and dere,
> Dey no let me rest, dey for black man no care . . . .

with one written only a very few years later:

Oh, I'm a roarer on de fiddle,
And down in old Virginny,
They say I play de skyentific
Like Massa Paganini.
Weel about and turn about
An' do jis so,
Ebery time I wheel about
I jump Jim Crow. . . .

to recognize this difference.

There are, however, certain characteristics of "plantation" dialect which mitigate sharply against its relative sophistication and maturity. Of foremost importance in this regard is the fact that "plantation," unlike "Guinee," is a determinedly comic dialect. That is, it attempts to achieve humorous effects through certain of its associated characteristics. Two distinct related characteristics which are particularly associated with "plantation" dialect (and were not with "Guinee") were the use of malapropisms and mispronunciations, and the use of a highly elevated and inappropriate vocabulary.

Both of these speech characteristics were from the very first appearances of "plantation" dialect linked with the speakers of that dialect to such an extent that they can be thought of as actual extensions of it. Understood dramatically, these comic devices -- malapropisms, inappropriate diction, mispronunciations -- produce the image of the arriviste and the social climber. They are expressions of social and cultural pretentiousness intended to be laughed at by the reader who normally belongs to the group to which the Negro aspires. They are, of course, not confined to the presentation of Negro speech: one can discover precisely the same devices employed to mock the aspiring English country squire, Irishman, Italian or Jew. Every society has always had its "outs" wanting to get "in." That these devices seem particularly exaggerated and crude when they appear in the conventional "plantation" dialect ascribed to Negroes may perhaps be accounted for by the fact that the audience for whom the dialect is intended is a mass audience: the "ins" of the audience can laugh only at those solecisms of the "outs" which they are able to recognize as solecisms.

Understood this way, it becomes clear that the shift from "Guinee" to "plantation" dialect represents an extraordinary change in the image of the Negro -- where the older one projects him as a child, the new dialect functions to humanize him, to socialize him. It finds a formal and traditional role for him to play in society -- though it is on the lowest rank. It is, as I have suggested, an ambivalent role. The new dialect is more mature and sophisticated and at the same time less dignified, more contemptible. It is suggestive that while "Guinee" dialect was frequently employed to achieve pathetic effects in the anti-slavery songs of the late eighteenth century, "plantation" dialect was, for roughly the first two decades of its use, an

exclusively comic dialect which, when it did employ sentimental or pathetic material, reduced it to bathos or burlesque. When such sentimental songs as "Aura Lee" or "My Darling Nellie Gray" were sung, little or no dialect was employed.

The change in literary conventions I have been describing is of particular interest since it suggests something of the way in which literary and social change impinge on one another. Certainly, the conventions governing dialect, because it always involves social classes, social roles and social values, are particularly susceptible to social change.

The vehicle for the transmission of the supplanting dialect was a new kind of "Negro" character -- the black-faced minstrel who appeared in American popular theaters in the 1820's. The formalizing, popularizing and disseminating of the written mode of his speech was accomplished through the "Ethiopian Songsters," inexpensive paperback song books which were broadly distributed from the 1830's on until almost the end of the century.

In the late 1820's there had begun to appear with frequency on the stages of American variety theaters a group of "Negro impersonators" who performed songs, eccentric dances and comic sketches. These white actors were, of course, not impersonators at all, but rather caricaturists who presented an image of the Negro which extended rather than embodied the popular stereotypes of the Negro to the point where not even the fondest and most uncritical believer of the stereotype could confuse the minstrel "Negro" in his soot black face and white grease paint mouth with any actual Negro. Equally extended by caricature were the Negro's speech, movement, dress and intellectual and moral "characteristics" as they were perceived by the popular audience.

These Negro caricatures quickly reduced themselves into two major types: one was the city dandy, an elegant fop and ladies' man, as embodied in such songs as Dandy Jim O'Caroline, Jim Brown or Jim Along Josie; the other was the ragged plantation hand of such songs as O Lud Gals, Gib Me Chaw Tebackur, Blue Tail Fly or Dixie; on occasion, as in the case of Jim Crow himself, they merged into each other. In the "dandy" song, the singer appears resplendently costumed, and his song usually gives a description of his own clothes, like this one from "The Dandy Broadway Swell" --

I wears a gold wash'd guard chain
Dat I bought ob Uncle Pete
But I left de watch for safety
Wid a man in Chatham street.
Wid grobes, an' cane, an' fancy vest,
French trowserloons an' hat,
Wid gran imperial which I cut
From de tail of our brack cat . . . .

The ragged "field hand" songs abound in references to raccoons and opos-

sums, both live and roasted; to corncake and hoecake; and most especially, to sweethearts left behind in Tennessee, South Carolina or Ole Wirginny.

Though these types may be regarded to some degree as distinct, an examination of the roles they play as revealed in their songs makes clear that they possess two significant characteristics in common: the Negro caricatured by the minstrel, whether Broadway Dandy or ragged field hand, is in the great majority of cases a Negro in the city, and, where the city is identified, most frequently a Northern city. The Dandy is successfully urbanized and imitates the white swells of his city with an aplomb that Brummel might envy. The plantation character, on the other hand, is lost and unhappy in the city, and from his situation was to come that whole line of minstrel songs on the theme of homesickness for the old plantation, a tradition of which Old Folks at Home and Dixie are perhaps the best known examples. Daniel Emmett, writing reminiscently about his most famous song, said, "I will merely say that [Dixie] is nothing but a plain simple melody, with plantation words, the purport of which is that a negro in the north feels himself out of place and, thinking of his old home in the south, is made to exclaim, in the words of the song: 'I wish I was in Dixie's Land!'"

This minstrel "Negro" is not only urban, but, as significantly, he is a freedman. Neither in the songs nor the sketches does he normally figure in a slavery situation. He is by occupation, when it is identified, a barber like Old Dan Tucker himself:

> Here's my razor in good order,
> Magnum bonum, jis hab bo't er.
> Sheep-shell oats, Tucker shell de corn,
> I'll shabe you as soon as de water get warm.

or a boot black, like Jim Brown, in a topical verse:

> I went on to Washington, de capital ob de nation,
> I ax massa Jackson, will you gib me situation?
> Says he, Jim Brown, I give you one, but what can you do?
> I can nullify de boot, and put de veto on de shoe . . . .

or a waiter, as in Root, Hog, or Die:

> I'm chief cook and bottle washer, captain ob de waiters;
> I stand upon my head
> When I peel de Apple dumplins . . . .

or a wagon driver, as in Jim Along Josie.

The minstrel "Negro," then, marks the appearance of the Negro freeman in America's popular literature. Unlike the "Guinee" speaking character who was a plantation slave or house servant, and frequently a pathetic figure, the minstrel "Negro" is free, urban and comic. Further we discover that the minstrel figure is conventionally defined in his songs and sketches as attempting to become a part of the dominant free society; the Dandy with his resplendent clothes and elegant manners marking the height of his achievement--though the most he accomplishes is a cruel caricature

-- just as the displaced "field hand" recalling "good old times" and longing to be carried back to Virginia marks his failure.

As either Dandy or Field Hand, however, he is foremost a foolish, childish, clownish, irresponsible figure and his creators seldom relinquish this conception of him in order to achieve pathetic or realistic effects.

Curiously, the scholarship on the historical development of the minstrel show -- even while it unconsciously documents and illustrates most copiously both the conventional and stylized rather than realistic nature of the caricature, and the urban and Northern rather than Southern and plantation setting in which the caricature performs -- has tended to disregard its own carefully assembled evidence in favor of an interpretation which equates the degree of caricature with the degree of "realism," as in Hans Nathan's typical judgment that when "The ragged Southern plantation type of Negro was frequently relegated to the second part of the show, while the more formal, Northern type, the dandy, was introduced into the first part . . . it was mainly the last part which retained a pronounced and genuine Negro atmosphere."

Of major influence in helping to shape the image of the Negro embodied in the minstrel character were two important historical factors. One was the appearance during the first quarter of the century in many cities, especially in the North and in the border states, of great numbers of free Negroes. The other was the efforts of the American Colonization Society to solve the problem of what to do with those Negroes.

Negroes began to come into the cities in great numbers at the end of the eighteenth century and continued to migrate into the urban slums. The North during this time, strongly influenced by Revolutionary sentiment and imbued with natural rights philosophy, was sharply aware of the incompatibility of slavery and the struggle for independence. Consequently, the period was marked by the highest rate of manumission in the history of American slavery. In 1800, about 37,000 Negro slaves remained in bondage in the North. By 1830, only 3,568 Negro slaves were left.

Great numbers of these Negro freemen migrated to the cities where they constituted a kind of sub-proletariat, limited to laboring in service and menial occupations, the women working as laundresses and cooks, the men as laborers, waiters, barbers, porters, coachmen and bootblacks. The lives led by these free Negroes in the cities were frequently poverty-stricken, squalid and miserable, and there seemed little hope to ameliorate their condition as their numbers grew. In 1816 the need to find some solution to the problem of what was to become of the free Negro population led a group of delegates from several states to organize the American Colonization Society. They agreed to take steps to colonize Negroes, on a voluntary basis, in Africa, or any place Congress might designate. The Society attempted to win public support for its position through a campaign conducted in a series of tracts, public addresses and its own newspaper, The

African Repository. The basic strategy of this campaign was to convince the American public of the inability of Negroes ever to find a place in American society in part because of the prejudices of the whites, but mainly because of the innate intellectual and moral inferiority of the Negroes. Though professedly friendly to the Negro, much of the colonization propaganda depicted him as physically and mentally unsuited to civilization: "he was naturally shifty and lazy, childlike and immature, untrustworthy, irresponsible, unable to handle complicated machinery or run business establishments, and seriously lacking in initiative and ingenuity."[2]

The image, of course, is the familiar one of the minstrel Negro. This is not to say that the American Colonization Society originated or was by itself responsible for the particular stereotype of the Negro the minstrel men drew upon. It is clear, however, that the Society's propaganda campaign, conducted over a period of some fifteen years before the appearance of the minstrel figure, formalized and articulated and gave respectability to the stereotype, all from ostensibly the most benevolent of motives. It may be conjectured that it was precisely this benevolence which contributed to the tone of affectionate contempt with which the minstrel audience regarded the Negro.

The Negro minstrel figure, then, created in the late 1820's, embodied, reinforced, and crystallized certain ideas about and attitudes toward the Negro which, in good part, had been formulated by the propaganda of the American Colonization Society. These ideas and attitudes had in turn been generated by the appearance in the cities during the first quarter of the nineteenth century of large numbers of free and often indigent Negroes. The resultant stereotype was to become particularly identified with the new "plantation" dialect employed by the minstrel men, and this dialect, with the stereotypic image it stood for, was to become fixed in printed form and broadly popularized by the widespread distribution, beginning in the 1830's, of inexpensive song books. From the song books, the dialect was to pass a generation later into popular fiction, carrying with it the ideas and attitudes that had coalesced about it.

This constellation of elements -- the minstrel comedian, the movement of free Negroes into the cities, cheap song books, the American Colonization Society and the conventions of literary dialect -- suggests something of the complexity and interdependence of literature and social change.

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Footnotes:

[1] (Norman, Oklahoma, 1962).

[2] Leon F. Litwak, North of Slavery (Chicago, 1962), 156.