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Language Differences and Literary Values: Divagations from a Theme

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*Language Differences and Literary Values:  
Divagations from a Theme*

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THIS PAPER WAS DELIVERED, in somewhat different form, in the spring of 1975 as the initiatory ritual display of professorial vanity at the Albuquerque meeting of the MLA's Commission on Minority Groups and the Study of Language and Literature. The paper was written on the optimistic assumption that significant concerns are shared by scholars dedicated to the languages and literatures of American minorities and by a monolingual Confederate Wasp—concerns with social class, with the relations between provinces or colonies and a dominant central authority, particularly with languages as at once the instruments of power, the vehicles of cultural traditions, and the media of literatures. After emphasizing the ambiguous nature of standard languages as both cultural necessities and tools of domination, the paper drifts into the fantasy of a linguistic and literary counter-culture which would reject both linguistic relativism and linguistic exploitation in a conscious effort to preserve humane values in an advanced industrial society. The fantasy is made perhaps more plausible by the suggestion that the problems of minority languages and literatures are variations on the problems which have everywhere had to be faced by colonials and the colonized—by the suggestion, in short, that pluralism need not mean separatism. Two imprudent questions then evade the necessity for a conclusion.

The MLA's refusal to publish the paper (which it had commissioned and paid for, with accompanying insistence on publication rights) would have been taken seriously but for the epidemic confusion between learned societies and political interest groups and for the politicians' inability (real or pretended) to distinguish between absolute unwillingness to teach a standard dialect and unwillingness to teach one for the wrong purposes of politicians and by the destructive methods of their kept pedagogues.

*The Curse and Blessing of Standard English*

Probably no other language was ever spoken so widely as English is today, when it is native to between three and four hundred million people all over the world. Smug Anglos are likely to forget that its predominance is relatively

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recent and may be relatively brief—and even more likely to forget that English achieved its modern status as a world language less through merit than by force and violence. We in the U.S.A. cannot flatter ourselves on being uniquely wicked: the British were before us in imperialism, and other nations have been quite as bloodily grasping when they had the chance; but it was we who got the best chance of these latter days—and took it. Never fully possessed of western Europe's old high culture, culturally subservient until the cultural chaos of our own time, nonetheless we had the wealth of our newly stolen continent, and the power and numbers of those who had stolen it. We used them to get richer still as what we called democracy helped make the world unsafer.

Today, amidst the chaos, contradictions spring from that history. English is indeed the most efficient presently available medium of interlingual communication. It is the language of one of the world's great literatures, and the most accessible storehouse of the world's knowledge, especially the knowledge of science and technology. In its edited written form it is much the same wherever it is used; as spoken by the educated, it is intelligible with little difficulty everywhere; it is securely established in the full range of functions which a language can serve, from love-making to divine worship, from flying airplanes to seeking cures for cancer. Yet standard English is also, as it always has been, an instrument of domination. The ancestor of our edited written English is what has been called "Chancery standard," the language of "that flood of government documents that starts in the years following 1430";<sup>1</sup> and the spoken standard which emerged in the next century was the language of the aristocracy in and around London and of the scholars and administrative types who served them.<sup>2</sup> Ever since, the demand for standard English has acted as a social filter. People who have hoped, like house-niggers, to "work within the System" have been required to adopt the System's language and—to the extent that language and belief are associated—the System's tacit assumptions. Initiation into the standard dialect enacts the great assumption that there is deep significance in linguistic differences, like that between *am not* and *ain't*, which do not affect intelligibility in the slightest. Nonstandard dialects are unacceptable for public celebration of established values, and inability or refusal to employ the hierophantic forms on the prescribed occasions is treated as immoral. Who would like his sister to sleep with a man who finalizes?

Inappropriate demands for standard English where it isn't needed, and frivolous demands for a super-standard beyond the standard, are thus used to gratify the vanity of the privileged and to keep the underdogs safely under; and if those demands are met, others still more difficult can always be invented. Yet very different arguments converge to show that rational demands for standard English are a great deal more than means to protect established power. A workaday argument begins with the minimal assumption that in our society everyone should learn to read. Among the English-speaking, learning to read means learning to read the most carefully standardized form of the standard dialect, simply because

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<sup>1</sup>M. L. Samuels, "Some Applications of Middle English Dialectology," in Roger Lass's anthology *Approaches to English Historical Linguistics*, p. 411.

<sup>2</sup>E. J. Dobson, "Early Modern Standard English," in Lass, p. 422.

almost nothing else gets printed. Readers have to learn conventional spellings, and conventional spellings represent phonologic structures deeper than the concrete speech sounds of actual utterance. Similarly when we learn to write, we do not and need not learn to transcribe our speech phonetically. Writing a markedly nonstandard dialect with any accuracy would be a wastefully complicated performance, as anyone can prove to himself by trying to write the contracted variants of the simple statement *I am going to go*. Mere literacy therefore demands a considerable receptive and productive control of standard English; and when we add that television and other amenities of civilized life teach us all to comprehend the *spoken* standard, it follows that literacy for Anglos implies the ability to read the prestige dialect, to understand it when it is spoken, and even to write it within no very broad range of morphologic and syntactic deviation. There is no basis, however, for the strange belief—widespread among linguists—that children must learn a standard pronunciation before they learn to read and write.

A rational demand for standard English can also be supported by less pragmatic arguments. Without memory of the past and hope for the future (one line of reasoning goes), our present is brutally diminished; and the chain that links our times is language, the symbol of community. Of all minorities in any culture, none is more important than the gifted few, whatever their language, race, or class, who know their language best as it has been most fully cultivated and who can maintain and extend the traditions of its highest use. One can quite readily admit that no literature can escape the limitations of its creators, and no language the limitations of its users. One can be totally unwilling to see diversity in speech homogenized or to see acceptance and opportunity denied to bearers of linguistic traits which touch neither character, ability, nor fitness to serve. But when all such qualifications have been made, the arguments for the cultivation of minority languages and literatures still apply, with equal or greater force, to the cultivation of the language and literature of the majority. Bureaucratic pretenses to the contrary notwithstanding, nobody has in fact opposed, or in reason could oppose, the teaching of standard English, for good ends and by good means, to students of any age who want to learn it. The question whether or not it should be taught is thus a spurious issue,<sup>3</sup> as spurious as the question

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<sup>3</sup>Karen Hess, Ph.D., who described herself in 1972 as “Project Director” for the Central Midwestern Regional Educational Laboratory, Inc., has pursued this red herring with indiscriminating vigor. See her article “Is Learning a Standard English Important?” in *The Florida FL Reporter*, Spring/Fall, 1972. In February of that year, Dr. Hess sent me an abstract she had prepared of an article of mine. In the abstract she said that I had characterized the teaching of standard English as “immoral and racist.” Distressed by the confusion of *the with some*, I replied at once that the abstract was “an absurd and stupid perversion,” and quoted an essay which I had published just the month before (*CE* 33.455): “There is not, moreover, and there never has been, a serious proposal that standard English should not be taught at all, if for no other reason than because its teaching is inevitable.” Dr. Hess went happily on, in the *FL Reporter*, to offer me as the primary exhibit among alleged believers that “a standard English should not be taught.”

In 1974, Dr. Hess was still hard at it. In that year, the NCTE published a big “kit” called *Dialects and Dialect Learning*, in which Dr. Hess and colleagues collaborated with John C. Maxwell, the Council’s Associate Executive Secretary. Concerning the same article which I had rebuked Dr. Hess for misrepresenting, the “kit” repeatedly asserts, “James Sledd is

whether Navaho should be taught, or Spanish, or Swahili, or Chinese. The answer is always yes—to the right people, in the right way, for the right reasons.

### *Fantasia*

The issue could never have been imagined in a healthy society; but the enormous changes which are the remote causes of our petty window-dressing conferences—the collapse of the once-shared beliefs of the old European culture, the weakening of European hegemony, the emergence of the third world and the resurgence of the oppressed—have left us with a ruling class whose fitness to rule is widely questioned and whose favored dialect has lost much of its authority. Since no sane man would wish to be indoctrinated with our masters' values, people who shift from another language or dialect to standard English must be concerned about the consequences for their own ideals and conduct, their own place in the world.

We English teachers must be very sure of our motives as we work with students who enlist our aid in making such a shift. They will come to us equipped mainly with the conversational language of their peers, in which many registers (to use the British term) have never been developed; and they may be puzzled or repelled by the idea of a loved and respected language of literary tradition, the language not of a privileged class but of an educated class, a socially conscious and conscientious class. We might try to implant that idea, the idea of honest craftsmanship in words, by teaching not just the language actually used in the conduct of our nation's important affairs, which will generally be gobbledygook or doublespeak, but the language that *ought* to be used, a cultivated language always in touch with actuality but never quite contented with it. The possibility of a linguistic and literary counter-culture—not the counter-culture of *like man, you know*—is something we should think about.

The suggestion is not, of course, original—but remains heretical among both the oppressors and their mimics the oppressed. The characteristic linguistic enterprise of our English teachers for the last ten or fifteen years has been motivated by the great boobois ideal of upward mobility in the mainstream. Biloquialism, or bidialectalism, as the enterprise has been called, is a foolish and destructive approach to a real problem. Governments, foundations, and professional societies (which follow established power like its shadow) have devoted themselves to imposing standard English on speakers of nonstandard dialects for all occasions which the dominant Anglos care to regulate—imposing it by the threat that those who do not learn the standard will be forever denied economic opportunity and social acceptance and by the unsupported promise that learners

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OPPOSED to giving students who speak nonstandard dialects an opportunity to acquire [*sic*] skill in speaking the dialect standard in their region." The same James Sledd, in a speech at the NCTE convention in November, 1972, had warned against that same deception: "Before proceeding, I will merely say, to avoid the clumsier forms of misrepresentation, that there are also plenty of good reasons why many blacks do value the mastery of an appropriate form of standard English and why the schools should do what they can to cultivate such mastery." The speech was published in the *English Journal* in May, 1973, and was also available to Dr. Hess and Secretary Maxwell in an NCTE cassette.

will be rewarded with material goodies. The consequence of success would be the political neutering of agents of potential change and the ultimate eradication of the nonstandard dialects, but the biloqualists have accompanied their campaign for the language of power with the tiresome insistence that no language and no dialect is better or worse than any other.

To that linguistic relativism (which supports just any old status provided it is quo), rationality opposes the simple fact that we must and do choose constantly between different languages and different dialects and between alternative forms within a *single* dialect. Similarly, to the definition of the target-dialect as the language of power, the language really used by important people as they muddle our important affairs, rationality opposes the ideal of language which would accomplish, in a given circumstance, what a good man would *want* his language to accomplish there. Briefly, linguistics is value-laden, and teachers of languages must accept and indeed create a constant tension between what is and what they think should be. It is distressingly easy, in such an effort, to be quixotic or indeed tyrannical; yet the effort must be made. Humanists must be dedicated to *changing* the mainstream, and the English that teachers teach must not be the uncritically aped language of the Kennedys, Johnsons, Nixons, Reagans, Fords, of Toofie Carter or the Hump or flunkies for moneyed red-necks. Standard English is not the personal property of the class which fathered it. It can be the medium of a great literature as well as the vehicle of bureaucratized deception, a means to healthy survival, not to the disease of upward mobility. The power it confers can be power for change as well as power for repression.

No change is more urgently needed than the abandonment of upward mobility as a social ideal. Upward mobility presupposes the continued existence of the present scale of social status—the scale which defines *upward*. Upward mobility means the continued wanton destruction of irreplaceable resources in ritual waste. Upward mobility does *not* mean a fair chance for everyone to live in health without indignity. On the contrary, it means that oppression must continue, since there aren't enough goodies in the biosphere to keep humanity in the style to which the American *Übermensch* has grown accustomed, and it means that those who have the least to waste must be despised even by themselves, since they have failed in the universal duty of getting and spending.

If the minorities want power only for upward mobility, then they *deserve* repression; for inexperienced exploiters are worse than old hands at that bloody game.

### *Colonials Old and New*

The old, respectable, but currently unrespected notion of a standard deliberately cultivated may be defended by a variety of arguments: by an invitation to write the Declaration of Independence in the dialect of Uncle Remus, or a treatise on miracles in the Scots of Robert Burns; by the reminder that the relativist in theory is a dogmatist in practice, insisting that although all dialects are equal, everybody must learn his; by the simple observation that in fact we all

are language-loyalists, critics and celebrants, lovers and haters. A less hackneyed argument is that the experience of blacks, chicanos, and native Americans, faced with the political dominance of Anglos and the linguistic dominance of English, is quite comparable to the experience of Anglos themselves and—more generally—to the experience of all the colonialized, of all colonials and provincials everywhere. The difference is that the Anglos, once colonials, have become colonizers themselves.

As colonials, the English-speaking whites who invaded North America were not a representative sample of the population of the old countries. Because most of them were anything but upperclass, their English must have included many nonstandard forms; and a new life in a land that was new to them, in contact with languages other than their own, broadened the gap between the English of North America and that of Britain. Yet the ties to Britain were strong, and the sense of cultural subservience abiding: high culture remains alien to most Anglos, so that most of us have to be initiated, as outsiders, to some of its ranges, where we can never feel perfectly comfortable. We learn only a partial language inwardly; whole reaches of English will always remain our acquisition, not our inheritance. Our problem, consequently, in learning to write is not to abandon the native speech whose mastery has made us human, and not to reject all alien strength and grace, but instead to compose a new, third world of words where our heritage will not be repudiated but enriched.

Maybe that is every writer's problem. Maybe, in a way, it is universal. And seen in this light, the literary and linguistic problems of minorities are surely not unique, not totally different from the problems of other people. For example, the novelists and poets who are trying today to write seriously in what has been called Black English might learn a great deal from Mark Twain, from Robert Burns and other Scots before and after, from Caribbean and African and Anglo-Indian writers in the language which once was England's. It makes no sense to isolate ourselves by ignoring the solutions which other men have proposed for problems like our own.

### *Pluralism Not Separatism*

If the linguistic and literary problems of minorities in the Southwest are in some ways notably similar to the problems of Anglos there and elsewhere, they may also be related to our much-lamented "crisis in writing." In dealing with that crisis, which has been announced periodically for some centuries, today's school-persons have not distinguished themselves. The English teacher's principal effort in this connection has been the composition course, especially that disgrace of the universities, Freshman English.

In the big state universities, ambitious faculty won't teach freshmen if they can help it, because professional advancement depends on the judgment of one's professional colleagues, and the profession judges by scholarly research, not undergraduate teaching. A pretext would therefore be found to abolish freshman English, despite the "crisis in writing," but for one thing: appointments to teach the course, at slave wages, will still support a small army of graduate

students, whose lemming-like urge to become unemployable Ph.D.'s makes them sacrificial beasts for the professors' seminars. This one inestimable advantage outweighs all objections, including the objection that most freshmen in our culture feel no respect for competent writing, small need to learn to write, and therefore defeat both devoted and perfunctory teaching by stolid, passive resistance.

The course that results from this election of the lesser evil is multifarious, but one of its more stable characteristics is a kind of compulsive verbal nit-picking which accomplishes very little against the whole force of an unliterary society except to baffle students whose dialects are too heavily nit-infested. The methods we have used for teaching standard English to students who least need such teaching will not work with those who have seen no reason to learn an alien dialect or have had no chance for its natural and naturally rewarded use. Accordingly, teachers of freshman composition are tempted either to pass everybody in an equivalent of "social promotion" in the secondary schools or to flunk everybody except middleclass Anglos and the upperclass minority of the minorities. Both teachers and students thus become victims of a conflict which nobody has yet found a way to deal with.

The solution for the problem must be the pluralism which we so often talk about—but seldom practice. States whose population is as diverse as that of Texas can no longer run degree mills where thousands of students are processed as if they were identical. There is real danger, to be sure, in the best-intentioned effort to meet differing needs by differing instruction. If minorities are given special help, the majority will complain of discrimination in reverse. If minorities are sometimes set apart because earlier discrimination has denied them knowledge or ability which the fortunate acquire without formal study, the minorities may in their turn complain of segregation and paternalism. The old socialist maxim is sufficiently high-minded—"From each according to his ability, to each according to his need";<sup>4</sup> but at our bicentennial we know that one constitution is as liable to subversion as another. We must still take the risk—a risk like those which attach to every human enterprise. In rational moments we have never treated everyone alike (as matrimony proved until the age of sexual freedom), and bicentennial dreams are unlikely to be realized if we tolerate the existence of a *Lumpenproletariat* or if, on the other hand, we waste our most precious resource, intelligence, by denying to the gifted of every race and class the challenge that they need. An educated minority need not be an unjustly privileged minority.

Once again the argument has led to disagreement with the professional establishment. But the idea of an educated counter-culture of the great traditions, vitalized by a social conscience which would keep it in touch with social

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<sup>4</sup>My old edition of Bartlett's *Quotations* says that Marx put the nouns in the plural—or rather that Max Eastman translated them as plurals—and that the Constitution of the USSR is a bit different still: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work." I like it the way I first heard it, in a sophomore class in economics at a Southern Methodist college: Methodists make Coca-Cola, Babtists [*sic semper Baptistis*] raise peanuts; and both will have their reward in heaven.



reality, is surely no less hopeful than the idea of the MLA or the concept of the National Council. The organized body of professional academics in the United States has ceased to be responsive to external judgment and social need and has constituted itself as an independent, research-oriented interest-group, not the custodians of great traditions but middleclass businessmen like other middleclass businessmen; and so long as our professional societies continue as bureaucracies controlled by the entrenched white academic operator and closely tied to the centers of governmental power, no genuine educational or social change will be prompted by our official spokesmen. If they really spoke for change, they would quickly cease to be official.

### *Two Questions and No Conclusion*

The successful use of nonstandard dialects in English and American literature has been quite limited, most obviously to lyric poetry and to dialogue in fiction and drama. Intellectual prose in nonstandard dialects has so far been an infertile hybrid, because the appropriate registers have not been developed outside the standard, whose use the existing intellectual audiences expect. Even a masterpiece of fiction like *Huckleberry Finn* was parasitic, in a way—presupposing a standard which the vernacular could be played off against. It would seem to follow that the response to such literature is likely to be either condescending (if the reader is alien to the vernacular culture and knows only the standard) or sentimental (if the reader is newly educated but keeps some attachment to his origins). One may wonder, then, to what extent a literature is possible, now, in a nonstandard dialect. Can black literature, for example, be linguistically black, or do we call it black because it is *by* blacks and about them? Can there be black style in white English?

A second question follows from the first. The Commission on Minority Groups has as a stated goal “to develop in the mainstream of literary studies an awareness of literature by and about minorities.” Ten years ago Ralph Ellison dismissed the metaphor of the mainstream as a mirror of “segregation and second-class citizenship”;<sup>5</sup> and it is not obvious that the quality of a literature is much affected by who it is about. Certainly we all should know more about one another (though only the naive can think that understanding everything breeds forgiveness of it). Certainly our country and all countries would be better if creative talent were nowhere stifled by oppression and injustice. But (leaving the platitudes for the bureaucrats) is *Macbeth* a good play because it’s about Scots, or is *Henry V* three times as good as *Macbeth* because Jamy is Scotch, and Macmorris Irish, and Fluellen a Welshman? Of a contemporary writer whom she disliked, Flannery O’Connor once said that what was wrong with him was that he wasn’t *from* anywhere. How do the uprooted create a literature with roots?

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<sup>5</sup>Mr. Ellison fractured decorum at the American Academy’s “Conference on the Negro American,” reported in *Daedalus* for the winter of 1966. Of course nobody paid him any mind.