



PROJECT MUSE®

Rhetorics of Literacy

Nurhussein, Nadia

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Nurhussein, Nadia.

Rhetorics of Literacy: The Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry.

The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/23953.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23953>

Conclusion

I want plane facts, and I want plane words
Of the good old-fashioned ways,
When speech run free as the songs of birds
'Way back in the airy days.

...

Tell of the things jest as they was—
They don't need no excuse!—
Don't tetch 'em up like the poets does,
Tel theyr all too fine fer use!

—James Whitcomb Riley, “A Tale of the Airly Days”

Poetry!—that 's the way some chaps puts up an idee,
But I takes mine 'straight without sugar,' and that's
what's the matter with me.

—Bret Harte, “Cicely”

In a publication designed to assist readers with “Riley Day Programs,” Indiana Superintendent Charles A. Greathouse called on “the teachers of Indiana” to celebrate Riley’s pedagogical impact: “You do well to honor, by appropriate exercises, the man who is the teacher of us all.”¹ It is unlikely that Greathouse would have thought of the reading of dialect orthography such as Riley’s as a valuable pedagogical experience in and of itself—he was probably thinking of the message of wholesome exemplarity broadcasted in the titles of poems like Riley’s “A Life-Lesson”—but his remark points perhaps unwittingly to the ways in which American readers at the turn of the century felt that they *were* instructed by dialect poetry. As Roy Harvey Pearce wrote of turn-of-the-century American poets like

Riley (whom he mentions by name in a “depressing list” that also includes Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Richard Watson Gilder), their “poems are, in the bad sense, exercises in rhetoric.”² Casting a revisionist eye on the “bad sense” of Riley’s rhetoric, however, my aim has not been to defend the aesthetic value of the work of the most popular American dialect poets but to uncover the ways in which the rhetorics of literacy advanced by dialect poetry were especially effective in redirecting the fragile reading processes of the children who constituted a large part of the genre’s readership as well as the seemingly established reading practices of advanced readers who found themselves stumbling through the weird spellings they encountered.

Although records of actual literacy rates have been fundamental to my project, the ideology of literacy is what is most relevant to the story of American dialect poetry. As Cathy N. Davidson writes, “literacy itself is never a simple ‘rate’ but embodies an ideology, a philosophy of education, of who should be educated, at what public cost, and to what end.”³ An unexpectedly useful tool for the nineteenth-century American schoolteacher, dialect poetry addresses these questions both covertly and directly, “educating” its readers in its own systems and frequently thematizing education—specifically literacy acquisition and proper spelling. Because the last decades of the nineteenth century represented a period of dramatic increase in literacy rates, more and more people were responsive to the fact that dialect writing appeared to be, on the page, performing the work it described. In interrupting the reading process and temporarily rebuilding an alternative literacy based upon new and strange orthographies, dialect poetry expressed an ideology of literacy, courting those readers who were familiar with conventional spelling even as it overthrew that spelling and erected a new one in its place. “A work of art,” writes Pierre Bourdieu, “has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded,” and a “beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms.”⁴ It is difficult to imagine a more apt description of what is involved in reading the “chaos of sounds” transliterated by dialect poets, whom Ambrose Bierce disparaged as a “pignoramus crew of malinguists, cacophonologists and apostropographers.”⁵ Surprisingly, through a Bourdieuan lens, dialect poetry exemplifies not popular literature but the highbrow and exclusive literature of cultural capital. Celebrating dialect poetry as a kind of classroom misbehavior, then, as does Walter Blair (cited in my first chapter), glosses over its collaborations with general literacy and elite literary culture.

Dialect poetry's ability to force readers' attention to aspects of literacy acquisition and the reading process—the tensions between sounding out and silent reading, the temporal distance between reading and decoding—suggests just how tied it is, in all of its forms, to acts of reading. My attention to form intends to demonstrate that the success of dialect poetry depends upon obstructions on the level of small components of language like phonemes and graphemes; it is a body of writing that necessarily makes reading a laborious activity, as reading in general typically is for the person learning to read. In that labor is the constantly vacillating exclusion and inclusion that defines the dialect poetry reading experience: that is, one moves between being excluded and included as he or she moves through the text.⁶ In the work of most of the poets discussed here, this exclusion typically does not occur on a lexical level but a graphic one.

As I have argued throughout this study, all of this labor made dialect poetry reading a difficult experience. Just as the child is first confronted with alien letters that, her teacher tells her, correspond to familiar sounds, the dialect poetry reader must make her way through the labyrinth of a writer's odd and deliberate orthography, nostalgically reliving the early experience of learning to read. To quote Aldon Nielsen:

It is crucial that we recall that realism of linguistic representation, like social and magical realism in the novel, is a carefully constructed literary style, not a scientific recording of actual speech. It is a fictive orthography adopted for the purpose of conveying an entire literary ideology via style. Even the most lifelike literary representations of colloquial speech only infrequently correspond with exactitude to the recorded utterances of actual speaking subjects.⁷

This opposition between the purported “realism of linguistic representation” in dialect poetry and the artifice of its “constructed literary style” manifested as contradictions in its reception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Nielsen's “infrequently,” however, I would replace with “never,” unless perhaps the imagined speech is represented using a phonetic alphabet, resulting in writing that is then fairly useless as literary language.) Reactions to dialect poetry's convolutions are in fact comparable to those identified by Dorri Beam in her reading of a type of “highly wrought” fiction by nineteenth-century American women writers: there is a simultaneous appreciation and critical scrutiny of “labor that had become a luxury in its excess, or a surface that had become inappropriately labored,” respectively.⁸ All of the complex formal mechanics of

dialect poetry that I have attempted to identify and illuminate in this book have been obscured by the requisite ease of the subject matter and the pretense of simplicity.

The confusion surrounding the dialect poem's simultaneous graphic difficulty and emotional sincerity also results in some contradictory advice regarding its performance. In *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue*, S. S. Curry, the president of the School of Expression when he published this study in 1908, describes Riley's "homely Hoosier dialect as the clothing of the speaker in most of his monologues," a description that resonates with the fabric metaphor used by Charles Battell Loomis in "The Dialect Store," cited at the start of this book. In his instructions for recitation, Curry advises readers that a "dialect too literally reproduced will be understood with great difficulty, and the reading will cause no enjoyment." "All true art," according to Curry, "is clear; it is not a puzzle" and "must never be labored."⁹ What Curry neglects to say here is that, even in performance, in order for a dialect poem not to be a puzzle or a labor for the listener, it must be a puzzle and a labor for the performer.

Authors such as William Dean Howells, as Henry B. Wonham writes, viewed dialect as "a lingua franca for the common man" that was therefore, in theory, "consistent with the official social vision of realism," but, in actuality, dialect "often serves to emphasize the utter strangeness of unassimilable elements."¹⁰ So Riley's speaker, in the poem from which I quote in the epigraph above, can ask for "plane facts" and "plane words," all the while asking for these facts and words in a manner that is anything but plain, and can wish for a time "[w]hen speech run free as the songs of birds," despite the fact that the effort required to voice dialect poetry necessarily impedes smooth recitation. Unlike the "tale" that the speaker desires, Riley's poem is of necessity "tetch[ed] . . . up." Even the word "plain" is misspelled, a homonym providing Riley with a perfectly ironic example of eye dialect.

This study demonstrates how an art form that appears to be most closely linked to the vernacular is in fact preoccupied with investigating its distance from it. As a genre cultivated in order to mimic oral performance and to fashion authentic personalities, dialect poetry lays bare its own construction. Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American dialect poetry is in essence the mingled product of enduring oral art forms and increased reading and writing practices. And, although the performance of dialect poetry during this period has garnered more scholarly attention than the silent reading of it, the history of dialect poetry's reception proves that readers clearly invited the challenge of printed dialect poetry into their

lives, especially in surprising places like elite magazines such as the *Century* or primary school textbooks. In fact, the historical presence of dialect poetry in contexts that are typically associated with silent reading counters the standard view that locates dialect poetry's cultural significance in its performance.

Turning to one of the appendices of Frank Luther Mott's classic *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* is particularly illuminating in this respect. Sales of books of dialect poetry apparently outstripped sales of books of non-dialect poetry in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States. According to Mott, Riley's *The Old Swimmin' Hole* and *'Leven More Poems* is one of a very small number of books of poetry (such as Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads* and Edgar Guest's *A Heap o' Livin'*, both largely in dialect) that meet his guidelines for "best seller" in the United States from 1870 to 1930, the years covered by *Rhetorics of Literacy*. What did so many readers want from printed dialect poetry and from the private reading of dialect poetry, and why did so many teachers facilitate the sales of dialect poetry books, believing the genre to be wholesome and useful, when they were at the same time so heavily invested in standard orthography? The neglected formal characteristics of dialect poetry allowed the subgenre to be used by authors, readers, editors, and even schoolteachers as a difficult and cultivated form that ironically fostered a novel and experimental sort of literacy through its departures from recognizable forms of written English.

Recontextualizing figures lost to literary history like Harte and Riley within the narratives of the development of American poetry provides us with a new way to understand representations of speech in literature in general, reorienting our approach to such seemingly dissimilar poets as Robert Frost and Charles Olson, poets who were concerned with speech but with whom we do not associate the genre we think of as dialect poetry. This recontextualization can also revise how we think of the literary landscape of earlier American poetry and the twentieth-century history of it—the "continuity of American poetry," to quote Roy Harvey Pearce—that allowed poets like Riley to fall out of the canon. Critics usually elide American poetry of the late nineteenth century, as John Timberman Newcomb has shown, almost as if out of embarrassment. Like Newcomb, I propose "taking seriously the sort of verse we were taught to regard as worthless doggerel." Unlike the prose fiction of the period, Newcomb points out, "verse texts that come across as sentimental in tone, transparent in theme, or conventional in form, are ignored or scorned"; the generic privileging of prose fiction has in fact blinded us to the consequences of this depreciation.¹¹

Donald Hall, in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Children's Verse in America*, presents a narrative that accuses Riley of diverting the stream of American poetry in a manner that destroyed its ability to be simultaneously serious and popular, as it was in Longfellow's day. He associates Riley's embrace of the low-brow with a "considerable decline in literacy from Professor Longfellow"; from Riley, "[t]he path slopes downward through Eugene Field to end in the pages of the *Detroit Free Press* with Edgar A. Guest."¹² And, yet, literacy, I argue here, is what dialect poetry is all about. We have forgotten how writers we think of as modern received the poetry of Harte and Riley as part and parcel of their poetic education. We have forgotten that it was the tremendous success of "Plain Language from Truthful James"—not of the realist Western fiction with which Harte's reputation has become associated—that prompted the *Atlantic Monthly*, needing a "marquee name to shore up subscriptions and raise advertising revenue," to offer him an exclusive contract on June 21, 1870, as contributing editor for the magazine. Harte's travel across the country to assume his new post was greeted with such eagerness that, according to Twain, "one might have supposed he was the Viceroy of India."¹³

Twain's exotic analogy also reminds us of the fact that the story of American dialect poetry is not exclusively American: not only did Harte, Riley, and Dunbar cross the country to present their work, all three also crossed the Atlantic to conduct tours in England. English audiences were interested in the peculiarly American voices, in regional dialects, that they recreated on stage. Following the lead of recent work (including a 2005 special issue of *Victorian Poetry*) on transatlantic Victorianism, emphasizing "the presence of American poetics within Victorian poetics, and of Victorian poetics within American poetics," I believe that, although I focus in this book on American poetry, the cultural impact of dialect poetry should be considered not only transhistorically but also transnationally.¹⁴ Aside from the common ground shared by the American dialect poetries discussed here and British dialect poetries of the same period (like Tennyson's), it is evident that the issue of poetic voice generally and the experiments with the dramatic monologue form among British Victorian poets resonated in the work of late-nineteenth-century American dialect poets. Summarizing Victorianist critic Eric Griffiths's views, Margaret Linley writes that "there is a peculiar specificity to how voice is constituted in acts of reading when that reading is mediated by print. The embodied voice of poetry that is born in the era of the printing press is neither wholly mechanical nor animate but both simultaneously." Dialect poetry is an extreme case that supports this view, as both the animated voice it

suspended and the printed features through which a reader must labor are exaggerated. Furthermore, Linley adds that “we might analyze how at the moment when voice would seem to have died onto the page, its spirit returns, as the written sign of voice and in acts of reading aloud, as an organic (though technologically enhanced) prosthesis for the machine-made word.”¹⁵ The strange relationship between dialect poetry and the modern sound and visual technologies with which some believed it to be compatible while others perceived it to be dissonant again makes this argument even more strongly; the receptions of the filmic and phonographic representations of Riley heighten and amplify the relationship between his oral and written incarnations. With the work of those critics who “address Victorian poetry as itself a technology” in mind—Victorian poetry on both sides of the Atlantic, I would add—the complexity of dialect poetry’s negotiations of voice and print becomes more and more apparent.¹⁶

I would like to return briefly, in closing, to Loomis’s “The Dialect Store,” the story that started this book, now retrospectively straightforward and naive in its stitching together of different dialect orthographies after we have explored the various forms of dialect poetry developed by the poets addressed here. When the narrator of “The Dialect Store” finds, at the “Western dialect” counter, that Riley “had just engaged the whole output of the plant,” he points not only to the perception of the conventionality of Riley’s dialect poetry, but to the enormous demand that takes a factory’s output to meet it.¹⁷ As Janice Radway and Perry Frank point out, Riley’s “idealizations of farm and country life were enormously popular throughout the country, despite the fact that the peculiar language he employed was nearly incomprehensible to some.”¹⁸ Even Henry Van Dyke, one of Riley’s admirers, sheepishly writes that he “must confess that [the dialect] sometimes looks a little queer as printed.”¹⁹ Why were readers drawn to dialect poetry that was barely legible—essentially, a “difficult” popular poetry, a seeming paradox—and what did that dialect poetry presume to offer them? I propose here that both readers and writers found an edifying pleasure in laboring through that illegibility. Although the late-nineteenth-century craze for dialect poetry has passed, like so much of the nonstandard language that contributed to it, American poets continue to pursue writing that is, as Harryette Mullen describes her dictionary in the poem “Sleeping with the Dictionary,” “thick with accented syllables.”²⁰