chapter one

The Difficulty of Dialect Poetry

* * *

“Another book of Riley’s”—
And now, on every side,
The folks who aim at dialect
Take up their pens with pride;
They ring in “ef” and “ruther,”
And “thist,” and “shucks” and “haint.”
The frost is on their dialect—
The spelling, though, is quaint.

“Another book of Riley’s,”—
They lift their joyous song,
In which they show that dialect
Consists in spelling wrong.
They’re writing now from Portland
Clear back to Sandy Hook
An endless stream of “dialect”
On Riley’s “nuther book.”

“Another book from Riley”—
They wreck the alphabet
To twist us out some dialect
That ne’er was spoken yet.
Here’s to you, Mr. Riley,
Your book’s a welcome guest,
It’s good to read your dialect
And then skip all the rest.

—W. D. Nesbit, “The Rhymes of Riley”

* * *

When the speaker of James Whitcomb Riley’s “The Rossville Lec-
tur’ Course” says that humorist Robert Burdette is too “busy writin’
ortographts” to perform as part of a small-town Chautauqua-style lec-
The Difficulty of Dialect Poetry

In conflating “autograph” with “orthography,” Riley’s dialect spelling in “The Rossville Lectur’ Course” participated indirectly in the debates surrounding the organized spelling reform movements developing in late-nineteenth-century America. First published in 1886, Riley’s poem appears coincidentally during the same year that the American Philological Association and the Philological Society of England together compiled a lengthy list of words whose spellings they proposed should be improved (for example, above should be written abuv, and addle should be written adl). Six years later, in a Harper’s Magazine essay titled “As to ‘American Spelling,’” Brander Matthews is one of many luminaries contributing to the attack upon conventional spelling, arguing that “our spelling, so far from being immaculate at its best, is, at its best, hardly less absurd than the haphazard, rule-of-thumb, funnily phonetic spelling of Artemus Ward and of Josh Billings.” The dialect writer-performers Matthews mentions, Ward and Billings, became famous through “cacography,” with spellings that are meant primarily to indicate illiteracy and not mispronunciation; each, as William Dean Howells writes, “appeals to the grotesqueness of mis-

ture series, it is no accident that Riley’s invented dialect term lies visually between “autograph” and “orthography.” Refusing to resolve itself, Riley’s dialect spelling pun illustrates how dialect poetry could assume a contradictory role in literary education: “bad spellings” exemplified the dangers the popular genre ostensibly posed to everyday speech, but these dangers were often outweighed by the valuable possibilities opened up by its orthographical experimentation in the mastery of both oratory and, ironically, literacy.

Usually associated with orality, dialect poetry in fact often both thematized and cultivated literacy, finding a distinct place for itself in the increasingly silent classroom. In other words, the public performance and declamation of dialect poetry (disseminated in a manner consistent with its nostalgic vision of a lost, primary orality) was exceedingly popular, but the silent reading of dialect poetry—a seeming oxymoron—encouraged a new and challenging kind of literacy. Riley and other popular dialect poets published in various print media. And, complicating the perceived opposition between literacy and orality, some dialect poets were also presented to audiences by the end of the century in new visual media and media of secondary orality. A silent film in which Riley appeared, to which I turn at the end of this chapter, even reproduced the dialect spellings of his writing on the screen in order to provoke a viewing experience that mimicked the book-reading experience, combining the visual “autograph” of Riley’s appearance with his peculiar “orthography.”
spelling to help out his fun.” In fact, however, their spellings sometimes correspond to those of spelling reformers in their faithfulness to spoken English; for example, the Complete Works of Josh Billings lists the titles of its chapters in a “Table ov Kontents,” spelled in a way that would please many spelling reformers. Nevertheless, Matthews’s intended point is clear: the established orthography and the language of dialect poets resemble each other in their irrationality.

H. L. Mencken, on the other hand, argues years later in The American Language that one of the major impediments to successful spelling reform is precisely the fact that the new phonetic spellings recall comic dialect writing, and therefore will not be taken seriously. It seems that there was no consensus in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, at the time of dialect writing’s greatest popularity, about what dialect spellings in fact were doing. Literary dialect incorporated both the phonetically significant (in representing nonstandard speech) and the phonetically insignificant (as in cacography, which I am including under the rubric of dialect poetry, and as in eye dialect), and it recalled both conventional and reformed orthographic systems while destroying the illusion of perfect correspondence suggested by either system. For that reason, Matthews may use literary dialect as a negative example in order to support his argument against conventional spelling, and Mencken may use it to show the pitfalls of spelling reform. The strange spellings of dialect poetry allowed popular writers of the late nineteenth century to trouble the relationship between written and spoken American English, alternately reforming and reinforcing conventional orthography.

In either case, dialect writing was closely associated with its orthography, at least for the obvious reason that literary representations of speech formally consisted in distortions of conventional spelling. Walter Blair describes the late-nineteenth-century mania for dialect writing as a kind of classroom misbehavior: “It was an age, too, when schoolmarms and dictionary makers were stuffy and stern about spelling, elegant diction, and grammar; therefore, assaults on all three seemed both naughty and funny.” All three, admittedly, could be attacked in dialect poetry, but assaults upon orthography were the ones to which readers seemed most sensitive. For example, in an 1895 letter to the editors of Dial magazine given the title “The Craze for Wrong Spelling,” a frustrated reader from Texas, William Wanless Anderson, complains about what he calls “newspaper poems of good quality, marred only by the fault of bad spelling, intentionally bad spelling,” used to indicate “vulgar pronunciation.” He
is concerned principally with spelling and not syntax in dialect poetry; he finds that the latter is usually “from first to last . . . faultless.” He claims:

There is no conceivable temptation that can justify the use of orthoëpic, orthographic, or syntactical irregularities, unless it be a desire for picturesqueness—such, for instance, as is found in the Scottish dialect, or the dialect which Tennyson musically portrays. . . . The common American half-dialect which is found in most of these poems is altogether unpicturesque and unbeautiful. . . . Dialect poems are, of course, sometimes so good as to be still good, though defaced in this manner; as are some of the pieces of the well-meaning James Whitcomb Riley, at present the chief offender. . . .

Anderson ends his letter with the pronouncement that dialect poets “should respect the English language, not degrade and deface it.” His attitude, including the Anglophilia reflected in his description of American English as “unpicturesque and unbeautiful,” is not far removed from the attitude that Blair alleges typified schoolmarm and dictionary makers in the late nineteenth century.

However, American spelling reformers, most notably Noah Webster, had already begun their “assault” upon a less-entrenched orthography by the late eighteenth century. Webster’s efforts to change American spelling were founded upon the desire to make it conform to his idea of actual American speech. Many nineteenth-century philologists, Gavin Jones points out, saw spelling reform “as a form of democratic social work,” an effort to increase mass literacy. Like spelling reform, dialect poetry’s attention to spelling betrays in some cases a certain reverence for it and for its potential, as phonetic dialect poems attempt (at least in theory) to uncomplicate the relationship between speech and writing, providing greater access and creating more potential readers. Moreover, stereotypical schoolmarm and dictionary makers were hardly attacked in or by dialect poems. The dialect poem in fact ironically performs the work of the schoolmarm: it promotes literacy. By “writing orthographies” as well as “writing autographs,” popular dialect poets of the period stimulated the public’s interest in bad spelling and thereby in spelling in general, standing for contradictory positions in the debate, at a time when concerns about spelling on both sides were gaining more public notice.

As good spelling was fast becoming the cornerstone of a solid education, dialect poetry’s spellings, even if potentially useful as an aid to literacy, were certainly imagined to be exerting a negative influence upon
the informal speech of its audience. The catchiness essential to most dialect poems enabled their lines to lodge in the minds of listeners and readers, and these lines were easily integrated into American phraseology at large. An anonymous reviewer in the November 1871 issue of The Galaxy certainly suggests as much when he writes of Bret Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James,” “It is not too much to say that it has sensibly modified the colloquial speech of the day.” As if recalling an epidemic, one journalist remembers a time when Harte’s poems were “in everybody’s mouth, from the codfish shores of the Atlantic to the golden sands of the Pacific, from the rustic regions of the Northern Lakes to the alligator bayous of the Gulf of Mexico—so to speak. . . . [I]t seemed impossible for any man to address another without lugging in the grotesque phraseology of the Californian humorist.” The influence of Harte’s poem was transnational and, for a time, seemed destined to be transhistorical. In 1900, T. Edgar Pemberton could write—in England—that, “in spite of the thirty years that have elapsed since his creation, the doings of Ah Sin and the sayings of Truthful James are still as familiar amongst us as household words.” And, as late as 1911, a journalist cited an English writer who claimed that, with the exception of Pope’s “Essay on Man,” “there is no poem in our native tongue that has added so great a number of distinctive phrases and epithets to our everyday speech.”

The language of dialect poetry could be heard everywhere, but it is also worth noting that it was printed everywhere. In 1871, only a year after they were published, Harte’s poem and John Hay’s “Little Breeches,” another popular dialect poem, had “probably been printed a million of times. They are copied and gravely approved by English reviews of the first class. . . . They are pinned up on the walls of gin-shops, and carried furtively in the portemonnaies of Doctors of Divinity.” Not only did copies of the poems seem ubiquitous in print culture, crossing all boundaries of social class, the language of the most popular dialect poems—especially “Plain Language from Truthful James”—had printed lives outside of the poems themselves. Reporters used Truthful James’s words as if they were their own, leading the reviewer cited above to claim that “[n]o poem of its length in the language has furnished such a store of quotations to the newspapers as Mr. Harte’s ballad of ‘Ah Sin.’” One newspaper writer, in the same year that saw the explosion of printed iterations of Harte’s and Hay’s poems, prematurely declared the end of dialect poetry, perhaps eager to be rid of “the most fearful swarm of poetical dialecticians” that followed in Harte’s wake. “No newspaper was complete without one,” he writes, but, because “the thing was overdone to an extent which has
made people awfully tired of it,” the newspapers stopped printing it. To paraphrase Mark Twain, these early reports of the death of dialect poetry were greatly exaggerated, as the amateur attempts to reproduce Harte’s and Hay’s (and, later, Riley’s, as the epigraph to this chapter illustrates) work proliferated. As these imitations suggest, not only did readers of dialect poetry learn to read the orthographies of their favorite dialect poets, they also learned to reproduce them, assimilating new scripts in the process.

The impact of literary dialect in general, especially because of its ubiquity, was felt to be an especially great danger to the speech of children as they were struggling toward an understanding of the mechanics of the English language. The vulnerability of schoolchildren is addressed indirectly in an acerbic poem called “A Recipe for a Poem ‘In Dialect,’” also briefly cited in this book’s introduction. The writer worries insincerely that he might be a “fogy” because

\[\ldots\]
I can’t help recalling an earlier stage,
When a Poet meant something beyond a Reporter,
And his lines could be read to a sister or daughter;

\[\ldots\]
And we all would have blushed, had we dreamed of the rules,
Which are taught us to-day in our ‘Dialect’ schools.

\[\ldots\]
Well! ’twere folly to row ’gainst a tide that has turned,
And the lesson that’s set us has got to be learned;
But I’ll make one more desperate pull to be free
Ere I swallow the brood of that “Heathen Chinee.” (emphasis in original)\[18\]

In light of this poem, it makes sense that newspaper writers would have picked up the language of popular dialect poems. If dialect poems themselves are nothing more than a form of reportage, those journalists who quote from poems such as “Plain Language from Truthful James” would perhaps find Harte’s language surprisingly consistent with journalistic discourse, if a bit more colorful. But the pedagogical power of dialect poetry is even more significant here. Essentially comparing the reading of newspapers to a passively received education, the poet regrets that “the lesson” taught in the contemporary “Dialect’ schools” is unavoidable. For better or for worse, to be well versed in dialect poetry was now a necessary part of being an educated American.
Evidently, however, dialect poetry’s supposedly unfortunate influence upon speech differed from its influence upon elocution. While literary dialect was believed to corrupt everyday speech, and to frustrate any attempts to standardize spelling in one way or another (as the opposing views of Mencken and Matthews demonstrate), it could actually improve oratorical skills. Late in the nineteenth century, the recitation movement shifted noticeably, becoming more democratic and entertainment-oriented and less instructive, with recitations of dialect poetry becoming increasingly common and contributing to this shift. In addition, at the turn of the century, elocution was evolving into a less formal, less artificial art, and dialect suited efforts to sound more natural when reciting literature.

But, somehow, just as the production and recitation of dialect poetry was rising, it appears that reading aloud was generally waning. In the 1880 *Every-Day English: A Sequel to ‘Words and their Uses,*’ a compilation of articles originally published throughout the seventies, Richard Grant White complains that “[r]eading aloud seems almost gone out of fashion. . . . It is no longer really taught in schools, or it is taught in very few. A single generation has seen it pass away.” One of the reasons for its decline in the home and in public, White argues, is the rise of silent reading. This demise was perceived as especially disastrous for the appreciation of poetry. In a journal article from 1914, John Harrington Cox, an educator and early scholar of folksong, insisted that poetry “must be heard. The printed page is able to impress the thought and the form, but the melody and the cadence must be sounded, and these are the things which touch the emotion and enliven the imagery. Silent reading of poetry is artificial.” As a solution to this unfortunate occurrence, he proposes that “[t]here should be a return to the oral presentation of verse. . . . At home, by the fireside, in the school, in public everywhere, let poetry be read as verse.” In other words, both private and public reading of poetry must, for Cox, in essence be public, as he rejects reading practices that mute and, therefore, interiorize poetry. Silent reading was having a profound effect upon reading practices at home, at social events and, perhaps most important, at school. Shirley Brice Heath writes:

By the . . . early twentieth century in the United States, exercise books, written examinations, and standardized tests silenced classrooms. Learning to read and write one’s mother tongue depended on written practice to reproduce standard language norms, which at the lower levels were isolable mechanical features of the language (e.g. spelling, subject-verb agreement, vocabulary development, etc.), and at the higher levels relied on predictable responses to literature. Once students learned basic ter-
minology surrounding the identification of authors, genres, and literary conventions, they moved on to write the essay, the dominant productive genre in classrooms. For the instruction and testing of such learning, silence became *de rigueur*, and evaluation of a student’s knowledge depended exclusively on the written record.²²

More than other genres of poetry, dialect poetry had the ability to keep alive the tradition of reading aloud in this new era of the silent classroom. Its burgeoning popularity supported a fundamentally nostalgic and conservative impulse. Despite dialect poetry’s reputation as a possible impediment to the improvement of children’s spelling and colloquial speech, it was considered a pedagogically valuable instrument for the disappearing art of recitation.

Because it was one of the genres of literature most suitable for the revival of elocution, dialect poetry was well positioned to promote an alternative literacy, one steeped in what Walter Ong would call a culture of “secondary orality.” The period of 1918 to 1925, according to one study, may have “marked . . . an exaggerated and, in some cases, almost exclusive emphasis on silent reading procedures”—with the transformative year of 1922 coincidentally being “particularly productive of books that treated different phases of silent reading”—but dialect poetry continued to counter these forces by nudging readers toward a new kind of print-influenced orality.²³ In addition to silent reading, another significant change in reading instruction ushered in during the early twentieth century (although it was also tried and promoted by some educators earlier) was the intense emphasis on “whole word” reading, or what Lillian Gray called the “look-and-say excess,” as opposed to phonics, which was popular at the turn of the century, or the alphabet method, “which was nearly universal in the United States until about 1870.”²⁴ Although there have been vociferous advocates on both sides of this divide since the early nineteenth century, the general shift in the early twentieth century was toward whole-word reading. It is easy to see how the dialect poetry reading experience presents a challenge to this shift. In encouraging readers to sound out words, dialect poetry supported prevailing reading instruction methods when “rigorous phonic programs were the rule . . . from about 1880 to 1915.”²⁵ However, by the end of Riley’s career, when his poems were introduced most aggressively into the classroom, dialect poetry worked against the emerging whole-word instruction and required an approach based in phonics that we might call reactionary and nostalgic in light of contemporaneous pedagogical innovations.
Chapter One

Anthologizing Dialect Poetry

Far from offending the traditional schoolmarm, then, dialect poetry complemented her efforts and soon entered the textbooks. As a matter of fact, in 1905, the Indiana State Teacher’s Association honored Riley with a program of lectures and performances in tribute to him, the transcripts of which were published. Riley Day, a local and then national school holiday, was observed by students through performances of both Riley’s work and their own modeled after Riley’s, a testament to the didactic quality of his verse, which I will discuss in greater depth in the next chapter. At the level of higher education, he was awarded several honorary degrees. Elizabeth J. Van Allen writes in her biography of Riley that “[s]tudents in classrooms on the prairie and in the Ivy League read Riley poems,” indicating the wide range of students to whom his poetry was taught. Not surprisingly, Harte and Riley are well represented in poetry collections like 1935’s You Know These Lines!: A Bibliography of the Most Quoted Verses in American Poetry as poets whose “lines you do remember” whether or not “you should.” Their poetry, in other words, may be memorable, but it is hardly worth memorizing; it is rote knowledge that somehow entices and creeps up on its readers. In this way, dialect poetry functions as an extreme subgenre of lyric poetry; as Jonathan Culler writes of the lyric, “poems seek to inscribe themselves in mechanical memory, Gedächtnis, ask to be learned by heart, taken in, introjected, or housed as bits of alterity that can be repeated, considered, treasured, or ironically cited.” Like the poetry itself, the personality of Riley in particular looms large and mesmerizes students in their classrooms. The classroom influence of Riley and Eugene Field, another “children’s poet,” is compared by Walter Barnes to a type of thrall and hero-worship: “[w]e have hypnotized school-children into admiration of them; we celebrate their birthdays, hang their pictures in our schoolrooms.” In addition to choosing children as the subject for his poetry, Riley actively courted schoolchildren as a significant segment of his reading audience.

However, the poetry by Riley that was read in the classroom was not a representative portion of his oeuvre. It was most often less dialectal than the best known of his verses; that is, the dialect used is relatively intelligible and not visually intrusive. In Tables 1 and 2, I refer to this quality as “readability,” borrowing loosely from Edgar Dale and Jeanne S. Chall’s definition of the term to mean “the sum total . . . of all those elements within a given piece of printed material that affects the success a group of readers have with it. The success is the extent to which they understand it,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>James Whitcomb Riley Poems</th>
<th>Readability, Based Upon Dialect Spellings¹</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Open Sesame! Poetry and Prose for School-Days, Vol. 1, Arranged for Children from Four to Twelve Years Old</em> (1889)</td>
<td>“Little Orphant Annie”</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“When She Comes Home”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“A Life Lesson”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td>“A Song”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Nothin’ to Say”</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
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<td>“Knee-Deep in June”</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
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<td><em>Lights of Literature</em> (1898)</td>
<td>“The King”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td>“Knee-Deep in June”</td>
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<td><em>Best Things from American Literature</em> (1899)</td>
<td>“A Life Lesson”</td>
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<td><em>The Literature of All Nations and All Ages: History, Character and Incident</em> (1900)</td>
<td>“A’ Old Played-Out Song”</td>
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<td>“Beautiful Hands”</td>
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<td><em>The New McGuffey Fourth Reader</em> (1901)</td>
<td>“A Song”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td><em>The Heath Readers, Fifth Reader</em> (1903)</td>
<td>“The Child”</td>
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<td>“A Song of Autumn”</td>
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<td><em>Wheeler’s Graded Readers, A Third Reader</em> (1904)</td>
<td>“The Brook-Song”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td>“The Land of Thus-and-So”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td><em>Classics Old and New: Third Reader</em> (1906)</td>
<td>“A Simple Recipe”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td><em>Poems By Grades, containing Poems Selected for Each Grade of the School Course, Poems for Each Month and Memory Gems, Vol. II, Grades 5, 6, 7, 8</em> (1907)</td>
<td>“The Name of Old Glory”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td><em>The Art-Literature Readers, Book Four</em> (1909)</td>
<td>“Child-Heart”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td>“The Brook Song”</td>
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<td>“No Boy Knows”</td>
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<td>“The Yellow-Bird”</td>
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<td>“The Boy Patriot”</td>
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<td>“The Circus-Day Parade”</td>
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<td>“Pansies”</td>
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<td>“On the Sunny Side”</td>
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<td>“The South Wind and the Sun”</td>
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<td>“Extremes”</td>
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<td>“The Nine Little Goblins”</td>
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<td>“The Prayer Perfect”</td>
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<td>“God Bless Us Every One”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“A Life-Lesson”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<td><em>Elson Grammar School Reader, Book One</em> (1911)</td>
<td>“The Name of Old Glory”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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TABLE 1 (Continued)
Selected Textbooks and Anthologies, 1889–1935

| Title                                                                 | James Whitcomb Riley Poems                                      | Readability, Based Upon Dialect Spellings¹  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|****************************************************************|--------------------------------------------|
| *The Riverside Reader, First Reader* (1911)                           | “A Sea-Song”                                                    | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “The Name of Old Glory”                                         | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “Out to Old Aunt Mary’s”                                        | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “A Song”                                                        | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “A Sudden Shower”                                               | Standard English                           |
| *Studies in Reading* (1912)                                           | “Let Something Good Be Said”                                    | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “A Life Lesson”                                                 | Standard English                           |
| *The Young and Field Literary Readers, Book Four* (1914)              | “The Circus-Day Parade”                                         | Standard English                           |
| *Readings from American Literature: A Textbook for Schools and Colleges* (1915) | “When She Comes Home”                                           | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “The Raggedy Man”                                               | Low readability                            |
|                                                                       | “The Days Gone By”                                              | Standard English                           |
| *American Literary Readings* (1917)                                   | “Afterwhiles”                                                   | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “The Raggedy Man”                                               | Low readability                            |
| *Wheeler’s Graded Literary Readers with Interpretations, Sixth Reader* (1919) | “Out to Old Aunt Mary’s”                                        | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “The South Wind and the Sun”                                    | Standard English                           |
| *Poems for Youth* (1925)                                              | “Little Orphant Annie”                                          | Low readability                            |
|                                                                       | “When the Frost is on the Punkin’”                              | High readability                           |
| *An Hour of American Poetry* (1929)                                   | “A Man by the Name of Bolus”                                    | High readability                           |
|                                                                       | “The Old Man and Jim”                                           | High readability                           |
| *First Appearance in Print of Some Four Hundred Quotations* (1935)    | “A Life Lesson”                                                 | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “An Old Sweetheart of Mine”                                     | Standard English                           |
| *You Know These Lines!: A Bibliography of the Most Quoted Verses in American Poetry* (1935) | “A Life Lesson”                                                 | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “Little Orphant Annie”                                          | Low readability                            |
|                                                                       | “An Old Sweetheart of Mine”                                     | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “The Old Swimmin’-Hole”                                         | High readability                           |
|                                                                       | “Out to Old Aunt Mary’s”                                        | Standard English                           |
|                                                                       | “The Raggedy Man”                                               | Low readability                            |

¹ High readability = more than one of five words is a dialect spelling; Low readability = fewer than one of five words is a dialect spelling; Standard English = no dialect spellings.

² I have categorized this poem as “standard English,” because its only dialect spellings are “’em” and “babtizin’,” the latter left in quotation marks.
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<td><strong>Elocutionist’s Annual (1885)</strong></td>
<td>“Out to Old Aunt Mary’s”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Elocutionist’s Annual (1888)</strong></td>
<td>“The Elf Child” (“Little Orphant Annie”) “An Old Sweetheart of Mine” “The Old Man and Jim”</td>
<td>Low readability Standard English High readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard Comic Recitations (1888)</strong></td>
<td>“Chairley Burke’s in Town”</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
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<td><strong>Elocutionist’s Annual (1889)</strong></td>
<td>“The Land of Thus and So”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emma Dunning Banks’s Original Recitations (1890)</strong></td>
<td>“The Elf Child” (“Little Orphant Annie”)</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Werner’s Readings and Recitations, No. 2 (1890)</strong></td>
<td>“Waitin’ Fer the Cat to Die” “So I Got to Thinkin’ of Her” “Old-Fashioned Roses” “My Fiddle” “Lost” “A Canary at the Farm”</td>
<td>Low readability High readability Low readability High readability Standard English Low readability</td>
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<td><strong>Readings, Recitations, and Impersonations (1891)</strong></td>
<td>“The Elf Child” (“Little Orphant Annie”) “At ‘The Literary’”</td>
<td>Low readability Low readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal Series: Select Readings and Recitations for Christmas (1891)</strong></td>
<td>“Last Christmas Was a Year Ago”</td>
<td>High readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal Series: Select Readings and Recitations (1891)</strong></td>
<td>“The Unheard”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal Series: Select Readings and Recitations for Young People (1891)</strong></td>
<td>“The Baby” “Curv’ture of the Spine”</td>
<td>Standard English Low readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal Series: Select Readings and Recitations for All the Year Round (1892)</strong></td>
<td>“A Feel in the Chris’mas-Air”</td>
<td>High readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard Recitations (1893)</strong></td>
<td>“Little Cousin Jaspar”</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good Humor for Reading and Recitation (1893)</strong></td>
<td>“A Fall-Crick View of the Earthquake” “Who Santy Claus Wuz”</td>
<td>Low readability Low readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal Series: Select Readings and Recitations for Christmas (1894)</strong></td>
<td>“Mr. Foley’s Christmas”</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal Series: Select Readings and Recitations (1894)</strong></td>
<td>“Let Something Good Be Said”</td>
<td>Standard English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Werner’s Readings and Recitations, No. 20 (1899)</strong></td>
<td>“A Liz-Town Humorist”</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Werner’s Readings and Recitations, No. 23 (1899)</strong></td>
<td>“Iry and Billy and Jo”</td>
<td>Low readability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ High readability = more than one of five words is a dialect spelling; Low readability = fewer than one of five words is a dialect spelling; Standard English = no dialect spellings.
Because I argue that the most unintelligible feature of dialect poetry, the feature inhibiting our ability to “read it at an optimum speed” and the feature to which most detractors of dialect poetry objected, is spelling and not, for example, syntax, I use the number of dialect spellings as my measure of readability.

In his *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States*, Frank Luther Mott writes, “There was a time when ‘The Old Swimmin’-Hole,’ ‘An Old Sweetheart of Mine,’ and ‘Little Orphant Annie’ were memorized and recited by thousands,” but Mott does not mention just who was memorizing these poems (children or adults, for example), or in what contexts (school or home or some other place). “Little Orphant Annie,” a “low readability” poem and arguably Riley’s most famous, rarely appears in textbooks. Of the selected textbooks and anthologies I reviewed, only three include it, one being *You Know These Lines*, a book that is not for school-use and is not geared toward children. In the commonly taught Riverside and McGuffey readers, none of the Riley poems included are in dialect. The group of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century textbooks listed in Table 1 gives his “standard English” poems disproportionate weight.

In Table 2, which lists selected late-nineteenth-century elocution manuals, many not explicitly for school-use (including volumes of *Standard Recitations*, the *Ideal Series*, and *The Elocutionist’s Annual*), we find the situation reversed: dialect poems outnumber non-dialect poems dramatically, with twice as many “low readability” (17) as “high readability” (8) texts. That Riley is best known as a dialect poet is not apparent in the textbooks and anthologies, but is clear in the elocution manuals. Although part of this shift can be attributed to the decline in the popularity of dialect poetry, it also indicates that the classroom was not the place for “low readability” poems. To cite Lesley Wheeler, “the canon of elocution—the most famous and most admired poems for recitation—is remarkably different from the literary canon that survived recitation’s ubiquity,” and, although none of Riley’s poetry has been canonized, the choices of the anthology- and textbook-makers cited in Table 1 reflect a desire to create a distinct “literary” canon of Riley’s work. As his example demonstrates, dialect poets were valued in the classroom—and the hints of local color provided by the suggestion of dialect were considered constructive and instructive—but only so much dialect orthography was allowed. In other words, even the pedagogically valuable aspects of dialect poetry were exploited only with reservations, and dialect poetry was a contradictory educational tool.
In addition to serving elaborate and complex educational goals, much of dialect poetry, as we will see in the coming chapters, takes as its subject the process of becoming literate in one way or another, whether that process is illustrated through dueling paratactic and hypotactic constructions, the misspellings of a spelling bee, or the products of child writing. The act of reading these poems in effect breaks down literacy in order to rebuild it in unorthodox ways; hearing them performed does not have this effect. The competent reader, as a result of the poem’s disruption of literacy through bad spelling, is returned to a state of virtual semi-literacy. As Gavin Jones puts it, dialect “transferred the difficulties of subliteracy onto ‘sophisticated’ readers.”

Of course, the act of reading dialect writing differs greatly from the act of reading most other types of literature. Jones paraphrases William James’s argument regarding the effects of spelling reform upon reading in *The Principles of Psychology* that “[t]o emphasize single phonemes rather than the ideographic wholeness of words would work directly against reading’s psychological mechanisms”; as Jones points out, dialect writing works the same way, disturbing “the natural process of reading, making it seem difficult for people of supposed linguistic competence, slowing them down.” However, literary dialect does more than slow the reading process; it forces some degree of articulation, making what would be silent reading a performance. Michel de Certeau writes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that reading is no longer accompanied, as it used to be, by the murmur of a vocal articulation nor by the movement of a muscular manducation. To read without uttering the words aloud or at least mumbling them is a ‘modern’ experience, unknown for millennia. In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor.

Reading dialect, however, can require “uttering the words aloud or at least mumbling them.” Not quite the articulation of oral delivery, but a bit beyond the subvocalization associated with reading in general, dialect poetry’s voicing resembles more closely the “sounding out” of a reader in the early stages of literacy. As de Certeau writes, “the schoolchild learns to read by a process that parallels his learning to decipher; learning to read is not a result of learning to decipher: reading meaning and deciphering letters correspond to two different activities, even if they intersect.” The person becoming literate performs how the acts of reading and decod-
ing happen separately. In “sounding out” words, the child and the dialect reader are not reading but merely translating from one medium to another: first, encountering words visually, letter by letter; and second, producing a phonetic interpretation of the marks on the page. Regardless of the many non-phonetic features of literary dialect, dialect poets often insist that their work must be read aloud, making readers of dialect poetry involuntary actors, as de Certeau puts it.

Late-nineteenth-century readers were not approaching dialect poetry as an imitation of oral art, but as a new and experimental generic experience combining the resources of orality and literacy. As a result, the links between dialect poetry performances and the appearances of dialect poetry in print (in textbooks, anthologies, magazines, newspapers, and other media) are necessary to an understanding of the ways in which literary dialect functioned psychologically and culturally. In reading dialect, the nostalgic experience—aside from that supplied by the thematic material of the literature—derives from the fact that readers were able to re-enact the experience of becoming literate through the phoneticization of literary dialect. This obtains to some degree even for children, having recently become literate. This developmental nostalgia, of the early childhood reading experience, works in tandem with the historical nostalgia many associate with dialect poetry. In practice, then, the competent reader and the semi-literate reader would differ in their approaches to literary dialect, because literary dialect (especially child writing, which I will discuss later) encourages a return to an orality similar to Ong’s secondary orality, to a new form dependent upon elements of both print and oral cultures, mixing spelling errors that don’t indicate phonetic differences with spelling errors that have phonetic accuracy as their goal.

Marketing the Mass Poet

To be sure, performed dialect literature idealistically appears to direct its appeal to both semi-literate and highly literate readers, and to the working and leisure classes. William Dean Howells argues that Riley’s audience exceeds Longfellow’s in size because his poetry “reaches the lettered as well as the unlettered” and excludes no group from his potential audience. Most treatments of dialect poetry, however, have emphasized the “unlettered” as its most significant audience. For example, Paul H. Gray claims that popular poetry of the “poet-performer movement” from 1870 to 1930, a movement in which dialect poetry played a major part, was
“aimed unerringly at the petite bourgeoisie—farmers, merchants, salesmen, and housewives—people who claimed they hated poetry but flocked by the thousands to hear these poets perform and then bought their books by the millions”; Gray calls the poetry “self-consciously and deliberately ‘low-brow.’” A letter found in the James Whitcomb Riley Collection at Indiana University’s Lilly Library would appear to support this view, as the letter writer alerts Riley to the fact that, while shopping just before Christmas, not only did he witness “a little boy poring over one of yr books his face all aglow & smiling & he utterly oblivious to the crowd jostling about him,” he also observed “an old farmer (in his native costume clad) look around over the store, fingering now this book and that, & after much consideration finally he selected a big family Bible and Riley’s works.”

However, Martha Vicinus in her study of nineteenth-century British dialect literature perhaps unintentionally admits one of the central paradoxes of dialect writing when she writes that, although an “average reader” may find dialect literature appealing in its subject matter, he or she “might have had difficulty in deciphering the irregular spelling of dialect works.” Because Riley’s themes revolve mainly around lower and lower middle-class life, many mistakenly assume that his reading audience consisted mainly of members of these classes. In a statement about nineteenth-century regionalist writing, a statement that just as easily could have been limited to dialect poetry specifically, Richard Brodhead argues that it “was not produced for the cultures it was written about, which were often non-literate and always orally based.” Similarly, Alan Trachtenberg writes that, before Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, “dialect either appeared within a grammatical framework or otherwise made clear it was intended for a grammatically proper reader.” Rather than courting an illiterate or minimally literate reader or listener, as an understanding of dialect poetry as oral or inclusive would suggest, the dialect poem targets a highly literate reader.

The notion that dialect poetry’s supposed orality was a sign of inclusivity is implicit in much late-nineteenth-century American dialect poetry, particularly poetry written in the Riley tradition. As Paul Laurence Dunbar writes in his poem “James Whitcomb Riley,” Riley succeeds as a dialect poet because “he puts the food so good an’ low / That the humblest one kin reach it.” Riley’s poetry is described by critics (and describes itself) as low-brow, just as Gray alleges, but Angela Sorby’s perspective in a recent study of Riley differs: she claims that his poetry in fact satisfied the reading appetite of a disappearing “middlebrow” culture, giving as evidence his Rubaiyat of Doc Sifers, “a piece that both parodies Fitzgerald’s
Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam as ‘hifalutin’ and yet assumes a knowledge of the Rubaiyat’s literary conventions.”

Interestingly enough, Riley’s decision to include a reference to the Rubaiyat in his title led to an extended argument with his publishers. The Century’s William Carey (the Rubaiyat of Doc Sifers was published by the Appleton-Century Company) worried that the title would “hinder the sale of the book several thousand copies,” as even he “had to go to the Dictionary to find out the meaning of Rubaiyat but there are others who will not go. . . . They will never get beyond the word they don’t understand & they will not recommend a book whose title they cannot pronounce.” (It is curious that the impediments to pronunciation within the book posed no problem for Carey.) Riley, resistant to the “gloomy forecast” predicted by his publishers and to requests that he “manage to get in the home idea somewhere in that title in place of the Rubaiyat,” claimed to better understand the cultural capital with which his readership approached his books. “How can the title fail,” he asked Carey, “when it is the poem’s very self—its life-thread—surely—surely—I argue, you are most strongly mis-reading your audience and mine in this one instance.” A few months later, the publishers were apparently proved right, as sales of the book were weak relative to Riley’s other ventures.

As a matter of fact, the pun of the character’s name—Sifers/ciphers—points, I believe, to Riley’s deliberate efforts to make his dialects difficult to “cipher,” despite his statements to the contrary. On the one hand, he writes to a correspondent in 1890 of his dislike of Thomas Gray for his inversions—“isn’t it more like Algebra? There is positive evidence that the poet ‘ciphered it out’!—and yet, on the other hand, the linguistic convolutions of Riley’s own Rubaiyat led one critic to write that it was “written in a dialect that is calculated to loosen the back teeth of the man who tries to read it aloud.” Doc Sifers even reads the natural world as if ciphering: “bark o’ trees ’s a’ open book to Doc, and vines and moss / He read like writin’—with a look knowed ever’ dot and cross.” (The character’s practice recalls Madison Cawein’s advice to Riley a few years earlier, in 1892: “Why, my dear boy, don’t you do as I have done? Hunt out some delightful country homestead in the very heart of wild and picturesque hills where you have rusticity spread open before you like a unique schoolbook, full of facts & information, to study and peruse!” Even though Riley’s attack upon Gray’s poetry cited above continues with the aphoristic advice that “Clearness is poetry’s first virtue. . . . Readers would read—not conjecture—speculate—grop and be left groping” (emphasis in original),
we cannot legitimately call the dialects of Riley’s Rubaiyat clear or easily accessible to all.

Before buying books by Harte, Riley, and Dunbar, readers of dialect poetry frequently encountered their writing in magazines that were clearly targeted toward high-brow audiences. These three dialect poets published much of their work in elite magazines, such as the Atlantic Monthly, Harper’s, and the Century; and, in 1870, Harte was famously offered a prestigious contract to write for the Atlantic Monthly exclusively for one year. Even abroad, Harte was “known to every cultivated man in Europe,” which included readers of the Moscow Gazette and the Revue des deux Mondes. This is not to say that these writers published exclusively in elite magazines. They were published—and were reprinted—everywhere. Riley certainly had “low-brow” readers, and had, as Sorby notes, a “middle-brow following between 1877 and 1915 despite the shifting and shrinking of the ‘genial middle ground’ that had supported midcentury poets such as Longfellow and Whittier,” but his reading audience necessarily consisted of many readers who were considered high-brow.

The instability of the cultural status of Riley’s poetry is telling. As Lawrence W. Levine points out in Highbrow/Lowbrow, the nineteenth century saw operas and Shakespeare’s plays as both high and mass art. The poetry of Longfellow occupied the same stratum mid-century, but Riley—who, in terms of popularity, could be called the Longfellow of his generation—found his position much more complex and confused than his predecessor’s. As the last decades of the nineteenth century initiated a downturn in the cultural legitimacy of popular poetry, Longfellow’s work gained status as Riley’s lost it, and the middle stratum essentially disappeared. But that does not mean that the “high-brow” were not reading Riley. At a time when distinctions between classes of entertainment were becoming more clearly defined, the idealized experience of reading and hearing Riley’s dialect poetry encourages an internally stratified movement from an imagined low-brow speaker to a high-brow reader with the Riley persona designated as a middle-brow mediator, a translator, an everyman.

The “shifting” mentioned by Sorby (and identified by Van Wyck Brooks) is more significant in this case than the “shrinking of the ‘genial middle ground’”: distinctions between Riley’s audience and Longfellow’s can be attributed to the beginnings of the effects of mass production upon the literary world. This is what effectively leads William Charvat to distinguish between Riley and Longfellow, calling the former a “mass poet” and the latter a “public poet.” He excludes Riley and his fellow
mass poets from his outline of American literary history because they are “not artists but manufacturers—impersonal producers of a commodity.” Even Riley’s origin myth, as described to Hamlin Garland, would appear to present Riley as a manufacturer, beginning with his apprenticeship as a newspaper writer producing “reams and miles” of “free doggerel advertising, for our regular advertisers,” as if writing poetry was factory work. When he graduated to publishing what he viewed as more serious poetry in the newspaper, not versified advertisements, he “gathered them together in a little parchment volume” and, because of positive reader response, “printed a thousand copies—hired ‘em done, of course, at my own expense.’” And, when Garland asked Riley if he sold them, he replied, “‘They sold themselves. I had the ten-bushel box of ‘em down in the “Journal” office.’” One wonders what Charvat would make of Riley’s weighing of his books in bushels and of his conception of books not only as objects to be sold but as objects that autonomously sell themselves, like hotcakes.

That Riley conceived of and marketed his poetry—both serious and frivolous, both commercial and nominally divorced from commerce—as a product, and that his poetry was extremely and widely popular, does not mean, however, that it was truly intended for everyone. Although the “Hoosier Poet” image and persona was mass-marketed through the use of his likeness on cans of fruit, vegetables, juice, and coffee, his poetry defined itself by the exclusion of readers who were not competent to translate the orthography of his dialect writing, or not distant enough from the acquisition of literacy. As Van Allen writes, although Riley’s characters were frequently semi- and illiterate, “the end product was usually geared for a very highly literate reading public,” and his books, in fact, were “a sign of taste to be displayed in the parlor.”

Performing Dialect Poetry

Despite the elaborate processes involved in reading dialect, the perception that literary dialect is purely and straightforwardly oral speech delivered by the unlettered to the unlettered is deep-seated, and the extreme popularity of dialect poetry performances in the late nineteenth century stems from this perception. Those who attended performances by Riley expected to find the characters in his verse come authentically to life, and in many cases they found them. In a special issue of The Book News Monthly dedicated to Riley, Henry Van Dyke engages in phrenological praise of Riley’s plainness used as a tool to inhabit his characters:
Look at his head. Every outline of it is clear-cut, distinct, individual, and seems to say: “Whatever you are, be that.” This is no figure in a masquerade, no fancy sketch of a twentieth-century troubadour, no grotesque imitation of a backwoods bard in a red flannel shirt or a barnyard balladist with a billowy beard. It is simply, “the gentleman from Indiana,” just as he feels and as he is.63

Those who attended Riley’s readings frequently remarked upon the “blankness” of the performer. One reviewer’s description of him as feature-less suggests his ability to fall into character: “a plain-featured, boyish-looking young man with colorless hair. . . . His face, too, is a blank.”64 Hamlin Garland notes a similar impression in Roadside Meetings; he writes that Riley’s “face remained as blank as the side of a china bowl.”65 Decades earlier, Garland interviewed Riley for McClure’s and described his face as “the face of a great actor—in rest, grim and inscrutable; in action, full of the most elusive expressions, capable of humor and pathos.”66 Sorby, in addition, cites several spectators who claim that he seemed completely “in character” when he performed a poem. Just as easily, he would fall out of character; between poems, he seemed a blank slate. Mark Twain was one of many who praised him for his unique talent for transformative reading which, as Harold K. Bush argues, “coincided perfectly with the emergence of radical new developments in the theory of acting and performance” that emphasized “absorbing character” and not reading directly from the book.67 Twain and others believed that Riley absorbed character better than almost any other poet of the period. That Riley, when not in character, displayed no obvious markers of being either low- or high-brow was a significant element of his reception, and he became an invisible middle-brow mediator between audience and character. Here I differ from Sorby’s characterization of the power dynamics embedded in Riley’s dialect poetry. She writes that “[i]n Riley’s most popular performance pieces, power relationships are made fluid by the complete absence of sober, middle-class, standard-English-speaking white men and women.”68 I would argue that Riley is that middle-class, standard-English speaker; his presence in performance makes him a necessary component of his audience’s reception of his poetry. His poetry allows him to be, as Shira Wolosky writes, “peculiarly, if not impersonal, then unindividuated.”69 Furthermore, his middle-class character and his blankness are strangely equated, just as whiteness and blankness are strangely equated, meeting to instill in Riley a kind of bilingual or even ambilingual authority.

Riley’s face and body did not convey expression or even features when not engaged in a performance, but this invisibility notably did not apply to
his mouth. Of course, as he became his dialect-speaking characters, listeners naturally focused on his lips. Garland, for example, in his McClure’s article called Riley’s mouth “his wonderful feature: wide, flexible, clean-cut. His lips are capable of the grimmest and the merriest lines. When he reads they pout like a child’s, or draw down into a straight grim line like a New England deacon’s, or close at one side, and uncover his white and even teeth at the other, in the sly smile of ‘Benjamin F. Johnson,’ the humble humorist and philosopher.” But, even during the interview itself, Garland notes, “The most quaintly wise sentences fell from his lips . . . ; scraps of verse, poetic images, humorous assumptions of character, daring figures of speech—I gave up in despair of ever getting him down on paper.”

Even when Riley is not in character, his mouth and—by extension—his seemingly oral nature fascinate and elude an audience increasingly steeped in print culture.

As an “oral” poet, it is no surprise that Riley should appear to “come alive” to his audience in performance. Perhaps, too, it is no surprise that his audience might claim to find it difficult to capture him in writing even outside of performance. But, paradoxically, Garland also says of Riley that he “spoke ‘copy’ all the time.” And, in fact, despite the fact that Garland regrets his inability to get Riley “down on paper,” he describes those elusive gems escaping from Riley’s lips as peculiarly material “scraps.” In other words, Riley’s bits of wisdom are already imagined to be in print as they leave his mouth. As much as his audience wanted to think of him as an oral poet, they could not avoid the fact that the orality associated with Riley was ultimately born in a world of print. It is as if Riley’s audience, Garland included, could not resolve what they perceived as an incompatibility between orality and literacy.

Eventually, Riley stopped performing and, when asked why, he complained, “If you had ever gone about as a lyceum entertainer and been invited to the homes of local celebrities in small towns—and if you’d had to sit and listen to the small daughter of your hostess while she recited one of your poems in sing-song fashion . . . well, I say, if you’d been through what I have you wouldn’t ask such a question.” Mabel Potter Daggett anecdotally recalled that Riley didn’t “at all enjoy having Mary or Johnny trotted into the parlor in best clothes to recite ‘Orphant Annie’ to him,” and that, when asked if he would participate in a street fair in his neighborhood, Riley allegedly said, “I’ll do anything you want, if only you won’t make a show of me.” He refused to perform, but offered an incarnation of himself on paper: a printed pamphlet of an occasional poem written
for the fair, which sold for a dollar. As this anecdote illustrates, Riley was moving late in his career away from the oral representation of his work (by which he had made his reputation) and toward securing a place for his verse in print. It is as if the oral reproduction of his poetry by his own readers ultimately drove him further and further from performance.

Unlike Riley’s, Harte’s stage presence failed to impress audiences. A contemporary review of one of Harte’s lectures reports that “[t]hose who had expected to see a physical illustration of an ‘Argonaut’ were most grievously disappointed.” C. Lewis Hind’s *Authors and I* gives a humorous account of Harte’s foppish appearance and its failure to meet his expectations, depicting a caricatured Harte, with “hair too artfully curled,” as an “attractive dandy [who] fingered his ring and then glanced meditatively, and with approval, at his manicured finger nails.” When Harte adjusted his waxed mustache with one of those manicured hands, Hind marveled at the unlikelihood of the fact that this “was the hand that had written of Miggles, and Stumpy, and Kentuck.” Walt Whitman, too, called Harte a “sharp, bright fellow, but entirely cut off from what he writes about by having cultivated foppishness and superiority.” In fact, Harte complained of his audience:

They always seemed to have mentally confused me with one of my own characters. . . . I think, even now, that if I had been more herculean in proportions, with a red shirt and top boots, many of the audience would have felt a deeper thrill from my utterances and a deeper conviction that they had obtained the worth of their money.

Although Riley, late in his career, also was a “man of marked neatness of dress and delicacy of manner,” a “faultlessly attired gentleman . . . with a gold headed cane and often with a white carnation in his buttonhole,” audiences were apparently enough satisfied with the transformative nature of his performances to accept his paradoxical attire. Harte’s performance of his dialects, on the other hand, failed to conform to audience expectations. Gary Scharnhorst mentions a reviewer from the *Toronto Mail* who describes Harte’s “down-east accent, betraying ‘peculiarities of diction that he did not pick up between Poker Flat and Lone Mountain.’” Twain claims that Harte was such a bad reciter that, at one performance, he felt compelled to seize Harte’s story and read it for him. Their styles differed greatly; while Twain was interested in dramatic flair and entertainment, Harte was concerned with what he perceived to be realism and avoided
exaggeration. Associating the audience’s pleasure closely with the performer’s ability (or willingness) to become the dialect speaker, Harte points in the lengthy quotation cited above to a crucial condition of dialect poetry’s success. He was extremely well known in 1871 due to the publication of “Plain Language from Truthful James,” but his popularity waned with his move to the East Coast. His disgust with the ubiquity of “Plain Language from Truthful James” meant that, “[t]hough Harte occasionally read it at the conclusion of his lecture, he usually tried to avoid exploiting what he considered its cheap popularity.” At times, he would consent to audience demands, but his refusal or inability to temporarily fall into the role of the low-brow speaker with accuracy left audience members without a clearly defined high-brow role to play. His resistance to the implied contract of dialect poetry performance confused, frustrated, and disappointed audiences.

Even so, a few were moved by Harte’s lectures and readings, and even Riley, a decade before publishing his first book, found himself influenced by Harte’s performance style after hearing him read. Dialect poetry performances in general were extremely popular entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; not only did audiences flock to hear poets read their own work, but amateurs and actors attempted performances of dialect poems at picnics, benefits, school and church functions, socials, and other venues. Like the poets themselves, performers tried to become the speakers of the poems, and to recreate the situations of the poems accurately. Riley Readings with Living Pictures gives instructions for performing Riley’s poetry, down to building a set and choosing the lighting, and, in the case of “The Raggedy Man,” urges the performer to do “anything to make it lifelike.” Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s introduction to The Dunbar Speaker and Entertainer, which includes several poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar, similarly encourages performers to “make it a part of yourself, put yourself in the place of the speaker whose words you are memorizing.” In other words, these performers were instructed to “absorb character,” and to emulate performers such as Riley in reading style. More than anything else, it was important to give an authentic performance.

As performances of dialect poetry were becoming more popular, much of middle- and upper-class American society in the late nineteenth century condemned theatricality as essentially duplicitous (as it involved adopting a persona) or even immoral. The differences between parlor recitations, school recitations, public performances by poets, and public perform-
ances by amateur and professional readers (as in the lyceum and Chautauqua) are subtle, and these types of performance vary in their theatricality. Some forms of performance were considered legitimate and beneficial, while others were corrupt. But these boundaries between acting and elocution, for example, were permeable and unstable. Strangely, dialect readings, though they fall under the heading of “reading” and not “acting,” complicate the duplicity of theater: not only did the poet adopt a persona, his persona was one that was decidedly not two-faced. Alison Byerly asserts that “the solo voice was preferable to an entire cast because it seemed to signify the presence of a stable, sincere self behind the theatrical roles.” However, the sincerity of the character portrayed, coupled with the implied “sincere self” behind him, conspire to create a listening experience for audiences that is in actuality more duplicitous than theater itself, despite the fact that it appears to be completely genuine. A variation on the “vicious circle [that] characterized . . . the genteel performance” described by Karen Halttunen, the sincerity of the dialect poet’s recitation was so formulaically sincere that it ceased to be sincere. And, when we consider the multiplicity of characters presented by the dialect poetry performer, we are left with a theatrical performance that lacks the grounding stability normally associated with the one-man show.

The practice of silent reading in this cultural context, however, reveals as much about the nature of dialect poetry as the history of the performance of Harte’s and Riley’s work. As popular as Riley was as a performer, books of his poetry also sold extremely well. People not only performed his poems publicly, they read them at home. As Mott writes, “the Bowen-Merrill illustrated editions [of Riley’s poetry] were on half the parlor center-tables in the land.” William Dean Howells goes even further, effectively calling Riley’s impact historically unprecedented in his claim that “[p]robably the most widely read American poems in their time were Longfellow’s ‘Hiawatha’ and Whittier’s ‘Snow-Bound;’ but Mr. Riley’s poetry is much more widely read than either.” One minor poet and fan of Riley’s recognized (and regretted) that his time on the stage prevented him from producing new poems for print. In a poem titled “An Open Letter to James Whitcomb Riley,” Nellie Frances Milburn wrote:

    Each month I scan the magazines,
        And look for rhymes by Riley.
    No other poet takes the place
        Of him I prize so highly.
On birthdays, too, my friends, I know,
    Receive with stifled curses,
The substitutes that I must buy
    In lieu of Hoosier verses.

O! Leave the platform's noise and glare,
    And trav'ling's mad confusion;
Your native state bids you return,
    And seek your home's seclusion.

There fancies new will flock around,
    And beg you not to slight them,
Let other readers speak your lines,
    Ah! You alone can write them!\(^2\)

According to Milburn, Riley’s unique contribution came through his published work rather than performance. Readers of periodicals were similarly clamoring for work by Harte. Just days after the first periodical publication of “Plain Language from Truthful James” in *The Overland Monthly*, Scharnhorst notes, the poem “had been reprinted in dozens of newspapers and magazines across the country, including the New York *Evening Post* and *Tribune*, *Boston Transcript, Providence Journal, Hartford Courant*, and *Saturday Evening Post* (twice).”\(^3\) In fact, the entry for “Plain Language from Truthful James” in Scharnhorst’s bibliography of Harte, listing all of the newspapers, magazines, ephemera, and anthologies in which it appears, goes on for nearly four pages. Clearly, the print (and reprint) history of the most famous dialect poems—particularly of Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James” and Riley’s “Little Orphant Annie”—is as noteworthy as the history of the oral circulation of dialect poetry. Although Harte’s and Riley’s poetry was performed and heard by many, it was likely read silently by many more.

### Silent Reading and Silent Film

If we consider print to be a silent medium in turn-of-the-century American culture, we must acknowledge and account for the oddly silent presence of dialect poetry, however counterintuitive it may be to call a genre so closely associated with performance silent. In Riley’s case, the silent and voiced lives of his verse were complicated by the poet’s appearance
in the relatively new silent medium of film. In 1918, Selig Polyscope Company produced a feature film adaptation of Riley’s most famous poem, “Little Orphant Annie.” The material supplied by a 32-line poem was, understandably, a bit thin for a feature-length film. Using some details from Riley’s “Where is Mary Alice Smith?,” a prose piece about the “real” Annie, a narrative was built around the character, played by ingénue Colleen Moore, in which she was neglected and abused by her aunt and uncle (who appear in her mind as the “gobbl’uns” of the poem) and rescued by a local farmer (who appears in her mind as the typical knight in shining armor). Later in the film, the farmer tragically dies in battle, and his death is soon followed by Annie’s, before it is all revealed to be “just a bad dream.” Variety called the “excellent” film “a sweet but pathetic little story which has lost none of its human touches upon the screen.” The elaborate fantasy scenes and realistic scenery are noted by the reviewer, who praises the “[e]xcellent photography with unusual lighting effects” and settings that “are all homely and picturesque.”

What is most intriguing about the film for my purposes, however, is Riley’s role as narrator opening and closing the film—a structural framing device not mentioned in this brief Variety review. Riley is pictured, surrounded as per usual by a throng of children, reciting his poem. Because this is a silent film, his silent performance is followed by intertitles, printing bits of the poem’s narrative for viewers to read themselves. Although familiar phrases appear as intertitles, the adapted poem loses its verse form and becomes a prose narrative, even when Riley performs it for the children sitting around him. The poem as it was transformed by the filmmakers provides viewers with “repetition with variation,” resulting in “the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise,” as Linda Hutcheon describes the pleasures of adaptation. At the close of the film, the intertitles are replaced by a more traditional and familiar verbal medium: the book itself. As Kamilla Elliott finds in her analysis of intertitles and other words incorporated into early films, late silent films (1918–1926, the period during which Little Orphant Annie was produced) often “increased the use of legible texts” that “double as pictorial and textual objects inside filmed scenes,” and the appearance of Riley’s book in this film illustrates this trend. As viewers, we flip through the pages of The Orphant Annie Book, reading in the theater what we might have read in our parlors.

So, what do viewers gain by Riley’s unvoiced performance? What does his appearance add to the film? It’s possible that Riley could have attracted audiences to the film, simply by his celebrity. As Timothy W. Galow writes,
in his discussion of the celebrity of high modernist writers (whose books, I might add, coexisted with Riley’s in the early-twentieth-century literary marketplace), “authorial personae functioned as an important site of knowledge production that could ultimately displace the texts upon which a writer’s fame rested.” Although Riley’s work was certainly very well known, his popularity as a celebrated figure may have even exceeded the popularity of his poetry. In an account of celebrity worship that sounds strikingly contemporary, a book called *In Lockerbie Street* (named for the street on which Riley lived) describes the attention Riley and his house received:

More than fifteen years ago a poet went there to live. There fame and the tourists have followed him. Now the soft brooding quiet of the little green lane is broken by the blatant bawling of the sight-seeing autos that announce, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is Lockerbie Street and Riley’s residence!”

Yes, and once on a sultry summer’s day as, on the front porch he refreshed himself with a cooling glass of innocent lemonade, the climax of dramatic interest was reached when the megaphone boomed hysterically, “Ladies and gentlemen, behold James Whitcomb Riley drinking a high ball!”

. . . So he retreats from the front porch where he loves to linger, but where lately

The cam-e-ras
will catch him
if he don’t watch out!

. . . [T]hey are coming to Indianapolis to bring him the laurel wreath of their admiration. That it is done in the curious vandal American way, that would crown him and then carry away a piece of the crown as a souvenir, makes the tribute not the less real. Only the staring glare of publicity shines a trifle unpleasantly in eyes that have loved so well just starlight and sunlight falling in flickering shadows in Lockerbie Street.

With a terrifying account of the anxiety and imprisonment brought on by Riley’s national celebrity—“it’s frightful to be forever on parade as a superhuman. It’s like a man wearing a dress suit every day and not daring to bend for fear his smooth shiny shirt front might crack”—this writer clearly pities Riley for what she perceives as the misery of an unceasing spotlight, a theatrical stage from which he can never exit. The threatening camera of the tourist, however, was later replaced by the apparently welcome film camera.
Given that audiences would not hear Riley perform his dialect in the film as they would have if attending a poetry reading, some must have gone to the movies simply to see a representation of Riley’s body, to watch his movements and gestures—to see him act, in the early-twentieth-century film sense of the word. However, his performance style generally did not rely upon movement for expression. Instead, observers noted that Riley “depended entirely for emphasis on a rising or falling inflection, never raising the tone and seldom making a gesture.” Illustrations of Riley in performance printed in a book titled Authors’ Readings, show a physically inexpressive performer, with subtle movements of his head and arms and with his eyes obscured by eyeglasses. The film opens, after an intertitle asserting that the film is “Dedicated by the Poet to ‘The Children of the Old Times and of These’—‘With Changeless Love,’” with a shot of “the late James Whitcomb Riley” (he died before the film was released) sitting casually and almost motionlessly in a chair, gently petting a dog.

We might consider Riley’s stillness in light of Walter Benjamin’s distinction between the imagery of painting and that of film: “No sooner has [the spectator’s] eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. . . . The spectator’s process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of film.” The portions of this film that focus on Riley, on the other hand, are marked by very slow movement, and in their lack of film tricks these scenes resemble theatrical performance and therefore do not clearly exemplify the loss of aura Benjamin associates with reproducible art forms such as film. (Of course, the Annie narrative at the heart of the film depends heavily upon special effects and sometimes frantic movement.) That Riley’s person would be used to this end—to infuse the film nostalgically with some degree of aura—is no surprise. There is no “shock effect” here. The love Riley offers is “changeless” and the children he addresses are both modern and ancient.

The next shot shows a reciting Riley standing stiffly and formally (again, almost motionlessly), now accompanied by a version of the poem’s actual dedication: “INSCRIBED—with all faith and affection—‘To all the little children. The happy ones—The sober and the silent ones, the sad ones!—And all the lovely bad ones!’” Then, a scene shows “[t]he poet’s afternoon at home,” with a throng of children swarming up the exterior stairs of his celebrated home. This very image of Riley with his dog on his lap and surrounded by children dressed in frilly white outfits would have been familiar already to many viewers as it was recycled footage from a now-lost documentary filmed for Indiana’s centennial and also circulated as a still photographic version by Lester C. Nagley, reproduced in
Figure 1. Illustration of James Whitcomb Riley by Art Young, from *Authors' Readings* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1897). Harvard University Library, Widener Library
Figure 2. Illustration of James Whitcomb Riley by Art Young, from *Authors’ Readings* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1897). Harvard University Library, Widener Library
postcards, books, and other printed material, that Elizabeth Van Allen calls “the best-known photograph of the Hoosier poet.” To these children, he says, “I will tell you children the story of . . . ,” and this introduction is followed by the aforementioned shot of The Orphant Annie Book, published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1908. Riley reappears at the end of the film, leaving the children who surround him with the following conclusion: “And that is the story of Little Orphant Annie. Some day I’ll tell you how she grew up and lived happy ever after. Now run along and remember The Gobble-uns ’ll git ye—Ef you don’t watch out.” The intertitles mimic the staggered appearance of the last line in the printed versions of the poem. After he waves goodbye to the group of departing children, the camera focuses again on The Orphant Annie Book, and closes it ceremoniously. These opening and closing scenes encourage viewers to see the filmic experience as a substitute for the book-reading experience, complete with inscription.

Dialect and the Phonograph

Considering that tens of thousands had visited Riley’s body as it lay in state at the Indiana State Capitol, the posthumous presence of Riley’s barely animated (and reanimated) body on screen could have given viewers from other parts of the country the opportunity to view the recently departed poet as a form of mourning, using “technical reproduction [to] put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself,” similar to the ceremonial listening to Robert Browning’s phonographic recordings at the one-year anniversary of his death, which John M. Picker calls “an unprecedented form of poet worship.” While Riley on film gave audiences the silent physicality of the poet, or at least the illusion of his physical presence, Riley in phonographic recordings gave them the opposite: the poet as disembodied voice. These recordings, many of which are now available in the James Whitcomb Riley Recordings digital collection at the Indianapolis Marion County Public Library website, also brought him back into the parlor. Riley was pursued as a natural choice for preservation, not only because of his popularity, but also, I would argue, because of his associations with both orality and familiarity. As Jason Camlot writes, the phonograph was understood “as an apparent transcendence of the ‘technology’ of reading (as decipherment), leading to an experience that was even more immediate and intimate than that of the reader with his book.” Riley, having achieved a literary reputation that
placed him closer in the public’s perception to the medium of the phonograph than that of the book, would appear to be well suited for preservation as a voice.

A 1912 *Indianapolis Star* article, with the fascinating title of “Records Taken of Riley’s Voice. Poet Consents After Years to Read Choice Poems for Talking Machine Company. Noted Writer of Verse Hears ‘Proofs’ of Selections with Manifest Interest,” describes Riley’s response—giving in after repeatedly turning down offers to have his voice recorded—to hearing “his own voice repeating his own poems from the proof plates of a talking machine” for a “new, unseen audience.” Riley stood with “his hands thrust carelessly into his trousers pockets and an amused smile on his face. He was interested immensely and deeply impressed with the weirdness of hearing himself read.”

The man who recorded him, Harry O. Sooy, later wrote an unpublished memoir recounting his experiences as a Victor Talking Machine Company employee. Finding an elderly Riley at his home, Sooy found it necessary, and did, make the records there in his home by having him recline in an easy chair. This was accomplished by having the recording machine movable, permitting me to place the recording horn very close to his face while in a reclining position. Mr. Riley’s voice was, of course, very weak, so much so that I felt the records would not have commercial value, which proved to be quite true after I had returned and they were manufactured. . . .

After some discussion by the Company over these finished records of Mr. Riley’s, he was informed they did not have commercial value owing to their lack of volume. Mr. Riley then requested having me come out again to Indianapolis to try again, so I was instructed to make over the records in June. . . .

. . . I am very sorry to say he was too ill to make a good record of his voice. Although a few of Mr. Riley’s records appear in the Victor Catalog, they are not as good as we aim to have Victor products, but very few people understand just why they are not good; the foregoing is self-explanatory.

Fewer than half of the recordings produced were actually issued by Victor Talking Machine Company. From the company’s standpoint, having so few viable recordings after two attempts—and those “not as good” as hoped—would have to be considered a failure. The failure of Riley’s recordings is especially disquieting if we consider that the phonographic
recording generally was, to use Camlot’s words, promoted “as a synec-
doche for the entire person” and the recorded “voice as an alternative to
bodily presence.” If the phonograph intended to serve as a depository
of the “author’s immediate, individualized presence,” and Riley’s poetry
depended upon his particular “immediate, individualized presence” more
than almost any other poet, then we would expect the recordings to be a
runaway success.

And, yet, despite Sooy’s assessment, Theodore Dreiser recalls enjoy-
ing the recordings immensely in his *A Hoosier Holiday*, published the year
Riley died. He writes, “Three recitations by James Whitcomb Riley, ‘Little
Orphant Annie,’ ‘The Raggedy Man’ and ‘My Grandfather Squeers,’ cap-
tured my fancy so strongly that I spent several hours just listening to them
over and over, they were so delightful.” How can we reconcile these
two dramatically different impressions of the quality of the recordings?
Perhaps what Sooy believed to be “weak” recordings were simply less the-
atrical and more natural than the recordings to which he was accustomed.
Incidentally, the Victor encyclopedic discography includes several recita-
tions of Riley’s poems by people other than Riley, such as Harry E. Hum-
phrey, who recorded several poems between 1913 and 1916. Although
Riley’s recordings are faint, they are much more natural and charming
than Humphrey’s—which are hammy and overly dramatic—and therefore
more consistent with contemporary elocutionary trends. In an article titled
“Poetry and Speech,” Charles W. Hibbitt “recall[s] with pleasure” Riley’s
recording of “Little Orphant Annie,” praising “its honesty of interpreta-
tion, its straightforward statement of a child’s impressions, its humor and
pathos.” Turn-of-the-century elocutionary trends valued this sort of nat-
ural delivery.

It is worth noting also that Riley’s rustic and casual bemusement by the
recording process—“his hands thrust carelessly into his trousers pockets,”
as described in the newspaper article above—may have been part of the
show, as innovations in sound technologies would not have been alien to
the elderly poet. In fact, Riley’s letters to Joel Chandler Harris frequently
address his use of his own Zon-o-phone. The two writers even shared their
recordings with each other. In addition, William Lyon Phelps, editor
of Riley’s letters, recalled a dinner in Riley’s honor given by a Yale pro-
fessor of experimental psychology by the ironic name of E. W. Scripture,
whose research used “methods of natural science in studying the nature of
verse.” Scripture “got out his phonograph, and Riley recited into it his
famous poem, ‘Old Fashioned Roses’”; later, Phelps writes, “we ‘turned
it on,’ and it was a magnificent record.” Given that Scripture taught
at Yale from 1892 to 1904, and Phelps notes that the dinner was in New
Haven (Phelps was also a Yale professor during this time), this record-
ing must have preceded Sooy’s by several years. Moreover, Riley wrote an
autobiographical poem titled *The Boys of the Old Glee Club*, in which the
aging members of a glee club gather to listen to phonograph recordings of
their young voices. Although the speaker affects the same bemused reac-
tion that Riley does in the *Indianapolis Star* article, hearing the voices of
the deceased club members is ultimately a comfort to him:

... Brush had got the Boys to sing
A song in that-there very thing
Was on the table there to-day—
Some kind o’ ’phone, you know.—But say!
When John touched it off, and we
Heerd it singin’—No-sir-ee!—
*Not the machine a-singin’*—No,—
*Th’ Old Glee Club o’ long ago!* . . .
There was *Sabold’s* voice again—
’N’ *Ward’s*;—and, sweet as summer-rain,
With glad boy-laughter’s trills and runs,
*Ed. Thompson’s* voice and *Tarkington’s!* . . .
And *ah, to hear* them, through the storm
Of joy that swayed each listener’s form—
Seeming to call, with hail and cheer,
From Heaven’s high seas down to us here:—

As Ivan Kreilkamp and John M. Picker have pointed out, many early lis-
teners were disgusted and disturbed by the phonograph’s ability to store
the voices of dead loved ones. Picker cites Browning’s sister, who called the
posthumous playing of Browning’s records an “indecent séance,” and, as
Kreilkamp puts it, citing an 1877 article, “To hear a voice speaking when
the body from which it emerged has ‘turned to dust’ is wonderful but also
‘sstartling,’ eerie.” The separation of voice from body is not, however,
 disturbing for Riley. Rather than finding the preserved voices of the dead
horrifying, or at least profoundly unsettling, Riley is quickly able to hear
a reassuring humanity in the sounds emitted from the machine. What
seemed at first to be “the machine a-singin’” is soon recognized unpro-
blematically as the singing of his departed friends. It is as if his friends have
“thrown” their voices down to earth, an ordinary act of ventriloquism
with which a dialect poetry performer would be familiar.
In a review of *The Boys of the Old Glee Club*, *The Independent* asked rhetorically, “Should not this be noted as the first attempt to bring the phonograph into the range of poetry?” However, much earlier in his career, Riley wrote a poem titled “The Phonograph,” published in his hometown newspaper *The Hancock Democrat* but never collected in any of Riley’s books. It is unlikely that a man alienated by the “weirdness” of sound recording would write a poem that playfully anthropomorphizes the phonograph with such warmth and familiarity:

Grandmother Phonograph, oh she’s a busy body—
Gossiping and chattering and tattling all the while;
Jolly as an office seeker o’er a glass of toddy,
With a friend to listen, nod his head and smile.

She knows a thing or two nobody else can tell you—
She can quote from Shakespeare to Mary’s Little Lamb;
Perpetrate conundrums that will pick you up and sell you
At a rate that indicates she doesn’t care a—clam.

Wonderful advantages she has of other women,
Some of which are serious I’m sorry to relate—
Give her crank a yank or two and here she comes a jimmin’
Like a human organ-grinder in the hands of Fate.

Got a metal palate and a metal tongue to match it,
And a fund of epithet it’s harrowing to hear—
Let her get her back up, and I really wouldn’t stretch it,
On a sixty thousand dollar salary, once a year.

Wait till she lifts her voice in Woman’s rights orations,
And stumps around the commonwealth in politician style,
And I’ll bet, not to disappoint her sex’s inclinations,
She’ll accept the Presidential office after while.\(^{120}\)

As what is essentially a versified editorial in response to a small-town exhibition of the “most marvelous invention known to science” (as it was called in the *Hancock Democrat*’s announcement of the event), “The Phonograph” encapsulates Riley’s sense of wonder and fascination inspired by this object. In fact, the poem was introduced with the following editorial note, which suggests that the phonograph acted as his muse: “Our
home poet, after lavishing four complimentary tickets on the affair, felt constrained to cock his prophetic eye upon the early future and grind out the following impromptu.” In describing Riley’s compositional process as a “grinding,” the editor points to an affinity between Riley himself and the phonograph, who is, as Riley calls her, a “human organ-grinder.” The metaphor prefigures Twain’s remarks in introducing Riley at an 1889 joint reading with Bill Nye, remarks quoted by Sorby to introduce her chapter on Riley: If Riley “enchants your spirit and touches your heart with the tender music of his voice,” remember that “[i]t’s not his music. . . . He only turns the crank.”

Riley imagines himself turning the crank, too, in “The Phonograph”—“Give her crank a yank or two”—and the implied violence of the action suggests that the relationship between Grandmother Phonograph and he who would turn her crank might be a kind of power struggle. Her unlimited and unpredictable power, evident in her ability to “[p]erpetrate conundrums that will pick you up and sell you” and her “fund of epithet it’s harrowing to hear,” resembles the frightening ambitions of a liberated woman who could eventually make her way to the White House. Comparing her to a “human organ-grinder,” in addition to expressing a commonality between Riley and the phonograph, suggests a gruesome crushing of humanity (both body and sound) akin to that of a meat grinder; the proximity of “human” and “organ” permits a listener to hear the hyphen, alternatively, between those two words. When she “lifts her voice,” is her voice her own? Is it a human voice? When she meets with a friend, “[g]ossiping and chattering and tattling,” is she speaking, or has her body been evacuated so that other voices may step in and possess her? Is gossip—things heard from other people and passed on—itself a medium reminiscent of the phonograph, and therefore what we should expect to hear from a phonograph’s mouth?

The tensions between the phonograph’s opposing qualities—she seems human at times, but at other times seems simply an apparatus or medium in which human voices drown—again points us directly back to Riley’s identity in performance. Grandmother Phonograph’s shifting registers, as she goes from quoting Shakespeare to “Mary’s Little Lamb,” finds a parallel in Riley’s movement from one dialect persona to another, and he even compares himself directly to a phonograph in an 1879 letter to a friend. Camlot, citing an early promotional recording that assumed the voice of the Edison phonograph, remarks upon the “high elocutionary style [used] to perform the true voice of the phonograph,” which purported to “serve as the transparent medium for the performance of other (say, less pure)
voices and characters without losing its own identification with the clear and natural.” “The speaker who can mimic a range of sounds and voices convincingly,” Camlot writes, “may then underscore the underlying transparency of his own voice, just as the phonograph’s voice was inherently clean.” In light of this, Riley’s renowned blankness, discussed earlier in this chapter, reinforces his affiliation with the machine and its supposed neutral transparency.

Despite his awe, Riley ultimately was not intimidated or unsettled by this technology; if anything, he found a kinship between his voice and hers, even with her cyborg “metal palate and a metal tongue to match it.” Later, in 1900, he still views the emerging sound technology through corporeal metaphors; away from home, he writes to the Holsteins (the family with whom he lived) to ask whether his Zon-o-phone’s “bronchial trouble [is] clearing up in the milder summer weather.” Riley does not find any incompatibility between phonographic recording and his verse, contradicting Frederick A. Kittler’s example of the poet Ernst von Wildenbruch, whose 1897 “For the Phonographic Recording of His Voice,” composed and performed for the phonograph, demonstrates in its “poetaster rhymes” what Kittler calls “an embittered competition between poetry and technological media.” Riley’s position also contrasts strongly with that of Twain, who said of the phonograph, “you can’t write literature with it, because it hasn’t any ideas & it hasn’t any gift for elaboration, or smartness of talk, or vigor of action, or felicity of expression.” Despite the poem’s sexism and anxiety, Riley’s picture of an interactive, progressive, and energetic Grandmother Phonograph expresses his view that she has all of these qualities. His identification with her does not mechanize him as much as it humanizes her.

Furthermore, in Riley’s “An Old Sweetheart of Mine,” one of the poems recorded for the Victor catalog, the speaker yearns for his childhood sweetheart only to be interrupted mid-reverie by his wife, who, in a twist, turns out to be the “living presence” of that sweetheart, a phrase rendered newly ironic by its utterance by a phonographic voice. Unlike Browning’s famously disappointing recording of “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix,” which trails off into forgetfulness and “preserves not the transcendence of poetic genius but the humanity of memory’s imperfection,” Riley’s recorded voice was received by many listeners as a perfected animation of a dormant and vital poetic voice inaccessible in print and finally released. For instance, Riley inserts laughs into his readings of “On the Banks of Deer Crick” and “Tradin’ Jim” in a seemingly natural and spontaneous manner, and these laughs are the peculiar signature of his “immediate, individual presence,” or—to quote “The
Rossville Lectur’ Course”—his “ortograph.” It is not surprising that Dreiser should have found his performances so satisfying.

Exactly half of the Riley recordings available on the Indianapolis Marion County Public Library website are of pieces written in dialect, and they are performed in a way that is consistent with reports of Riley’s live performances. They are, just as Camlot writes of dialect monologists Cal Stewart and Russell Hunting, done “in an unstudied manner that does not reveal the source of the speech to be letters on a page.” As exemplified in the non-dialect performance of “An Object Lesson,” Riley’s recordings, like the “Cohen on the Telephone” recordings discussed in Camlot’s essay, imply an audience and “often position the listener as eavesdropper . . . upon his one-sided conversations with people he does not understand (and who, of course, do not understand him).” In overhearing these phonographic performances, members of Riley’s listening audience again—as they did in attending his live performances—establish themselves as ironic participants in this high cultural activity. As Camlot argues, “The recorded monologue . . . complicates the audience’s position in relation to dialect, for in this in-between space the monologue is both objectified and received from a distance, and yet it is also potentially something performed by the audience itself,” leaving the question of “whether they laughed at the ethnic characters or, in a more familiar (if not familial) way, laughed with them—or both.”

Riley’s dialects did not foreground ethnicity or race, but the racial dimension is a significant factor in recordings of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poetry. However, recordings of Dunbar’s poetry did not exaggerate dialect as one might expect if reading Dunbar in the context of minstrelsy. Although there are, to my knowledge, no recordings by Dunbar himself, it is nearly as instructive to consider the many early performances of his work recorded by actors. According to Tim Brooks, the earliest Dunbar recordings, by Reverend James A. Myers of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, are performed “without excessive exaggeration”; the 1913 recordings by Edward Sterling Wright are “intelligent and sensitive readings, without a trace of mockery,” with the dialect “pronounced when it serves the scene, restrained otherwise.” Unlike Riley’s recordings, it is worth noting that recordings of Dunbar’s poetry rarely invited audience laughter at the expense of the speakers and worked to distinguish themselves from the “coon song” recordings popular at the time with which the poems often were conflated.

Although Dunbar was a popular performer of his verse, his particular manipulations of dialect demonstrate a strong commitment to the printed word, as we will see in later chapters. Riley, too, placed his dialect verse in
dialogue with textual media familiar to his readers, especially in the case of the relationship of his “child dialect” to educational reading material, as I address in the next chapter. Beyond the versions of the poet presented in printed media, however, the two additional Rileys produced in film and phonograph—technological media new to turn-of-the-century America—combined to offer his listeners and readers a multimedia poetic experience. Riley’s presence in these modern media would seem to problematize his association with a provincial simplicity of a time gone by, but, ultimately finding a compatibility between the poet and these modern media, audiences felt reassured that films and phonographic recordings were simply new repositories in which to preserve Riley and the world he represented safely in the past.