Rhetorics of Literacy
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chapter two

Plain and Peculiar Dialects

Bret Harte and James Whitcomb Riley

Just as the cultural and formal importance of dialect poetry as a genre has been largely dismissed, so has the importance of its most prominent practitioners. The dialect poetries of Bret Harte and James Whitcomb Riley have been ignored by recent genealogies of American literary history, despite the fact that Harte and Riley cast considerable literary shadows, with the writings of numerous canonical authors bearing traces of their influences. A good deal of recent work in American literary and cultural studies has addressed the significance of dialect as a discrete and secondary characteristic of regionalist and local color writing, but I argue in this chapter that granting primacy to the formal details of Harte’s and Riley’s forgotten verse can shed new light on the relationship of issues of race and class to the linguistic experiments of written dialect. Harte, whose dialect is fairly “plain,” and Riley, whose dialect is more “peculiar,” develop two quantitatively and qualitatively different ways of representing nonstandard speech, each used to distinctly political ends: in the service of political satire in the case of Harte and in the service of childhood literacy acquisition in the case of Riley. In this chapter, I also return to the late nineteenth century’s valorization of proper spelling, the implications of which Harte and Riley explore in their poems. Before turning to Riley’s “peculiar language,” I will examine the effects of the “plain language”—a dialect less
extreme in its departure from written English—used by Harte in his most famous poem, a poem that alerts its readers to the apparent plainness of its language in its very title.

Because several traditions of dialect poetry are dependent upon illusions of authenticity and sincerity, writing a successfully ironic dialect poem would prove to be difficult, as Harte discovered. His intentions in writing “Plain Language from Truthful James” have been well documented: the poem means to attack white racism, not Chinese immigrants. As Gary Scharnhorst has pointed out, how the poem was received is a different matter. The poem’s seeming transparency allows it to have, as a critic writing in 1957 notes, “little more meaning than a Rorschach blot.”\(^2\) Readers used the poem to support hatred as if it finally gave, in its catchy phrases, a citable and metrical vocabulary to the anti-immigration sentiment that was growing in the West. Contemporary newspaper articles frequently cited “Ah Sin” or “the Heathen Chinee” in otherwise straightforward news articles as both historical and exemplary rather than a fictive creation. If, as Gavin Jones claims, dialect writing “was more than a humorous gimmick: it enabled certain types of political criticism . . . by creating another level of discourse in which deep ethical convictions could be safely represented,” why did the second “level of discourse” so often fail to register with Harte’s readers?\(^3\)

Jones points to Finley Peter Dunne’s Mr. Dooley as an example of a character who uses dialect in his “plain, common-sense criticism of weighty political problems,” but reading Mr. Dooley’s dialect is a much more complex process than reading Harte’s is.\(^4\) The same is true of the dialect of William Dean Howells’s Berthold Lindau in \textit{A Hazard of New Fortunes}, which, as Henry B. Wonham points out, functions to “cloth[e] his revolutionary ideas in a ridiculous idiom”; it is a “masking device that allows Howells to import socialist thinking into the novel, while ensuring that Lindau’s ideas remain linguistically marginalized.”\(^5\) In other words, Mr. Dooley’s and Lindau’s views may be “plain,” but their language is not. Although dialect can be a fitting vehicle for satire, it depends upon the type of dialect used. The “plain language” sort typified by Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James” was, simply put, too plain to serve the satire he intended. Harte’s poem succumbed to misappropriation more readily than it would have had it been written in a “low-readability” dialect.

The overt political humor of “Plain Language from Truthful James,” whether understood by its original readers in a blatantly racist or blatantly anti-racist manner, actually facilitated its circulation. Because Harte’s poem achieved such fame and was quoted everywhere, it was,
to use de Certeau’s term, aggressively interiorized by its performers. In fact, distance from the actual local conditions that gave rise to the poem drew readers to the poem even more, as a 1911 article from the *Charlotte* (NC) *Daily Observer* argues. Initially ignored in California, “where it should have been at once understood and appreciated,” the poem made its way to newspapers in the Eastern United States and England, where it was received warmly by readers who enjoyed it despite the fact that they “missed a little of the fun that those who lived nearer the scene of their action derived from it”; “thousands of people who knew nothing of possible difficulties which the growing power of the Chinaman might create in the labor markets of California, were talking of Ah Sin.”6 Readers “absorbed” the character of Truthful James, and this character’s perspective was sometimes absorbed to such a degree that “Plain Language from Truthful James,” incredibly, was cited on the floor of Congress as if it were empirical evidence of the menace posed by Chinese laborers.7

From “Plain Language from Truthful James,” the mantra “We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor” became a battle cry for those who feared the “Yellow Peril.”8 It seems, as Scharnhorst and many others have argued, Harte’s irony was missed. In the poem, Truthful James and Bill Nye challenge Ah Sin, whom James also calls “the heathen Chinee,” to a game of euchre.9 Because Ah Sin claims not to understand how the game is played, James and Nye consider him an easy target. James says that he regrets duping the innocent Ah Sin, but Nye shamelessly hides cards in his sleeves with the intent to cheat him. Ah Sin, however, does understand the game and attempts to one-up the card sharp by hiding jacks in his own sleeves. Upon discovering this deception, Nye becomes furious and violent. The fact that he is “ruined by Chinese cheap labor” appears to be the basis of the offense. Our “reporter” Truthful James understates the brutal nature of the one-sided assault: he says only that Nye “went for that heathen Chinee” and a vague “scene . . . ensued.”

Voicing Harte’s Truthful James and Ah Sin

“Plain Language from Truthful James” recounts a hate crime not unlike the attacks happening across the West at the time. Scharnhorst writes that “[w]hile Harte may have meant to satirize prejudice, his poem had the opposite effect,” in fact inciting or at least legitimizing racial violence.10 Scharnhorst does not, however, propose why or how this misunderstanding might have happened. I argue that Harte’s speaker’s seemingly
plain-spoken style especially contributed to both the popularity and the straightforward misappropriation of his text. In the first stanza of the poem, Truthful James’s indirect language belies his epithet:

Which I wish to remark,
And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark
And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinee is peculiar,
Which the same I would rise to explain.

His complaint about the “peculiar” Ah Sin, whose “dark” ways and linguistic deception stand in stark contrast to his own “plain language,” is that Ah Sin’s language is not completely transparent and fails to reflect Ah Sin’s thoughts. However, James’s own language is hardly transparent. The obscurity begins with the first word: “Which I wish to remark—” appears to begin the poem in medias res, unconnected grammatically to any other clause in the stanza. The last line of the stanza repeats the violation, with “[w]hich the same I would rise to explain” reading as an unnecessary addendum (in the first version published in the Overland Monthly, where Harte was an editor, this last line is isolated, forming its own distinct, though fragmented, sentence). This last line poses as linear expository writing—i.e., “I will explain this below”—but its structure ends up confusing rather than clarifying James’s point. Most conspicuously, however, the recurrent “which” leaves the earthy James strangely ungrounded, and it may be the most unusual and unintelligible (and yet most copied) feature of his “dialect.”

What is perhaps the most obscure definition of “which” included in the Oxford English Dictionary’s entry gives a quotation from Harte’s Truthful James (“His Answer to Her Letter”) as an example of usage. Ironically listed under “Peculiar constructions,” this “which” is defined as “[h]ence, in vulgar use, without any antecedent, as a mere connective or introductory particle.” Although the introductory “which” poses as a uniquely Western dialect feature—and Harte suggests his dedication to spoken American dialect when he attributes the realization of the American short story in part to “the inchoate poetry that may be found even hidden in its slang”—it appears that Harte may have borrowed James’s verbal tic from English literature.11 John O. Rees traces Harte’s use of the introductory “which” to Joe Gargery of Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations. After Harte adopted the expression in “Dow’s Flat,” Rees writes, “‘Which . . . ’
was clearly on its way from conscious humility to Gilded Age ostenta-
tion, and three months later Harte’s most famous speaker, the exuberant
Truthful James from Table Mountain, went on to fix the term firmly in the
American imagination of his time as a Western flourish.”

In fact, years later, a line remarkably similar to Harte’s surfaces in fellow Northern Cali-
ifornian Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation.* Stanza 38 opens with the
line, “Which I wish to say is this.”

The accusation that he derived his style from Dickens dogged Harte
from the early days of his career. Twain claims that “Bret Harte was by
no means ashamed when he was praised as being a successful imitator of
Dickens; he was proud of it. I heard him say, myself, that he thought he
was the best imitator of Dickens in America.” Harte’s dialect, too, was
said to have been lifted from Dickens; Howells was one of many com-
plaining of Harte’s “cockney-syntaxed, Dickens-colored California.”

Generally, Harte was considered a poor dialect writer and “a benchmark
against which writers claimed greater dialectal authenticity.” In the pref-
ace to *The Hoosier School-Master: A Story of Backwoods Life in Indiana,*
Edward Eggleston says of Harte’s stories that “the absence of anything
that can justly be called dialect in them mark them as rather forerunners
than beginners of the prevailing school,” and Twain, too, claims that “no
man in heaven or earth had ever used [Harte’s dialect] until Harte invented
it.” Many others, however, defended the authenticity of Harte’s West-
ern literary dialect against these complaints. “Which,” in particular, was
defended as authentically Western American. In an article assessing Harte,
Warren Cheney says that “‘which’ is perfectly good Pike.” Henry Childs
Merwin calls the charge against “which” “ridiculous” in his biography of
Harte, claiming that “[t]he use of ‘which’ is indeed now identified with
the London cockney, but it may still be heard in the eastern counties of
England, whence, no doubt, it was imported to this country.”

Even as influential a scholar of literary dialect as George Philip Krapp, in his 1925
*The English Language in America,* claimed that Harte’s “use of *which* as
a kind of demonstrative or coordinating conjunction is supported by other
local American use.”

Nevertheless, the charge is a grave one for a writer so closely associated
with his literary dialect. That Harte’s speakers would habitually use any
constructions that are distinctly and identifiably non-Western is enough
of a problem for his dialect, but that such a prominent construction—one
that came to define the literary American West—could have direct English
literary antecedents undermines the poetry’s claims to dialectal honesty,
transparency, or “plain language.” “Which” made the poem strange for
most readers, as J. C. Heywood suggests in his 1877 collection of essays, *How They Strike Me, These Authors*:

At the time when it was written the peculiar use of the relative pronoun “which”—a rhetorical figure borrowed from the slang of the London cockneys—and other characteristics in the style of this piece, could be seen in a comic paper published in Australia. But it was novel enough to be uncommonly attractive to staid people on both continents, who habitually heard only conventional forms of speech, and whose spirits were less active than those of explorers, to whom innovation is the rule of life. For Heywood, it is not Ah Sin but Truthful James, in his use of “which,” who is “peculiar.”

In the end, Ah Sin wins—by cheating—“the game ‘he did not understand.’” Like Truthful James, Ah Sin, by feigning incomprehension, pretends to lack sophistication and facility with the language. However, when he uses this presumed lack to his advantage in his scam, Ah Sin’s linguistic abilities are exposed. Significantly, the internal quotation marks setting off “he did not understand” serve as scare quotes, primarily to highlight the irony of the statement, but also may indicate either a paraphrase of Ah Sin’s speech or a quotation from Truthful James, who speaks the same line earlier in the poem. To have James enclose his own statement, from a previous line in the poem, with quotation marks would be unnatural and awkward; therefore, the former reading seems to me more plausible.

Here is a difference between the facsimile of the original manuscript and the version first published in the *Overland Monthly*. The original line is “In the game he did not understand”; the quotation marks are absent. If we understand the words as spoken by Ah Sin, Harte’s change acknowledges Ah Sin as a voiced participant in the poem, not simply a device or symbol, but the words enter the poem stealthily. The quotation marks are misleading; because the subject of the phrase is in the third person and the action in the past tense, we know that he is not being quoted directly here. Moreover, it is odd that, in a dialect poem that emphasizes Ah Sin’s foreignness until this point, literary dialect is not used to represent his indirect speech. Ah Sin’s speech is the opposite of Truthful James’s “plain language” dialect: rather than inscrutable language parading as plain, unadorned speech, Ah Sin’s presumed indecipherability is revealed to be intelligible. In representing the representation of Ah Sin’s speech in standard written English, Harte expresses his refusal to estrange Ah Sin,
without actually having to represent his speech in one way or another; he leaves that job to James. Harte gives Ah Sin one line of hidden, indirect speech in an attempt to alienate the reader from Truthful James more strongly than from Ah Sin.

But the line’s workings are more complex than this. Even if James does not quote himself here, he is the one paraphrasing Ah Sin. The line, reported by James, passes through his dialect. Regardless of this fact, James’s quotation marks suggest more of a fidelity to Ah Sin’s words than an unmarked paraphrase would. Ironically enough, there is no difficulty in understanding “he did not understand.”

Ah Sin’s apparent silence in “Plain Language from Truthful James” prompted a curious literary response, one of many poems responding to Harte’s, that put Ah Sin in James’s place. In a poem likely falsely attributed to Harte, “Ah Sin’s Reply to Truthful James” (published originally in the January 22, 1871 Chicago Tribune), Ah Sin turns the tables on James, calling his deception the “sinfulest.” In this poem, Ah Sin’s cheating is all a misunderstanding: the wax on his nails that facilitated the cheating in Harte’s version is here revealed to be shoemakers’ wax, because Ah Sin was “’prenticed on shoes”; the cards up his sleeve “got there by mistake.”

Most noteworthy, however, is that Ah Sin’s dialect resembles James’s closely. Ah Sin even begins with James’s introductory “which.” Because the poem is an imitation of Harte’s original, this resemblance makes sense, but it is striking in light of the fact that everything surrounding Harte’s original (including the illustrations, which I will discuss later) conspires to give Ah Sin an exaggerated Chinese pidgin literary dialect. In addition to restoring Ah Sin’s integrity, “Ah Sin’s Reply to Truthful James” treats Ah Sin’s speech in “plain language” style. The traces of James’s dialect—such as that introductory “which”—cannot be eliminated in a poem imitating a “Truthful James” poem without tampering with the poem structurally.

“Ah Sin’s Reply to Truthful James” succeeds in giving Ah Sin a voice for the first time, because Ah Sin doesn’t speak directly in Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James.” Richard Brodhead’s discussion of American regionalist writing is helpful in understanding the popularity of Truthful James’s manner of speech and the relative silence of Ah Sin. He explains what is at stake in regionalist writers’ decisions to represent white American speech instead of the speech of the ethnically diverse immigrants populating the United States at the time, as white readers were able to “substitut[e] less ‘different’ native ethnicities for the truly foreign ones of contemporary reality: crusty Yankee fishingfolk for southern Italians or Slavs, Appalachian hillbillies for Russian Jews and Chinese.”
ever, “Plain Language from Truthful James” is an interesting case: it presents a moment of contact between a character of a “less ‘different’ native ethnicit[y]” alongside a “truly foreign” character only to mute the latter. To have Ah Sin speak in a way that is too “dark” or too “plain,” just as James cannot speak in a way that is too “plain” or too “dark,” would render the poem’s argument about linguistic and moral transparency less subtle or defuse the irony of the poem. For a notable example of a dialect poem in which a non-white character’s lack of voice is glaring, we may look to Dunbar’s “When Malindy Sings.” In a response to Gayl Jones’s reading of the poem, Gavin Jones writes:

Gayl Jones criticizes Dunbar for never representing Malindy’s voice, for never letting her speak her own story, yet the very point of the poem is that her voice inherently lies beyond the written medium. By emphasizing the resistance of black voices to literary representation in a dialect whose purpose it was to capture this very voice, Dunbar creates a massive irony that highlights dialect as an inadequate literary convention. “When Malindy Sings” has a self-destructive logic that undermines rather than confirms the dialect stereotype.24

Gavin Jones’s defense of Dunbar’s silencing of Malindy could be extended, if problematically, to Harte’s treatment of Ah Sin’s voice. Dunbar, a black poet silencing the singing voice of a black woman, does not parallel our case exactly here, in which a white poet silences the speaking voice of a Chinese man. Although Harte works deliberately to avoid presenting stereotypes of the immigrant Chinese voice, at least in this poem, to the point of not representing the voice directly at all, racial difference makes his case necessarily different from Dunbar’s. On the phenomenon of white writers assuming the voices of non-white characters, Michael Toolan writes, in an essay on literary dialect in South African writing, “Intent on avoiding perpetuating the insult of appropriation, not wishing to be seen attempting to confer legitimacy or worth on speech (since they would reject, as another version of ideological domination, the very idea of ‘conferring legitimacy’), these authors have maintained a kind of problematic silence with regard to the voices of ordinary black people.”25 Toolan’s explanation of the suppression of black voices in J. M. Coetzee’s writing can also explain why Harte’s representations of Ah Sin’s voice are as convoluted as they are. Harte’s indirect quotation of Ah Sin, giving him a half-voice, can be understood as an attempt to avoid the Scylla of insulting representation that dialect poetry’s audiences often expected and the Charybdis of censored silence.26
As easy or as difficult as Ah Sin’s and Truthful James’s speech may be to understand, their relationships to written language are a separate matter. Truthful James and Bill Nye are characters that draw significantly from orally based cultures. James’s recurrent “which” makes his language resemble more closely the repetition of oral storytelling than it does the linear structures conventionally associated with written narrative. The “Truthful James” poems read as if transcribed speeches and conform to a rhetorical shape that is conventionally oral. However, if, as Walter Ong and others claim, one of the features characteristic of orality is its emphasis upon parataxis and one of literacy its emphasis upon hypotaxis, then it appears that James exaggerates elements from both oral and literate composition in his speech. James’s “which,” regardless of the fact that his use of it may refer to a true dialectal use in some varieties of British or Western American English, seems in the context of the poem to belong to hypotactic discourse. It is not, however, the start of a syntactically subordinate clause. As for Ah Sin, there is little indication in “Plain Language from Truthful James” that he is either literate or illiterate in English but, in another poem featuring Ah Sin, he is one of a group of men producing a sign—a warning to Truthful James and his partners—“with letters in some foreign tongue.”

Ah Sin, presumably, is fully literate in at least one language, and James is at least familiar with the structures of written discourse.

“The Latest Chinese Outrage” is a poem in which Ah Sin does speak—he speaks, in addition, in “Free Silver at Angel’s,” which did not have the popular success of “Plain Language from Truthful James”—and, when he does, his divergence from standard English is made prominent. Harte’s mercenary attitude toward his writing career may account for his decision to have Ah Sin’s voice conform to popular views of it. Similarly, although Truthful James’s speech is represented in conventional orthography in “Plain Language from Truthful James,” James’s language is marked in later poems such as “Truthful James to the Editor” and “The Spelling Bee at Angel’s” as dialect through misspelling. Why would Harte use conventional orthography to represent James’s speech and quote Ah Sin’s only indirectly in “Plain Language from Truthful James,” a poem that takes as the subject of its satire the supposed deceit and inscrutability of foreigners? and why would this fact make the poem more palatable to those who would use it unironically?

The misreading of “Plain Language from Truthful James” was facilitated by the fact that the “plain language” dialect—in other words, dialect that doesn’t make itself visually obtrusive—encourages readings of the poem’s voice as authentic. Although it is true that Harte’s message
may not have been in such danger of being misunderstood had he not emphasized the supposed sincerity and simplicity of his speaker, measured against the duplicity of Ah Sin, “plain language” dialect poetry is always defined in part by the sincerity and simplicity of the speaker. If an audience understands a poem to present the dialect as a lens through which truth can be glimpsed (that being Truthful James’s unadorned “plain language”), then the ideas expressed through that medium, regardless of the author’s distancing ambitions, will be read uncomplicatedly as authentic and sincere. If, on the other hand, an audience approaches a poem’s voice as an encrypted space—passed through an author’s phoneticization to be analyzed by the reader—it becomes too essentially duplicitous to be very effectively used as straightforward propaganda. Truthful James’s “plain language” dialect was adopted as propaganda because it was not enough of a dialect to work as satire. The process of reading “Plain Language from Truthful James” is unlike the typical dialect poetry reading process: the poem does not require that its reader revisit semi-literacy through phoneticization. Its potential difficulties are due to syntactical differences, which could put readers whose speech patterns are depicted therein at an advantage, and not spelling distortions, which put readers who are highly literate—regardless of speech—at an advantage. Unlike Riley’s literary dialect, which depends upon spelling distortions, Harte’s literary dialect in “Plain Language from Truthful James” depends upon syntax in order to represent nonstandard language, and consists of few words whose spellings need deciphering. On the surface, the language of the poem is very “plain.”

One year after the poem’s initial publication, a reviewer for the London Spectator remarked upon the poem’s vulnerability to misreading. Calling the poem’s use of satire “subdued” and “restrained,” he writes that it fought against racist attitudes on one hand and provided support for them on the other, giving the anecdote of a politician who thanked Harte for his anti-immigration poem:

Of course, if the story is true, the politician in question must have been somewhat thick-headed, for it would not be easy for a moderately intelligent man to avoid seeing that Mr. Bret Harte wished to delineate the Chinese simply as beating the Yankee at his own evil game. . . . Still, the blunder, or it may be the rumor of the blunder, points clearly to the most striking characteristic of the humor displayed in this ballad, and in one or two others of the same kind which are published side by side with it in the volume from which we take it,—the extreme reticence of
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style,—a reticence which if expressed in less vernacular language would indicate the reserve of cultivated indifference,—with which the writer glosses over what he desires to say. Mr. Bret Harte’s genius is chiefly, as we have said, great in pathos; but in “That Heathen Chinee” there is no pathos, only banter and scorn of the outwitted Americans who raise the cry against cheap labor.

It would be impossible, we think, to conceive a more impartial and carefully subdued narrative. It has the air almost of “quietism,” so scrupulously does it refrain from using strong expressions, or rather even seek for weak ones when strong would be justified . . . 29

This “extreme reticence of style,” coupled with the image of a manicured Harte discussed in the previous chapter, evokes the impression of a Flaubertian author as described by Stephen Dedalus, paring his fingernails from an impersonal distance. Although the reviewer stops short of blaming Harte’s use of “vernacular language” for the misreading, he implies that the same poem written in standard English would have expressed a “cultivated indifference” that would have made the satire impossible to miss. Harte’s unfamiliar hybridization—mild dialect mingled with an “extreme reticence of style”—effectively renders the poem unreadable to some. Many readers would find dialect to be at odds with subtlety, and in Harte’s poem the “strong expressions” one would expect from a dialect satire are missing.

In fact, the central act of violence against Ah Sin is related in a surprisingly mild manner; it is not made plain by the poem itself. As Scharnhorst points out, the illustrations to “Plain Language from Truthful James” by Sol Eytinge in the Osgood edition—the “only illustrated edition of the poem published with the author’s sanction”—and by Joseph Hull in the unauthorized Western News Company edition expose the violence that is veiled in the poem.30 Hull even summons up an unmentioned crowd to include in his illustrations “a barroom brawl where Ah Sin is tossed up into the air by a gang of drunken hooligans wielding liquor bottles (and somebody’s boot) and shooting off a gun,” essentially “suppl[y]ing his own solution to the ‘Chinese Problem’: mob violence against Ah Sin.”31 When the Eytinge-illustrated edition was published, newspapers across the country, including the Cincinnati Daily Gazette, delighted in the fact that, after so many unauthorized and “hopelessly inane” illustrated editions, readers would finally see the characters as they should appear, “according to Mr. Harte’s own suggestions; thus furnishing what may be accepted as authentic portraits . . . and veracious representations of the different acts.”32 Despite the fact that the illustrations depict more than the poem
states outright, Eytinge’s illustrations were deemed to be accurate depictions of the poem’s narrative.

An ephemeral illustrated edition of the poem Scharnhorst does not discuss—one that veers even further from the Hull edition in its unsanctioned feel—is a pamphlet advertising Western railroad travel on the “Rock Island Route.” Just as Yopie Prins says of Browning’s poetry in a railroad edition of his work, the Rock Island edition allowed Harte’s poem to be “incorporated into the body—individual and collective—of American readers, who knew [him] ‘by heart’ not only by memorizing and reciting his verse at home and in school, but by association with the rhythms of train travel.” However, unlike the other kinds of reading mentioned by Prins, train reading prohibits recitation. The expression of this incorporation, which we might associate with the interiorization discussed by de Certeau (“he made his voice the body of the other”), becomes awkward and inappropriate in a public train car. Railroad editions of poetry like Browning’s and Harte’s are ideally designed for silent reading, lest you risk disturbing the passenger sleeping beside you. Moreover, it is worth noting here that the transcontinental railroad may have, in fact, been a factor in accelerating the triumph of silent reading in late-nineteenth-century America, since passengers were traveling long distances in relative comfort, giving them the opportunity to read, but only to themselves. In fact, Tom D. Kilton calls the railroad “a leading secondary contributor to the spread of reading and learning among the masses through its various roles as publisher, bookseller, and librarian,” and the railroad’s relationship to reading practices in the United States remains an understudied topic of research in literary studies.

Although most of the illustrations to Harte’s poem in the Rock Island edition are accompanied by captions that are derived from the poem indirectly, such as “The inference that Mr. A. S. was soft” and “The smile that was pensive and childlike,” one of the illustrations also introduces, in its captions, the dialect that is strenuously avoided in the text proper. The caption on the page depicting the discovery of Ah Sin’s treachery reads “Mr. A. S. holds much’ee jacks.” The next page, which presents the final stanza of the poem and an illustration of a violent attack upon Ah Sin, carries the following caption: “The language that was plain.” In the first caption, Ah Sin’s exaggerated foreignness—epitomized by an invented dialect—emerges, not surprisingly, just at the moment when Bill Nye and James discover the proof of Ah Sin’s cheating (the cards in his sleeves and the wax on his fingernails). The illustration accompanying the final stanza of the poem depicts even more violence, unlike in Eytinge and Hull’s
Figure 3. Illustration from Bret Harte’s *Heathen Chinee* (Rock Island and Pacific Railroad, 1872). Albert and Shirley Small Special Collection Library, University of Virginia
Figure 4. Illustration from Bret Harte’s *Heathen Chinee* (Rock Island and Pacific Railroad, 1872). Albert and Shirley Small Special Collection Library, University of Virginia
editions (where James stands alone, facing the reader), visually equating “The language that was plain”—“American” language—with a sort of basic and unrefined vigilante justice.

Harte’s efforts to satirize white racism and to avoid putting Ah Sin’s speech into literary dialect are especially undercut by this illustrator, and were easily defeated by the contexts in which Harte’s work was published. Soon after the publication of “Plain Language from Truthful James,” Ah Sin developed what became a firmly entrenched voice, used even in laundry advertisements, and it was not one of Bret Harte’s making. Images of Ah Sin were made to conform to existing racist representations of the Chinese in popular culture, and “[c]heap reprints with caricatures of Ah Sin were vended on the streets of cities around the globe.” The fact that the poem was, in effect, popularly renamed “The Heathen Chinee”—even the official facsimile of the poem, published in 1871, adopts this title—illustrates the shift in the poem’s message. The cultural moment into which Harte’s poem was received had already determined that Ah Sin was a “pidgin dialect” character, despite the fact that Harte never gives him a full voice. Harte immediately became estranged from his universally adored creation. Although a biographical sketch published in the Overland Monthly in 1902 claims that Harte “never would have succeeded as a ‘space writer’ on a newspaper; he was too conscientious and too scrupulous in his laborious composition,” it is worth noting that the poem that made his reputation, published in the same periodical thirty years earlier, supposedly “was hastily written . . . to fill an unfinished column.” The poem “was always being altered and stippled up,” but it was essentially written and published as ephemera, with a careless surviving typesetter’s mistake and a collaborative composition history that includes contributions by the magazine’s printer, proofreader, and a “literary friend,” alongside Harte. The fact that readers so often encountered dialect poetry as they went about their daily lives, outside of books and magazines but through ephemera such as an extended advertisement for a train line, must inform any examination of the publication and reception histories of dialect poetry.

Riley’s Child Writing

Hamlin Garland called Riley the “poet of the plain American,” but, unlike the plain language of Truthful James, the language of Riley’s child-writing poetry is presented as Ah Sin’s unspoken voice was: it is peculiar.
ing Riley’s child-writing poetry “peculiar,” I also intend to reiterate Derek Attridge’s reference in *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* to William Wordsworth’s use of the word in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as a type of literary language that deviates from so-called ordinary language. By child writing, I do not mean representations of children’s speech, although these are also part of his oeuvre.\(^{41}\)

An example of Riley’s child writing can be found in a newspaper piece titled “Schoolboy Silhouettes—No. 1,” in which the narrator is overcome by nostalgia when confronted by an old McGuffey’s Reader and, more important, by the spelling mistakes of his childhood sweetheart in a letter contained therein:

“My own true love, I seat myself to let you know I got your respected letter with much goy. I thought I would write you a few lines before I come to scool, so’s I could get Annie to give you this before scool was took up. I herd pa say you was with those boys to Shivverree last nite at Mr. Joneses, and I node you wasent, so when he went to the store I cride. I also send those lines of poetry back as you sed. I think those lines is beautifull. Won’t she be mad when Dan speaks those lines as you sed. I can have ma says a party when summer comes, and I want you to come to.” \(^{42}\)

Much of the language of “Schoolboy Silhouettes—No. 1” intended to represent spelling mistakes could, for a moment, be mistaken for the language of a dialect poem, representing nonstandard pronunciation. Similarly, part of Riley’s “Lisping in Numbers” seems at first glance to be a phonetic dialect poem, but it is in fact an imitation of a child’s written English. Implicit in this poem—and in the many others that rely on illiterate spellings for their effectiveness (or their “fun,” as Howells puts it)—is the loaded suggestion that a child’s apparent illiteracy and a nonstandard dialect speaker’s English can be presented in the same written language. This is unsurprising, since much dialect writing, in its composition and reception, has allowed depictions of nonstandard speech to be confused with illiteracy. In order to suggest nonstandard speech, the writer deviates from written English, reinforcing the assumption that it represents only the standard prestige dialect. Like eye dialect, illiterate writing is often more accurate than standard orthography and demonstrates how illogical English orthography can be.\(^{43}\) As Noah Webster argues, quoting Benjamin Franklin, “‘those people spell best, who do not know how to spell;’ that is, they spell as their ears dictate, without being guided by rules, and thus fall into a regular orthography.”\(^{44}\)
But Riley’s speaker is not quite illiterate. Choosing a child on the cusp of literacy as his speaker, Riley performs the act or process of becoming literate in his poem. The language of “Lisp in Numbers” reflects the psychology of a speaker beginning to internalize the rules of literacy (which letters can go together, for example) and sometimes overcompensating and getting it wrong, as in “qute” for “cute.” Unlike most literary dialect, child writing can record spelling errors that don’t indicate a phonetic difference. These are “semi-literate” errors—errors produced in the acquiring of literacy—and a reader’s understanding of the “joke” depends upon the reader’s memory of that acquisition. The errors of child writing are usually phonetic simplifications. For example, in *Children’s Creative Spelling*, Charles Read finds that “children represent syllables that consist of an unstressed vowel plus /l/ or /n/ with just /l/ or /n/. . . . The similarity is not exact, in most such words there is usually no vowel in actual pronunciation, so that the children’s spelling is simply phonetically accurate.” Children learning to read frequently expect our language to be more phonetically regular than it is, and they tend to reflect this regularity in their spelling.

The semi-literate child of “Lip in Numbers” writes his own poem called “The Squirl and the Funy Litel Girl.” Its language is remarkable in its resemblance to the languages of both dialect poetry and spelling reform:

A litel girl
Whose name wuz Perl
Went to the woods to play.
The day wuz brite,
An’ her hart wuz lite
As she galy skiped a way.

A queer litel chatter,
A soft litel patter,
She herd in the top of a tree:
The surprizd litel Perl
Saw a qute litel squirl,
As cuning as cuning cud be.

She twisted her curl,
As she looked at the squirl,
An’ playfully told it ‘good day!’
She callld it ‘Bunny’—
Wuzent that funy?
An’ it noded an’ bounded a way.
Some of the alternative spellings here would please any spelling reformer. Although “brite” and “lite” call advertising language to mind, and many spelling reformers recommend against their adoption, they do seem more phonetically accurate than “bright” and “light” as they are pronounced in modern-day American English. Moreover, the child writer’s spellings of “call’d” and “squirl” are consistent with Read’s findings about simplification in children’s spellings. Some of these phonetic misspellings essentially amount to eye dialect (“wuz,” “hart,” “herd,” which represent standard pronunciations but are meant to visually suggest nonstandard ones), and have appeared in dialect writing as such. However, eye dialect in a dialect poem is phonetically insignificant; it does not succeed in representing nonstandard speech. Here, since the goal is to represent writing and not speech, what would be eye dialect elsewhere strangely becomes significant. The “dialect” of “The Squirl and the Funy Litel Girl,” in the larger context of the dialect poem “Lisping in Numbers” in which it is embedded, exposes the traces of the vacillation between orality and literacy found in Riley’s work. One critic, writing in 1937, inadvertently points to this vacillation. Praising what he sees as the oral basis of Riley’s poetry, he criticizes, on the other hand, modern poets such as e. e. cummings for “the un-English appearance” of their writing. Cummings, he continues, “throws at the reader a series of ‘unknown’ words which must almost be taken into a laboratory to analyse,” resulting in a poem that is “a puzzle to disentangle” and whose only virtue resides “in the cleverness of the typewriter keyboard.” He seems unaware that his description of cummings’s work applies to Riley’s just as well, and that his praise of Riley’s phonographic performance of “Little Orphant Annie”—“No one has ever read it so well as he, because he did not print on the page how it should be read”—only proves that Riley’s poetry is as much of a “puzzle” as cummings’s and does not offer up the secrets to its oral interpretation. Although one would expect Riley to treat his poems as scripts for producing Hoosier dialect, there are elements in his work that resist this type of performance.

Issues of literacy emerge even more aggressively in certain inconsistencies. Rhyming “Bunny” with “funy,” for example, seems implausible; “funy” would appear to rhyme with “puny,” not “bunny.” But Riley will not allow two rhyme words to be misspelled to the point of confusion. “Perl” and “squirl,” both misspellings, rhyme in stanza two, but both also appear as rhyme words elsewhere in the poem, paired with words that are spelled correctly. Even more glaring is the presence of the apostrophe in this poem. Every use of the word “and” here ends with the omission of the “d” and the addition of an apostrophe, a spelling that suggests literacy.
speaker who pronounces the word as “an” would, of course, have no reason to mark the word as lacking something. Dale B. J. Randall writes of the “literate blunder[s]” found in other Riley poems supposedly written by semi-literate poets: “Benj. F. Johnson of Boone would never have written whoopin’ nor s’pose unless he was far more wise in the ways of punctuation than his real-life counterparts.”

“Lisping in Numbers” deals directly with the writing process; many others of Riley’s poems involve or take place in school, or describe scenes of reading and writing. These are typical subjects for children’s literature of the period. In his A Child-World, Riley writes of Almon Keefer:

But the best
Of Almon’s virtues—leading all the rest—
Was his great love of books, and skill as well
In reading them aloud, and by the spell
Thereof enthraling his mute listeners . . .

And, in Riley’s Book of Joyous Children, in a section of a series of poems titled “A Session with Uncle Sidney,” Riley’s child speaker extols similar virtues in “little Leslie-Janey,” who is pictured writing at her desk in an accompanying illustration:

Uncle Sidney’s vurry proud
Of little Leslie-Janey,
'Cause she’s so smart, an’ goes to school
Clean 'way in Pennsylvany!
She print’ an’ sent a postul-card
To Uncle Sidney, telling
How glad he’ll be to hear that she
“Toock the onners in Speling.”

The poem illustrates the relative importance placed upon spelling of all scholastic subjects. Unlike Leslie-Janey, Riley had some difficulty with spelling as a child, and the idea that his precise experiments with spelling as a dialect poet could have been motivated by this initial trouble with spelling is amusing to consider. Of course, the irony of these lines is that the excellent speller Leslie-Janey makes several spelling errors in her postcard home. She leaves the “h” off of “honors”—an error to which I will return in my discussion of Dunbar—and even misspells “spelling.” Like “The Squirl and the Little Girl” in “Lisping in Numbers,” the line
‘Toock the onners in Speling,’ as it appears in a post-card, is not intended to reflect nonstandard speech but nonstandard writing. However, prefaced as it is by child dialect, the child writing begins to resemble that other sort of altered orthography.

A poem whose subject is on the cusp of literacy, as Leslie-Janey seems to be, invites its reader to put the maximum distance between himself or herself and the subject of the poem. However, Leslie-Janey says, inexplicably and comically, that she “[r]oock the onners in Speling.” She has proven herself to be literate, but the poems’ misspellings demonstrate that there is a “difference” between her literacy and our literacy. In the context of a poem that uses dialect spellings, the spellings in Leslie-Janey’s post-card do not look all that out of place—just as the misspellings of “The Squirl and the Funi Litel Girl” did not look out of place in the context of “Lisping in Numbers”—and they trick readers into confusing her misspellings with Riley’s. But what are the effects of this misspelling on readers who are only just becoming literate, as the likely target audience of *The Book of Joyous Children* would have been? Adult readers nostalgic for and charmed by creative misspelling would have no trouble identifying “onnors,” for example, as child writing and not dialect writing; a child, who may be encountering a version of his or her own failed attempt at writing, mingled with spelling errors he or she may recognize, would probably find reading these poems a very alienating and confusing experience.

A group of more conventional child-dialect poems (*not* child-writing) by Riley would have confronted adult readers of the *Century’s* December 1890 issue, in the “Bric-À-Brac” section of the magazine. These three pages, titled “Some Boys,” included “The Raggedy Man” and “Our Hired Girl,” two of his most well-known poems. He introduced the poems with the following statement:

In presenting the child dialect upon an equal footing with the proper or more serious English, the conscientious author feels it neither his desire nor his province to offer excuse. Wholly simple and artless, nature’s children oftentimes seem the more engaging for their very defects of speech and general deportment. We need worry very little for their futures, since the All-kind Mother has them in her keep. It is just and good to give the elegantly trained and educated child a welcome hearing. It is no less just and pleasant to admit his homely but wholesome-hearted little brother to our interest and love.\(^{54}\)

The overly “elegantly trained and educated child” is only tolerated by him because it is “good”—not “pleasant”—to do so. The child whose speech
and writing show “defects” is more interesting and endearing to Riley. Furthermore, he believes that his speech is more authentic, just as non-standard dialects are believed to be more authentic than standard; Riley appears to understand the subcategory of child dialect through an application of recapitulation theory in his argument that “[t]o range back to the very Genesis of all speech, we can only rightly conjecture a dialectic tongue—a deduction as natural as that a babe must first lisp—the child babble—and the youth and man gradually educate away all preceding blemishes.”

Apparently closer to the original source of language, the “uncultivated” child and the dialect speaker are less adulterated, and their defects and childhood lisps as represented in print are the visible marks of that purity.

Despite this clearly nostalgic perspective that seems to target adults, Riley’s poetry was frequently marketed towards children. *The Riley Reader*, published in 1915 and described in its promotional materials as a collection of Riley’s “choicest poems for children,” also included “a program for observing Riley day and some model reading lessons based on poems in the book.” These announcements for the book were sent to school superintendents across the country, encouraging them to adopt the book, which was “suitable for use in the fourth and fifth grades.” The publishers quickly ran out of examination copies; schools were apparently eager to include Riley’s poetry in their curricula. In fact, an announcement for the Indiana School Journal Teachers Club (essentially an advertisement for Riley’s *Homestead Edition Complete Works*) recommends the adoption of Riley’s poetry as a solution to the teacher’s difficulty “to secure material for school readings that is wholly applicable and healthy,” and one teacher writes in response, “I know of no books more likely to leave a wholesome impression upon the minds and characters of teachers and pupils alike.”

The Riley papers at Indiana University include letters from teachers and students, expressing admiration for and enthusiasm about Riley’s presence in the classroom. Like Garland, one child praises Riley for using “plain language that every one can understand” rather than “Flowery language’ as most poets do.” Another child, using misspellings reminiscent of Leslie-Janey’s, tells Riley that his favorite of his poems is “the ragdiman” and that his “teacher rote poems on paper and told us to lurn them.”

In addition, Riley’s poetry reached children in their homes. Just after Riley died, Harper and Brothers published a multi-volume set of his work, a set of “easy-to-read, comfortable sort of books that James Whitcomb Riley would have liked.” *The Complete Works of James Whitcomb Riley* was apparently wholesome enough to be advertised in a magazine...
“How Do You Do, Mr. Riley?”

Once when I was just a little girl—only four years old—mother and I went downtown and I saw you not far away. I broke away from mother, ran up to you and said, ‘How do you do, Mr. Riley?’ I shall never forget the wonderful smile on your face when you turned and saw me, a tiny little tot. You bowed and spoke to me as though I were a queen, and when I told you I knew most all of your child rhymes and enjoyed them very much, you were as pleased as if some man-of-letters had complimented you. That, Mr. Riley, is one of my finest memories.”

So wrote a grown-up little girl to James Whitcomb Riley.

Are you giving your children the precious memories of the beautiful poems? Will your children be able to say—‘My mother read me Riley when I was a child—and ‘The Raggedy Man’ and ‘Little Orphant Annie’ have rejoiced and comforted me all the days of my life.”

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

has passed on—and the grown-up world mourns. In the hearts of the little children is a void that cannot be filled—but that can be forgotten by the reading and rereading of these simple and childlike poems.

No more does Uncle Sam’s pooh-pooh stagger under the weight of ticoo letters—the tribute of the children of the world to their Uncle Riley (James Whitcomb Riley) on his birthday. Riley has passed on but his work lives. You can read it to your children—and enrich their lives and yours for all time.

Those of us who have missed things in childhood—missed learning to ride or to swim—feel that there is a lack that can never be made up. Even more is this so with things of the spirit. The child whose imagination has been enriched by the beauty and charm of Riley carries a treasure to old age—a treasure hard to get later on.

From the little girl who said she felt all alone without him to the President of the United States, who pays him tribute, Riley is in all hearts—big and little.

HIS HEIRS DESIRE ONLY A SMALL ROYALTY

The Riley of James Whitcomb Riley came to us, as the publishers of Mark Twain, and said that they would be glad to give his royalty so that we could place the works of James Whitcomb Riley in the homes of all those who loved him. So we are able to make this complete set of all Riley’s works—considered over seventy years and a biographical sketch of Riley—at a very low price—for the present—a price we can pass on to you.

We have planned a fitting form for these books—beautifully typed—the easy-to-read, comfortable sort of books that James Whitcomb Riley would have liked. This set is full of handsome and beautiful illustrations by Howard Chandler Christy and Edward Franklin Bormann—some in full color—some in two colors, and some in black and white.

The limited addition of Riley’s complete works sold from $125 to $275 a set. Yet you can have your set for less than one-sixth the lowest price made before.

The generosity of the Riley heirs and the resources of Harper and Brothers give you a rare opportunity. Don’t miss it. Need the money for your set on approval today.

HARPER & BROTHERS

1817-1917

NEW YORK

Figure 5. An advertisement for The Complete Works of James Whitcomb Riley, published in the December 1917 Biblical World. Harvard University Library, Widener Library
called *The Biblical World*, among others. In the advertisement, a little girl approaches the poet (whom she recognizes) to tell him that she knows “‘most all of [his] child rhymes and enjoyed them very much,” to which Riley responds “as if some man-of-letters had complimented” him. As an adult, she recalls the memory of this meeting in dialect fittingly modeled after Riley’s—“Onct when I was ist a little girl.” The woman’s dialectal voice, however, is supplanted by the less charming voice of the adman, who points a finger at parents in an accusatory manner: “Are you giving your children the precious memories of the beautiful poems? Will your children be able to say—‘My mother read me Riley when I was a child—and “The Raggedy Man” and “Little Orphant Annie” have rejoiced and comforted me all the days of my life.’” The message of the advertisement is that the failure to expose children to Riley at a young age is a “lack that can never be made up,” like the inability to ride or swim; it does them a disservice because it is “a treasure hard to get later on.” Luckily, unlike the bittersweet loss of childhood that comes with inevitable maturity, so perfectly expressed in the woman’s memory that introduces this advertisement, Riley’s loss eventually “can be forgotten by the reading and re-reading of these simple and childlike poems.”

As early as 1889, *St. Nicholas* magazine was soliciting Riley for more verse for their Christmas issue (“Whatever special subject pleases you best is sure to be the one that will also please the boys and girls best”59). By 1894, Riley claimed *St. Nicholas* was “rebukeful over [his] long neglect of them.”60 In the interim, Riley had conceived of a distinct strategy for his child poems. Rather than publishing them in venues specifically for children, he approached their sibling magazine the *Century*, a magazine associated with cultivation, with the “elegantly trained and educated child” as opposed to his “homely but wholesome-hearted little brother.” In 1890, Riley explained his plans to *Century* editor R. U. Johnson:

*I believe* I’ve struck a novelty in child literature, and fear Child Magazines will erroneously interpret its effect on the juvenile mind—and mark this proof of my standpoint’s undeniable truth, right here:—While I am aware of the rigid restrictions and responsibilities of the Editor’s office, I feel certain that my real boy, if admitted to the literary realm, with all his dialectic imperfections, would in no wise pervert his more fortunate fellows; but, rather, indirectly—wholesomely and amusingly instruct, being at the same time in return, equally advanced and benefited.—This theory’s truth, again and again, I have years found proved, in public audiences, by enthused parents as well as children.—So, from
like evidences by steady mail, the most popular poem I have ever written—the most sought for in enduring form—is “Little Orphant Annie,” with its awful, dire, and wholly lawless grammarless refrain of ‘The Gobble-uns’ll git you

Ef you
Don’t
Watch
Out!

(emphasis in original)

Riley’s pedagogical argument for his child dialect—that it would “instruct” rather than “pervert” cultivated children—he claims to find supported by his audiences of both adults and children, but he recognizes and anticipates resistance to his point of view. He frames his proposition to Johnson by admitting that he has “not had dialect encouraged by the juvenile magazines anyway” (emphasis in original) and asking if the *Century* would accept “a group of these little poems, which might be used, with some brief comment from the author.” When Johnson accepts the poems, Riley rejoices in the fact that “[n]ow everybody shall” (emphasis in original) love his child creations as much as he does, with the *Century’s* “sanctioning hand to lead the little rompers into full view of the public.”

Riley’s uncertain place in magazines illustrates how his designation as a poet for children was constantly shifting, and how the boundaries between adult and child verse were increasingly gaining definition. Even among his “Hoosier Child Rhymes,” E. L. Burlingame, editor of *Scribner’s*, made distinctions between poems that “might seem to us too specially directed to children for our purpose,” and “others, though of child-subjects, [that] are of wider appeal.” As a result of these shifting tectonic plates, much of his work fell between the cracks, as when *Century* editor Carey informed Riley in 1895 that the *St. Nicholas* editor “is afraid that ‘a homesick memory’ is too teary & adulty for St Nicholas & Mr Johnson feels it is too youthful for the Century.” Although Carey’s response suggests a thematic basis for his distinction between child and adult poetry, Riley’s letter to Johnson quoted above emphasizes the role dialect played in the children’s magazines’ reluctance to accept some of his poetry. It is precisely this dialect that Riley claims would educate his young readers, albeit “indirectly.”

If we take on face value Riley’s pedagogical goals for his peculiar writing as explained to R. U. Johnson in the quotation above, then Riley’s elucidation of the differences between the “bad spellings” representing
transcribed dialect and those representing illiterate writing also apparently has a pedagogical purpose:

I’ve written dialect in two ways, first as a writer bringing to bear all the art he possesses to represent the way some other fellow speaks and second as a Hoosier farmer might write. Old Benjamin F. Johnson was supposed to have written the poems for the paper. They represent his way of writing, while the others are my interpretation of his speech. In either case it’s the other fellow doin’ it.⁶⁵ (emphasis in original)

By extension, according to Riley, child-writing poems should be considered in the same league as dialect poems like “Little Orphant Annie” and the “Some Boys” poems published in the Century. His statement reflects the inconsistencies in his own practice of literary dialect. On the one hand, he distinguishes between representations of speech and of writing (“I’ve written dialect in two ways”), but on the other hand he seems unaware of the fundamental differences between the modes (“In either case it’s the other fellow doin’ it”). Again, the assumption that dialect speaking and illiterate writing are somehow linked stems from certain practices of reading literary dialect as oral. Because standard written English does not correspond to the standard prestige dialect any more strongly than it does to nonstandard dialects, there’s no reason why the way a “fellow speaks” should predict or determine the way he “might write.” The two are unrelated, but the resemblance between “bad” writing and good transcriptions of “bad” speaking is so striking visually that the connection has become deeply entrenched. Riley’s dialect has been attacked and defended by many in terms of its accuracy,⁶⁶ but, because Riley states his two goals as interrelated, even the phonetic dialect is loose enough to include non-phonetic elements.

As Donald M. Scott writes in an essay about the lecture system in mid-to late-nineteenth-century America, orality and literacy coexisted in forms that often present themselves as if exclusively oral or exclusively literate. Because most people attending lectures during this period were “both hearers and readers,” with each role affecting the other, “it does not seem particularly useful to think in terms of oral versus printed media. Instead of construing print and orality as belonging to inherently separate social and cultural worlds, it might be more useful to approach them as different parts of an overall system of cultural expression, a system containing a variety of printed, oral, and visual genres.”⁶⁷ Although the idea of dialect poetry as fundamentally oral clung to Harte’s and Riley’s dialects,
the mingling of oral and literate modes in nineteenth-century American literary culture is evident in the misreading of Harte’s attempt to ironize James’s “plain language” as anything but plain, and in the confusion of representations of illiterate writing and representations of dialect by Riley himself and by his readers. The interplay of phonetic and nonphonetic elements in their work informs the reading process of silent dialect poetry readers, readers whose experiences with dialect poetry borrow from both orality and literacy.

The Spelling Bee Poem

In a May 17, 1905 newspaper article published in the Bellingham (WA) Herald titled “Ade’s Literary map of Indiana,” the journalist describes a speech delivered by George Ade in which Ade geographically divides Indiana, a state especially overrun by authors, by literary genre. “Go south and west of Indianapolis,” he says, “and you will find the dialect poetry. Riley started it. Now no one seems able to head it off. Every man who can spell thinks he is an author.” Given the intricate and controlled manipulations of spelling found in Riley’s child-writing experiments, as well as in other more conventional types of dialect poetry, it does make sense that Ade associates the ability to spell correctly with the ability to write a dialect poetry that defines itself through misspelling. Moreover, dialect poetry, like popular turn-of-the-century poetry generally, frequently addresses thematically the problem of correct spelling. The obvious difference between dialect and non-dialect poetry that takes up the subject of spelling is, of course, that dialect poetry necessarily consists of misspelled words.

Harte’s poem “The Spelling Bee at Angel’s” belongs, as do the lines quoted above from Riley’s “A Session with Uncle Sidney,” to a subgenre of dialect poetry I call the Spelling Bee poem, one that demonstrates how literacy is problematized in dialect poetry. The “humor” in these Spelling Bee poems derives in part from the irony of the fact that a speaker whose language is recorded to suggest illiteracy could be the winner of a spelling bee. Harte’s speaker (again, Truthful James) invites a group of schoolchildren to listen to his morbid tale of a bar-room spelling bee and its unrefined participants. One of these outlaws, Smith, proposes to the group a “new game . . . that ez far ez I can see / Beats euchre, poker and van-toon” and, after some initial resistance (one man insists that “the man who tackled euchre hed his education squar”), everyone joins in. Incongruously, a teacher is in the crowd, and, because he knows the rules, “high upon the bar itself the schoolmaster was raised.” As the words become more dif-
icult, the participants become more frustrated and aggressive. One of the words given even prompts a threat: “When ‘phthisis’ came they all sprang up, and vowed the man who rung / Another blamed Greek word on them be taken out and hung.”

As it turns out, strangely enough, the word “phthisis” was something of a lightning rod for spelling reform efforts. On more than one occasion, Mark Twain (in “A Simplified Alphabet” and “Spelling and Pictures,” at least) cites “phthisis” as a prime example of the problems with our orthography. In addition, this very word provokes the ire of spelling reformer Masticator B. Fellows in Owen Wister’s How Doth the Simple Spelling Bee. In this comic novel, Fellows stalks a professor and somehow sneaks a leaflet into his pancake breakfast asking, “Phthisis. How can you eat while a word like that is allowed?” As in “The Spelling Bee at Angel’s,” and in the poem by Loomis mentioned briefly in this book’s introduction, the novel ends in violence over spelling. The national pride at stake in the argument over spelling is apparent in the ode of the Simplified Spelling committee assembled by Fellows:

My spelling ’tis of thee,
   Sweet land of spelling-bee,
   Of thee I sing.
   Land of the pilgrims’ pride,
   Land where my fathers dide.
   For spelling simplifide
   Let freedom ring.

The ode’s unmistakable message is that our current spelling is fundamentally unpatriotic. Poking fun at those spelling reformers who believe that social injustices could be resolved by simplifying written English, the satire reaches absurdity especially in changing the spellings of “died” and “simplified” to match their rhyme word “pride.” Wister’s Fellows embodies this sentiment: he urges his committee to “[r]emember the poor foreigners, remember the little children. It is for them that the English language exists; and for them we must, therefore, smooth our spelling’s cruel path.”

Arguing to reform our language for the sake of foreigners and children was nothing new. Over a century earlier, in his Dissertations on the English Language, Webster asked,

Would this alteration produce any inconvenience, any embarrassment or expense? By no means. On the other hand, it would lessen the trouble of writing, and much more, of learning the language; it would reduce
Webster proposes here that not only would foreigners and children benefit from spelling reform, nonstandard English speakers would also learn “true pronunciation” (undoubtedly a dialect not dissimilar from Webster’s). Moreover, one of the desired goals of Webster’s reforms could be described as nostalgic, if not reactionary: to keep the language as it is and “prevent the possibility of changes.” Unlike the Riley tradition of dialect poetry, Webster’s ideal English language would need no preservation for future generations. While part of Riley’s project was to use phonetic spelling to capture a disappearing language, Webster expresses in this passage his hopes that phonetic spelling would encourage American dialects to disappear without a trace and leave a strong centralized standard dialect in their place, one that would not and could not disappear.

In “The Spelling Bee at Angel’s,” phonetic spelling allows for a literate joke similar to the one from Riley’s “The Rossville Lectur’ Course.” At the end of Harte’s poem, James tells his audience that he is the winner and only survivor of a spelling bee that somehow turned violent, but then the dialect spelling in the poem continues, ironically, with the word “eddication.” More of a malapropism than a dialect spelling—lying somewhere between education and edification—the word is a joke aimed over James’s head, at his expense, and directed toward the reader. The moral connotations that “edification” brings to bear upon “education” are in keeping with the message of a poem that ends by insisting that children pray. Like Riley’s “ortographt,” Harte’s “eddication” depends upon the visual effect of its hybridization to underscore the non-phonetic aspect of the poem’s phonetic dialect; the visual joke is obscured in performance. Again, the poem targets a highly literate reader, and James’s ignorance of the joke points to his semi-literacy. Truthful James’s audience within the poem, too, is only semi-literate: he tells the children “from school . . . driftin’ by” to “drop them books and first pot-hooks.”

During the fight that breaks out prompted by disagreements over the spelling bee, three-fingered Jack dies “with Webster on his chest and Worcester on his brain.” In 1878, the year “The Spelling Bee at Angel’s” was published in *Scribner's Monthly*, Noah Webster’s was still the most popular dictionary, but J. E. Worcester’s 1846 *Universal and Critical Dictionary* was also widely known. Many of the spelling changes Webster
proposed in his original 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* have been adopted in American English, such as the omission of the “k” in words like “publick” and “musick” and the “u” in words like “favour” and “honour.” Worcester’s dictionary and spellers were less revolutionary than Webster’s in their approach, taking British English as the orthographical standard. The controversy surrounding the publication of Worcester’s dictionary—in 1829, he was accused of plagiarizing from Webster—continued in the 1850s and 1860s through publishers of the then-deceased Webster. Webster’s certainly had greater cultural influence and, more often than not, was the authority used for spelling bees. In an essay on the history of the spelling bee, Allen Walker Read cites a nineteenth-century anecdote as evidence: “The schoolmaster . . . remark[s] that he . . . shall give out nothing that is not in the spelling book.” In a footnote to this quotation, Read claims that “[t]his proviso throws light on the hold that Webster’s spelling-book had on the public mind.” What is perhaps the most famous spelling-bee scene in American literature also features Webster’s spelling-book. In Edward Eggleston’s *The Hoosier School-Master*, the dialect-speaking teacher declares that he “put[s] the spellin’-book prepared by the great Daniel Webster alongside the Bible.”

However, as the quotation from *Dissertations* above reveals, Webster had more in mind than the improvement and consistency of written English; he wanted the standardization of writing to encourage the standardization of speaking. Webster writes, “Nothing can be so disagreeable as that drawling, whining cant that distinguishes a certain class of people; and too much pains cannot be taken to reform the practice. Great efforts should be made by teachers of schools, to make their pupils open the teeth, and give a full clear sound to every syllable.” And although, nearly a century later, Worcester allows for pronunciation differences in his 1879 *A Pronouncing Spelling-Book of the English Language* between American and British speakers, he too gives strict pronunciation rules together with his spelling rules that seem designed to privilege certain regional and class differences while vilifying others: “Sound the *r* clearly. Say *jar*, not *jah*; *charm*, not *chahm*. Do not pronounce *aw* as if ending in *r*. Say *jaw*, not *jawr*. In their discussion of literacy instruction in nineteenth-century North American schools, Suzanne de Castell and Allan Luke point out that “‘provincial’ speech codes were frowned upon as evidence of rudeness or ignorance; textbooks of this period advised students to cultivate the friendship of children of higher station, so that they might assimilate more cultured and aristocratic speech habits.” The fact that three-fingered Jack’s last thoughts are of these two most significant forces for stan-
standardization—not only of American writing but, less overtly, of American speech—is a humorous moment but also a disturbing one. Although the spelling bee itself ignites a general riotous and rebellious refusal to give in to Webster and Worcester, questioning the validity of words like “phthisis,” three-fingered Jack cannot in the end free himself of a rule-bound and prescriptive approach to written and spoken language.

The value placed upon proper spelling obscured the secondary goal of standardizing pronunciation and creating a narrowly defined and uniquely American language. In this light, the nineteenth-century devotion to the spelling bee, reflected in the dialect literature, is about more than simply spelling for spelling’s sake. It is important to remember how crucial spelling was as a scholastic subject during this period. We see this clearly in literary depictions of Midwestern towns and villages. Eggleston’s narrator claims, condescendingly, that “[t]here is one branch diligently taught in a backwoods school. The public mind seems impressed with the difficulties of English orthography, and there is a solemn conviction that the chief end of man is to learn to spell.” The same schoolteacher who states that he would put Webster’s speller alongside the Bible also comically declares that “[s]pelling is the corner-stone, the grand, underlying subterfuge, of a good eddication.”

Not only does Harte’s blended “eddication” reappear here, but Eggleston humorously uses the word “subterfuge” to mean something like substructure while conveying something like its opposite.

In an 1876 article addressing the introduction of the spelling bee to England, an anonymous writer jokingly suggests that a spelling bee participant who misses a long word may not be familiar enough with small-town newspapers and their excessive use of “spelling-bee” words: “we shall expect soon to hear that an ‘orthographical conglomeration’ has been held in some provincial town.” With short and familiar words, on the other hand, dialectal differences can become an issue, and some people stumble when they spell words phonetically; the writer complains that “[i]t cannot be too often impressed on American speakers that when they come to write they must add a ‘g’ to the word which they call ‘fixins.’” Perhaps more often, however, Americans are said to go too far in the other direction, toward overcorrection and dependence upon the text, and become victims of “spelling pronunciation.” In Every-Day English, published in 1880, White writes that Americans “are trying to be exact, to talk like a book, to speak dictionary English. A word to them is not simply a sound which expresses a thought or a thing, but something which is spelled, and which they must carefully pronounce according to its spelling.” What else could motivate the anxious overcompensation behind spelling pro-
nunciation but a desire to turn from orality and an accompanying desire to cleave to the written word?

Spelling bees in dialect poems sometimes end by implicitly forwarding the principles of spelling reform, but the characters of Harte’s poem (like Eggleston’s characters) nevertheless take proper conventional spelling very seriously. They regress to a child-like state of excitement about the bee, during which, Truthful James says, “’twas touchin’ to survey / These bearded men, with weppings on, like schoolboys at their play.” One participant bellows, “not one mother’s son goes out till that thar word is spelled!” In their allegiance to Webster and Worcester, Harte’s spelling bee participants in effect eliminate the possibility of reading literary dialect as signifying illiteracy. In other words, spelling-bee words—illogical or foreign spellings such as “phthisis”—rarely succumb to dialect spellings because they are so distantly related to their pronunciations. Few people, literate or illiterate, nonstandard- or standard-English-speaking, know how they should be pronounced. In other words, winning the spelling bee has nothing to do with “good” pronunciation. The man who spells “eider-duck” with an “I” recognizes the irrationality behind correct spelling and becomes violent for the sake of spelling reform.

As entertaining and eventful as the spelling bee could be—and a spelling bee could hardly be more dramatic than the one at Angel’s—the bee’s pedagogical value trumps its entertainment value. The education supposedly gained from correct spelling was not frivolous but necessary linked to morality. If spelling bees were entertainment, they were Christian, wholesome entertainment; “[t]hey became, naturally enough, a social event, although the name ‘spelling school,’ which clung to them, salved the Puritan conscience.” Nineteenth-century spelling books also emphasize the moral value of good spelling. As Shirley Brice Heath points out, “During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, grammar books and composition texts show increased collocations of terms such as ‘good,’ ‘moral,’ ‘industrious,’ ‘hard-working,’ with ‘good language’ or ‘suitable compositions.’” The message of spellers was that good spelling would ensure goodness.

At first Harte’s poem seems in keeping with the ideology of the spellers, but ends by refuting it. The poem concludes with James’s admonition to the schoolchildren:

O little kids, my pretty kids, down on your knees and pray!
You’ve got your eddication in a peaceful sort of way;
And bear in mind thar may be sharps ez slings their spellin’ square,
But likewise slings their bowie-knives without a thought or care.
You wants to know the rest, my dears? Thet’s all! In me you see
The only gent that lived to tell about the Spellin’ Bee!

The men of “The Spelling Bee at Angel’s” are invested in good spelling and yet immoral. Regardless of their ends, the “sharps ez . . . slings their bowie-knives” are equally comfortable “sling[ing] their spellin’ square.” Truthful James even compares victory on the battle-field to victory in a spelling bee in the case of Pistol Joe: “For since he drilled them Mexicans in San Jacinto’s fight / Thar warn’t no prouder man got up than Pistol Joe that night.” As charming a scene as grown men sitting down for a spelling bee might be, we never forget that they are violent men, and hardened criminals besides. For the spelling bee participants, morality and spelling are entirely unrelated. And this, I argue, is what is so discomfiting for the children who hear Truthful James’s story. The children leave James with “downcast heads and downcast hearts—but not to sport or play / For when at eve the lamps were lit, and supperless to bed / Each child was sent, with tasks undone and lessons all unsaid, / No man might know the awful woe that thrilled their youthful frames.” The story is a shocking one under any circumstances, but it is especially disturbing for children on their way home from supposedly edifying spelling lessons. They have been utterly changed by this experience, and now question the idealizing pedagogy of the late-nineteenth-century classroom. Is spelling still good? Even if the children pray, as James beseeches them to do, might they end as the participants of the spelling bee at Angel’s?

Besides being a social event and a supposedly wholesome activity, the spelling bee performance, in educational value, falls somewhere between the popular poetry reading culture emerging in the late nineteenth century and the more high-minded elocation tradition that preceded it and continued, transformed, into the twentieth century. Even quotidian schoolroom instruction could be a performance. As W. H. Venable, a superintendent of Dayton, Ohio schools from 1874 to 1884—and, incidentally, friend and correspondent of Riley’s—wrote in an 1892 memoir, spelling lessons, “always taught orally,” allowed verbal communication to enter the increasingly silent classroom, as “all the noise that had been pent up for the day, like a dammed and swollen stream, broke forth in one impetuous torrent of mingled howls and screams, every scholar yelling out his lesson on his own hook, and in his highest key, making the little old school-house rock again.”89 In Eggleston’s The Hoosier School-Master, the “spelling-school,” as he calls it, “is the only public literary exercise known in Hoo-pole County. It takes the place of the lyceum lecture and debating club.”90
That a public exercise in the spelling of obscure words could have served as a “literary” event seemed to some to run counter to the contemporaneous interest in dialect poetry. Joaquin Miller, for instance, found fault with the ever-expanding dictionaries entering the market and in the same breath praised poetry for its lexical simplicity. For him, poetry and words are strangely at odds:

... Dr Johnson, and a plague take him so far as poetry is concerned, made a dictionary of about 50,000 words. Then our Webster died with the boast on his lips that he had built a dictionary of 200,000; then came the “Century” with 250,000; then the “Standard” with 300,000! Why, at this rate, before long we might have more words and less poetry than China!

All honor to the great and learned teachers who made these wondrous books! Science needed them, but poetry, no ...

And this is Riley’s secret. He uses only little bits of baby words, and as few, even of these, as possible. I dislike dialect, but I take the stand to say that James Whitcomb Riley has written more real poetry and will reach more hearts than all the rest of us put together.91

What Miller overlooks is that Riley’s “baby words” are themselves exercises in spelling and therefore, in this moment of active spelling reform debate, exercises in wordplay of a sort.

Like spelling reform and the spelling bee, dialect poetry raises the question of what is good spelling: correct, or corrected? Riley’s interest in spelling is essential to the practice of his poetry, despite the fact that Minnie Mitchell observes a separation between the two in her reminiscences of the childhood Riley, writing, “[i]t was a matter of amusement how quickly Bud would slump out of sight at the mention of a spelling match, but how interested he became in the literary part.”92 The spelling bee was both edificatory and popular, and occupied a unique position in American culture and in American dialect poetry, as we will see also in Dunbar’s poems. In the spelling mistakes of their “plain” and “peculiar” dialects, Harte and Riley emphasized the literate dimensions of their apparently oral poetry. In light of this, their visual experiments in dialect poetry can be considered important predecessors to the visual experiments of modernist poetry, and this chapter constitutes an effort to make their dialect poetries visible once again and return them to American literary history.