MICHAEL NORTH, THE DIALECT OF MODERNISM: RACE, LANGUAGE AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE NY: OXFORD UNIV. PRESS, 1994

1

Against the Standard: Linguistic Imitation, Racial Masquerade, and the Modernist Rebellion

I

In the preface to *Pygmalion* George Bernard Shaw reassures his readers, some of whom might be daunted by the dazzling success of Eliza Doolittle, that she is but an example of the "many thousands of men and women who have sloughed off their native dialects and acquired a new tongue." Sounding a bit like Dale Carnegie, who began his self-help empire at about this time, Shaw promises those who follow Eliza a world of social harmony based on proper phonetics, a world in which words cannot be mispronounced, in which men and women will no longer be divided by differences of speech. "It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul," as Henry Higgins crows in the play itself.[1] The American musical *My Fair Lady* expands on Shaw's expansiveness by staging Eliza's final elocution lesson as a triumphant tango: when "the rine in Spine" finally becomes "the rain in Spain," the three principals drop all decorum and dance.

The same subject is handled rather differently in another famous American musical, one whose slapdash colloquial title, *Singin' in the Rain,* would have made Henry Higgins cringe. In this elocution lesson, Don Lockwood, famous silent movie actor, receives instruction from a prissy professorial type in string tie and thick glasses. Don's lesson also ends in dance, but in this case the student and his sidekick transform the professor's tongue twister into a tap extravaganza, in which the professor himself is merely a dumb prop. They untie his tie, muss his hair, put a lampshade on his head, throw his papers in the air, and end by belting out a perfectly harmonized *a,* the same *a,* incidentally, that Eliza finally masters in *her* triumphant elocution scene. But what a difference! Don and his friend Cosmo dance to demonstrate their utter indifference to verbal exactitude. Taking the tongue twister into tap shows how American verve and creativity triumph over empty formality, American individuality over conformity and authoritarianism. What else would you expect from a movie whose very title drops its *g*'s?[2]

Yet this movie, seemingly so breezy and informal, contains within it a tangle of feelings about speech and language that makes Shaw seem almost as shallow as

Dale Carnegie. The elocution scene is but a part of the larger story of the arrival of the talkies, an arrival that *Singin' in the Rain* portrays, on one level at least, as an unmasking. Lina Lamont, silent movie star and Don Lockwood's longtime screen companion, seems sweet and refined. Her voice, which is carefully kept out of the first few scenes of the movie so as to heighten its impact, reveals the fact that she is not. Her coarse screeching is contrasted throughout to the calm, low voice of the newcomer Kathy Selden, who *is* sweet and also genuine, which is much better than being refined. Thus the whole movie is structured around the contrast between Kathy and Lina: their names, their clothes, their faces, their hairstyles, their personalities. Kathy enters the movie as a critic of the trumped-up, hokey acting of the silent era, and her progress from obscurity to stardom is an allegory of the emergence of movies like *Singin' in the Rain.* Don's screen love scene with Lina involves powdered wigs, heavy brocade, and stilted language on the title cards; for his first love scene with Kathy, he sets up the most ostentatiously simple stage set ever filmed and then croons straight from the heart.

The big difference, of course, is sound, which frees movies from the dodges, exaggerations, and falsehoods of the past and allows them to sing. On the other hand, sound puts film actors to the test, and those, like Lina, whose talent is shallow and unnatural are exposed. But sound brings to the movies not just singing but also another, more equivocal, art: dubbing. The studio's answer to Lina's vocal limitations is not to replace her with Kathy, but just to replace her voice with Kathy's. It is historically true that dubbing was born with the talkies: Warner Oland's "Kol Nidre" was dubbed in *The Jazz Singer;* Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* was completely reshot as a talkie, with Hitchcock's script girl crouching under tables and behind doors to provide a voice for the thickly accented leading lady.[3] But the possibilities of dubbing threaten the whole structure of *Singin' in the Rain,* based as it is on the idea that voice reveals the true measure of one's talent and character.

There is actually a good deal of unacknowledged dubbing in *Singin' in the Rain.* Because Debbie Reynolds, who played Kathy Selden, wasn't a very strong singer or dancer, her high notes and taps were dubbed throughout the movie. Beyond this, two entire songs were dubbed by Betty Noyes, one of them the very song Kathy Selden sings to cover up Lina's vocal limitations. If this seems to smudge the message of the movie somewhat, it's as nothing compared with the scene in which Kathy dubs Lina's spoken voice. Here Reynolds is actually dubbed by Jean Hagen, who played Lina. In other words, Hagen is dubbing Reynolds dubbing Hagen. The reason for this last sleight of hand is that Reynolds had what director Stanley Donen considered a "midwestern" accent, while Hagen, beneath the screech she affected for her role as Lina, actually had just the sort of smooth, cultured voice the scene demanded.[4] One wonders why they didn't just give Reynolds elocution lessons.

Behind its assured surface, therefore, *Singin' in the Rain* reveals the mixed emotions that most Americans have about the national speech. Despite its pose of

insouciant nonconformity, the movie is just as prescriptive as Henry Higgins, with the same linguistic hypersensitivity that Americans have always harbored along with their colloquial freedom. And yet hypocrisy is just one element of this complex situation, for while the movie is furtive about its own dubbing, it is quite open about the dubbing of "The Duelling Cavalier," the movie within the movie. When Cosmo Brown comes up with the idea of dubbing, everyone cheers him as a genius, though they promise to use the technique "just this once," as if it were a powerfully seductive drug. The deception is finally revealed to the opening-night audience when Kathy is exposed singing behind the miming Lina, but their reaction is not outrage or confusion but laughter and applause. As Ronald Haver points out in his audio essay on the movie, the audience realizes at once what is happening, though dubbing is so new it should be unrecognizable to them.

Such knowing enjoyment is an actual component of audience reaction to films like *My Fair Lady,* since everyone has known from the very beginning that Audrey Hepburn is not actually singing in the scene that celebrates Eliza's discovery of her new voice. Though Eliza may labor long and hard to sound like a proper lady, Audrey Hepburn can sing like Marni Nixon virtually at the touch of a button. What's really being celebrated in such scenes is not vocal authenticity but rather the technical wizardy that can make anyone sound like anyone else. The real American retort to linguistic authoritarianism is dubbing, carefully manipulated falsehood, and not the naturalism of Don Lockwood's love song to Kathy. If *Singin' in the Rain* is about the entry of the movies into modernity, then that condition is represented as one in which technology sets the whole concept of vocal authenticity aside as irrelevant and is applauded for doing so.

In one of the most peculiar scenes in this movie, the camera follows Don and Cosmo as they cross a vast stage set on which four or five movies are being filmed simultaneously. As they pause near the "African" set, a white extra in blackface and elaborate feathers reads them a notice from *Variety* announcing *The Jazz Singer.* This scene provides the pretext for everything else that happens in the movie, since it is the success of *The Jazz Singer* that motivates the changes in the film studio, and at the same time it reveals an important missing element in this, one of the most lily-white musicals ever made: race.[5]

Except for this one element, *Singin' in the Rain* is a very faithful retelling of *The Jazz Singer.* Rebellion against Old World authority through jazz is also the essence of the earlier movie, as is revealed at the very beginning when old Mr. Yudelson catches Jakie Rabinowitz, the cantor's son, down at the beer garden, singing "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee" and "shufflin'" when he should be practicing the "Kol Nidre" with his father.[6] Later, as an adult, Jakie, become Jack Robin the jazz singer, has an archetypal American argument with his father: "[Y]ou're of the old world! Tradition is all right, but this is another day! I'll live my life as I see fit!"[7] Finally, just as his career is about to take off, Jack is once again summoned to sing the "Kol Nidre," this time as his aged father lies on his deathbed. Like *Singin' in the Rain, The Jazz Singer* tells this story partly to reflect

and applaud its own technical accomplishments. Jack succeeds as a singer because he sings from the heart; his voice "has that tear in it."[8] The growth to self-realization of such a career could only be told in sound, by a process like the one Vitaphone was introducing with elaborate fanfare in *The Jazz Singer,* so that Jakie's acquisition and defense of his own personal voice recapitulates the advance of movies into the talking era.

On the other hand, *The Jazz Singer* raises the same questions about technical wizardry that *Singin' in the Rain* does: Is a movie with sound more realistic than one without, or is it merely the producer of newer and more powerful illusions? When Jakie becomes Jack and sings his own songs is he unmasked, revealed as himself at last, or is he wearing a new mask instead? These questions, which are posed by the use of dubbing in *Singin' in the Rain,* are presented visually as well as vocally in *The Jazz Singer* by Jolson's blackface makeup. Mr. Yudelson puts it with crude succinctness upon discovering Jack in his dressing room: "It talks like Jakie, but it looks like a nigger."[9] Yet, for the most part, "it" doesn't even sound like Jakie: the music that represents his youthful self-assertion is mostly black music, from the minstrel shuffle he does as a youngster to "Mammy" at the very end. How can Jakie become Jack, become himself, as it were, by donning a disguise? More fundamentally, how can *The Jazz Singer* enter the modern era of talking pictures by recapitulating a minstrel show routine at least a hundred years old?[10] Why should the latest technical accomplishment, one that claimed to provide a new fidelity to nature, rely on such an old-fashioned and painfully obvious masquerade?

Like *Singin' in the Rain,* once again, *The Jazz Singer* keeps these questions out in the open. The later musical makes dubbing not only a major subject but, in fact, the fulcrum of the plot, as if in blissful ignorance of the peril this technique poses to the movie's central message of wholesome naturalness. The earlier movie does the same by pulling its star, Al Jolson, back and forth across the racial boundary. It shows him making up, juxtaposes scenes in the synagogue with those on stage, and, at one point, does a mirror dissolve from his face with black makeup to that of a cantor singing. All this suggests conflict and tension, but it also suggests that the black mask is less important than the process of masking. The alternative to Old World tradition with all its rigidity is not blackface per se but the ability to change identity that blackface implies.

There is a kind of vocal blackface too, a mimicry of "black" speech patterns that serves to cover up what Sampson Raphaelson, author of the story on which *The Jazz Singer* was based, called the "richly filthy East Side *argot.*"[11] But visual and vocal blackface don't always coincide in *The Jazz Singer,* and the black makeup is often weirdly incidental to Jolson's performances. He can "sing it jazzy," without his makeup, as he does when singing "Blue Skies" to his mother,[12] and he can sing a sentimental number of his own like "Mother of Mine, I Still Have You" as if he were an Irish tenor, despite wearing blackface. What all

of this emphasizes is that blackface is a role, a creation, into which and out of which Jack can slip at will.

It is only partially accurate, therefore, to portray Jakie's transformation into the Jazz Singer as his achievement of a free, authentic personality, an American personality untrammeled by outmoded conventions. For the modern American personality Jakie acquires is free precisely to the extent that it is inauthentic, free to don and change masks at will. The grotesque exaggeration of blackface makeup had always been meant at least in part to emphasize the fact that the wearer was *not* black; in the 1920s Jolson made this old tactic breezy and up-to-date by publicly joking about the inauthenticity of his role. In 1925 *Vanity Fair* published his account of a trip to the South under the title "Maaaaam-my! Maaaaam-my! The Famous Mammy-Singer Explores His Native (?) Sunny Southland." For the purposes of this article, Jolson pretends to believe the clichés he has been purveying about the South, and he reacts with mock horror as the actual South repeatedly fails to conform to the clichés. Finally, he hopes at the very least to find "the southern darky—the banjo strummer whose wit is famous wherever minstrel shows have been played," but when he does find a promising specimen the man tells Jolson one of his own jokes, a joke he had been using on the stage for years.[13]

Jolson does not draw the obvious conclusion from this episode, that he is himself the "southern darky" he is looking for, he and white performers like him the only fleshly reality of this very old stereotype. But neither does he flinch at the contradiction between such knowing self-mockery and the maudlin sentiment of films like *The Jazz Singer.* One does not undermine the other, because the film insists equally on both. On one hand, the black persona carries all the connotations of natural, unspoiled authenticity that Europe has attached to other cultures at least since Montesquieu, and thus Jakie can throw off convention to become himself by becoming "black." On the other hand, blackface declares itself openly as a mask, unfixes identity, and frees the actor in a world of self-creation.[14]

We seem to have come a long way from Eliza Doolittle's masquerade as a lady, and yet all of our masquerades tell the same story, or parts of the same story. *Singin' in the Rain* shows how variously Americans respond to the linguistic and cultural prescriptiveness of experts like Henry Higgins. A single movie can accommodate Stanley Donen's nervous conventionality, Don Lockwood's brash freedom, and Cosmo Brown's technical wizardry, which allows the movie to have both convention and nature by erasing all the boundaries between them. This is what makes *Singin' in the Rain* such a faithfully American movie, its utterly genuine combination of cultural innocence and technological cynicism. But *Singin' in the Rain* is less than faithful to the moment it pretends to portray, the modernist moment of the 1920s, in that it omits any mention of race. The new voice that American culture acquired in the 1920s, the decade of jazz, stage musicals, talking pictures, and aesthetic modernism, was very largely a black one.

In music, on stage, and in film, white artists dubbed in a black voice and often wore, as Jolson did, a black mask. Because this mask, and the voice that issued from it, already embodied white America's quite various feelings about nature and convention, it became an integral part of the cultural and technical innovation of the 1920s. The story that both *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Jazz Singer* tell, the story of modernity's triumphant rebellion against the restrictions of the past, can hardly be told without it.

II

In January 1922, about the time that T. S. Eliot returned from his rest cure in Lausanne with a certain nineteen-page poem in his suitcase, Sampson Raphaelson published "The Day of Atonement" in *Everybody's Magazine.* This is the story of a young Jewish American so taken with "the plaintive blare of 'Alexander's Ragtime Band'" that he becomes a "blackface comedian," a story later made into a play and then the movie *The Jazz Singer.*[15] This protagonist's route to modernity may seem quite different from the one Eliot was about to chart, and yet the story Raphaelson tells of becoming modern by acting black was to be retold over and over in the next decade. It is, in fact, this story that links the transatlantic modernism Eliot and Joyce inaugurated in 1922 with the Harlem Renaissance that began, with Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows,* at exactly the same time.

At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, in the year of *The Jazz Singer,* Rudolf Fisher reported wryly that all his favorite Harlem haunts had been taken over by whites "playing Negro games. . . . They camel and fish-tail and turkey, they geche and black-bottom and scronch, they skate and buzzard and mess-around—and they do them all better than I!"[16] In the same year Charles S. Johnson published in his anthology *Ebony and Topaz* a story that goes one step further, for the title character of "The Negro of the Jazz Band" is, despite his seemingly black skin and extraordinary sense of rhythm, white.[17] Though the story is meant to be a kind of fantasy, there were at this time many fashionable whites who purposely skirted the racial line, and at least a few who temporarily crossed it. Carl Van Vechten, who was famously caricatured in blackface by Miguel Covarrubias, had first passed for black as an undergraduate. Waldo Frank, author of the racial melodrama *Holiday,* also posed as black when traveling in the South with Jean Toomer.[18]

One might include in this company a number of white writers without Van Vechten's obvious connection to Harlem. Long before the Harlem Renaissance, Wallace Stevens signed himself "Sambo" in a letter to his fiancée, and long after it Ezra Pound was still calling Eliot "de Possum" and using what he imagined was black dialect in his letters.[19] It was in London that Eliot signed himself "Tar Baby," in Paris that Gertrude Stein casually used "dey" and "dem."[20] William

Carlos Williams imagined himself as a black musician in the 1940s, and as late as 1959 John Berryman could go back to the very source by dedicating one of his first *Dream Songs* to Daddy Rice, who "jumped 'Jim Crow' in 1828."[21] In "The Day of Atonement," then, Raphaelson tells a rather common story of white rebellion and escape by means of racial cross-identification, a story Nathan Huggins sums up in three phrases: "They defected, became apostates; they became Negroes."[22]

What ragtime promised Raphaelson's protagonist, what the minstrel show promised Berryman almost two generations later, was a voice. In 1923 Sherwood Anderson wrote to Jean Toomer about listening to some black dockworkers sing, held back from speaking to them by a reluctance he did not quite understand: "Perhaps I did not know how much I wanted a voice from them."[23] The heroine of *HERmione,* H.D.'s autobiographical novel, feels the same sort of vocal magnetism, in her case amounting almost to mesmerism, in talking to her family's black cook: "Her fell into the rhythm of Mandy's speech, the moment she began to speak to Mandy."[24] Though H.D. never let this rhythm pass into her published work, Alice Corbin, one of the early coeditors of *Poetry* magazine, did, in the appropriately named "Mandy's Religion," as did a number of other contributors to the journals of the early modernist avant-garde, including Carl Sandburg, Malcolm Cowley, Mina Loy and, perhaps most famously, Vachel Lindsay.[25] Eliot, Pound, and Stein fell into the same rhythm, in published work and in their letters, where it was often saved for private allusions and in-jokes, as if there were some secrets only a black voice could conceal.

The whole pattern of rebellion through racial ventriloquism is best illustrated by someone who might seem the least likely example: T. S. Eliot. As unlike Jakie as he might seem, as distant as he was from the Hester Street synagogue and from ragtime, Eliot did nonetheless resemble Jakie in defying his father's ancestral expectations to follow a more modern art. Instead of finishing his dissertation and joining the Harvard faculty, as his father had requested, Eliot remained in England to become a poet and free-lance man of letters, and he was very much saddened when his father died apparently thinking his son a failure.[26] Even before he abandoned his dissertation, however, Eliot produced a long-running parody of the kind of scholarship to which he was supposed to devote his life. In 1914 he sent to Conrad Aiken one of the infamous King Bolo poems, an obscene screed about "King Bolo's big black queen," carefully and cruelly annotated: "See Krapp: STREITSCHRIFT GEGEN HASENPFEFFER. I.xvii §367, also Hasenpfeffer: POLEMISCHES GEGEN KRAPP I.II. 368ff. 490ff." Obscene doggerel is obviously a safety valve for this student sick of scholarly trivia, and eye dialect of a very crude sort becomes an alternative to the cramped language of references and citations: "King Bolo's big black basstурd kween / Her taste was kalm and klassic. . . ."[27] Thus Eliot rejects his family's traditional expectations and becomes a "blackface comedian," a role to which Ezra Pound gave the name "de Possum."

As the comic alternative to the serious scholarship expected by his family,

doggerel in dialect becomes the prototype of the audacious poetry Eliot was to write instead of academic philosophy. As early as 1915 he wrote a play with a blackface role, the "REV. HAMMOND AIGS comic negro minister, of the 'come breddern' type."[28] Although the play was little more than an extended joke to entertain his Cambridge friend Eleanor Hinkley, it did suggest close knowledge of the prevailing dramatic stereotypes. So fond was Eliot of these particular clichés that Clive Bell sarcastically suggested in 1921 that Eliot's "agonizing labours seem to have been eased somewhat by the comfortable ministrations of a black and grinning muse."[29] Bell declined to be more specific, but at the time Eliot was laboring to put his knowledge of black music to work in *The Waste Land*, which contained at one time references to a number of rags and minstrel songs. These were finally removed from the final text, so that Eliot's "black and grinning muse" did not emerge in print until the fragments of *Sweeney Agonistes* were published in 1926–27.[30] The climax of this unfinished play is a minstrel show rendition of the Johnson–Cole–Johnson hit "Under the Bamboo Tree," a sensation during the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, which Eliot attended with his family. Eliot called *Sweeney* a "Comic Minstrelsy" and a "jazz play."[31] It is, in fact, his version of *The Jazz Singer*, which was released that same year, his way of breaking with the very respectability he had so recently achieved.

For Eliot, as for a large number of other writers who were to make transatlantic modernism the dominant movement of the 1920s, the story of *The Jazz Singer* seems paradigmatic.[32] For another modern movement struggling to emerge at the same time, however, the story had a very different import. In 1927 James Weldon Johnson, lyricist of "Under the Bamboo Tree," published *God's Trombones*, which carefully avoided the very voice Eliot, Anderson, H.D., and the others envied to the point of mimicry. Johnson says in his preface that "practically no poetry is being written in dialect by the colored poets of today."[33] Dialect is impossible for a serious black poet of the 1920s because it is "based upon the minstrel traditions of Negro life," on "a happy-go-lucky, singing, shuffling, banjo-picking being," the very being, that is to say, that Jolson became in *The Jazz Singer*.[34]

When Alain Locke, instigator and editor of the landmark anthology *The New Negro*, wanted an example of "the newer motive" in African-American literature, he turned to "The Creation," the first of Johnson's sermons to be published. In this "interesting experiment," says Locke, is to be seen one of the "modernistic styles of expression" coming into being in the 1920s.[35] "The Creation" hardly seems "modernistic" in comparison to its exact contemporary *Sweeney Agonistes:* it has no contemporary references, no stylistic tricks, nothing overtly "experimental." But it could seem modern in the context of *The New Negro* simply by avoiding certain nearly inescapable stereotypes suggested by its subject, stereotypes Eliot had naturally drawn upon for his character the Reverend Hammond Aigs. As Van Vechten put it, "The Creation" was the poem that "broke the chain

of dialect which bound Paul Laurence Dunbar and freed the younger generation from this dangerous restraint."[36]

Van Vechten's metaphor tells the whole story of the difference between these two modernisms. Linguistic imitation and racial masquerade are so important to transatlantic modernism because they allow the writer to play at self-fashioning. Jazz means freedom to Jakie Rabinowitz partly because it is fast and rhythmically unrestrained but also because it is not ancestrally his: to sing it is to make a choice of self, to do his own dubbing, as it were. For African-American poets of this generation, however, dialect is a "chain." In the version created by the white minstrel tradition, it is a constant reminder of the literal unfreedom of slavery and of the political and cultural repression that followed emancipation. Both symbol and actuality, it stands for a most intimate invasion whereby the dominant actually attempts to create the thoughts of the subordinate by providing it speech.[37]

Even more ironically, when a younger generation of African-American writers attempted to renew dialect writing by freeing it from the clichés Johnson criticized, fashionable white usage of the same language stood in their way as a disabling example.[38] Locke hoped that the interest of certain white modernists in plain and unvarnished language would help to make a wider audience for writers like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay. At one point, he actually envisioned an alliance between an indigenous American modernism and the younger Harlem writers, to be based on a mutual interest in the language of the folk.[39] But these hopes were to be disappointed, and the younger writers found, as Johnson had, that white interest in African-American language and culture was, if anything, more dangerous than indifference.

Thus two different modernisms, tightly linked by their different stakes in the same language, emerge between 1922 and 1927. Houston Baker, Jr., has argued that Anglo-American modernism is dangerously irrelevant to the movement that was born at about the same time in Harlem.[40] In another sense, Anglo-American modernism is dangerous in its very relevance to the Harlem Renaissance because its strategies of linguistic rebellion depended so heavily on a kind of language that writers like Johnson rejected. For this reason, however, it is impossible to understand either modernism without reference to the other, without reference to the language they so uncomfortably shared, and to the political and cultural forces that were constricting that language at the very moment modern writers of both races were attempting in dramatically different ways to free it.

III

The publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the most important event in the stabilization of the English language, took more than forty years—coincidentally from the 1880s, when most of the transatlantic modernists were

born, to the 1920s, when their most important works were published. Hugh Kenner has suggested that this is an important coincidence, that the OED shaped the way modernism looked at language.[41] But the OED, even in all its massiveness, is just one element in a whole complex of tense and tangled relationships within the language, all of which had their effect on the modernisms of the period.

In the beginning, the whole purpose of the OED was to deny the possibility of tense and tangled relationships within the language. To have any hope of success within the lifetime of humankind, the compilers of the dictionary needed to set some limit to the number of words to be defined. The 1858 proposal for the dictionary, therefore, rules out of consideration dialect words more recent than the Reformation, and, in doing so, provides what the OED itself cites as the first recorded use of the phrase "standard language."[42] This phrase was such a useful one that it became more and more common as the century went on. Shaw, for example, claimed that the whole purpose of *Pygmalion* was to dramatize the need for a "standard English."[43] The real danger, of course, is not simply that gutter-snipes like Eliza will continue to wallow in linguistic filth, but that perfectly respectable girls like Clara Eynsford Hill will adopt it and make it fashionable. If Henry Higgins does not set the standard, then Eliza and her like will, and the whole country will end up talking a "quaint slavey lingo."[44]

Demands for linguistic standardization had been made from the earliest days of printing, which made variations more obvious by distributing them more widely, and became particularly insistent in the eighteenth century, when decorum of all kinds was highly prized.[45] But there was a distinct increase in volume in the years encompassed by the publication of the OED. It was in the 1880s that criticism of linguistic faults became a "thriving industry." Kenneth Cmiel's tabulation shows forty-one editions of works of verbal criticism or linguistic self-help between 1881 and 1885 and twenty-nine more between 1886 and 1890, almost twice as many as any other decade after 1860.[46] Popular magazines reflected this interest as well, with whole series of articles on standardization and usage in *Harper's, Lippincott's, Scribner's, Appleton's,* and the *Galaxy.*[47] This was also the heyday of spelling reform, Shaw's own hobbyhorse.[48]

There was a change of tone as well as volume. Standardization of the kind advocated after 1880 is different from the process by which one dialect gradually acquires power and prestige and so comes to dominate its rivals, as West Saxon crowded out other dialects to become Old English. What the flood of books and articles published in the 1880s called for was "a process of more or less conscious, planned and centralized regulation of language" in which "new elements threatening to enter the language are limited, and . . . variants within the language are hierarchized, and sometimes eliminated."[49] This program brought with it a moralistic tone and an almost evangelical fervor that made relatively minor infractions seem matters of cultural life or death.

During this period a number of organizations were formed to monitor such infractions. One of these was, of course, the OED itself, although on publication

it turned out to be far too inclusive to serve as the mighty bulwark many had hoped for.[50] More stringent was the Society for Pure English (SPE), whose founder, Robert Bridges, was one of Shaw's models for Henry Higgins. The SPE was originally conceived in 1913 to "preserve the richness of differentiation in our vocabulary" and to oppose "whatever is slipshod and careless, and all blurring of hard-won distinctions." It began by objecting to artificial standards, even those promulgated by the new pronouncing dictionaries of the era, and it included among its members writers such as Thomas Hardy and Arnold Bennett, whose novels often included language that was more genuine than correct. Before long, however, the tracts of the SPE became little more than a testing ground for the little articles on *"shall* versus *will"* and the split infinitive that H. W. Fowler was to consolidate in his *Modern English Usage.*[51] Though Robert Graves's accusation that the SPE was "the literary equivalent of political fascism" seems a bit extreme, its tracts did devote a remarkable amount of space to issues, such as the proper use of the hyphen, of greater symbolic social value than linguistic significance.[52]

The SPE allowed Bridges to play Higgins on a larger stage, which grew even larger when he chaired the first BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English.[53] Some members of the SPE also served on the commission chaired by Sir Henry Newbolt that examined the role of language and literature in the English educational system. The Newbolt Report, or *The Teaching of English in England* as it was properly titled, called unequivocally for "correct pronunciation and clear articulation" of "standard English" as the bedrock of education in all subjects.[54] This report, as well as Bridges's role with the BBC, shows how the pressure for standardization suffused the country by the 1920s.

An American equivalent of these groups was the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which received a grant in 1916 to "determine its duty regarding both the preservation of the English language in its beauty and integrity, and its cautious enrichment by such terms as grow out of modern conditions."[55] By the early 1920s, however, this modest program had become a full-fledged cultural crusade. In a national radio broadcast Nicholas Murray Butler proclaimed, "The preservation of our English speech in its purity is for the Academy a matter of high concern." Thus the academy established a Medal for Good Diction on the Stage and assigned Hamlin Garland to monitor the progress it would encourage.[56]

Garland thus joined the swelling ranks of the linguistic watchdogs, Englishmen like George Sampson, whose *English for the English* warned that the country was "torn with dialects," and Americans like Adams Sherman Hill, who decried in *Our English* the "'local color' and local dialects which jaded minds demand nowadays."[57] So pervasive and so inescapable was the conviction that language was in peril that even in deepest Africa H. Rider Haggard's She complained that the savages among whom she lived had "debased and defiled" the pure Arabic of the past.[58]

The stage was crowded in these years with individuals volunteering to serve as

"linguistic conscience" to the nation.[59] In a book that had gone through eighteen editions by 1889, Richard Grant White attempted to enlist his readers in "a sort of linguistic detective police."[60] Noses to the ground, decoder rings at the ready, members of White's club would find and, apparently, punish those variations that so many writers of the time seemed to find disloyal. In fact, what was new and peculiar to the period was not linguistic difference and variation, which had been even more promiscuous in the past, but demands for its elimination. Leonard Forster dramatizes this change by noting that when William Beckford wrote *Vathek* in French in 1784 it excited little comment, but when Oscar Wilde wrote *Salomé* in French in 1894 it caused a scandal. What makes the difference is a concept of "language loyalty" relatively new in history and, John Joseph points out, peculiar to Europe.[61]

The whole idea that language is something to which one must remain loyal, the idea that empowers White's detective police as they search the countryside, is a popularized application of Romantic philology.[62] When Leibniz declared that "tongues differ as profoundly as do nations," he suggested an equation that was to be crucial for Herder, who taught that each language is a spiritual individuality like a nation, and for Humboldt, who took the next and, for our purposes, most crucial step, by maintaining that language is "an accurate index to the grade of intellectual comprehension attained by" a people.[63] Thus language becomes the cornerstone of national identity and an index of cultural health. Over and over, the linguistic conscience tells its captive audience that linguistic unity is not just crucial to national unity but actually synonymous with it. English, according to the Newbolt Report, is not just a medium: "It is itself the English mind." Thus, according to George Sampson, "The one common basis of a common culture is the common tongue." And finally, linguistic nonconformists must be admonished, as American immigrants were in 1916, that "a cleavage in the language now would mean to us a cleavage of the nation in its most vulnerable if not its most essential part."[64]

As powerful, and as powerfully seductive, as these ideas are, they are haunted by a crucial weakness, a self-destructiveness in the very notion of racial, national, or linguistic purity. Etienne Balibar maintains that a "pure race" can never, by definition, coincide with the totality of a national population, so that racism always works in reverse, creating a nation by taking its distance from the rejected.[65] The same is true of languages, which can never be pure despite the best efforts of the SPE. Thus the most shopworn commonplace in all the propaganda for standardization is that the standard language cannot be defined or even adequately described: "We do not expect to hear it, as a matter of course, in any given place where men congregate; when we do hear it, we know it for what it is."[66] This is the infallible, if somewhat mysterious, test: "[W]e all know when we are reading good English and when we are reading bad English. That is the conclusion of common sense. . . ."[67]

Despite these bland assertions, it turns out that, more commonly, we know

only when we hear *bad* English. Sampson's second thoughts on the subject are revealing: "There is no need to define Standard English speech. We know what it is, and there's an end on't. Or, to put it another way, we know what is *not* standard English, and that is a sufficiently practical guide."[68] This explains why the campaign for standardization became a chorus of complaint and censure, why, even today, virtually all popular linguistic criticism focuses obsessively on minor errors and why grammar, in the popular mind, consists entirely of prohibitions. Over a hundred years ago, Henry Alford, Dean of Canterbury, condensed the entire tradition into one elegantly self-evident maxim: "Avoid all oddity of expression."[69] Yet this puts the poor speaker in the plight of the person who is ordered not to think of a brown bear. This situation is especially painful because the errors that are most stigmatized are, of course, the most common. The final turn in this paradoxical situation comes when we realize that "a particular usage is not attacked as non-standard until it has become very general and widespread."[70] The standard is not standard, that is to say, but rather the very opposite. Critics willing to play with numbers speculate that perhaps 3 to 4 percent of the population of England speaks standard English,[71] but the truth is that no one speaks standard English because that language is simply whatever shapeless thing is left when all the most common errors are removed.

If standard English is chimerical, however, the social forces that stand behind it are not, and the theoretical weakness of the standard language movement was precisely what gave it such great social strength. The period covered by the publication of the OED was one of great immigration and urban centralization: between 1871 and 1901 the number of towns in England with more than fifty thousand inhabitants doubled, and in the same period there was mass emigration from southern and eastern Europe and Russia at the greatest rate in history. At the same time, European imperialism attained a new pace so feverish it was commonly called a "scramble."[72] If anything, these vast social changes tended to favor linguistic uniformity, and linguists such as Otto Jespersen suggested that dialects were in the process of dying out worldwide.[73] Yet this process was hardly a painless or impersonal one.

Urbanization and mass emigration brought together all sorts of languages, dialects, and idiolects previously separated by space and social difference. The flood of linguistic criticism after 1880 was part of an attempt to sort out these competing languages and arrange them in order of prestige. At the same time, this concentration on linguistic propriety concealed concern for another kind of purity. Defense of the language became an indirect and intellectually respectable way of defending the borders, those outlying borders crossed by foreigners and those closer, less tangible, but even more sensitive borders crossed by a growing urban working class.[74] At the same time, the linguistic thought police struggled against one of the ironies of empire: extending the borders meant including millions of new speakers who might in time exert more influence over English than it could exert over them.

The first consideration given for the creation of the SPE was, therefore, the spread of the English language throughout the world.[75] Originally such anxiety had been directed at the United States. Americanisms had been decried as early as the 1740s, and in the generally unfriendly spirit of the 1860s Alford drew a direct connection between "the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans" and the debasement of the American nation in general.[76] Bridges had chiefly the Americans in mind when he decried "this most obnoxious condition, namely, that wherever our countrymen are settled abroad there are alongside of them communities of other-speaking races, who, maintaining among themselves their native speech, learn yet enough of ours to mutilate it, and establishing among themselves all kinds of blundering corruptions, through habitual intercourse infect therewith the neighbouring English."[77] The racism inherent in such attacks could be surprisingly indiscriminate. In 1927 an anonymous contributor to the *New Statesman* denounced the outrageous idea that "our language belongs to everybody who uses it—including negroes and Middle-Westerners and Americanised Poles and Italians."[78]

If the American experience excited such anxiety about "other-speaking races," the great expansion of empire in the nineteenth century made linguistic critics almost giddy. In 1886 T. L. Kington-Oliphant had serenely decreed that in recompense for all she borrowed, England provided to the empire "her own staple, namely the speech of free political life."[79] Looking back in 1926, however, A. Lloyd James, secretary to the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English, took it for granted that the influence had been all in the other direction: "[T]his territorial expansion of our language sowed the seeds of its disintegration. . . ."[80] Between these two dates, "the immense area over which the language now extends" is routinely cited as one of the most important factors in its decline from purity.[81] The language that was to have symbolized England's cultural preeminence over the world, thus justifying its political and economic domination, became instead a symbol of English vulnerability, and defense of the language became a way of defending England against the cultural consequences of the implosion of the empire.

American concerns of the time about the purity of the language were in part defensive reactions to English prejudice. Richard Grant White batted back Dean Alford's slur on American speech by claiming that the British were even worse. John Hay took another tack by praising the vigor and power of American speech.[82] But Americans also had imperial anxieties quite similar to those of the English. In 1887 William Fowler worried that as "our countrymen are spreading westward across the continent, and are brought into contact with other races, and adopt new modes of thought, there is some danger that, in the use of their liberty, they may break loose from the laws of the English language. . . ."[83] Announcing the dedication of the American Academy of Arts and Letters to language issues thirty years later, Paul Elmer More spoke as if this dangerous process were

nearly complete, the language "no longer the possession of the people alone who had created it, but . . . spoken and written over a vast territory among many peoples separated from the main stem by political and other traditions."[84] American expansion westward implied the same danger of linguistic contamination for Americans "from the main stem" that the English had feared from America itself.

Worse yet, in this view, was the threat that American English faced even if it stayed put: the threat of immigration. The boom in linguistic criticism in the United States coincided with the increased immigration of the 1880s and was one manifestation of the reaction against it. The "wild motley throng" that crowds in through the "unguarded gates" of Thomas Bailey Aldrich's 1895 poem of the same name bring with them a disturbing cacophony:

> In street and alley what strange tongues are loud,
> Accents of menace alien to our air,
> Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew.[85]

Thus, in a book that had gone through twenty-one editions by 1892, William Mathews declared that since "unity of speech is essential to the unity of a people" even so much as "a daily newspaper with an Irish, German, or French prefix, or in a foreign language, is a perpetual breeder of national animosities."[86] More dangerous yet was the possibility that foreign languages might corrupt English itself, so that Joseph Fitzgerald urged his readers to treat foreign loanwords "as aliens, and to agitate for an exclusion act against them."[87]

This was not merely a jingoistic campaign carried on by xenophobic know-nothings; it was in large part the work of established writers and intellectuals, men like Barrett Wendell, Brooks Adams, and Francis Parkman. For example, when Henry James returned to the United States in 1905, after his own immigration to England, he was appalled to find that he had forgotten to lock the door behind him. In his outrage James felt the presence of newly emigrated speakers of English quite literally as the invasion of a burglar:

> All the while we sleep the vast contingent of aliens whom we make welcome, and whose main contention, as I say, is that, from the moment of their arrival, they have just as much property in our speech as we have . . . all the while we sleep the innumerable aliens are sitting up (*they* don't sleep!) to work their will on their new inheritance and prove to us that they are without any finer feeling or more conservative instinct of consideration for it . . . than they may have on the subject of so many yards of freely figured oilcloth, from the shop. . . .

James's other metaphor for this linguistic violation is even more intimate:

> [T]o the American Dutchman and Dago, as the voice of the people describes them, we have simply handed over our property—not exactly bound hand and foot, I admit, like Andromeda awaiting her Perseus, but at least distracted, dishevelled, despoiled, divested of that beautiful and becoming drapery of native atmosphere and circumstance. . . . [88]

James's choice of allusion may have made the graduating class of Bryn Mawr, to whom he directed this hysterical outburst, uncomfortable in ways that he did not intend, but it struck a sympathetic chord in Paul Shorey, who told the American Academy a few years later:

> [W]e are all hearing every day and many of us are reading and writing not instinctively right and sound English but the English of German American and Swedish American, Italian American, Russian American, Yiddish American speakers, pigeon [*sic*] English, Japanese schoolboy English, Hans Breitmann English, doctors' dissertation English, pedagogical seminary English, babu English.[89]

The verbal excessiveness of these defenses, like a squid shooting ink, suggests that both Shorey and James were so concerned they were willing to destroy the language in order to save it.[90]

It should be clear by now, however, that language is simply a convenient symbol of resistance to social change. The same processes that took the English to the far corners of the world and the Americans to the western shore, that brought emigrants from all over Europe to the United States, tended to erase the most visible means of distinguishing between different classes and nationalities. One of the wry messages of *Pygmalion* is that clothes make the lady, and, as manufacturing made dress more uniform, the leap from flower girl to lady became less extreme. But it is far easier to dress Eliza up in borrowed finery than it is to change her speech. Shaw's play is, therefore, a demonstration of the way that speech came to play the role of chief social discriminator as other means became less effective.[91] Between the 1880s and the 1920s, linguistic criticism became a way of checking social mobility and racial progress without overt illiberalism. Even today, criticism of speech is often, if not always, a way of expressing other social prejudices that polite discourse overtly disavows.[92] Thus the theoretical weakness of Romantic linguistic nationalism, its ghostly, parasitic dependence on that which it would expel, is the source of its social utility. The standard language movement did not need to define the standard language in order to succeed, because its real purpose was to focus attention on the alien, both foreign and domestic, and to provide a means of discriminating where other methods were beginning to fail.

IV

In these years during which dialect words were excluded from the pages of the OED, dialect was, of course, routinely stigmatized. The inconveniences arising "from the existence of local dialects" are, in the opinion of G. P. Marsh, "very serious obstacles to national progress, to the growth of a comprehensive and enlightened patriotism, to the creation of a popular literature, and to the diffusion of general culture."[93] The two great myths of linguistic decline, the Hellenizing

of Greece and the fall of Rome, tended to associate the division of a language into varieties with cultural collapse. Thus Paul Elmer More warned the American Academy that English had entered its "Englistic" period, beyond which the future seemed pretty dim.[94]

Yet, in the same set of addresses, Shorey reminded his listeners that it was "the scholarly Lowell who composed poems in a Yankee dialect."[95] And it was the scholarly Bridges who lamented "our perishing dialects" in the tracts of a society devoted by title at least to the preservation of pure English. In fact, the SPE was sometimes seen, from within and without, as a kind of junior branch of the English Dialect Society. In the 1918 *Cambridge History of American Literature* C. Alphonso Smith treated the SPE as if it were a conservator of dialect differences, and Walter Raleigh joined the SPE, by one account, because he thought it would offer opportunities to "coin words, and use dialect, and rap out forcible native idioms."[96] This paradox was hardly limited to the SPE. The Newbolt Report contained an opinion, submitted by the Committee on Adult Education, that dialect literature should be encouraged because "dialect, where it still lives, is the natural speech of emotion, and therefore of poetry and drama."[97]

There seems to be some indecision here, even in this very opinionated propaganda, about which English is really pure. The Newbolt Report was forthright about the need for instruction in standard English, especially if this required the abandonment of dialect, and the tracts of the SPE devoted many pages to monitoring niggling distinctions.[98] And yet there was some suspicion even here that the standard language was a fiction, an artificial convention, and that a mere convention could hardly play the role in the English ethos assigned to the national language. After all, the popular linguist Max Müller had taught since the middle of the century that the standard written languages were mere confections: "The real and natural life of language is in its [spoken] dialects."[99]

In fact, there was a marked increase in English dialect writing at this time, including works by Hardy, Stevenson, Kipling, Barnes, and the writers of the Irish Revival, as well as writers such as Henley and Davidson, who were aggressively vernacular in style.[100] The conflict between dialect, idiolect, and the standard language began to appear as a plot element in literature of the period, but not all writers agreed with Mr. Alfred Yule of Gissing's *New Grub Street,* who was given such exquisite pain by his wife's uneducated speech he never invited guests to his home. Bi-dialectal shifters such as poor Mrs. Yule, who live in two distinct speech communities, begin to appear in a sympathetic light and then in a favorable one, a process that can be traced from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to *Lady Chatterley's Lover.*[101]

Dialect writing was pursued even in an atmosphere of linguistic censoriousness because of the hope that it might be "the prince in disguise . . . an original and unique literary medium of expression."[102] Dialect, it was often argued about this time, was "purer" than the standard written language because it was less affected by printing, education, and "elocution masters."[103] If the real

culprit in the degeneration of language is education, or the newspapers, or science, or modern slang, as Alford, James, and other watchdogs variously claimed then perhaps the good old rural dialects of England were the "pure" alternative.[104] This is one way of understanding the enlistment in the SPE of Thomas Hardy, though he was perhaps the leading practitioner of dialect writing at the time.

Times of verbal nicety in England have often coincided with romantic rediscoveries of dialect, a coincidence best exemplified by the careers of Scott and Austen. The sort of recourse to dialect represented by Scott is easy enough to understand, but what of C. M. Doughty's claim that he traveled into Arabia "to redeem English from the slough into which it has fallen."[105] How could a sojourn among the heathen possibly redeem English? Of course, if distance from education, newspapers, science, and modern slang makes for authenticity and pure language, then maybe Arabia is just the place to find it. Or perhaps Africa, as Andrew Lang suggested when he said that "the natural man in me, the survival of some blue-painted Briton" responds best to "a *true* Zulu love story."[106] Or perhaps South America, where Roger Casement found a language so old, so elemental and untouched, no one even knew the meaning of it.[107] The shape of the paradox, at any rate, begins to emerge. On one hand, the standard language movement has as its central purpose the protection of England from other races. Yet, insofar as it recoils from what Henry James called "the high modernism of the condition,"[108] the more it is thrown into the kind of primitivism that contributed to another great trend of the period: the colonial adventure story. Perhaps it is not so odd, then, that when Rider Haggard's heroes Holly and Vincy finally reach the heart of darkest Africa and complete their search for the mysterious She, they find a linguistic critic.

The situation in America is even more complex, since it develops in the shadow of England's authority. American defiance of this authority can take two forms: a claim that Americans are in fact more proper in their speech than the English, or a claim that Americans speak a more vital, natural speech than their decadent co-linguists. Thus American linguistic critics are even more apt than their English colleagues to splay themselves across this paradox. Even Shorey, as pinched an authoritarian as ever addressed the American Academy, praised the "crisp concise verbiage" of popular America because it "unites us in a fellowship of democratic revolt against the pedant" and "differentiates us from the supercilious and slow-witted Englishman who cannot understand it."[109] Both Brander Matthews, another Academician, and Gilbert Tucker wrote to the SPE to alert it to the fact that American English still had all the pith and vividness the SPE was searching for in England.[110]

However true this may have been, it ran against another cherished notion that America had no dialects, at least in the sense of provincial variations. Visitors to the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reported an amazing uniformity of speech, on which the Americans sometimes plumed

themselves when it seemed to contrast favorably with the divisiveness of English provincialisms.[111] There was, of course, one significant exception to this general uniformity: "Dialect in general is there less prevalent than in Britain, except among the poor slaves."[112] In fact, there grew up a theory that was to enjoy an extremely long life, that the English dialect variations were preserved in America only in the untutored speech of the slaves. Joel Chandler Harris, for example, claimed that the language he used in the Uncle Remus stories was simply white English three hundred years out-of-date. In the 1920s, George Philip Krapp made this claim into a full-fledged scientific theory, one which enjoyed a certain popularity in the black press of the time perhaps because it seemed to rescue black speech from the worst prejudices against it.[113]

If the slaves had preserved the "good old Elizabethan pronunciation," as R. Emmett Kennedy put it, then did it not follow that theirs was the purest English? Kennedy followed the SPE line of reasoning perfectly: the true index of a race or nation is found in its "native melodies and folk literature," preserved as much as possible from "the artificialities of civilization." Yet this authentic national voice belonged only to the unlettered folk "who have not lost the gracious charm of being natural." Ambrose Gonzales, like Kennedy a white dialect writer of the 1920s, said much the same thing: "The peasantry, the lower classes generally, are the conservators of speech."[114] As an anonymous critic observed in an 1889 review of Harris, such ideas fit perfectly within the confines of Romantic philology, except that "Putnam County . . . becomes like the Central Plateau of the Hindu-Kush Mountains—'east of the moon and west of the sun'—so dear to the myth-mongers and philologists of the Müller school."[115]

And yet, on the other hand, black English had long been considered not just corrupt in itself but also the cause of corruption in others. As early as 1740, dire notice was taken of the way that a colonial speaker who regularly consorts with slaves "acquires their broken way of talking."[116] In the next century, Dickens noticed with disapproval that "women who have been bred in the slave States speak more or less like negroes, from having been constantly in their childhood with black nurses."[117] Writers like Kennedy and Gonzales do not disavow such notions: the black speakers in their works are abundantly provided with the sort of malapropisms that have always characterized literary representations of "broken English." Somehow the language included in works like Kennedy's *Black Cameos* and Gonzales's *Black Border* is both broken and pure, twisted and authentic. And yet perhaps it is this very inconsistency that explains why the 1880s, the decade in which the standard language movement became a "thriving industry," also marked the beginning of another, seemingly quite different, industry: dialect literature.

From the hint given by Irwin Russell's "Christmas Night in the Quarters" in 1878, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page developed a style of writing that was soon to dominate American magazines to such an extent it provoked pleas for relief.[118] In 1897 T. C. De Leon called it "a sort of craze." Even Page

himself admitted that the result of Harris's success with Uncle Remus was "a deluge of what are called 'dialect-stories,' until the public, surfeited by them has begun almost to shudder at the very name." Prominent magazines such as *Harper's,* the *Atlantic, Scribner's,* the *North American Review,* and *Century* ran hundreds of stories and vignettes in dialect in this period.[119] At first this may seem to be a realization of the standardizer's worst fear, that popular language would be determined from below and not from above. On the other hand, however, it may be that these stories in dialect are simply another way of managing the social pressures behind the standard language movement.

C. Alphonso Smith did not consider it especially peculiar that his survey of "Negro Dialect" in the 1918 *Cambridge History of American Literature* was almost totally devoted to white writers. Smith dismisses Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois not because they did not write in dialect but because they were not of "unmixed negro blood," and he ignores Charles W. Chesnutt altogether.[120] Here Smith simply reflects the fact that the dialect movement was almost exclusively a matter of white mimicry and role-playing. Harris may have been the most successful such writer because he had the greatest psychological investment in the role. Painfully shy and a stutterer, Harris preferred to appear before his public, and sometimes even before personal friends, as Uncle Remus. Like Jakie Rabinowitz forty years later, it seems that Harris could not find a voice until he found a black one.[121]

On the other hand, Harris was an accomplished editorialist for the Atlanta *Constitution,* where he helped Henry W. Grady define the New South that was to follow the demise of Reconstruction.[122] Harris's dual role is more than a psychological curiosity: it expresses the duplicity of the whole dialect movement. It is no accident that this movement coincides with the dismantling of Reconstruction and the birth of Jim Crow, with a legal retrenchment that began in 1883 with the overthrow of the Civil Rights Act and culminated in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, and with an increase in racist propaganda and hate crimes.[123] For the comic stories of the dialect movement firmly establish in the minds of the white readership a picture of the freed slaves as hapless, childlike, and eager for paternalistic protection.

The essential conceit on which these works are based is that their subject is fast disappearing. Over and over, it is said that Harris caught Uncle Remus at the moment he and his kind had ceased to exist.[124] Oddly enough, such figures continued to disappear for at least the next thirty years, at which time E. K. Means congratulated himself for preserving in print a new generation of vanishing Negroes.[125] The central trope of the movement, the "disappearing Negro," was serviceable on several levels. It functioned as wish fulfillment, revealing the barely submerged hope that the freed slaves would simply die off. It served as a metaphor of the temporal reversal of the post-Reconstruction period, taking readers imaginatively back in time as the South was being taken politically back in time. And it fed nostalgia for a time when racial relationships had been simple and

happy, as least for whites, suggesting that they might be simple and happy again if southern whites were simply left alone to resolve things themselves.[126]

What was really vanishing, in other words, was a racial relationship that Jim Crow laws were meant to recreate. The black of the dialect stories was little more than a metaphor for the antebellum way of life. As Page put it, "It has been very often suggested that I was writing up the darkey; but my real intention has been to write up the South and its social life, using the darkey as a medium. . . ."[127] Yet Page seems unaware of the full implications of this metaphorical identification, as Julia Peterkin certainly was when she ingenuously rephrased it: "I shall never write of white people; to me their lives are not so colorful. If the South is going to write, what is it they are going to write about—the Negro, of course."[128] If the South has no subject but the Negro, as Harris had no voice but that of Uncle Remus, then the region has come to be defined entirely in terms of that which it hates and fears. The freed slaves are submerged, expelled, and expanded until they become coterminous with the region itself.

In the same way, black speech is mocked as deviant and at the same time announced as the only true voice of the South. This has the effect of affirming the standard about which the standardizers were so concerned while simultaneously creating an escape from it. Smith claims that "the American passion for a standardized average of correctness" has checked the use of dialect among whites, but he does not suspect that the "Negro dialect" to which he devotes his article *is* white dialect in that it stands in for that which has apparently been abandoned.[129] Bad grammar has long been the privilege of the upper classes, who demonstrate their superiority to social constraints by slipshod speech. The dialect tradition extended this privilege to the entire white race, which could pay homage to and in the same breath demonstrate its independence from the standard language.

The difficulties this created for African-American writers of the time are indicated by the absence of Charles W. Chesnutt from Smith's encyclopedic article. Chesnutt himself included a sort of allegory of this situation in his novel *The Marrow of Tradition,* in which Tom Delamere, "a type of the degenerate aristocrat," excels in "cakewalk or 'coon' impersonations, for which he was in large social demand." Delamere's talent turns to crime when he robs and kills his own aunt while disguised as the faithful black houseservant Sandy, who is nearly lynched for the crime.[130] The way that Delamere goes free while Sandy is confined and almost executed represents the unequal effects of the racial mimicry of the dialect tradition, which represented imaginative license for its white practitioners but quite literal imprisonment for blacks. These effects impinged in the same way on the most noted African-American poet of the period, Paul Laurence Dunbar, who complained that praise of his dialect verse had become a trap because readers would pay attention to nothing else.[131] This is the very "chain of dialect" that Johnson had to break in the 1920s, while another young aristocrat named Tom practiced his "coon impersonations."

In the generation between *The Marrow of Tradition* and *God's Trombones* the

chain became, if anything, even tighter. According to Thomas Gossett, the widespread race riots of 1919 marked an intensification of American racism that lasted throughout the 1920s: "[B]ooks and articles expounding the transcendent importance of race as a key to civilization poured from the presses in the 1920's." There was an increase in racial violence, in overt discrimination, and in prejudices about language: in 1919 fifteen states passed laws requiring that all instruction, public and private, be in English.[132] At the same time, there was a second boom in dialect writing, even larger, if anything, than the first. So strong was the "vogue" that Edgar Billups feared that the field would be given over to mere "faddists." Julia Peterkin complained that her Gullah stories were ignored because so many of the potential reviewers wrote dialect stories of their own.[133] These might have included Irvin Cobb, Hugh Wiley, T. S. Stribling, Robert McBlair, Gertrude Sanborn, Ada Jack Carver, John Trotwood Moore, Marcellus Whaley, E. C. L. Adams, Roark Bradford, John B. Sales, and many others. In addition to the magazines and journals that had been publishing dialect since the 1880s, *The Saturday Evening Post* began to make it a particular speciality.[134]

By the 1920s, then, dialect was solidly established in a quite equivocal role: it reflected increasingly shrill demands for adherence to a chimerical standard and at the same time defied those demands. As "broken English," dialect was the opposite without which "pure English" could not exist. In fact, "pure English" could never adequately be represented except by implication, so that dialect, slang, and other forms of linguistic slovenliness had to be kept in currency to keep "pure English" alive. At the same time, however, dialect served as the "natural" form of "pure English," its unmarked counterpart, to which even the strictest schoolmaster had to pay lip service at times. Finally, dialect preserved an escape from all the social pressures implied by the standard language movement: "black" dialect was white dialect in hiding. This is not to say that there was no actual black speech with its own order and rules, only that the acted, sung, and published versions of this language were almost always white products, no matter how much they may have resembled their black prototypes. Black dialect was a resort freely open only to whites, and thus its popularity matched and in fact reflected the influence of the standard language movement so inimical to non-European cultures and languages.

V

Born in the 1870s and 1880s, modernists such as Eliot, Pound, Stein, H.D., Williams, and Stevens grew up at a time when the English language was being pulled apart by competing political and social forces. Schoolchildren, both white and black, "were taught that the speech of their fathers was not proper English speech. They were encouraged to leave behind their dialects and regional and ethnic idioms."[135] This, for many, was a rather more difficult process than Shaw

supposes when he speaks of the "many thousands of men and women who have sloughed off their native dialects and acquired a new tongue." At the same time, however, youngsters like Ra Pound were presented with a romanticized alternative in the stories of Uncle Remus and the dialect tradition of the popular magazines.[136]

When their movement climaxed with *The Waste Land* in 1922, the modernists' linguistic horizon also enclosed "The Day of Atonement," the Newbolt Report, *The Book of American Negro Poetry, Harlem Shadows,* Clement Wood's *Nigger,* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus,* all of which were published in the same year. And though it may seem that these various linguistic productions have little to do with one another, they are in fact joined by a rather dense network. Brander Matthews, a member of the American Academy and a contributor to the tracts of the SPE, introduced James Weldon Johnson's dialect poetry to the nation.[137] C. K. Ogden, inventor of Basic English and translator of the *Tractatus,* published two dozen poems by Claude McKay in the same issue of the *Cambridge Magazine* that included "The Linguistic Conscience."[138] Eliot stole from Johnson; Johnson advised Van Vechten; Van Vechten introduced Gertrude Stein to Harlem by quoting her in *Nigger Heaven.*[139]

The position of literary modernism in this network of linguistic relationships is almost necessarily equivocal. In a 1926 comment in the *Dial,* Marianne Moore welcomed the SPE because she found its tracts "persuasively fastidious." Though she admitted that "perfect diction" is less to be found in America than mastery of slang, she did find enough of it to mention James, Poe, Whistler, Stevens, Pound, and Cummings as examples. Moore was clearly entranced by the possibilities for fine distinction presented by the articles of the SPE, which she saw as the ally of poets interested in the infinite variousness of words.[140] On her own side of the Atlantic, however, the forces of linguistic criticism had chosen Moore herself for attack. One of the papers published by the American Academy in 1925, Robert Underwood Johnson's "Glory of Words," is in fact an extended attack on literary modernism: on free verse, on contemporary subject matter, on colloquial diction, on Eliot, Conrad Aiken, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, and on Marianne Moore. Quoting a stanza from "Those Various Scalpels," Johnson asks, "what is the remedy for this disease?" The answer is "to dwell upon the glory of words in our inexhaustible and imperishable treasures of great poetry," which is probably about what Moore thought she was doing.[141]

The irony reveals how variously modernism might be defined as bringing greater precision to language or as destroying just those rules and usages that made precision possible. But there is another, more specific, twist in this relationship as well. Moore declares a "fascinated interest" in the variability of American pronunciation, "when in New York seabirds are *seaboids,* when as in the Negro vernacular, the tenth becomes the *tent,* certainly is *certainy,* and Paris is *Parus.*"[142] Moore's examples are fairly weak, and one is apparently a piece of eye dialect, but the message is clear: vernacular and dialect distortions of the language

are a resource to be mined. Eliot praised Moore in the pages of the *Dial* precisely for her ability to exploit this resource, "the jargon of the laboratory and the slang of the comic strip."[143] But in Johnson's ears this same mixture of sounds causes exquisite pain. "The free verse of to-day," he says, "disdains the lute, the harp, the oboe, and the 'cello and is content with the tom-tom, the triangle, and the banjo."[144] The racial implications of Johnson's musical examples are fairly clear: modernism disdains great literature for black minstrelsy. Its rebellion against pure English and the great literature written in it is figured as racial treason.

Johnson may have had in mind Vachel Lindsay's poem "The Congo" or Carl Sandburg's "Jazz Fantasia." He might well have trained his sights on two plays not published until two years after his talk, *Sweeney Agonistes* and E. E. Cummings's *Him*, both of which use minstrel instrumentation. Cummings's play, which Moore admired so much she arranged to have parts of it published in the *Dial*, aims to give offense in exactly the quarter defended by Johnson.[145] Perhaps this is what endeared it to Moore, because the play is an unruly compendium of variant Englishes from drunken slurs to soap box oratory to advertisement slogans to vaudeville to medicine show barking.

Cummings tends to arrange these languages in competing pairs. A drunken Englishman who asks to have his "topper" replaced on his "nut" is met by an American policeman who says things like "Lissun. Wutchuhgut dare." An Ethiopian who claims "Ah ain goin nowhere" meets some suspicious centurions. A "gentleman" whose hypercorrectness of speech leads him to misuse the word *infer* meets a shapeless mob. The climax, in a way, of this fairly shapeless bit of modernist vaudeville is the confrontation between six "coalblack figures" in full minstrel regalia, singing to an invisible jazz band, and John Rutter, "President pro tem. of the Society for the Contraception of Vice." Rutter spins out an enormously bloated indictment of "harmful titillation provocation or excitation complete or incomplete of the human or inhuman mind or body" whether it "be oral graphic neither or both and including with the written and spoken words the unwritten and unspoken word or any inscription sign or mark." Rutter is, in brief, one of the "linguistic thought police" let loose by Richard Grant White and egged on by Robert Underwood Johnson. Meanwhile the minstrel singers say things like "Gway yoh poor whytrash."[146]

The confrontation between linguistic authoritarianism and American dialects is but one version of a more general conflict between repression and freedom, which Cummings dramatizes by having the minstrels confront Rutter with "something which suggests a banana in size and shape and which is carefully wrapped in a bloody napkin."[147] This object symbolizes what Rutter, despite his name, does not have, what he fears, and what his language in all its convoluted Latinate obscurity attempts to hide. The ultimate affront to Rutter and his ilk would obviously be actual obscenity, and yet Cummings shrinks from this final outrage, letting black speech and jazz innuendo suggest what he is too squeamish to say.

Johnson is perfectly right, then, to associate the modernist affront with minstrel instruments. Minstrel dialect is for Cummings one of the languages of rebellion, and the rebellion against stifling linguistic authoritarianism that it makes possible is the type of a much broader rebellion against repression and standardization of all kinds. In the year of *The Jazz Singer* and *Sweeney Agonistes,* Cummings also breaks away from the fathers, from the Robert Underwood Johnsons, by donning a minstrel disguise. Thus the terms of *The Jazz Singer* are recapitulated, with Robert Underwood Johnson in the role of the outraged father who shouts, "Singing nigger songs in a beer garden! You bummer! You no good lowlife!"[148] and E. E. Cummings as the cheeky lad who demands the right to express himself by putting shoeblack on his face.

Thus the generational conflict between the older critics clustered behind the American Academy's walls and the younger writers outside was fought over the body of a third figure, a black one. When Sherwood Anderson wanted to express his fear about creeping standardization and linguistic intolerance, he drew on the old metaphor of the vanishing Negro: "Will the love of words be lost? Success, standardization, big editions, money rolling in. . . . Words goin the way of the black, of song and dance." It is no accident that Anderson actually begins to speak in dialect here, because he implicitly aligns the free language of the modern artist with the despised dialect of African America. In this analysis only the standard language is actually "white." Artistic language is, by virtue of its deviation from that standard, black: "In the end they will make factory hands of us writers too. The whites will get us. They win."[149]

Because the American Academy had long associated immigration with linguistic decline, it also viewed the conflict over language as a racial one. Modernism became another form of mongrelization, another impurity stirred into the terrifying mixture that America was becoming. Like Johnson, Stuart Sherman attacked the younger generation as if its literary experiments had introduced some sort of alien bacillus into the bloodstream of the republic. Such young people, he charged, were in league "against virtue and decorum and even against the grammar and idiom of English speech." This league might never have gathered, Sherman suggests darkly, if not for a group of leaders "whose blood and breeding are as hostile to the English strain as a cat to water." Sherman's metaphor for these "alien-minded" writers is peculiarly inappropriate: he calls them "Mohawks," as if American Indians were somehow more alien to America than the English immigrants of the 1660s. But his point is clear nonetheless: writers who tamper with the English language are, ipso facto, racial aliens.[150]

The figure in the midst of all this, the racial alien, is, of course, a cipher, and yet it actually represents the one point of agreement in the battle of literary generations. Both sides tend to see this figure as natural, primitive, life-affirming, and impatient of restraint. This unspoken agreement shows how little threat was actually posed to the reigning order by plays like *Him*. Despite the outrage of Robert Underwood Johnson, such plays merely offered the sort of escape that

confirmed authority by confirming its categories, no matter how thoroughly they may have reversed the value judgments attached to those categories. When Cummings or Anderson romanticize dialect as a natural and spontaneous alternative to a restrictive standard, they merely repeat what Johnson has already said, albeit in a different tonality. And yet *Him* shares something else with *The Jazz Singer:* a tendency to undermine its own oppositions. The jumble of competing languages in Cummings's play makes it very difficult to nominate one as the most "natural." Cummings's vaudevillian ventriloquism is so indiscriminate it undermines the status of dialect itself, leveling all language. This is the real threat it poses to the forces of standardization.

VI

The third member of the linguistic ménage à trois at the center of *Pygmalion* is Colonel Pickering, author of *Spoken Sanscrit,* who comes home to England especially to meet Henry Higgins. One of Higgins's real-life prototypes, Henry Sweet, had predicted Pickering, in a way, when he argued that the widening of the Empire would provide linguists with innumerable useful and exotic examples, of which Sanskrit was only the first. Studying Sanskrit in India, Sir William Jones had proposed the notion of a common ancestor behind it and most of the European languages, an ancestor that came to be called Indo-European. Jones's suggestion gave rise to a kind of "unified field theory" of language, with a new etymological principle of human universality to replace that once provided in a narrower sphere by Latin grammar.[151]

Eliza's education is in part an experiment to test this theory, which she corroborates by ably learning a whole panoply of languages besides standard English, including African dialects and "Hottentot clicks."[152] Higgins's ability to teach and Eliza's to learn these quite different languages suggests a common substratum and therefore a brotherhood among them. Given enough time and study, perhaps all languages could be arranged around a single standard, a possibility that would assuage all the anxieties of the Society for Pure English by transforming it into the Society for Pure Language. But this is just what troubled the opponents of the Indo-European theory. If there is a common substratum linking English and Sanskrit, then there is a fundamental cultural commonality linking the English and what Müller called "the black inhabitants of India," and if there is such a commonality then it seems impossible to maintain the superiority on which the empire depended.[153]

The ironic result of the "unified field theory," as Linda Dowling points out, is that, instead of affording linguists a standard by which they could construct some vast pecking order of world languages, it reduced all languages to the same plane.[154] In this way the ethnographic appetite of imperialist Europe led in the end to the very opposite of the vast order once envisioned; it led to contemporary

cultural and linguistic relativism. The very gesture that extended European intellectual sway over all the globe undermined the pretensions of European thought and language. Thus professional linguists have been utterly at odds with the standard language movement since its beginnings, because they tend to look at language as purely conventional and relative.[155]

In part this relativism grew naturally out of the linguistic difficulties faced by the earliest ethnographers. Franz Boas, attempting to deal with the basic ethnographic problem of linguistic transcription, realized that it was impossible to treat a European language, no matter how "scientific," as a neutral container for other languages. Trapped inside his own linguistic system, the European observer could only approximate what he heard. Thus there was no way to rank or hierarchize languages; they were simply different sound systems, mutually incompatible.[156] The same was true for Bronislaw Malinowski, who claimed that ethnographic research had "driven" him away from the idea of language as a stable repository of meaning toward a new theory he called "the principle of Symbolic Relativity." This theory, which held that each language is governed by a "pragmatic world vision," frees us, Malinowski says, "from logical shackles and grammatical barrenness."[157] It also made the whole notion of a standard language a philosophical incoherence.[158]

This dual development, this link between ethnographic interests and linguistic relativism, was recapitulated within the international modernism that grew up at the same time. In some cases the connection between ethnography and artistic experiment was remarkably direct. The American painter Max Weber, for example, sat down in the American Museum of Natural History one day in 1911 and began to write free verse. Weber began with a piece called "To Xochipilli, Lord of Flowers," inspired by a pre-Columbian sculpture in the museum's collection, and finished fifteen years later with a book called *Primitives: Poems and Woodcuts,* which included poems like "Congo Form" and "Bampense Kasai," which was written about an African mask.[159] For the most part, however, the influence of ethnographic collections was mediated through scholars like Wilhelm Worringer and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. In both cases ethnography fed the desire George Steiner identifies particularly with the avant-garde of the period 1870–1900, the desire to investigate—through destructive experimentation if necessary—the very bases of language.[160]

The writers who felt this necessity most keenly all seem to have been polyglot cosmopolitans: Pound, Kandinsky, Cendrars, Tzara, Apollinaire. Richard Huelsenbeck's 1917 dada manifesto "The New Man" describes this miscellaneous group as "saturated, stuffed full to the point of disgust with the experience of all outcasts, the dehumanized beings of Europe, the Africans, the Polynesians, all kinds. . . ."[161] Peculiarly, Africans and Polynesians come to stand for all outcasts, and their languages, or imaginary versions of their languages, for the new speech of the new man. Pound declared that "the artist recognises his life in the terms of the Tahitian savage," and he sat for a portrait bust that made him

look like an Easter Island idol.[162] And when Huelsenbeck appeared at the first of many evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire, he recited "some Negro poems that I had made up myself."[163]

These poems were the first of many "chants nègres" to grace a dada evening at the Cabaret Voltaire, where the entertainment also often included Huelsenbeck's drumming and "African" masks by Marcel Janco.[164] Dada poetry of the period depended heavily on "pseudo-African" languages made up of nonsense syllables like the "umba umba" that graced Huelsenbeck's first essay in the genre. At its extreme, such poetry went beyond nonsense syllables to the very letter itself, as in Huelsenbeck's "Chorus Sanctus":

> aao a ei iii oii
> ou ou o ou ou e ou ie a ai
> ha dzk drrr br obu br bouss boum
> ha haha hi hi hi l i l i l i leïomen[165]

Using an ersatz African language as a wedge, Huelsenbeck pries language loose, letter by letter, from sense and meaning.

In this the dadaists came closer than they realized to one of the oldest and most traditional of all American entertainments. The original minstrel shows themselves were somewhat dadaistic. Dan Emmett, composer of "Dixie," also became famous for something called "Machine Poetry," "a babble on a single tone, fizzling out into prose."[166] And this history shows how deeply conventional the association between black speech and nonsense was. Yet dada pushed the disintegrating power of nonsense so far as to upset the easy dichotomy that kept the alinguistic safely in Africa or in the slave quarters of the plantation.

In 1926, for example, Hannah Höch produced the visual counterpart of a dada poem with her series of photocollages entitled *From an Ethnographical Museum*.[167] These mix African images with bits and pieces of conventional European beauty: lips, eyes, seductive female legs. The mixture disrupts conventional European notions of beauty by putting cover girl lips on an African mask and high-heeled legs beneath a sculptured African torso. It also disrupts the dichotomy that places only African images in ethnographic museums. Here the ethnographic gaze is all-encompassing, and it has the dadaistic effect of reducing every cultural icon to the same level, making nonsense of all. The collages are an exact visual equivalent of the effect that ethnography had on European linguistics, relativizing the European by including it in the same frame of analysis as the foreign, and they also reflect the reversal of values that lurked in the heart of the avant-garde poetry of this period that used African models.

Blaise Cendrars, to take an even more significant example, was an amateur ethnographer of some popular importance, since the *Anthologie nègre* that he published in 1920 became widely known in Europe and the United States.[168] Though Cendrars was not himself a dadaist, selections from the anthology were in fact used at a 1919 "Fête nègre" in Paris that very much resembled the goings-

on at the Cabaret Voltaire.[169] Cendrars, who was born Frédéric Louis Sauser in Switzerland and was a relentless traveler, agreed with Huelsenbeck that there was some essential correspondence between this condition of modern statelessness and the life of "le sauvage": "Quand le poète a voulu exprimer le monde moderne, 'il a souvent employé le langage du sauvage. C'était une nécessité.'" The poet faces the modern world "pauvre et démuni comme un sauvage armé de pierres devant les bêtes de la brousse."[170] Thus it was that one of the great themes of Cendrars's life was "le renouvellement du langage poétique par l'imitation de certaines caractéristiques des langues archaïques."[171]

This process produces certain poems, such as "Mee Too Buggi," that reproduce in poetry the relativizing effect of Höch's collages. "Mee Too Buggi" is, in fact, a collage, a tissue of quotations from a nineteenth-century English ethnographic work. Since this work depends on quotation itself, the words of Cendrars's poem sometimes have three or four competing resonances. "Mee Too Buggi" is, it turns out, the name of a Tongan dance, apparently rendered from the indigenous language into pidgin English and then imported by way of French translation into the text of Cendrars's poem. Though one American translator twisted the line into "Me too boogie," the circle cannot be closed that easily. The competing interests of Tongan, English, and French cancel one another out, producing a nonsense term that has no secure home in any language.[172]

As Jean-Pierre Goldenstein points out, this use of a language unintelligible to virtually all readers of the poem "crée un effet d'étrangeté et d'illisibilité."[173] "Mee too buggi," "fango fango," "Mee low folla" become mere signs torn loose from any signification. Thus Cendrars uses the ethnographic material in collage to reproduce the effect achieved by artists like Höch and, on a grander scale, Picasso, who used the clash between European and African materials to create an effect of cultural disorientation that would finally expose the pretensions of the sign to natural signification. "Mee Too Buggi" also juxtaposes "Bolotoo" and "Papalangi," as if these were two remote and unknown places, but "Papalangi," it turns out, was a Tongan word for Europe.[174] The European reader, in almost certain ignorance, looks back at himself or herself as at a foreigner from a distant country with a funny, nonsensical name. This effect is, for the most part, a private joke, but the poem makes the same point frequently on the surface. At the beginning of the poem, the poet takes up his sacred lyre and touches it to his nose. The whole production of literature, of history, of poetry ("Rimes et mesures dépourvues"), is reduced to slapstick ("L'homme qui se coupa lui-meme la jambe ruississait dans le genre simple et gai") and low pidgin ("Mee low folla").[175] The mockery reduces the privilege of poetry, of language itself, to nothing.

Unlike Cummings, who resorts to racial models so as to find an authentic language, a natural one to counterpose to the artificial languages of authority, Cendrars mixes pidgin in with French to emphasize the artificiality of both. His

nearest counterpart in English is perhaps Joyce, especially the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake,* but also the Joyce of "Oxen of the Sun," which ends its history of English prose styles with a "frightful jumble" of "Pidgin English, nigger English, Cockney, Irish, Bowery slang and broken doggerel. . . ."[176] This mélange may represent drunkenness or moral chaos, but it may also represent the present as an era without a dominant linguistic standard, one in which pidgin can replace Macaulay at the center of power. It is as if Joyce offers this as the language of modernism, of the modern condition in which dialect and idiolect take the place of standard English as the rightful language of literature.

Cendrars may find other counterparts among the transatlantic modernists, other expatriates such as Conrad or Stein, or writers who lived in the United States all their lives in a condition of linguistic disaffinity, like Williams. Such writers see their own language, once taken for granted, as a distinct and arbitrary set of conventions. According to Seamus Heaney, this is a condition that afflicts more and more poets in this century: "Many contemporaries writing in English have been displaced from an old at-homeness in their mother tongue and its hitherto world-defining heritage."[177] This is like the condition Marianna Torgovnick has discussed under Lukács's term "transcendental homelessness," but it is rather more specifically linguistic and political than transcendental. And it is a global condition that affects millions beyond the literate elite.[178] The forces behind the linguistic conflicts of the last hundred years are so vast as "to convert what had been an experience of small minorities to what, at certain levels, and especially in its most active sites and most notably in the United States, could be offered as a definition of modernity itself."[179]

As Torgovnick shows, primitivism seems necessarily to accompany a condition of exile, as the exile searches man's primeval past for another home.[180] But racial primitivism provides a home only for some exiles; for others, like Cendrars, it calls into question the whole notion of "at-homeness," especially if that condition goes along with a heritage once thought to be "world-defining." What "The Negro of the Jazz Band" finally learns by passing for black is that "everyone disguises his own personality. . . . The world is a marketplace of falsefaces."[181] This is the revelation that waits at the heart of *The Jazz Singer,* that there is no true voice at all, only a shuttling back and forth made possible by makeup.

Of course, this sort of restless relativism contains its own possibilities of romantic primitivism. Stephen Greenblatt maintains that the elemental cultural sin of the European colonizers was their refusal to grant "opacity" to the other peoples they encountered. Nowadays, as Sara Suleri has complained, such opacity is virtually enforced, as the "unreadability" of the colonial other becomes fetishized.[182] Thus the romantic nomadism of Deleuze and Guattari depends quite unself-consciously on the racial other as the type of the asignifying sign, and on dialect as the prototype of a nomadic language: "To be a foreigner, but in one's own tongue, not only when speaking a language other than one's own. To be bilingual, multilingual, but in one and the same language, without even a

dialect or a patois. To be a bastard, a half breed, but through a purification of race. That is when style becomes a language." This is what might be called postmodern primitivism, and it differs from the older modernist variety only in romanticizing the relativity and opacity of language instead of its concreteness.[183]

Thus the new aesthetic may look a great deal like the old, as Pasolini's African romanticism looks like Eliot's:

> I have been rational and I have been
> irrational: right to the end.
> And now . . . ah, the desert deafened
> by the wind, the wonderful and filthy
> sun of africa that illuminates the world.
>
> Africa! My only
> alternative . . .[184]

That such lines could be written by a postmodern hero as late as 1960 suggests that some things will never change, no matter how much the categories may be shuffled. On the other hand, the notion of linguistic and cultural relativism brought about by the dislocations of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries does make possible a reversal of terms, of points of view, very useful to writers who have never before been able to feel "at home" in English.

Something like this is suggested, at any rate, in Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* by the character of Saladin Chamcha, the Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice. Chamcha makes his money doing voice-overs: "On the radio he could convince an audience that he was Russian, Chinese, Sicilian, the President of the United States."[185] Chamcha's placelessness is thus played for laughs, but the humor is mostly at the expense of his listeners, who have no idea they are docilely listening to a man they might refuse to sit next to in the subway. What Rushdie is dramatizing here is a global reversal of the situation of *The Jazz Singer,* a fundamental contravention of the old law that mimicry meant freedom only for the European.

Like *The Jazz Singer, The Satanic Verses* is also self-reflexive, for Chamcha's voice-overs dramatize a situation of which Rushdie himself is one of the best examples:

> What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it—assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.[186]

Rushdie's final metaphor precisely reverses the standard imperialist language, as his whole statement represents his own hopeful reversal of the standardizers' worst fear. *The Satanic Verses* "rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure."[187] Across the century, Henry James and Rushdie agree that this is "the high modernism of the condition," that the movement and mixture of

peoples and their languages, dialects, and vernaculars is the defining condition of the literature of our time. How we get from James's shudder of rejection to Rushdie's celebration, and from the racial mimicry of T. S. Eliot to that of Saladin Chamcha, is one of the most important stories that modern literature has to tell.