

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

*“And the common people heard him gladly.”*

OF what shall be said herein of dialect, let it be understood the term dialect referred to is of that general breadth of meaning given it to-day, namely, any speech or vernacular outside the prescribed form of good English in its present state. The present state of the English is, of course, not any one of its prior states. So first let it be remarked that it is highly probable that what may have been the best of English once may now by some be counted as a weak, inconsequent *patois*, or dialect.

To be direct, it is the object of this article to show that dialect is not a thing to be despised in any event—that its origin is oftentimes of as royal caste as that of any speech. Listening back, from the standpoint of to-day, even to the divine singing of that old classic master to whom England's late laureate refers as

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

“ . . . the first warbler, whose sweet breath  
Preluded those melodious bursts that fill  
The spacious times of great Elizabeth  
With sounds that echo still ”;

or to whom Longfellow alludes, in his matchless sonnet, as

“ . . . the poet of the dawn, who wrote  
The Canterbury Tales, and his old age  
Made beautiful with song ”;—

Chaucer's verse to us is *now* as veritably dialect as to that old time it *was* the chastest English; and even then his materials were essentially dialect when his song was at best pitch. Again, our present dialect, of most plebeian ancestry, may none the less prove worthy. Mark the recognition of its own personal merit in the great new dictionary, where what was, in our own remembrance, the most outlandish dialect, is now good, sound, official English.

Since Literature must embrace all naturally existing materials—physical, mental, and spiritual—we have no occasion to urge its acceptance of so-called dialect, for

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

dialect *is* in Literature, and *has* been there since the beginning of all written thought and utterance. Strictly speaking, as well as paradoxically, all verbal expression is more or less dialectic, however grammatical. While usage establishes grammar, it no less establishes so-called dialect. Therefore we may as rightfully refer to "so-called grammar."

It is not really a question of Literature's position toward dialect that we are called upon to consider, but rather how much of Literature's valuable time shall be taken up by this dialectic country cousin. This question Literature her gracious self most amiably answers by hugging to her breast voluminous tomes, from Chaucer on to Dickens, from Dickens on to Joel Chandler Harris. And this affectionate spirit on the part of Literature, in the main, we all most feelingly indorse.

Briefly summed, it would appear that dialect means something more than mere rude form of speech and action—that it must, in some righteous and substantial way, convey to us a positive force of soul, truth, dignity, beauty, grace, purity and sweetness that may even touch us to the tenderness of tears. Yes, dialect as certainly

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

does all this as that speech and act refined may do it, and for the same reason: it is simply, purely natural and human.

Let the Lettered and the Unlettered powers be at swords' points; and very old and bitter foemen, too, they are. As fairly as we can, then, let us look over the field of these contending forces and note their diverse positions: First, *the Lettered*—they who have the full advantages of refined education, training, and association—are undoubtedly as wholly out of order among *the Unlettered* as the Unlettered are out of order in the exalted presence of the Lettered. Each faction may in like aversion ignore or snub the other; but a long-suffering Providence must bear with the society of both. There may be one vague virtue demonstrated by this feud: each division will be found unwaveringly loyal to its kind, and mutually they desire no interchange of sympathy whatever.—Neither element will accept from the other any *patronizing* treatment; and, perhaps, the more especially does the *Unlettered* faction reject anything in vaguest likeness of this spirit. Of the two divisions, in graphic summary,—*one* knows the

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

very core and centre of refined civilization, and this only; the *other* knows the outlying wilds and suburbs of civilization, and this only. Whose, therefore, is the greater knowledge, and whose the just right of any whit of self-glorification?

A curious thing, indeed, is this factional pride, as made equally manifest in both forces; in one, for instance, of the Unlettered forces: The average farmer, or countryman, knows, in reality, a far better and wider range of diction than he permits himself to use. He restricts and abridges the vocabulary of his speech, fundamentally, for the reason that he fears offending his rural *neighbors*, to whom a choicer speech might suggest, on his part, an assumption—a spirit of conscious superiority, and therewith an implied reflection on *their* lack of intelligence and general worthiness. If there is any one text universally known and nurtured of the Unlettered masses of our common country, it is that which reads, "All men are created equal." Therefore it is a becoming thing when true gentility prefers to overlook some variations of the class who, more from lack of cultivation than out of rude intent, sometimes almost compel a

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

positive doubt of the nice veracity of the declaration, or at least a grief at the munificent liberality of the so-bequoted statement. The somewhat bewildering position of these conflicting forces leaves us nothing further to consider, but how to make the most and best of the situation so far as Literature may be hurt or helped thereby.

Equally with the perfect English, then, dialect should have full justice done it. Then always it is worthy, and in Literature is thus welcome. The writer of dialect should as reverently venture in its use as in his chastest English. His effort in the *scholarly* and *elegant* direction suffers no neglect—he is *schooled* in that, perhaps, he may explain. Then let him be *schooled* in *dialect* before he sets up as an expounder of it—a teacher, forsooth a master! The real master must not only know each varying light and shade of dialect expression, but he must as minutely know the inner character of the people whose native tongue it is, else his product is simply a pretence—a wilful forgery, a rank abomination. Dialect has been and is thus insulted, vilified, and degraded, now and continually; and through this

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

outrage solely, thousands of generous-minded readers have been turned against dialect who otherwise would have loved and blessed it in its real form of crude purity and unstrained sweetness—

“Honey dripping from the comb!”

Let no impious faddist, then, assume its just interpretation. He may know everything else in the world, but not dialect, nor dialectic people, for both of which he has supreme contempt, which same, be sure, is heartily returned. Such a “superior” personage may even go among these simple country people and abide indefinitely in the midst of them, yet their more righteous contempt never for one instant permits them to be their real selves in his presence. In consequence, his most conscientious report of them, their ways, lives, and interests, is absolutely of no importance or value in the world. He never knew them, nor will he ever know them. They are not his kind of people, any more than he is their kind of man; and *their* disappointment grieves us more than his.

The master in Literature, as in any art, is that “divinely gifted man” who does just obeisance to all living

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

creatures, "both man and beast and bird." It is this master only who, as he writes, can sweep himself aside and leave his humble characters to do the thinking and the talking. This man it is who celebrates his performance—not himself. His work he celebrates because it is not his only, but because he feels it the conscientious reproduction of the life itself—as he has seen and known and felt it;—a representation it is of God's own script, translated and transcribed by the worshipful mind and heart and hand of genius. This virtue in all art is impartially demanded, and genius only can fully answer the demand in any art for which we claim perfection. The painter has his expression of it, with no slighting of the dialectic element; so, too, the sculptor, the musician, and the list entire. In the line of Literature and literary material, an illustration of the nice meaning and distinction of dialectic art will be found in Charles Dudley Warner's comment of George Cable's work, as far back as 1883, referring to the author's own rendition of it from the platform. Mr. Warner says:

While the author was unfolding to his audience a life and society unfamiliar to them and entrancing them with pictures,



## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

the reality of which none doubted and the spell of which none cared to escape, it occurred to me that here was the solution of all the pother we have recently got into about the realistic and the ideal schools in fiction. In "Posson Jone," an awkward camp-meeting country preacher is the victim of a vulgar confidence game; the scenes are the street, a drinking-place, a gambling-saloon, a bull-ring, and a calaboose; there is not a "respectable" character in it. Where shall we look for a more faithful picture of low life? Where shall we find another so vividly set forth in all its sordid details? And yet see how art steps in, with the wand of genius, to make literature! Over the whole the author has cast an ideal light; over a picture that, in the hands of a bungling realist, would have been repellant he has thrown the idealizing grace that makes it one of the most charming sketches in the world. Here is nature, as nature only ought to be in literature, elevated but never departed from.

So we find dialect, as a branch of Literature, worthy of the high attention and employment of the greatest master in letters—not the merest mountebank. Turn to Dickens, in innumerable passages of pathos: the death of poor Jo, or that of the "Cheap John's" little daughter in her father's arms, on the foot-board of his peddling cart before the jeering of the vulgar mob; smile moistly, too, at Mr. Sleary's odd philosophies; or at the trials of

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

Sissy Jupe; or lift and tower with indignation, giving ear to Stephen Blackpool and the stainless nobility of his cloyed utterances.

The crudeness or the homeliness of the dialectic element does not argue its unfitness in any way. Some readers seem to think so; but they are wrong, and very gravely wrong. Our own brief history as a nation, and our finding and founding and maintaining of it, left our forefathers little time indeed for the delicate cultivation of the arts and graces of refined and scholarly attainments. And there is little wonder, and great blamelessness on their part, if they lapsed in point of high mental accomplishments, seeing their attention was so absorbed by propositions looking toward the protection of their rude farm-homes, their meagre harvests, and their half-stabled cattle from the dread invasion of the Indian. Then, too, they had their mothers and their wives and little ones to protect, to clothe, to feed, and to die for in this awful line of duty, as hundreds upon hundreds did. These sad facts are here accented and detailed not so much for the sake of being tedious as to more clearly indicate why it was that many of the truly heroic an-

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

cestry of "our best people" grew unquestionably dialect of caste—not alone in speech, but in every mental trait and personal address. It is a grievous fact for us to confront, but many of them wore apparel of the commonest, talked loudly, and doubtless said "thisaway" and "thataway," and "Watch y' doin' of?" and "Whur y' goin' at?"—using dialect even in their prayers to Him who, in His gentle mercy, listened and was pleased; and who listens verily unto this hour to all like prayers, and yet pleased; yea, haply listens even to the refined rhetorical petitions of those who are *not* pleased.

There is something more at fault than the language when we turn from or flinch at it; and, as has been intimated, the wretched fault may be skulkingly hidden away in the ambush of *ostensible* dialect—that type of dialect so copiously produced by its sole manufacturers, who, utterly stark and bare of the vaguest idea of country life or country people, at once assume that all their "gifted pens" have to do is to stupidly misspell every word; vulgarly mistreat and besloven every theme, however sacred; maim, cripple, and disfigure language never in the vocabulary of the countryman—then



## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

smuggle these monstrosities of either rhyme or prose somehow into the public print that is to innocently smear them broadcast all over the face of the country they insult.

How different the mind and method of the true interpreter. As this phrase goes down the man himself arises—the type perfect—Colonel Richard Malcolm Johnston, who wrote “The Dukesborough Tales”—an accomplished classic scholar and teacher, yet no less an accomplished master and lover of his native dialect of middle Georgia. He, like Dickens, permits his rustic characters to think, talk, act, and live, just as nature designed them. He does not make the pitiable error of either patronizing or making fun of them. He knows them and he loves them; and they know and love him in return. Recalling Colonel Johnston’s dialectic sketches, with his own presentation of them from the platform, the writer notes a fact that seems singularly to obtain among all true dialect-writers, namely, that they are also endowed with native histrionic capabilities: *Hear*, as well as read, Twain, Cable, Johnston, Page, Smith, and all the list, with barely an exception.

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

Did space permit, no better illustration of true dialect sketch and characterization might here be offered than Colonel Johnston's simple story of "Mr. Absalom Billingslea," or the short and simple annals of his like quaint contemporaries, "Mr. Bill Williams" and "Mr. Jonas Lively." The scene is the country and the very little country town, with landscape, atmosphere, simplicity, circumstance—all surroundings and conditions—*veritable*—everything rural and dialectic, no less than the simple, primitive, common, wholesome-hearted men and women who so naturally live and have their blessed being in his stories, just as in the life itself. This is the manifest work of the true dialect writer and expounder. In every detail, the most minute, such work reveals the master-hand and heart of the humanitarian as well as artist—the two are indissolubly fused—and the result of such just treatment of whatever lowly themes or characters we can but love and loyally approve with all our human hearts. Such masters necessarily are rare, and such ripe perfecting as is here attained may be in part the mellowing result of age and long observation, though

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

it can but be based upon the wisest, purest spirit of the man as well as artist.

In no less excellence should the work of Joel Chandler Harris be regarded: His touch alike is ever reverential. He has gathered up the bruised and broken voices and the legends of the slave, and from his child-heart he has affectionately yielded them to us in all their eerie beauty and wild loveliness. Through them we are made to glorify the helpless and the weak and to revel in their victories. But, better, we are taught that even in barbaric breasts there dwells inherently the sense of right above wrong—equity above law—and the One Unerring Righteousness Eternal. With equal truth and strength, too, Mr. Harris has treated the dialectic elements of the interior Georgia country—the wilds and fastnesses of the “moonshiners.” His tale of “Teague Poteet,” of some years ago, was contemporaneous with the list of striking mountain stories from that strong and highly gifted Tennessean, Miss Murfree, or “Charles Egbert Craddock.” In the dialectic spirit her stories charm and hold us. Always there is strangely mingled, but most naturally, the gentle nature cropping out amid the most

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

desperate and stoical: the night scene in the isolated mountain cabin, guarded ever without and within from any chance down-swooping of the minions of the red-eyed law; the great man-group of gentle giants, with rifles never out of arm's-reach, in tender rivalry ranged admiringly around the crowing, wakeful little boy-baby; the return, at last, of the belated mistress of the house—the sister, to whom all do great, awkward reverence. Jealously snatching up the babe and kissing it, she querulously demands why he has not long ago been put to bed. “He ’lowed he wouldn’t go,” is the reply.

Thomas Nelson Page, of Virginia, who wrote “Meh Lady”—a positive classic in the Negro dialect: his work is veritable—strong and pure and sweet; and as an oral reader of it the doubly gifted author, in voice and cadence, natural utterance, every possible effect of speech and tone, is doubtless without rival anywhere.

Many more, indeed, than may be mentioned now there are of these real benefactors and preservers of the wayside characters, times, and customs of our ever-shifting history. Needless is it to speak here of the earlier of our workers in the dialectic line—of James Russell

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

Lowell's New England "Hosea Biglow," Dr. Eggleston's "Hoosier School-Master," or the very rare and quaint, bright prattle of "Helen's Babies." In connection with this last let us very seriously inquire what this *real* child has done that Literature should so persistently refuse to give him an abiding welcome? Since for ages this question seems to have been left unasked, it may be timely now to propound it. Why not the real child in Literature? The real child is good enough (we all know he is bad enough) to command our admiring attention and most lively interest in real life, and just as we find him "in the raw." Then why do we deny him any righteous place of recognition in our Literature? From the immemorial advent of our dear old Mother Goose, Literature has been especially catering to the juvenile needs and desires, and yet steadfastly overlooking, all the time, the very principles upon which Nature herself founds and presents this lawless little brood of hers—the children. It is not the children who are out of order; it is Literature. And not only is Literature out of order, but she is presumptuous; she is impudent. She takes Nature's children and revises and corrects



## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

them till "their own mother doesn't know them." This is literal fact. So, very many of us are coming to inquire, as we've a right, why is the real child excluded from a just hearing in the world of letters as he has in the world of fact? For instance, what has the lovely little ragamuffin ever done of sufficient guilt to eternally consign him to the monstrous penalty of speaking most accurate grammar all the literary hours of the days of the years of his otherwise natural life?—

"Oh, mother, may I go to school  
With brother Charles to-day?  
The air is very fine and cool;  
Oh, mother, say I may!"

—Is this a real boy that would make such a request, and is it the real language he would use? No, we are glad to say that it is not. Simply it is a libel, in every particular, on any boy, however fondly and exactingly trained by parents however zealous for his overdecorous future. Better, indeed, the dubious sentiment of the most trivial nursery jingle, since the latter at least maintains the lawless though wholesome spirit of the child-genuine.—

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

**“Hink ! Minx ! The old witch winks—  
The fat begins to fry ;  
There’s nobody home but Jumping Joan,  
Father and mother and I.”**

Though even here the impious poet leaves the scar of grammatical knowledge upon childhood’s native diction ; and so the helpless little fellow is again misrepresented, and his character, to all intents and purposes, is assaulted and maligned outrageously thereby.

Now, in all seriousness, this situation ought not to be permitted to exist, though to change it seems an almost insurmountable task. The general public, very probably, is not aware of the real gravity of the position of the case as even unto this day it exists. Let the public try, then, to contribute the real child to the so-called Child Literature of its country, and have its real child returned as promptly as it dare show its little tousled head in the presence of that scholarly and dignified institution. Then ask why your real child has been spanked back home again, and the wise mentors there will virtually tell you that Child Literature wants no real children in it, that the real child’s example of de-

## DIALECT IN LITERATURE

fective grammar and lack of elegant deportment would furnish to its little patrician patrons suggestions very hurtful indeed to their higher morals, tendencies, and ambitions. Then, although the general public couldn't for the life of it see why or how, and might even be reminded that *it* was just such a rowdying child itself, and that its *father*—the Father of his Country—was just such a child; that Abraham Lincoln was just such a lovable, lawless child, and yet was blessed and chosen in the end for the highest service man may ever render unto man,—all—all this argument would avail not in the least, since the elegantly minded purveyors of Child Literature can not possibly tolerate the presence of any but the refined children—the very proper children—the studiously thoughtful, poetic children;—and these must be kept safe from the contaminating touch of our rough-and-tumble little fellows in “hodden gray,” with frowzly heads, begrimed but laughing faces, and such awful, awful vulgarities of naturalness, and crimes of simplicity, and brazen faith and trust, and love of life and everybody in it. All other real people are getting into Literature; and without some real children along will they not soon be getting lonesome, too?

