edge except subconsciously (although that certainly is enough). The next sentence, *His French was poor*, is more direct in controlling how we hear the speaker. It still isn't a dialogue tag because of its grammatical separation from *Very good, sir*, but it serves the same purpose as a tag like *he said haltingly*, or *he said in bad French*. The reason for doing it this way may be entirely stylistic, at least in this example. The sentence is sharp, it matches the style of prose (short, simple sentences) that surrounds it, and—most significantly—it separates the narrator from the speaker. This narrator doesn't want to be in the same sentence as the character; his words are sequestered, completely separate from the joyless *ha-ha* and the smug *Very good, sir*. The narrator describes the speech from the outside, not participating even grammatically in the content of the dialogue.

I've chosen this example from Carey not only because it illustrates why a writer might use separate sentences to control a reader's experience of speech but also for transitional purposes. Usually dialogue tags and their accessories help us imagine the tone/pitch/volume of a character's voice, or what he does while he speaks. In the final sentence of this passage, however, Carey's dialogue supplement *His French was poor* tells us about the particular way the actual syllables are pronounced. In other words, it raises the thorny and controversial issue of how to portray an accent, something we'll delve into in chapter 4.

four

Should You Phonetically Represent Characters' Speech?

As in chapters 2 and 3, italics generally indicate quoted or invented passages. Hereafter, chapters revert to the standard practice of using quotation marks.

When a character speaks with a particularity of pronunciation, whether it's an accent or a speech impediment or some other verbal tic, a writer has a few options for communicating the sound of that speech. One common style is to render the speech in Standard English, then give instructions on how to pronounce it in the dialogue tag or supplement, as in these examples:

"You should park your car over there," Jim said in his South Boston accent.

"I wouldn't wish that on Wilma." Amy drew out the phrase for a full thirty seconds because of her stutter.

At the other end of the spectrum is the method of portraying oddities of speech in the dialogue itself. Writers who do this indicate exactly how the words sound by using phonetic spellings and constructions, like this:

"Yoo shood pahk ya cah ovah they-uh," Jim said.

"I w-w-wouldn't w-w-w-ish that on W-w-w-w-w-w-ilma," Amy said.

Although there are other methods of communicating how a character pronounces words, we'll start by looking at these two extremes.

STICKING WITH DIALOGUE SUPPLEMENTS

We can deal with this end of the spectrum rather easily, because it's not far removed from what we talked about in the last chapter. Writing something like *"Take out the trash," Mom screamed* is not so different from writing *"Take out the trash," Mom said in her Cajun patois.* You simply describe the accent or impediment outside of the dialogue, often but not always in the tag. The benefits are 1) you don't slow down a reader by making him translate the letters and sounds into words, 2) it doesn't take as long to craft the dialogue, and 3) it never seems silly, as bad phonetic dialogue does.

One downside is that there are only so many words that specifically describe accents. There's *drawl* and *twang* for Southerners and *brogue* for Irishmen and *burr* for Scots, but not many others. Thus you're limited to using modifying phrases with the tag *he said*, or to adding a new sentence, as Carey did in the line cited in the previous chapter: *"Very good sir." His French was poor.* That doesn't seem so tough, until you consider what a vague thing pronunciation is, especially if you're going beyond the generic—if you want your character to sound not just Canadian, for example, but Manitoban or New Brunswickian or Torontonian—and how trying to describe something elusive or vague can lead to overwriting. An author who wants you to hear an accent, but who doesn't have the right verb or noun for it, might be tempted to craft florid prose: *His voice, shaped by the hills of Andalusia, melted off his tongue like dulce de leche.* Or the author might invoke a cliché: *his Alabama accent was as thick as molasses.* Or he might throw up his hands and use a cultural reference: *He sounded like Pierce Brosnan, with a touch of Margaret Thatcher.* All of these, I hope we can see, are mistakes.

PHONETIC CONSTRUCTION OF ACCENT

Harold Bloom calls our literary period "The Ironic Age," and indeed contemporary writers like to mock, while avoiding that which might bring mockery upon them: sentimentality, coincidence, melodrama, even plain old earnestness. If the trend these days is to lean toward the end of the spectrum that involves letting dialogue tags do most of the work, perhaps it's because phonetic representation of speech is easy to make fun of. To be sure, there are other reasons to avoid this style, as we shall see, but fear of looking silly is one of the major ones, and that's rarely a good reason to avoid doing something. I'm always impressed by students who try phonetic representation, even when they fail. Plus, many excellent writers (including Chaucer, the granddaddy of ironists) have used the phonetic style.

One of the more notable examples of phonetic dialogue appears in Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat." Here's a brief excerpt:

> "Some day Ah'm goin' tuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness. 'Nother thing, where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony. He aint fuh you to be drivin' wid no bull whip."

Students often claim that dialect in this form is too hard to understand. I think they really mean it's hard to understand quickly. Any student can sort out what the characters mean if he's patient enough: he just reads it out loud, or deciphers the speech word by word. But as students often reasonably inquire, who wants to do that? Fiction depends on the reader proceeding with relative fluidity throughout the text, and if we have to spend a few minutes decoding a short passage, we'll have a hard time engaging with the characters and action. We'll experience it as text, not speech.

This is a fair objection, but there's a counter to it, which is that the difficulty of reading phonetic dialect can be exaggerated. Sure, it looks odd when you first see it, but your mind quickly adjusts. It's not unlike reading Shakespeare; once you've put a few pages behind you, you don't struggle with it as much. A reader's brain is wonderfully adaptive.

Besides that, phonetic dialect may provide something that justifies the risk of distraction: authenticity. In this case, Hurston wanted to record the customs and speech of African-American Florida in the 1920s, and she wanted to get it right. As a trained anthropologist, she considered her fiction to be something like an ethnographical endeavor. Her micromanaging of the way we hear the characters talk represents the same dedication to accuracy that we see in a social scientist writing up fieldwork.

An equally significant aspect to this search for authenticity is the avoidance of inauthenticity. That is to say, while writers using phonetic dialogue want you to hear a line exactly as it should sound, they also want to make sure you don't insert whatever clichés of accent and dialect you would otherwise fall back on. Like benevolent dictators, these writers believe their readers would only abuse freedom if they were granted it.

Haughty as that may sound, readers do sometimes require protection from themselves. Imagine coming across the line *"My darling, I have brought you the cheese from Paris," said Guillaume in his thick accent.* The writer lets us

hear Guillaume's words for ourselves, giving only the vague guidance that we should imagine them in French-inflected English. And what do we do with that freedom? I think many of us hear some sort of Pepé Le Pew–or Inspector Clouseau–inspired voice (*My dar-leeng, I 'ave brought you ze chiz from Paree*), possibly preceded by the nasally *hunh-hunh-hunh* laugh of Gallic caricature. Unfortunately, certain accents—the Frenchman, the Southerner, the Noo Yawker, and so on—are so engrained in our cultural imagination that it's hard for us to hear an authentic version of them if we're just told to. This is a serious problem for someone trying to write verisimilar fiction. France, after all, contains many different regions and dialects, as does the American South, as does the New York megalopolis. What if you want your reader to hear the curious twang of panhandle Florida or the slow drawl of coastal Carolina, and instead all they hear is Forrest Gump?

That's troubling enough from a purely artistic standpoint, but there are also sociopolitical implications of allowing a reader to hear an inauthentic voice. Hurston wrote her stories in part to document lives and places that would otherwise be neglected because of racial intolerance. In forcing readers to hear these voices exactly as she wanted them to, she gave them no freedom to imagine African-American caricatures instead (this was the 1920s, remember, the decade of *Amos 'n' Andy*). And if readers can't hear those caricatures, it becomes less easy to buy the stereotypes that come with them. The same can be said of any writer seeking to document a group that is susceptible to stereotype, be it a regional/national population or an ethnic/racial one or one united by a verbal disability. To see another example, go back to the excerpt from Roddy Doyle's *The Van* in chapter 2, and see how he uses phonetic dialogue to make you hear Irish accents that are far removed from the Lucky Charms leprechaun. For these writers, there's more at stake than verisimilitude—they also fight against our cultural prejudices.

Ironically, some of Hurston's contemporaries believed her use of dialect encouraged stereotypes by making the characters appear uneducated. In recent decades, as we've come to recognize the complex grammars of dialects apart from Standard English, this criticism has lost steam. But still some readers and scholars make the argument that phonetic dialect diminishes a character in the eye of the reader, by making her look foolish or inarticulate or at the very least peculiar. They certainly have a point when they're talking about badly crafted dialect. If a writer makes an Australian say "G'day, mate" or gives a Mexican the line "Ay, caramba!" he turns his

own characters into caricatures (Crocodile Dundee and Speedy Gonzales, respectively). He makes both a moral and an artistic transgression.

Another problematic aspect of phonetic dialogue has to do with the crafting of vernacular speech by people who do not belong to the group being depicted. Frankly, this doesn't happen a lot, because people are afraid of coming off as racist. But a contemporary bestseller, Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, serves as an interesting illustration of how such a technique can play out. Stockett, a white Southerner from a privileged background, wrote some chapters of her novel from the perspective of black maids in 1960s Mississippi. Because of the first-person style, she didn't have the option of describing the characters' voices in dialogue tags; she had to construct their sound and patterns in the words themselves. Predictably, she received some criticism for this decision, from those who claimed she didn't have the right to appropriate the voices of an oppressed race and class. Stockett must have known such criticism was likely; the safe choice would have been to keep the whole novel in the voice of the white narrator, so she deserves credit for risking castigation in order to write a more rounded, comprehensive book.

It's telling, though, that she didn't actually use phonetic dialogue in the way we've been speaking about it. Here's a sample of a black character's voice in the novel:

> I take the tray a devil eggs out to the dining room. Miss Leefolt setting at the head and to her left be Miss Hilly Holbrook and Miss Hilly's mama, Miss Walter, who Miss Hilly don't treat with no respect. And then on Miss Leefolt's right be Miss Skeeter.

Even the phonetically spelled words—"*a*" instead of "*of*," "*devil*" instead of "*deviled*"—are actually words themselves, with the result that the passage doesn't contain any of the apostrophes or blatant misspellings we see in most phonetic passages. Primarily the voice comes across through grammar and syntax, in the way she uses double negatives (*don't treat with no respect*), verb conjugation (*to her left be Miss Hilly Holbrook*) and regional quirks (*setting* instead of *sitting*). This style, which we'll discuss in a later section, has many benefits. But I think one of them is to mitigate the stark, sometimes exaggerated appearance of true phonetic dialogue. Phonetically, Aibileen probably pronounced the first line in the passage "*Ah tak' de tray uh devil' eggs out tuh de dinin' room*," but this version looks more aggressive in the way it underscores her accent, it's easier to interpret as a mockery of her

speech. Stockett knew she was taking a chance in appropriating the voice of black characters, but in eschewing true phonetic spelling, she chose a less overt style of presenting the dialects.

Even if phonetic dialect can lead to offensiveness—or the accusation of it—we can't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Yes, there are characters whom authors ridicule by giving them stereotypical dialect (Brer Rabbit, Jim in *Tom Sawyer*, the slaves in *Gone with the Wind*). But there are also many for whom the reader feels tremendous respect and affection (Faulkner's Dilsey, Jim in *Huck Finn*, Stowe's Uncle Tom, Dickens's Oliver Twist). Carefully crafted phonetic dialect can enrich a reader's experience of the characters, while shoddy or disrespectful treatment of the same can diminish them in the reader's eyes—and any diminishment created by such an overt technique will result in a loss of respect for the writer as well.

PHONETIC REPRESENTATION OF SPEECH IMPEDIMENTS OR VERBAL TICS

You might say that my advice in the last section boiled down to this: *If you want to write phonetic dialogue to represent an accent, great, just make sure you don't screw it up, or you'll look silly and/or racist.* I'm afraid the first part of this next section doesn't offer you even that much leeway. Accents are complex and multifaceted products of vowel and consonant formations, so if you work hard to listen to the way people speak and avoid that which is false and trite, you can replicate them in writing. But when we're dealing with speech impediments and other verbal particularities, that's not always the case.

In fiction, the most common non-standard speech that doesn't involve accent is probably stuttering. And unfortunately, generations of writers have failed to come up with an effective way to phonetically represent it. Probably the most famous stutterer in literature is Billy Budd—his speech impediment is actually a plot point in the novel—and here's how Melville had him talk:

> "D-D-Damme, I don't know what you are d-d-driving at, or what you mean, but you had better g-g-go where you belong!"

Saul Bellow gave a twist on this familiar method in *Humboldt's Gift*:

> "But what were you re-re-reserving yourself for? You had the star attitude, but where was the twi-twi-twink . . ."

With apologies to these two brilliant writers, repeating the first letter or syllable of a word doesn't satisfy. It simply fails to give a sense of what people sound like when they stutter. The noise emitting from a stutterer's mouth and throat are much more complex. In fact, the sounds don't always involve letters from the Roman alphabet, so they are virtually impossible to emulate in written English. When writers try it, the result is not just false but insulting to readers and stutterers. Because of that, it may be a fool's game to try to represent a stutter phonetically. At least I've never seen it done in a convincing and verisimilar way.

Stuttering, however, is not the only speech impediment out there, and with some of them, phonetic representation may be possible for the sensitive writer. For example, Jonathan Lethem gives a first-person voice to a man with Tourette Syndrome in his novel *Motherless Brooklyn*. The narrator, Lionel Essrog, thoroughly describes his odd tics and emissions, and he uses some phonetic constructions to show what his dialogue sounds like. Usually this involves removing the space between words and putting the phrases in italics, as in "You shouldn't make fun of—*Lyrical Eggdog! Logical Assnog!*—you shouldn't make fun of me, Julia" and "*Doctorbyebye!*" Lionel also describes the physical gestures that accompany the tics, and delves into his subjective experience of shame and alienation. We get the full picture of the man's affliction, not just the parts that might result in cheap laughs. And we become convinced that phonetic portrayals like "Anyone—*Kissmefaster! Killmesooner! Cookiemonster!*—anyone the killer might target?" are the most accurate and sympathetic methods of replicating the outbursts.

The treatment of other speech impediments (such as lisp, cluttering, whatever Foghorn Leghorn has, etc.) can be approached from the perspective of the previous discussion. That is, if a manner of speech can be fully represented by our language, or if its experience can be portrayed with a combination of phonetics and description, then it makes sense to try to capture the actual experience in the dialogue. If Lethem had chosen to merely describe Lionel's Tourette's symptoms, without ever letting us see in plain English what his speech looked like, the novel would have frustrated its readers. And yet, while stuttering manifests as a verbal affliction, I believe writers must acknowledge that it's not verbal in any way that we can authentically capture with the letters and syllables of English.

I'd like to bring up one last non-standard, non-accented style of speech that writers often don't know what to do with: the speech of a drunk person.

Many of the points about accent will apply here, in particular the dan-

ger of making the character appear as a stereotype. We all know the trite soundtrack of the drunkard of caricature: the slurred words, the raised volume, the hiccups. Because of that, you may want to avoid phonetics altogether, and write something like *"You better believe it, baby," he said. The bartender could barely make out his words.*

But for the sake of authenticity, and so that your reader doesn't insert the inauthentic speech of cultural cliché, you may want to do as Fitzgerald did in "Babylon, Revisited":

> "Come and dine. Sure your cousins won' mine. See you so sel'om. Or solemn."

Fitzgerald's ear for drunken speech, which he honed with extensive fieldwork, is pitch perfect. He captures the tendency of drunks to abbreviate sentences (*sure your cousins* instead of *I'm sure your cousins*), to drop consonants (*sel'om*), to misuse and get distracted by language (*Or solemn*). This line, which occurs without any dialogue accessory, is much more effective than it would have been if he'd asked a narrative tag to do all the work.

OTHER OPTIONS: LIMITED PHONETICS AND GRAMMAR / SYNTAX / DICTION

One odd fact about phonetic dialect is that writers almost always use it inconsistently. Hurston's line *"Some day Ah'm goin' tuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness"* uses some phonetic spelling, but many of the words—*some, dead, from, of*—are spelled correctly, even though, like most English words, they're not spelled the way they're pronounced. If she had decided to use absolute and consistent phonetics, she would have written something like this: *"Sum day Ah'm gon' tuh drop ded frum sum ov yo' foolishness."* Which might be taking it a bit far—it's the kind of ultra-faithful phonetic style that makes *Wuthering Heights*'s Joseph so incomprehensible. (A sample line: *Hathecliff maks noa 'count 'o t' mother, nor ye norther; but he'll heu' his lad; und I mun tak' him—soa now ye knaw!* Thanks for clearing that up, Emily Brontë.) Because it's untenable to phonetically spell every word of dialogue, Hurston only does it to a few of the more exaggerated pronunciations, so that the reader can get a feel for the accent. Once we have that feel, we make adjustments in other places; we hear every word in the dialect of the speaker. It's a trick, an aural illusion.

Writers who are uncomfortable with phonetic dialect, but who acknowledge its benefits, try to extend the possibilities of this trick, in which a little phonetic representation is made to go a long way. These writers provide long stretches of dialogue in Standard English, but throw in occasional phonetic spellings to jolt the reader back into the accent. They might drop the *g* on gerunds, for instance, or turn *them* into *em*—nothing that will slow down the reader much, but enough phonetics to give a small taste of the accent, with the hopes that the reader will do the rest. Here's how it looks in two separate excerpts from Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*:

> "I be back later. Maybe I be back tomorrow. But I want you here doin right when I get back, doin good."

> "She ain't no more dead than you or me. Now hush that ruckus. Go find them children. In the next room. Go find em and see to em."

In real life, the spelling and pronunciations of many of these words would not have matched up (*tomorrow* was probably *tomorruh*, *get* was more like *git*), but Jones doesn't want the language to distract, so he gives only a few non-standard spellings, assuming you'll make up for the rest.

These examples illustrate another method of controlling the way a reader hears accent, one that doesn't have to use phonetics at all: the manipulation of syntax, grammar, and diction—the method we briefly saw in the excerpt from *The Help*. In *The Known World* passages, the faulty grammar in the first two sentences (they're both missing the auxiliary verb *will*) and the colloquial phrases of the third (*doin right* and *doin good*) contribute to the accent Jones seeks to present—in this case, an African American in nineteenth-century Virginia. We can see another example in an excerpt from Barry Hannah's *Ray*:

> "I was saying the other day, Doc, I was telling Poot Laird, 'The large bird flies and roars because it has the span. The small bird creeps and misses because it hasn't.' That's what I told Poot."
>
> "That doesn't sound half-bad," I said. "What was Poot's reaction?"
>
> "Nothing. He can't talk. A cottonmouth bit him in the tongue when he was little. Only expression he's got, is after a big supper and beer, he lifts a leg and—"
>
> "Poots," I guessed.
>
> "But strange, like somebody mumbling."

Without using phonetic spelling (he doesn't even drop the *g*'s, although certainly his characters do), Hannah lets us know that these men speak in Southern accents, specifically the odd mixture of the elegant and the colloquial that characterizes his Mississippi setting.

The mechanisms he uses are his syntax (the ordering of the parts of the sentence) and his word choice. This includes the characters' casual repetitions, which we see in the way the first speaker gives three variations of *I said* (*I was saying the other day, I was telling Poot Laird, That's what I told Poot*). He has picked up on the odd grammatical constructions, as when the speaker introduces the main clause of a sentence with "*Only expression he's got, is after a big supper and beer.*" He uses the region's word choice and general local color: *supper*, a nickname like *Poots*, cottonmouth snakes. Even personality traits contribute to how we hear the voice, as the speaker's somewhat pompous habit of communicating through adage (*the large bird flies . . .*) makes us picture the way such tidbits come out of the mouths of certain grandiose Southerners.