

INTRODUCTION

Finding English, Finding Us

I GREW UP ON A STREET FULL OF LANGUAGES. I heard Yiddish every day from my parents and grandparents and from the families of my friends. There was Italian around the corner, Cuban Spanish down the block, Russian in the recesses of the subway station. Some of my earliest memories are of their sounds. But there were also words of what seemed to be my own family's making and that I have found in no dictionaries: *konditterei*, a strange blend of Yiddish and Italian calibrated to describe the self-important café set; *vachmalyavatet*, a tongue-twister used to signify complete exhaustion; *lachlat*, a cross between a poncho and a peacoat that my father pointed out one afternoon.

Still, there was always English, always the desire, in my father's father's idiom, to be a "Yenkee." My mother was a speech therapist in the New York City schools; my father, a history and English teacher. For the first decade of my life, we lived a dream of bettering ourselves through English. We tried to lose the accent of the immigrant. We memorized poetry. Days I would spend with Walt Whitman (de facto poet laureate of Brooklyn) until I was called in, *O Captain-ing* together with him straight to supper. I read *Beowulf* in junior high, and in the arc of Anglo-Saxon or the lilt of Chaucer's Middle English I found words that shared the Germanic roots of Yiddish. There was that prefix for the participle, *ge-*, in all those languages. If Grendel's mother was *gemyndig*, mindful, remembering, harboring a grudge, then so too was my mother. Everything in my family was *gehacketet*—ground up, hacked to bits, whether it was the chicken livers that we spread on toast or the troubles that beset us all (the Yiddish phrase "*gehacketet tsuris*," hacked up troubles, has always stayed with me. I think of Grendel's leavings—the dismembered bodies of the Danes—with no more apt phrase).

At Oxford, I studied for a degree in medieval English languages and linguistics. J. R. R. Tolkien and W. H. Auden had died only a couple of years before I arrived, and Oxford in the 1970s had an elegiac quality about it. Tolkien and Auden were the two poles of its English studies: the first philological, medieval, and fantastic; the second, emotive, modern, and all too real. My tutors were their students and their self-appointed heirs. I learned the minutiae of philology, details whose descriptions had an almost incantatory magic: Frisian fronting, *aesh* one and *aesh* two, lengthening in open syllables. I went to bed dreaming about the *Ormulum* and the orthoepists. And then, one evening in the spring of 1977, in some grotty dining hall, I heard the poets Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney read. Heaney got up, all red-faced and smiling, brilliant in his breath. He read poems about bog men—ancient Germanic people who had been preserved in peat for fifteen hundred years. Twenty-five years later, I found in Heaney’s *Beowulf* translation what I had felt on that evening: the sense that the study of the word revealed not just a history of culture but a history of the self. “I had undergone,” Heaney writes of his study of Old English in the introduction to his *Beowulf*, “something like illumination by philology.”

Philology means “love of language,” but for scholars it connotes the discipline of historical linguistic study. For Seamus Heaney, or for you or me, philology illuminates the history of words and those who speak them. My goal in this book is to illuminate: to bring light into language and to life. Whether you grew up in New York or New Mexico, whether your first words were in this or any other tongue, you are reading this book in the language of an early-twenty-first-century American. Writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Washington Irving called America a “logocracy”—a country of words. We all still live in a logocracy—invented then and reinvented everyday by citizens of language like ourselves.

This is a book about inventing English (*invent*, from the Latin *invenire*, to come upon or find). Each of its chapters illustrates how people found new ways to speak and write; how they dealt with the resources of language of their time and place; and how, through individual imagination, they transformed those resources into something uniquely personal. These chapters may be read in sequence, as you read a textbook or a novel; or they may be read as individual essays, each one suitable for bed or as a pause in the day’s tasks. My book, therefore, is less a history of English in the traditional sense than it is an episodic epic: a portable assembly of encounters with the language. Each episode recalls a moment when a person or a group finds something new or preserves something old; when someone writes

down something that exemplifies a change; when the experience of language, personally or professionally, stands as a defining moment in the arc of speech.

All of us find or invent our language. We may come up with new sentences never heard before. We may use words in a unique way. But we are always finding our voice, locating old patterns or long-heard expressions, reaching into our thesaurus for the right term. And in inventing English, we are always inventing ourselves—finding our place among the welter of the words or in the swell of sounds that is the ocean of our tongue.

And this, it seems to me, is what is new about this book—its course between the individual experience and literary culture, between the details of the past and the drama of the present, between the story of my life I tell here and the stories you may make out of your own. Histories of the English language abound, and different readers find themselves in each. Scholars research and write out of the great six-volume *Cambridge History of the English Language*. Teachers work from textbooks such as Albert C. Baugh and Thomas M. Cable's *History of the English Language*. The interested public has had, for the past half century, books ranging from Mario Pei's *The Story of the English Language*, to Anthony Burgess's *A Mouthful of Air*, Bill Bryson's *The Mother Tongue*, and the illustrated companion to the PBS series *The Story of English*. A university professor such as David Crystal has sought wider audiences for his arguments in *The Stories of English*. And I have spent the last decade addressing listeners and viewers of my lecture series prepared for the Teaching Company, *The History of the English Language*. I have spoken to college students, adult education classes, social clubs, and professional organizations. The fact remains that people of all vocations or politics are fascinated by the history of English, and my book invites the reader to invest in his or her (and my own) fascination with the word.

I think that we are fascinated by English not only because of how it has changed over time but because of how it changes now. Within a single person's lifetime, words shift their meaning; pronunciations differentiate themselves; idioms from other tongues, from popular culture, and from commerce inflect our public life. English is in flux. E-mail and the Internet have altered the arc of our sentences. Much has been made of all these changes: by the linguist Geoffrey Nunberg in his provocative radio and newspaper essays (collected in his book, *The Way We Talk Now*), or by the journalist William Safire in his weekly *New York Times Magazine* column. For all the nuance of their observations, however, neither of these commentators (nor really anyone else) locates our current changes in the larger

history of English. The shifts we see today have historical precedents. Our debates about standards and dialects, politics and pronunciation recall arguments by pedagogues and poets, lexicographers and literati, from the Anglo-Saxon era of the tenth century, through the periods of medieval, Renaissance, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society. This book therefore grows out of my conviction that to understand a language it is necessary to appreciate its history. We speak and spell for reasons that are often lost to us. But we can rediscover these reasons.

This book recovers answers to our current questions, and it illustrates how language is a form of social behavior central to our past and present lives. Throughout its historical survey, this book sets out to raise some basic questions for the study of our language—questions that have been asked at all times in its history.

Is there, or should there be, a “standard English”? Should it be defined as the idiom of the educated, the sound of the city-dweller, the style of the business letter? As early as the tenth century, teachers in the monastic schools of Anglo-Saxon England asked this question. Some claimed there should be rules for spelling, speech, and usage. Such rules were grounded in a particular dialect of Old English—the one that was geographically central to the region of the king’s court and the church’s administration. Similar attentions to dialect and standards were the subject of debates throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Was there, asked teachers and students alike, a particular regional form of English that should form a national standard? Should we write the way we speak? Should speech display one’s education (and thus something that could be learned) or should it reveal one’s class and region (and thus something that reflected birth)?

In asking questions such as these, teachers and scholars throughout history have raised another major question. Should the study of language be prescriptive or descriptive? Dictionaries, for example, record spelling, pronunciation, meaning, and usage. Are they simply recording habits of language or are they also codifying them? Isn’t any description also a prescription? When we present the features of a language—and when we do so through authoritative venues such as dictionaries, school texts, or public journalism—are we simply saying *how* we speak and write or are we also saying how we *should* speak and write?

Few debates about standards and prescription have been so fraught, especially in English, as those on spelling. Why do we spell the way we do? Why is there such a difference between spelling and pronunciation? As this book illustrates, English spelling is historical. It preserves older forms

of the language by using conservative spellings. English spelling is also etymological: that is, it preserves the earlier forms of words even when those forms no longer correspond to current speech. We spell words such as *knight* or *through* in these ways because we maintain an old convention of spelling these words in their earliest forms (in Chaucer's time, they would have been pronounced "k-nicht" and "throoch"). In Britain, the disparity between spelling and pronunciation can be even more extreme: a name such as *Featherstonehugh* is now pronounced "Fanshaw." A city such as *Worcester* (pronounced "Wooster") preserves the remnants of an Old English form: originally, *Wigoraceaster* (*ceaster*, originally from Latin, *castrum*, meaning a fort or a town; *Wigora* referring to a clan or tribe in ancient England: hence, the town of the Wigors). These habits are the legacy of medieval scribes, Renaissance schoolmasters, and eighteenth-century dictionary makers who fixed spelling and pronunciation according to particular ideals of language history, educational attainment, or social class. There was a time when English and American men and women spelled much as they spoke. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, English spelling and pronunciation had divorced themselves from one another. Spelling had become a system all its own.

The history of English pronunciation is a history of sound changes. The periods we call Old English, Middle English, and Modern English were distinguished not just by vocabulary, grammar, or idiom but also by pronunciation. Scholars of our language have codified sets of sound changes that, in particular historical periods, created systematic shifts in the English speech. For example, words that had a long *a* sound in Old English changed their pronunciation over time, so that by the time of Chaucer they had a long *o* sound. Thus Old English *ban* became *bone*; *ham* became *home*; *twa* become *two* (now pronounced like "too"). Old English had consonant clusters at the beginnings of words (*hl-*, *hw-*, *hr-*) that were simplified by the Middle English period. Thus *hlud* became *loud*, *hwæt* became *what*, *hring* became *ring*. Sometimes, sounds were twisted around (this phenomenon is known as metathesis—the same thing that makes children mispronounce *spaghetti* as "psghetti," or that generates dialect pronunciations of *ask* into "aks"). The Old English word for *bird* was *brid*; the word for *third* was *thrid*. Contact with languages, especially with French after the Norman Conquest, provoked changes in pronunciation. Contacts among different regional dialects also provoked changes. The famous Great Vowel Shift—the change in the pronunciation of English long vowels—that occurred in the fifteenth century may have been due, in part, to new contacts

among different dialect groups of late Middle English. Different dialects pronounced, say, the long *u* sound in Middle English differently; eventually a new form settled out as a double sound (or diphthong), usually written *ou*. Thus, *mus* became *mous*; *hus* became *house*; *lus* became *louse*. In addition to these historical changes, regional dialects survived in England, and American English descends from several of them. We need to understand how American English developed from these particular regions, and how these dialects were separated and later came into contact, after the periods of colonial settlement.

Finally, there are questions about grammar. Anyone who has studied another language, especially another European language, will know that English grammar seems “simple.” We have no grammatical gender of nouns, as French, German, Spanish, and other languages do. We do not have case endings: that is, we do not use different endings to show that nouns are subjects, direct objects, or indirect objects in sentences. Our verbs end in a relatively limited set of forms. Why did this happen? Old English was, like its contemporary European languages, a highly inflected language. Meaning was determined by word endings that signaled the number and gender of nouns; whether they were the subject, direct object, or indirect object in sentences; and whether relationships of agency or action operated among nouns and verbs (we now use prepositions for this function). Verbs were classed in complex groups, each with different kinds of forms or endings. Sometimes, tense could be indicated by the ending of a verb (talk, talked); sometimes, it was indicated by a change in the root vowel of the verb (run, ran). Some of these features do survive in Modern English, but the history of the language as a whole is, generally speaking, a story of a shift from an inflected to an uninflected language. Meaning in a sentence is now determined by word order. “The man loves the woman” is a very different statement from “The woman loves the man.” But in Old English the statements “*Se monn lufiað ðone wif*” and “*ðone wif lufiað se monn*” say the same thing. What matters are the grammatical cases (here, the nominative, or the subject case, signaled by the article *se*, and the accusative, or direct object case, signaled by the article *ðone*), not the order of the words.

But English has not completely lost these features. In fact, it preserves, in what might be called “fossilized” forms, certain very old patterns, endings, and inflections. Some regional British and American dialects preserve old forms, often because their speakers have been geographically or socially isolated for a long time. Some great works of literature—the

King James Bible of 1611, the plays of Shakespeare from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the novels of Charles Dickens from the mid-nineteenth century—deliberately preserve forms of the language that were deemed old-fashioned in their own time. Biblical English, for example, is full of old verb forms like *hath* and *doth* (even though we know from the evidence of letters, schoolbooks, and works of literature that people were saying “has” and “does” by the early seventeenth century). Shakespeare is using double negatives and comparatives (e.g., “the most unkindest cut of all”) even as they are passing out of common speech. And Dickens’s characters spout forms and phrases that echo a linguistic past preserved in little pockets of class or region (witness, for example, Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*: “I hope Uncle Pumblechook’s mare mayn’t have set a forefoot on a piece o’ ice, and gone down”).

The experience of English and American literature is, therefore, a linguistic as well as an aesthetic one. To illustrate the history of the English language, I will often draw on examples from poetry, prose fiction, drama, and personal narrative. To understand that history is to give us greater access to the imaginative scope of poets, playwrights, novelists, and philosophers of the past. If we are worried about language, we are also worried about literature: about the so-called canon of writers, about what we all should read and teach, about where our literature, not just the English or American language, is going. To deal with questions such as these, we need to understand how literature engages with the history of language. Often, word origins or etymologies can be a source of stimulus or humor for a writer. Often, too, literary works play with dialect. In many ways, the history of American literature—from Washington Irving, through Mark Twain, to Norman Mailer, to Toni Morrison—is a history of recording and reflecting on the differences in American language. Those differences are not always simply regional; they embrace race, class, gender, and social standing.

We always hear the history of English, whether we know it or not. For speakers and writers, for readers of literature, Web surfers and e-mailers, this book sets out to provide a portable history of the language and in the process to provoke us to consider histories of ourselves.