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Speaking Freely: Language, Class, and Assimilation in American Literature

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ABSTRACT

Spoken language has always been a social marker, a way for the individual to establish an identity that confers status and place in society. Yet speaking "properly" does not always mean speaking freely, especially if the signs of social and ethnic origins are considered socially unwanted. American writers have been sensitive to the nuances of language for over a hundred years, using speech as a way of defining character for purposes of social classification, moral judgement, confinement and liberation. This talk will explore the emergence of the "vernacular" in American literature, the way people "naturally" speak, as opposed to the way authors are presumed to write. It will also explore the convergence of authorial language and vernacular speech, looking at the social and political meaning of the colloquial as it becomes the "natural" language of writing.

Speaking Freely: Language, Class, and Assimilation in American Literature

by Miles Orvell

This talk is a kind of rumination about the vernacular. I am trying to puzzle out some aspects of vernacular expression that interest me, and that, the more I think about them, seem more and more complicated, which is why I may be raising questions here rather than offering answers. It is very much a work in progress, a first sketch, and may be part of a book I'm working on dealing with the roots of contemporary culture, called "Everything Must Go! Absolutely!"

Also, there are two endings: It ends, and then--if we have time--it ends again, with a coda.

I'm talking today about the emergence of the "vernacular" in American literature and culture, and I want to begin with a brief look at the word itself, "vernacular," since it's so very interesting and anticipates, in a way, the trajectory of my own argument. If you look up the word in, say, the American Heritage dictionary, you'll find these two seemingly contrary definitions:

1. The standard native language of a country or locality.

2. The nonstandard or substandard everyday speech of a country or locality.

Vernacular might seem to be one of those primal words that Freud has warned us about, that mean two contrary things at the same time.

Actually, it's not all that hard to reconcile these particular opposites, if we take care to observe from which perspective the judgment is being made and the etymology of the word. "Vernaculus" means, in Latin, "of a slave born in the house," and it comes from the word verna, meaning native or slave [probably Etruscan]. So from the point of view of the center of Latin culture, the languages that were spoken by domestic servants, by slaves, were, we might imagine, nonstandard, relative to Latin. The native speech of a population was thus the vernacular, a usage that is offered in the Oxford English Dictionary for 1601. By extension, when the Bible was translated from Hebrew or Greek into "the vernacular," it was translated into German, English, or French, or whatever. Vernacular is a distinction of a "lower" linguistic social class, we might say, relative to a dominant position. Within any given country, then--England, or the United States--the vernacular would denote the speech spoken in regional dialects or any other nonstandard, which is to say usually lower class, speech.

In contemporary usage, however, the stigma has been entirely dissolved from the word, and we use "vernacular" to denote the peculiar idiom of a profession or trade (again, from some imagined central or standard point of view) and very often we use it to describe a vigorous native or folk form, whether in speech or architecture or folk art or other forms of design.

In literature, which is of course part of the fabric of culture, we can observe a change in the meaning of vernacular in its most complex form, and I want to trace that change through some examples, this evening.

We don't have very many written records of American speech in the United States until the early 19th century, simply because it was assumed that anything committed to paper must be standard, and because the

standards of literacy were assumed to be uniform in English. But we can get a glimpse of the fascination of such speech in the work of such early American humorists as A.B. Longstreet, a Georgia lawyer, educated at Yale, who eventually became a college president and a staunch advocate of states' rights. Longstreet's sketches of rural life, collected in 1835 as Georgia Scenes, display the force of the vernacular and the perspective from which it was first viewed, or in this case, heard: Longstreet recounts how he was enraptured by the charms of spring on a particular day, by the

> enchantment of the season and the scenery around me, ... when I was started by loud, profane, and boisterous voices, which seemed to proceed from a thick covert of undergrowth about two hundred yards in the advance of me....
>
> 'You kin, kin you?'
>
> 'Yes, I kin, and am able to do it! Boo-oo-oo! Oh, wake snakes, and walk your chalks! Brimstone and--fire! Don't hold me, Nick Stoval! The fight's made up, and let's go at it--My soul if I don't jump down his throat, and gallop every chitterling out of him before you can say 'quit'!

The narrator hears the fight continue for a while as he approaches the spot, until he hears a cry "in the accent of keenest torture, "Enough! My eye's out!" He approaches closer and comes upon the victor, crowing over his victory; he insists that they both help the unfortunate victim, when the victor states what should have been obvious-- "There ain't nobody there, nor ha'n't been nother. I was jist seein' how I could 'a 'fout."

Longstreet's sketch amuses us, tantalizes us by its glimpse of raw

energies that seem out of control and barbaric, yet in the final revelation, the cool voice and controlled diction of the narrator is in control. The vernacular voice is rude and violent, but it's finally only a voice, a charade, nothing to worry about.

Coming to terms with the vernacular, as it develops in American literature and culture, would, at least through the 19th century, very often be a matter of portraying the distance between social classes and assessing the power--for good or evil--of the underclass and its speech.

The writer who moved the vernacular from the periphery to the center of literary discourse was, of course, Mark Twain, considered by Hemingway, and others, to have founded "modern literature," precisely because of the achievement of a distinctive new voice, in the person of Huckleberry Finn. It's all the more interesting that Twain's literary breeding ground was the tradition of Southwestern humor represented by someone like Longstreet. But the Southwestern humorists before Twain were careful to distance themselves from their vernacular, or low-life subjects, using the code of language to denote their superior social class. And Twain himself uses this technique in his early tales. With Huck Finn he does something quite different, using the vernacular not only as the main voice of the text, the voice that narrates the story, but also using it as the embodiment of the novel's whole moral center. Huck's ability to discriminate between the true and the false is, after all, a function of his whole mental universe, which is governed by the vernacular and rooted in the accurate observation of everyday life:

> "On a table in the middle of the room [of the Grangerford household] was a kind of a lovely crockery basket that had apples and oranges

> and peaches and grapes piled up in it which was much redder and yellower and prettier than real ones is, but they warn't real because you could see where pieces had got chipped off and showed the white chalk or whatever it was, underneath.
>
> (chapter 17)

Huck can tell the difference, between imitations and authenticity, in speech as well: after old Peter Wilks dies, the king and duke pretend to be his heirs, and then the real ones come along:

> That old gentleman that had just come looked all puzzled to death. Pretty soon he begun to speak, and I see, straight off, he pronounced like an Englishman, not the king's way, though the king's was pretty good, for an imitation. I can't give the old gent's words, nor I can't imitate him but he turned around to the crowd, and says, about like this ...
>
> (chapter 29)

Though we normally read Huck Finn entirely as written by Huck, in fact the book is framed by an initial "Explanatory" note signed by "The Author." It tells us how serious Twain was about his use of the vernacular. And it tells us that Twain separated himself from his character (as Twain himself was "separated" from Samuel Clemens). In effect, Twain mediates between the outsider perspective of Huck--the vernacular voice--and the audience of his readers whose standards of speech were of course "proper" and who could--and did--in many locales ban his book from the libraries because of its language and moral perspective.

Explanatory

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary "Pike County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guess-work; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding.

THE AUTHOR

We have heard recently from scholar Shelly Fisher Fishkin (in a somewhat misleadingly titled book, Was Huck Finn Black?) that Twain's source for Huck Finn was in actuality a black youth, whose language Twain represented in an early newspaper sketch and who fascinated Twain. And indeed Fishkin demonstrates similarities in their speech that let us see Twain's reach into African-American culture for the voice of this most "American" of literary heroes. But we shouldn't let the discovery, or claim, of such black roots blind us to what may have been Twain's even greater imaginative reach--that is, to have imagined a white boy who would knowingly and willingly violate the social and legal rules of his country by aiding a Negro slave in his quest for freedom. If Huck's voice has some roots in black speech, he is still in any case "white" and his ability to transcend his racial identity and codes of his society in the

novel must be seen as the more conscious, and more deliberate, and more significant achievement.

To measure just how radical was Twain's move, we might place it in the context of its time, comparing it with the work of the two major figures of literary realism in the 1890s, William Dean Howells and Stephen Crane, that is, with writers who saw themselves as opening up literature to the inclusion of characters and incidents previously considered beneath the consideration of the genteel reader. Howells and Crane were in the vanguard of literary realism, and their efforts were on behalf of cultural change especially within the realm of urban literature and the portrayal of the immigrant to the city. Yet we can see just how problematic the issue was when we listen to the way "lower class" and immigrant voices are handled, are managed, in their fictions, vis-a-vis the authorial voice. Even while Howells and Crane were moving sympathetically to embrace the problems of social change as fictional subject, they still kept their distance from the "minority" speech they were depicting, a distance that is both aesthetic and social.

Crane is the more obvious case, as in this passage from his book, Maggie, which is the story of a girl who grows up in the slum. Maggie is, in her innocence, attracted to a local youth by the name of Pete who eventually will do her no good. But Crane describes Maggie's attractions empathetically, for to Maggie Pete is a kind of heroic figure, and an escape from her oppressive family. Here are Maggie and Pete in a public saloon:

> He was extremely gracious and attentive. He displayed the consideration of a cultured gentleman who knew what was due.
>
> "Say what't eatin yeh? Bring d'lady a big glass! What

use is dat pony?"

"Don't be fresh now," said the waiter, with some warmth, as he departed.

"Ah, git off d'eart!" said Pete, after the other's retreating form.

Maggie perceived that Pete brought forth all his elegance and all his knowledge of high-class customs for her benefit. By accentuating Pete's language and distinguishing it from his own authorial voice, Crane is letting us keep our distance from Pete. Toward Maggie, Crane is more sympathetic, portraying her dream of escaping from the world of the Bowery into the world of popular culture, the glittering world of the theater. But Maggie is the exception in this picture of the slums, and Crane's empathy is reserved almost entirely for this exception. He admits her into his favor, but not her world.

Howells is more complicated. In A Hazard of New Fortunes, one of his greatest works, he attempts to come to terms with the new disorders of the city (and of society at large). In depicting New York, Howells opens up new fictional materials and he does so, moreover, by dealing explicitly with the whole problem of perception, and especially with whether we can "know" the truth about others from our outside observations. All of this is handled through the character of Basil March, who leaves his safe job in Boston to come to New York City, where he will assume the editorship of a new magazine. Howells shows us March perceiving the new world of the urban immigrants in terms of stereotypes, and while Howells seems to merge his voice with March's at times, we should also note his distance from this stereotyped perception, especially at the end of his passage:

New York is still popularly supposed to be in the control of

> the Irish, but march noticed in these East Side travels ... the numerical subordination of the dominant race. If they do not outvote them, the people of Germanic, of Slavonic, of Pelasgic, of Mongolian stock outnumber the prepotent Celts ... The small eyes, the high cheeks, the broad noses, the puff lips, the bare, cuefilleted skulls, of Russians, Poles, Czechs, Chinese, the furtive glitter of Italians - the blond dullness of Germans - the cold quiet of Scandinavians--fire under ice--were aspects that he identified and that gave him abundant suggestion for the personal histories he constructed, and for the more public-spirited reveries in which he dealt with the future economy of our heterogeneous commonwealth. It must be owned that he did not take much trouble about this, what these poor people were thinking, hoping, fearing, enjoying, suffering, just where and how they lived, who and what they individually were.
>
> (chapter 11)

Though Howells is distancing himself from March's stereotyped views, he himself keeps his own distance from his immigrant characters, and he does so through the use of dialect inserted into the narrative discourse to achieve a distancing and intended comic effect. Here, for example, is a German immigrant, Lindau, speaking. Lindau is a radical critic of capitalism whose critique of American society is close to what Howells felt; but Howells cannot afford to ally himself with Lindau, for fear of losing his genteel reader: Here is Lindau, complaining about the social-economic structure:

> Dere iss no Ameriga any more! ... No man that vorks his handts among you has the liperty to bursue his habbiness. He iss the slafe of some richer man, some gampany, some gorporation, dat crindt him down to the least he can lif on, and that rops him of the marchin of his earninas that he might pe habby on.

This is a dialect that the genteel reader would find slightly comic, especially since it is rendered orthographically strange by the effort to transcribe literally the immigrant's speech.

We can draw an almost direct line from Howells to Dos Passos in the 1930s: both novelists were trying, in their different times, to encompass the vast social complexity of the United States and its changes; both took active political stands outside their fiction; and both were fascinated by the role the immigrant would play in the evolving national political life. But we can measure the evolution of American culture--at least in its radical dimension--by observing how much farther Dos Passos has come in his acceptance of the immigrant as virtually the repository of truth, indeed the means by which the national virtue-considered to be lost in the Thirties--would be restored. In Dos Passos there is a complete inversion of values: Howells' genteel America has become, by the 1930s, the oppressor, the enemy, the thief of American values. In the voice of the immigrant lies the only possible salvation.

All of Dos Passos' great trilogy, U.S.A. is concerned with language, with the speech of the people, and Dos Passos perfected there a technique of narration by which he would merge his own authorial voice with the inflected idioms of his characters. But I want to cite a passage from the autobiographical Camera Eye sections (#49) in which the author explicitly

ruminates on the political fate of America in terms of its language and its declension from the original ideals. The occasion is the Sacco-Vanzetti case, in which the two immigrants from Italy lie languishing in jail near Boston, accused of murdering a bank guard. (Dos Passos was, in real life, an active supporter of Sacco and Vanzetti, as were many leftists during the 1920s.) Walking in Plymouth, Mass, Dos Passos is aware of the place itself, Plymouth, "where the immigrants landed, the kingkillers haters of oppression," and he associates the new immigrants from Italy with these old, original immigrants, the founders of America:

> "rebuild the ruined words worn slimy in the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges without the old words the immigrants haters of oppression brought to Plymouth how can you know who are your betrayers America or that this fishpeddler you have in Charleston jail is one of your founders Massachusetts?"

But Dos Passos is in the end not optimistic about the possibility of rebuilding the ruined words, declaring instead a division which seems irreconcilable:

> "America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul .... all right we are two nations."

I've been talking until now about the way the immigrant or lower class character was perceived by--in effect--the dominant voice, the official language of the culture. Twain, Crane, Howells were not immigrants; Dos Passos, though himself the son of an immigrant from Madeira, was educated at Harvard as the son of a wealthy corporate lawyer who identified

thoroughly with the English language.

What about the immigrant writer himself or herself? How did his or her voice enter American culture? How would he or she solve the problem of writing in a new place, in a "new language" for a new audience?

We see one especially revealing and interesting example in the great novel by Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky (1917), a complex study of an immigrant Jew who rises to economic success in the garment industry of the Lower East Side, yet who finds it much more difficult to feel 'at home', emotionally adjusted to this new world, and who fails in love, fails to establish the family he very much wants. Cahan was himself the perfect mediator between the culture of immigration and the established American society of the early twentieth century. (He was editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, writer of stories praised by Howells, socialist leader, who left Russia as a result of his radical activities.) Cahan is sensitive to the problem of the immigrant who is between two worlds, culturally and linguistically, and he depicts his hero-narrator as himself acutely uneasy before the new language of the adapting immigrant.

> The veranda was crowded and almost as noisy as the dining-room had been. There was a hubbub of broken English, the gibberish being mostly spoken with self-confidence and ease. Indeed, many of these people had some difficulty in speaking their native tongue. Bad English replete with literal translations from untranslatable Yiddish idioms had become their natural speech. The younger parents, however, more susceptible of the influence of their children, spoke purer English.

> It was a dark night, but the sky was full of stars, full of golden mystery. The mountains rose black, vast, disquieting. A tumultuous choir of invisible katydids was reciting an interminable poem on an unpoetic subject that had something to do with Miss Tevkin. The air was even richer in aroma than it had been in the morning, but its breath seemed to be part of the uncanny stridulation of the katydids ....

Notice how the narrator (Levinsky? Cahan?) re-establishes his authority linguistically by his diction and syntax and rhythm. Other times he makes explicit comments about the 'vulgarity' of the new tongue.

(an earlier, immediately preceding scene:)

> ... One middle-aged woman tried to monopolize me by a confidential talk concerning the social inferiority of the Catskills.
>
> "The food is good here," she said, in English. "There's no kick comin' on that score. But my daughter says with her dresses she could go to any hotel in Atlantic City, and she's right, too. I don't care what you say."
>
> I fled as soon as I could ....
>
> (book 12, chapter 4)

We must wait until Mike Gold's 1930 novel, Jews Without Money, before we find a narrative voice that is at once colloquial, American, and comfortable with its immigration backgrounds (Yiddish): Here is a comic scene, in which the narrator recalls the arrival into the Jewish community of a new Rabbi from the old country, who is to set everything right, to help the foundering Jewish community steer a steady course in the new world, to tell it whether or not it is lawful (according

to Torah) to shave the beard, for example. As the esteemed rabbi is brought in, Gold writes,

> I saw a fat, dull-faced man in a frock coat and high hat. He was obviously pleased with the new silk hat, and fiddled with it. His face held no ecstasy beefy smugness.

Note the colloquial diction (ital.). Still, the congregation of Chassidim are excited to have him, begin laughing, chattering, kissing one another, weeping with emotion, singing, flinging their arms to the ceiling, dancing with frenzy of joy.

> But the new Rabbi was not abandoning himself to the sacred rage. He was busy eating. He had immediately sat down at the refreshment table, and was stuffing himself with herring, sponge-cake, apfelstrudel, gefulte fish, and raisins. He devoured platters of food until his eyes popped, n sweat covered his face.
>
> I was disturbed by his gorging, not for esthetic or religious reasons, but because I was hoping to eat some of the food myself.

Little Gold tells the local rabbi, the host, of all this, and is immediately the subject of his wrath: "Go home. You've committed a sin in talking so stupidly about our Rabbi Schmarya" (Chapter 15).

Jews Without Money is written in an effort to speak truly about Jews, including their occasional gluttony, but also their spiritual aspirations, and above all their sense of dislocation in a world in which the values of family and communal solidarity, are eroded by the pressures of commerce and the casual violence of the city. Against the popular

stereotype of the Jew and his Money, these are of course, Jews without money. Gold's political bias, we know, was adamantly Communistic, and his steadfastness to the party would appall many otherwise left-leaning writers, including Dos Passos, when they themselves had drifted away from Communism during the latter thirties. But in Jews Without Money communism is almost an afterthought, tacked on to the ending in the form of a revelation that comes to the troubled narrator who is spiritually and economically defeated by America. In the hope of a revolution, Gold came to see the restoration of national and personal spirit, as indeed was the case for himself.

Listening to a man on a soap box one night, he hears the new message, and concludes,

> O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit.
>
> O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live.
>
> O great Beginning!

These weren't exactly the "old words" that Dos Passos wanted to rebuild, but they di relate to a vital impulse during the thirties.

The radical impulse--embodied in the vernacular and deriving from an immigra base--would surface again most notably in the work of Allen Ginsberg, after World W II. Ginsberg's voice is a literary creation, but it is so spontaneous in tone and rhythm that we might not immediately identify its literary underpinnings.

> America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
>
> America two dollars and twenty seven cents January 17, 1956.

I can't stand my own mind.

America when will we end the human war?

Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.

I don't feel good don't bother me.

I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.

America when will you be angelic?

Of course we can hear in the background Whitman--the length of the line varying according to sense, the free vocabulary, the relaxed personal stance, the high national purpose, the sense of prophecy, the address to the nation. (And back of that, we can hear the Jeremiad tradition.) We can also hear Whitman's approval of Ginsberg: "The Real Dictionary," he wrote in the early 1850s in what was eventually published by Horace Traubel in 1904 as An American Primer, "will give all words tha exist in use, the bad words as well as any. --The Real Grammar will be that which declares itself a nucleus of the spirit of the laws, with liberty to all to carry out the spirit of the laws, even by violating them, if necessary.--"

But in Ginsberg, the immigrant past is freshly alive, as a radical inheritance, and the Americanization of Communism, Socialism is fused with the Jewish radical tradition.

Here SPEAKER AND VOICE are fused. The poet CLOSES THE DISTANCE between himself and his idiom, there is no standing apart or above. How freely can any writer speak? Ginsberg himself--perhaps the freest of writers--spoke freely initially because he assumed he would not be read, and because he was speaking, he thought, essentially to himself, and to his closest friends. That premise freed him. Ginsberg was redefining "family," here, for it was specifically on the assumption that his family

would not read him that he felt free to speak. "At the time, writing 'Howl,'" he said in a Paris Review interview, "I assumed when writing it that it was something that could not be published because I wouldn't want my daddy to see what was in there. About my sex life, being fucked in the ass, imagine your father reading a thing like that, was what I thought. Though that disappeared as soon as the thing was real, or as soon as I manifested my . . . you know, it didn't make that much importance finally. That was sort of a help for writing, because I assumed that it wouldn't be published, therefore I could say anything that I wanted." (Paris Rev., 287).

Ginsberg's problem was to break down the distinction between what he might tell his friends and what he might tell his Muse, to talk as frankly to the one as to the other. And he credits Kerouac, actually, with the "great discovery," in On the Road, that "the kinds of things that he and Neal Cassady were talking about, he finally discovered were the subject matter for what he wanted to write down." This amounted to, as Ginsberg saw it, a "complete revision of what literature was supposed to be." (288)

How freely can a writer speak to one's mother, or about one's mother? Oddly, these are questions we are normally forbidden to ask, assuming that an intimacy must, should exist; or that we should protect our mother from our worst selves.

But let's make it easier: what is it to speak in the language of one's mother?--the "mother-tongue"? These are the questions that Cynthia Ozick poses, and it is with her long short story, "Envy, or Yiddish in America," that I want to close. Ozick problematizes the whole issue of the vernacular by writing a story in an American Jewish idiom, in English,

about the value of writing in Yiddish, or the impossibility of writing in Yiddish. Let me summarize it briefly: Edelshtein, a poet who writes only in Yiddish, is consumed with envy for Ostrover, who also writes in Yiddish but is widely known through translations of his work. Ostrover is celebrated, in fact, as a "modern" writer, a universal writer. (I.B. Singer is the presumed model.)

Edelshtein ruminates on his own neglect, believing it is symptomatic of the fate of the Jews, erased in World War II, nearly, and now losing their mother tongue, their mamaloshen. Only Ostrover has broken through and is known outside the Yiddish circle. But Edelshtein insists on the value of Yiddish (he condemns American Jewish writers who know nothing of Judaism) at the same time that he himself yearns to be translated and feels sure he will have his own success the moment he is put into English.

Edelshtein finally finds his potential translator--a young girl, Hannah, who has in fact read him in Yiddish and likes his early work. And Hannah is also Ostrover's translator, one of them. Edelshtein pleads with her to undertake the translation of his own work but she adamantly and harshly refuses. Yiddish and the old Jews, she says, are dead and past. What makes Ostrover great--even in Yiddish--is what makes him great in English too. Edelshtein, not humiliated enough, calls a telephone number for the "Troubled," and hears an anti semitic Jesus Messiah call him a kike. . . .

Ozick raises many questions that are not necessarily answerable, but that must be a part of any discussion of the vernacular in our time: "Whoever uses Yiddish to keep himself alive is already dead," young Hannah tells the aging poet. But is there no strength in old tongues? Do languages grow obsolete, can we do without them? Can we suffer their

loss? (whether by simply dying out, or by being murdered, as was Yiddish.)

The loss of language, the repression of the story, is, in part the story of perhaps the most remarkable post-Holocaust book to appear in recent years, Art Spiegelman's cartoon-novel, Maus. Written in pictures, Maus is a comic-strip fiction, but I will limit my discussion here to just one aspect of the work, Spiegelman's struggle to give voice to his father's language and experience. For it is the son, cartoonist Spiegelman, who is writing the story of the father, Vladek, who has survived the Nazi camps and come to America, where he has lived a life shaped wholly by that experience, yet one that has largely repressed it from memory. Art's task, as he conceives it, is to bring memory to life by bringing the father's speech to life. Armed with his tape recorder, Art teases the story out of his father, piece by piece.

Here is Art, playing over the tape he has previously made:

> "Then, when I came out from the hospital, right away she started AGAIN that I change my will!"
>
> "Please Pop, the tape's on. Let's continue."
>
> "I was still so sick and tired. And to have peace only, I agreed, to make it legal she brought right to my bed a NOTARY."
>
> "Let's get back to Auschwitz."
>
> "Fifteen dollars he charged to come! If she waited only a week until I was stronger, I'd go to the bank and take a notary for only a quarter!"
>
> "ENOUGH! TELL ME ABOUT AUSCHWITZ! You were telling me how your kapo tried to get you work as a tinsmith. . . "

"Yah. Every day I worked there right outside from the camp."

(Maus II, 47)

And so the story continues, dramatized now within the narrative frame.

In fact, Spiegelman brought this work out of his father's speech, but not literally: from the raw interviews, he blocked out the episodes, structured the narratives, improved the dialogue, compressed the language, working as an artist, a storyteller, yet preserving through the cadence and diction and phrasing the "sound" of the Yiddish-accented speech of Vladek.

What is it to have an identity as a writer? For Spiegelman, it is telling a story about a father who is a torment to his son (and to others) yet also, clearly, a loving man, and a hero whose act of surviving Auschwitz eclipses any accomplishment the son could possibly achieve. Achieving an identity through the voice of his father, Spiegelman solves his dilemma: he finds his own voice as a writer/artist by breaking the silence in which his father had lived for so long.

And again: What is it to have an identity as a writer? Is it bound by language and social class, or is it free of such accidents? Is the vernacular, in short, something we need in order to speak freely, or does it limit our translation into a common comprehension?

I've been speaking in more detail today about Jews and their coming to terms with the vernacular as a part of their identity as American writers, but the issues are of course broader than a single group. All minorities, all dissidents, have the problem of defining the self in terms of the larger culture, personally and linguistically. And the speaking of oneself occurs for all marginated groups as an initial act of

establishment within the culture. But we mustn't assume that all minorities speak with a single voice, naturally. And one of the most surprising things, repeated within all marginal groups, and therefore no longer surprising, is the degree of dissidence within the dissidents. Indeed it is a qualification of speaking critically about a minority group today that one must be oneself a member of that group. (Thus Gloria Naylor, a black novelist, can speak, as others cannot, on the psychological and cultural warping of young black men.) We have come full circle, in this, from the earliest notices of minorities and immigrants, who were seen as all one, and usually as all one disagreeable stereotype.

We come full circle in another respect as well: what was once the stigma of the slave, the "vernacular", has now become almost the sine qua non of speaking freely. We trust the vernacular voice in a way that we don't trust the voice of authority. Yet there is this dilemma as well: that the vernacular can become for the speaker yet another trap, yet another enslavement, to the degree that it becomes a kind of native dress that must be assumed on all occasions, a role that one must play, that one is forced to play by the mainstream culture. To the extent that the voice becomes created to fulfill that role, the voice is no longer free. And there is still some pressure within minority communities on the vernacular voice, not to speak some personal truth that doesn't reflect well on the "group." Speaking freely is not then, something that can be assumed as a right, any more than it is a privilege. Rather, it may be something to be contested in the marketplace, to be achieved with difficulty and deliberately to be sustained.

CODA

Let me close with a kind of coda on the subject of the voice on the page as a reflection of the self, for I don't want to leave the impression that only the minority voice can speak freely. There is, however, a sense in which the speaking of truth (if I can use that almost Biblical phrase) requires an originality that can only come from the margins, against the conventions of the mainstream. To that extent it may be, inevitably, a "minority" position, although minority here is not necessarily defined by ethnicity alone. And that is the point I want to illustrate by speaking finally, and briefly, about David Antin.

Ginsberg, like Whitman, achieved the effect of spontaneity on the page, fulfilling--though in ways he could not have foreseen--Wordsworth's dictum that poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." But Wordsworth assumed that emotion was recollected in tranquility; and even Ginsberg would revise his manuscripts. Consider as an extreme, beyond even Ginsberg and Kerouac, the example of David Antin, who, in Talking at the Boundaries (1976) and subsequent volumes, collects the spontaneous overflow of his powerful feelings, as they are spoken, by recording and transcribing his improvised performance poems. By this means, the self is invented as it is spoken:

> you come into a situation prepared to externalize or prepared i try not to be too prepared i mean im aiming not to be prepared so that i can do what i dont expect to do in terms of something i want to say and which is what one means by improvisation to do something you want to do in a way you

didnt know you were going to do it which is to do something new and what you mean by improvisation is coming and saying something you dont know perhaps discovering something you dont k now and in doing that you circle around the things you do know looking for an opening between what you know and what you don't know and before you make your move into what you dont know you go over in a sort of family way and pat the things you know on the head nicely things i know about impro visation namely that improvisation needs a sort of warmup

This is a talking as thinking (which is what we all do, when we are not reading papers), but here preserved, as if it matters. It is Jackson Pollock's principle of gesture and improvisation transferred to poetry; or going back beyond that, it is Duchamp's principle of chance, brought into the verbal arts. The self being created as Antin speaks, we might assume, is his "true self," but how can we be sure? Antin himself would not take his own words as the foundation for meaning:

you dont expect a deposition in court "did you really mean that?" 'i dont know what i meant i said it"

Truth, meaning, the self, are more provisional, subject to discovery, revision, examination.

Antin represents perhaps the limit of the vernacular in contemporary American writing, at least in the technical sense of the written word being tied directly,, mimetically, to the spoken word, with all its repetition, revision, circling around. Antin speaks, surely, from the margins of the institution of literature, but he reminds us that the sources of the vernacular are many in contemporary literature, encompassing ethnic voices, to be sure, but also the voice of the avant-

garde, another kind of minority. For Antin too, as close to speech as we can come, the vernacular embodies a point of view that is outside the speech of reason and order, and in that sense subversive of a society whose social controls are embedded in controlled speech.