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On Pronunciation, & Human Voices in General

BRONSON ALCOTT, the father of Louisa May Alcott, famously recorded Henry David Thoreau's name as "Thoro" in his letters and journals. Alcott also transcribed the name as "Thorow" and "Thorough," hoping to emphasize the correct pronunciation is THOR-o, with stress on the first syllable.¹ Alcott knew that people reading Thoreau's name years after his acquaintance's death would mispronounce it because even while Thoreau was alive and well, people in Concord were saying it incorrectly.

The correct pronunciation of Thoreau's name is such a well-kept secret that you can always tell a Thoreau scholar by his or her pronunciation, and when you yourself use the correct pronunciation, you will find people generally have no idea whom you're talking about. "Oh, you mean Thoreau?" most people typically, eventually, ask. A poet friend of mine actually quite angrily confronted me this summer about what he assumed was my mispronunciation, as this friend had been an enthusiast of Thoreau since he was a teenager growing up in New York. "You're saying it wrong. The way you say it makes it sound like *Thor!*" Like many Thoreauvians, my friend felt protective of his relationship to Thoreau, as if his belief in and happiness with his own less-than-extravagant lifestyle depended upon his connection to Thoreau. My friend had to deal with my knowing more than him in this regard, however. In a pun written in his journal on May 3, 1857, Thoreau said that he was a "descendant of the Northmen who worshipped Thor."²

Alcott's attempt to preserve the proper phonetic structuring of Thoreau's name gives rise to an interesting line of thought: what other names—famous or otherwise—are we mispronouncing, now that their owners are no longer around to correct us? One thinks of a roll call through history, various figures popping up; "Actually, it's Wil-dee, the 'e' is not silent," says Oscar. "Mill-don, you pronounce the 't' as a 'd,'" says John. "Aunt Won It!" roars former Queen of France, Marie (one sees the white tower of her hair, sprouting the white and pink feathers arranged there, like flowers in a vase, by her hairdresser, Monsieur Léonard). The phonetic structuring of these names *has* to be guessed at, so Alcott did us a service in recording the proper pronunciation of Thoreau's name; yet perhaps the stronger service is done by the writer who records words as accurately as possible, as they are pronounced by their speaker. I'm talking about voices here, how one pronounces words and generally speaks. How did Thoreau say *azalea nudiflora*? Was "azalea" shot off in one quick burst, then did "nudiflora" undulate across desert-like humps of phonetic sand? Did the "zale" in azalea pitch high like a gabled roof, then plummet down an acoustic river-bank to catch the low "yuh"? Was "nudi" off Thoreau's tongue *new-dee*, or *nuda*?

It might be easier to record phonetic pronunciations of single words like names than to capture the overarching rhythms and patterns of the

1 Cramer, Jeffrey S, ed. *The Quotable Thoreau*. Princeton University Press, 2011. Xxxix.

2 Thoreau, Henry David. *Journal: Aug. 16, 1856-Aug. 7, 1857*. Houghton Mifflin, 1906. 351.

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spoken word. Flannery O'Connor is a writer known as much for her eye as her ear. In Red Sammy's filling station in southern Georgia, one hears the restaurateur's wife saying, "Ain't she cute?" as if the reader were there, polishing off a "Co'-Cola."³ The coarseness and the twang of The Misfit's "It's no real pleasure in life" penetrate us because they strike us as real, as how things really sound, or sounded at the time, in this particular (and distinctly rural) place.⁴ And O'Connor's narrator speaking of a "brown flat shoe" rather than a "flat brown shoe" captures the nuance in southern speech just as delicately as her characters, making her a number of her works masterpieces of acoustical achievement.⁵ Tobias Woolf allows the outfielder at the end of "Bullet in the Brain" to pine, "Short's the best position they is. They is, they is, they is," and along with his protagonist, we feel a kind of joy, hearing such unassuming, and unexpected, poetry.

Yet it's not always geographical regions like the American South which churn out surprisingly poetic turns of phrase or determine patterns of speech. "Where are you from?" a colleague asked me recently, and when I told her southern Indiana, she swiveled her question to the real reason behind her asking. "What's with the accent?" I told my colleague that, as far as I knew, I didn't have any accent, yet, at the same time, I knew I was lying. I gave my answer because, for one, I wanted my colleague to know I was offended by the way in which she posed the question; *What's with the face?* I half-thought of replying. For another, how could I possibly give the real answer, without taking up half an hour of her time? The story of anyone's accent must be a rather long one, but mine is rather like the road the grandmother's family travels down in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find": long, dusty, more than a little perilous. How does anyone explain why they sound like they do? Yet perhaps it's worth my trying.

For a time in the 1970s, my grandfather lived in England. A Russian Jew from Omaha, he was, at the time, vice president of developmental research at the pharmaceuticals company Eli Lilly, based out of Surrey. In the UK, by osmosis, my grandfather began pronouncing advertisement ad-VER-dizz-ment; restaurant rest-ruhnt. (See how hard it is to record the phonetic?) A television program was a pro-grum. Research was ruh-SEARCH. His children, my mother included, on the other hand spoke *all* their words in a British accent. They grew up in Britain, so didn't know how to "speak American." When my mother and her family moved to the States, however, in the late 70s, my mother and her brothers were teased for their accents. "British Jews," they were called. "How positively queer!" So, like fruits ridding themselves of their own mold-fuzzed peels, my mother and her brothers dropped the accents adroitly; my mother says that with serious determination, she was able to rid herself of all traces of the British accent within one month. (I think of that month. What calendar month was it? I imagine my mother waking each day, perhaps each day in a snowy February, telling herself, don't say flower flow-ah, say, flow-ER.) Her parents retained their accents, but of course theirs were of a subtler vein to begin with, as, arriving in England as adults, their pronunciation and vernacular were already substantially entrenched. Indeed, wander-

3 O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Strous & Giroux. 1971. 121-122.

4 Ibid, 133.

5 Ibid, 289.

ing the cavernous halls of the British Museum, reading on a plaque in the Egyptian section the words *gesso, faience, lapis lazuli*, my grandmother was only wishing she'd brought a "bumbershoot" to face the day's rain in a tongue-in-cheek kind of way; the trunk of the car was only referred to as "the boot" playfully, as my grandparents assumed the role of expatriates pleasantly aware of their expatriatism.

Yet, somehow — isn't it mysterious how accents work? Like underground rivers sometimes bubbling up, sometimes sliding deep below — some of that accent which was so strong in my mother and her brothers (before they subdued it) reappeared in the younger generation; namely, in me. Why did it come back? Why did it pop up again? I don't speak all my words with a British accent, however I do pronounce *advertisement, restaurant, program* and *research* the way my grandfather did. And you know how it began? By poking fun at my grandfather's pronunciation behind his back. To my brothers and sisters, as we sat before the television, I would say, "Oh, this is a good pro-grum. I love *60 Minutes*." "Kentucky Fried Chicken is a fine rest-ruhnt." And at some point the humor guiding my pronunciation faded away, and solely the pronunciation itself stuck. Suddenly I was a young man who said ruh-SEARCH. The kidding — making fun of my crusty old grandfather — was gone. This reminds me of how, in high school, a buddy and I began going to the YMCA every day after school, knowing it was an exemplary choice of activity, one our mothers would approve of; but years later, the irony with which we faced our after school activity had disappeared, and we simply were young men whose high school days involved much time at the YMCA — soap fights in the locker room, sitting on sodden benches in the steam sauna. *What's with the accent?* How many people surely have been posed this question, or some question like it. But no matter how it's posed, it's confrontational, inherently. *Why do you talk like that? Please, explain where you're from.* The truth is that question was posed of *me* — a late twenties, long-nosed "white" guy — because when one speaks with a British accent when one is from southern Indiana, one is taken for a delusional snob. I am a Virginia Woolf scholar who, in the fall, teaches a course on the essay; in the spring, a course on criticism. Someone who asks me, *What's with the accent?* wants to confront me for what they assume is a pretense. You're from the Midwest, stop pretending you're Mrs. Dalloway. Wake up, you're not in Bloomsbury! You teach College Writing 101. Get a grip. I was aware of this judgment but not ashamed by it. I looked down at my confronter along my high, aristocratic, delusional nose.

I have to admit one reason I love having a partner from China — have I not mentioned my partner is from China? — is that he, navigating various layers of language each day, never questions my accent. His own speech, as he uses his so-called "second language," is a beautiful, surprising, menagerie with a singular music. "Herbs" gets a hard *h* from him. "Onion" is *luh-nyuhn*. "Zoo," significantly, is *roo*. I listen to what he says, consistently delighted, feeling totally comfortable because next to him my control of language (the fact that I have such control) looks wan, almost boring, as if knowing how to speak English "properly" strips it of its potential. Sometimes I am so enamored with the way my partner speaks, I want to adopt his pronunciations. Sometimes I try to make my intonations more musical; or, I let their natural musicality fly. Surely this makes me an Asiaphile,

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someone who is grossly prizing some person from another culture. But if I want to allow the beauty and idiosyncrasy of his speech to permeate my brain and tongue as I feel so tempted to let them (for isn't that what happens when we are around others with accents? Don't we start, inevitably, to adopt their accents as our own?), am I really onto something so bad? Am I motley, combining my natural tongue with one I've, by osmosis, discovered? Am I a poser? Still that wannabe Brit? Am I myself?

One person's voice I miss, and which I wish had somehow been preserved, is my grandmother's. A fiber artist, she spent each night hunched over her Bernina, Salem smoke threading its way through the air in thin white strings. When she said, "Cripes," the word would start high, as if on a hill, then dip down into a gravelly valley, before swinging back up again, cresting a slightly lower hill. *Cripes*. How could such a sound ever be preserved? I say it out loud; it's an approximation. I whisper it; I'm channeling her; surely this is how it sounded as she said it to herself, sliding a quilt depicting leaves under her needle, all those squares and triangles of brown, gold, tan, beige; but, still, it's my voice doing the speaking, not hers. So do we record the musical among us, so their voices may be heard when they're not around to speak? When two hundred years separate us from those voices—2017 marks the bicentennial of Thoreau's birth; yes, THOR-o's—what do we have to hold onto these people, acoustically? Surveillance cameras capture us entering stores, looking very bright on the raised playback screen, yet who among those we love, and who love us, will ever get to see those images, the footage of us, in a red t-shirt, shearling coat, blue ball cap, walking in carrying nothing, walking out holding a white plastic sack containing ink pens, two cartridges of printer ink, a black and white marbled notebook? Later on, how will we be heard?

Or maybe that is the beauty of our voices—they are only here for so long?