

1

British Mockery and American Disdain

“We see with other eyes, we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts than those we formerly used,” wrote Thomas Paine, author of *Common Sense* (1791) and *The Rights of Man* (1792). One of the most persuasive spokesmen for American independence, he championed the clearing away of British “cobwebs, poison and dust” from American society. American independence, he argued, could never be complete without that.

Many Americans thought the same way: that apart from economic stability and success, what they needed almost more than anything else after political independence was intellectual and cultural independence, free from the stifling influence of British arts, letters, and manners. They resented their cultural subservience, which had not disappeared with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Yet for more than a century after the Revolution, the majority of literate and cultured Americans did not want to turn their backs on British culture, “their ancient heritage”—especially its literature and the historical traditions of its language. About seventy long years after Paine’s statement, the popular English novelist Anthony Trollope elegantly expressed this powerful, persistent, and apparently inescapable linkage: “An American will perhaps consider himself to be as little like an Englishman as he is like a Frenchman. But he reads Shakespeare through the medium of his own vernacular, and has to undergo the penance of a foreign tongue before he can understand Molière. He separates himself from England in politics and perhaps in affection; but he cannot separate himself from England in mental culture.” Janus-like, and often at less than a fully conscious level,

Americans knew that their “mental culture,” whether they liked it or not, was linked to Britain’s, and they had little taste for parting with it.¹

2

America’s lingering literary and linguistic attachment to England is nowhere so evident as in the nation’s pervasive ambivalence toward Samuel Johnson and his great dictionary, published in 1755, which many call the first major dictionary of the language. He was the great sage of English literature, brilliant essayist, moralist, poet, lexicographer, and biographer, the “Colossus of Literature” and “Literary Dictator” of the second half of eighteenth-century England, a figure thoroughly synonymous with Englishness. Throughout his career as an author, Johnson advertised his multilayered and complicated dislike of America and Americans. In 1756, the year after he published his famous dictionary, he coined the term “American dialect” to mean “a tract [trace] of corruption to which every language widely diffused must always be exposed.” He had in mind an undisciplined and barbarous uncouthness of speech. With typical hyperbole on the subject of Americans, he once remarked, “I am willing to love all mankind, *except an American* . . . rascals—robbers—pirates.”²

Yet Americans could not get enough of him. They devoured his books, which libraries held in great numbers. His influence on American thought and language was vast. Thomas Jefferson recognized this as a grave problem: he wanted to get Johnson off the backs of Americans. In a letter in 1813 to his friend the grammarian John Waldo, he took note of Johnson’s *Dictionary* as a specific drag on the country’s cultural growth: “employing its [own] materials,” America could rise to literary and linguistic preeminence, but “not indeed by holding fast to Johnson’s Dictionary; not by raising a hue and cry against every word he has not licensed; but by encouraging and welcoming new compositions of its elements.” And yet, as one historian writes, “It was to prove more difficult to declare independence from Johnson than it had been to reject George III.” The weight of Johnson’s authority on culture in America was a legacy, both positive and negative, that would loom large in the American psyche far into the nineteenth century. Several of the leading American authors at the time actually fed the appetite for Johnson rather than attempted to dampen it.³

One of them, Nathaniel Hawthorne, revered Johnson. Although he complained in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1845), “How slowly our [own] literature

grows up,” for him Johnson could do no wrong. In London during the 1850s on government business, he recorded in his *English Note-Books* walking in Johnson’s footsteps—taking a meal at Johnson’s favorite London tavern, the Mitre; traveling up to Lichfield in Staffordshire to pay homage to the great man’s birthplace; and exploring Johnson’s rooms at No. 1 Inner Temple Lane in London, where his imagination luxuriated in the sense of place: “I not only looked in, but went up the first flight, of some broad, well-worn stairs, passing my hand over a heavy, ancient, broken balustrade, on which, no doubt, Johnson’s hand had often rested. . . . Before lunch, I had gone into Bolt Court, where he died.”⁴ As for James Fenimore Cooper, he was liberally using Johnson’s dictionary as his principal authority on the language, even after America’s first large (unabridged) dictionary was published by Noah Webster.

This type of American adulation of Johnson persisted into the second half of the century. Herman Melville, in *Moby-Dick* (1851), the novel he dedicated to Hawthorne, has his narrator, Ishmael, remark that in his telling of the story he had “invariably used a huge quarto edition of Johnson [his dictionary], expressly purchased for that purpose; because that famous lexicographer’s uncommon personal bulk more fitted him to compile a lexicon to be used by a whale author like me.” Louisa May Alcott, in her American classic *Little Women* (1868–69), features Johnson’s *Rasselas* and his book of essays, *The Rambler*, in a memorable scene or two. Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), however, was not so positive about Johnson, bearing witness to this Johnsonian obsession even as he debunked it. He had a go at Johnson at the expense of American Johnson lovers when he toured London only a few years before the outbreak of World War I. One day at the Cheshire Cheese tavern, near which Johnson had lived and where, legend has had it, he spent a good deal of time, Twain was enjoying some refreshment in the “Doctor Johnson room” with Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*, and the American journalist Eugene Field, when he burst out: “Look at those fools going to pieces over old Doc Johnson—call themselves Americans and lick-spittle the toady who grabbed a pension from the German King of England that hated Americans, tried to flog us into obedience and called George Washington traitor and scoundrel.” One could understand the adulation of Johnson by the English, he continued, “but of our own people, coming to the Cheese, ninety-nine per cent do so because they don’t know the man, and the others because they feel tickled to honor a writer a hundred and fifty years or so after he is

good and rotten.” For the rest of his time at the inn, in protest against his fellow Americans, he kept up his “slaughter of Johnson.” As for himself, he boasted he never read Johnson, “never a written word.”⁵

3

Cultural ambivalence was one thing. The persistent burden of cultural inferiority was another, at the center of which were the language and a national literature. There was little leisure, inclination, or confidence in the tempo of the nation’s early history to turn to literature and language in order to express and give meaning to the “new circumstances” of nationhood. Jefferson felt particularly strongly about this. A liberal advocate for linguistic reform and “lexical and orthographical innovation” in America as a sensible and natural way of promoting a stronger national identity and confidence, he lamented this weakness. Literary activity in the country was flat, he wrote in his letter to John Waldo, and there was no springboard for it: “[W]e have no distinct class of literati in our country. Every man is engaged in some industrious pursuit. . . . Few therefore, of those who are qualified, have leisure to write.” That was regrettable, yet at the same time in order to compensate for the barrenness of the American literary landscape—and revealing his own ambivalence over the British-American cultural imbalance—he encouraged the study of English authors, “the example of good writers, the approbation of men of letters,” and “the judgement of sound critics,” by means of which the English of Americans could be improved.⁶

Jefferson came in for some English criticism of his use of Americanisms in his only book, *Notes on Virginia*, in 1787. His use of the word *belittle* (a perfectly good word today, of course) in it inspired this piece of mockery in the *European Magazine and London Review*:

Belittle!—What an expression!—It may be an elegant one in Virginia, and even perfectly intelligible; but for our part, all we can do is, to *guess* at its meaning.—For shame, Mr. Jefferson! Why, after trampling upon the honour of our country, and representing it as little better than a land of barbarism—why, we say, perpetually trample also upon the very grammar of our language? . . . Freely, good sir, will we forgive all your attacks, impotent as they are illiberal, upon our *national character*; but for the future, spare—O spare, we beseech you, our *mother-tongue!*⁷

It is noteworthy, incidentally, that Jefferson has been credited with coining about 110 words included in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and with some 400 quotations providing the earliest record of meanings of specific words. That he felt keenly the importance of freeing American English from English restraints and conventions is as clear as a bell tolling American independence. Americans are different, he pointed out to John Waldo: “The new circumstances under which we are placed, call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects. An American dialect will therefore be formed.” There was no need to be ashamed of that.

Beware the abuse of such British editors, Jefferson advised Waldo, especially those of the influential *Edinburgh Review*, “the ablest critics of the age,” which in Jefferson’s view were spewing out retrogressive nonsense about how the Americans had been misusing the language. The best thing for Americans was to nourish their freedom and “separate it [American English] in name as well as in power, from the mother-tongue.” Jefferson dreamed of what the American language would become “in strength, beauty, variety, and every circumstance which gives perfection to language, were it permitted freely to draw from all its legitimate sources.” That meant using without embarrassment the new American words springing up across the land—Jefferson coined the word *neologize* to describe them—even if “in this process of sound neologisation, our trans-Atlantic brethren shall not chuse [choose] to accompany us, we may furnish, after the Ionians, a second example of a colonial dialect improving on its primitive.”⁸

As for dictionaries, whatever you do, avoid looking back to Johnson, Jefferson implored John Adams—although elsewhere he singled out Johnson’s *Dictionary* as essential reading for Americans, one of the books he said would “fix us [Americans] in the principles and practices of virtue.” In that comment he was remarking on Johnson’s *Dictionary* for its moral value, not as a guide to how Americans should use the language. He did not need the authority of any dictionary to sanction the legitimacy of new American words: dictionaries are but the “depositories of words already legitimated by usage. . . . When an individual uses a new word, if ill-formed, it is rejected in society, if well-formed, adopted, and after due time, laid up in the depository of dictionaries.” In another letter to William S. Cardell, Jefferson stressed the extreme importance of this subject: “[T]he improvement & enlargement of the scope of our language is of first importance. . . . Judicious neology can

alone give strength & copiousness to language and enable it to be the vehicle of new ideas.”⁹

John Adams managed to sound even more combative and visionary than Jefferson on the subject of the American language. Notwithstanding the fulminations of British reviewers, he waxed prophetic in a letter to Edmund Jenings in 1780: “I am not altogether, in jest. I see a general encreasing Inclination after English in France, Spain, and Holland, and it may extend throughout Europe. The Population and Commerce of America will Force their Language into general Use.” “English will be the most respectable language in the world,” he added later.¹⁰

There was one prominent contemporary of Jefferson’s, however, who did not see this matter as did Jefferson and Adams and was greatly troubled by what he observed was happening to the American language. Although he had great admiration for America and Americans, the Scottish churchman John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and member of Congress, as well as president of the College of New Jersey (renamed Princeton University in 1896) from 1768 until his death in 1794, was one of America’s important political figures and intellectuals awkwardly caught in the crossfire of the Anglo-American battle of the languages. Witherspoon understood and appreciated Jefferson’s celebration of neologisms and other types of vocabulary expansion as natural parts of language development, but he had no taste for the extreme forms of language he heard cropping up in all walks of life in the country. He deplored American slang and indiscriminate, undisciplined looseness of expression on the part of the better educated, including members of Congress, lawyers, and clergymen: “vulgarisms,” “common [grammatical] blunders arising from ignorance,” “cant phrases,” “personal blunders,” and “tautology.” “I have heard in this country,” he wrote in 1781, “in the senate, at the bar, and from the pulpit, and see daily in dissertations from the press, errors in grammar, improprieties and vulgarisms which hardly any person of the same class in point of rank and literature would have fallen into in Great Britain.” Among the *Americanisms* that he said he heard everywhere—he claimed he was the first to use that term to describe differences between British and American English—were the following: the use of *every* instead of *every one*, *contrive it* for *carry it*, *mad* for *angry*, *I thinks* for *I think*, *he had fell down* instead of *fallen down*, *I had wrote* instead of *had written*, *had spoke* instead of *had spoken*, and *drownded* instead of

drowned. Witherspoon also took note of prolific contractions such as *an't*, *can't*, *could'nt*, *don't*, *han't*, *should'nt*, *would'nt*. He particularly disliked *this here* or *that there*. He did concede that many departures from British English in the higher reaches of American society did not arise from ignorance or “inelegance” and therefore were authentically and therefore legitimately American. That, however, did not make them any more palatable to him. A malapropism was a malapropism, a “personal blunder,” in whichever country it occurred, although he said he heard them more often in the United States than in Britain.¹¹

4

An avalanche of British attacks on American society and culture in general and language and literature in particular in the early nineteenth century did not improve American self-confidence. While such British offensives did not exist in isolation from larger political events at the time that contributed to a hostility between the two countries, which eventually ignited in the War of 1812, that larger context fails to account for the harshness and frequency with which British writers insulted American life and manners. Many British travelers' attacks in books and the British press were simply outrageous and in poor taste, ill-informed or not informed at all, aiming to appeal sensationally to a portion of the British reading public that was either ignorant of America and prepared to think the worst of it, or welcomed such attacks as exotic and improbable adventure stories.

Fanny Trollope, mother of the novelist Anthony Trollope, wrote a sensational best seller, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), based on her months of traveling all over the country. An engaging but also wounding account, often insightful and sometimes appreciative, it is marred by a recurring strain of anti-Americanism. As she sees it, the abuse of the language was no small part of Americans' lack of discipline and bad taste and manners. She shudders over what she saw and heard as the vulgarity of American manners and language, appalled at the “strange uncouth phrases and pronunciation.” She is short on examples, but in an appendix she added to the fifth edition of her book seven years later in 1839, she records some family conversation in an unspecified part of the country. It contains this specimen of a father's pride in the chickens the family is about to serve up for guests: “Bean't they little beauties? hardly bigger than humming birds; a dollar seventy five for

they. Three fips for the hominy, a levy for the squash, and a quarter for the limes; inyons a fip, carolines a levy, green cobs ditto.” She links the speech she heard to the prevalent lack of refinement resulting from the low esteem in which women were held. If America was ever going to rescue itself from this revolting social malaise, she writes, it would have to be through the refinements of the arts: “Let America give a fair portion of her attention to the arts and the graces that embellish life, and I will make her another visit, and write another book as unlike this as possible.”¹²

In those early years of nationhood, Americans only occasionally protested. If you feel insecure, you are not apt boldly to fire back at your critics. The now forgotten Philadelphia scholar and diplomat Robert Walsh, whom Jefferson once described as “one of the two best writers in America,” did protest in “An Appeal from the Judgements of Great Britain Respecting the United States of America” (1818), but he managed simply to reinforce the persistent British belief that Americans were vain and supersensitive to criticism, “cherishing imaginary wrongs.” The shocks to American confidence and self-respect, however, being dished out by these British travelers, commentators, reviewers, and authors eventually proved to be too much for Washington Irving. They drove him to write a nine-page essay, “English Writers on America” (1819), in which he aims to stir up Americans to believe in themselves:

I shall not . . . dwell on this irksome and hackneyed topic; nor should I have adverted to it, but for the undue interest apparently taken in it by my countrymen, and certain injurious effects which I apprehended it might produce upon the national feeling. We attach too much consequence to these attacks. They cannot do us any essential injury. The tissue of misrepresentations attempted to be woven around us, are like cobwebs woven around the limbs of an infant giant. Our country continually outgrows them. One falsehood after another falls off of itself. We have but to live on, and every day we live a whole volume of refutation.

If the English persist with their “prejudicial accounts,” they will succeed only in “instilling anger and resentment within the bosom of a youthful nation.”¹³

Looking back at a century of such British mockery, the historian Allan Nevins in 1923 conveyed the seriousness of the threat relentless British mockery posed to the American psyche in the first quarter of the nineteenth

century and the anxiety it stirred up in the young country: “The nervous interest of Americans in the impressions formed of them by visiting Europeans and their sensitiveness to British criticism in especial, were long regarded as constituting a salient national trait.” Henry Cabot Lodge, US senator from Massachusetts, was appalled by the effect on American authors: “The first step of an American entering upon a literary career was to pretend to be an Englishman in order that he might win the approval, not of Englishmen, but of his own countrymen.” American poet, journalist, and commentator H. L. Mencken, in his linguistically patriotic book *The American Language* (first published in 1919), provides another retrospective in sections titled “The English Attack” and “American Barbarisms.” He describes the clash as “hair-raising,” an “unholy war” of words. Captain Thomas Hamilton, a Scot, mentions a few of the prevalent barbarisms: “The word *does* is split into two syllables, and pronounced *do-es*. *Where*, for some incomprehensible reason, is converted into *whare*, *there* into *thare*; and I remember, on mentioning to an acquaintance that I had called on a gentleman of taste in the arts, he asked, ‘Whether he *shew* (showed) me his pictures.’ Such words as oratory and dilatory, are pronounced with the penult syllable, long and accented; missionary becomes *missionairy*, angel, *ângel*, danger, *dânger*, &c.”¹⁴

5

With considerable zeal, the British assault on American values, manners, and achievements also turned to the state of literature in the republic. In 1810, the *Edinburgh Review* was severe: “Liberty and competition have as yet done nothing to stimulate literary genius in these republican states. . . . In short, federal America has done nothing, either to extend, diversify, or embellish the sphere of human knowledge.” Again in the *Edinburgh Review*, Sydney Smith, founder and first editor of that magazine, whose brilliant and witty essays and reviews particularly injured American pride, mischievously asked in 1820, “[W]hy should the Americans write books, when a six week’s passage brings them in our own tongue, our sense, science and genius, in bales and hogsheads?” Harriet Martineau, while pleased by America’s lack of “aristocratic insolence,” wrote bitinglly in *Society in America* after her travels in America in 1836, “If the national mind of America be judged of by its legislation, it is of a very high order,” but “if the American nation be judged by its literature, it may be pronounced to have no mind at all.”¹⁵

The American literati chimed in with vigor. John Pickering, the Harvard-educated diplomat and American jurist and linguist (more about him later), admitted in 1816, “in this country we can hardly be said to have any authors by profession.” In his book *The Importance and Means of a National Literature* (1830), William Ellery Channing, the famous Unitarian minister and early Transcendentalist, declared that what he meant by a national literature was “the expression of a nation’s mind in writing,” and he called for America’s literary mind to awaken. America needed “a high intellectual culture” that paid more attention to the spirit than to material aggrandizement: “There is among us much superficial knowledge. . . . There is nowhere . . . an accumulation of literary atmosphere.” More than half a century after independence, America still relied “for intellectual excitement and enjoyment on foreign minds, nor is our mind felt abroad.”¹⁶

American literature did rise, however, sooner perhaps than Jefferson and Adams had envisioned. James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, to mention but a few writers, all made names for themselves by the 1840s and 1850s as creative artists to be reckoned with not only in America but also in England and throughout the Continent.¹⁷ Emerson, the prophet-poet who strove “to extract the tape-worm of Europe from America’s body,” knew the American “renaissance” was dawning. “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe,” he declares in his pamphlet *The American Scholar* (1837), which was delivered and first published under the title *An Oration, Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837*. In his essay “Nature” (1836), he writes, “The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us and not the history of theirs?” The speech secured Emerson’s fame.¹⁸

6

Hand-in-hand with their trashing of American literature and intellectual life, British bashing of the American language in the press was a particularly vitriolic and crowded sport. It was the British attacks in this sphere that, more than any other, reinforced Americans’ sense of cultural insecurity in relation

to the British throughout the nineteenth century. The British press, “the Reviewers and magazine-men” whom Walter Savage Landor in England once described as “the linkboys and scavengers of literature,” gave no quarter to the ways American authors were using the language. American writing offered them ripe opportunities to exercise their wit and appeal to the prejudices of their readers. “Their pens have been dipped in gall” with “a mixture of malevolence and falsehood,” scoffed the president of Yale University, Timothy Dwight. At the root of much of this was a bias against how Americans presumed to “possess” the ancient English tongue and, as the British saw it, mangle it to such an extent that it was either vulgar and offensive or often simply incomprehensible. It was a disgrace to the venerable tradition of English letters. One day, the critics warned, if this mauling continued, the British would need a glossary to understand American writing; nor would the great works of English literature any longer be intelligible to the Americans.¹⁹

“Poor Dr. Johnson,” wrote the Scottish antiquarian and engineer John Mactaggart after three years in Canada in the 1820s and obligatory travels in America. Had Johnson known what the Americans would be doing with the language, surely he would have led the charge in his dictionary against the invasiveness of Americanisms: “The great Dr. Johnson, when he was arranging his noble national Dictionary, did not seem to be aware that he had so many mortal enemies at his door. . . . Here then is the *ruination* of our classic English language already begun. It is nonsense to imagine that our authors will there live immortal in their native strains.”²⁰

Jonathan Boucher, an English clergyman who lived for decades in Maryland and Virginia and was one of the most eloquent and controversial preachers of his day—a friend of George Washington, no less, in spite of his loyalty to Britain—took a hostile interest in the American language in his *Glossary of Archaic and Provincial Words*. A distinguished historian and philologist, Boucher was only one of a legion of British prophets of doom late in the eighteenth century who imagined the day would come when Englishmen would be unable to understand Americans: “[T]heir language will become as independent of England, as they themselves are; and altogether as unlike English, as the Dutch or Flemish is unlike German, or the Norwegian unlike the Danish, or the Portuguese unlike Spanish.” That sentiment was a commonplace in England by the 1830s. If that were to be the fate of American speech, Captain Hamilton writes, so be it: “Unless the present progress of

change be arrested, by an increase of taste and judgment in the more educated classes, there can be no doubt that, in another century, the dialect of the Americans will become utterly unintelligible to an Englishman, and that the nation will be cut off from the advantages arising from their participation in British literature.” Alluding to Noah Webster, already famous by then for his “American” dictionary, he predicts the result would be “as novel and peculiar as the most patriotic American linguist can desire.”²¹

In one of his many illuminating essays on early American speech, the twentieth-century American historian of early American English, Allen Walker Read, attempts to demystify what he describes as misguided notions of the American language from the late eighteenth century right up to Mencken and later. It was the British reviewers of American books, he suggests, who should have known better, not the impressionable British travelers. While many travelers certainly cringed when they heard American accents, coinages, “vulgarisms,” and (to their minds) misuse of perfectly good English words, or noticed the continued use of words and phrases that long ago had become archaic in England, they were on the whole more generous and approving than the professional reviewers and commentators. They were able at least to discover firsthand, for example, and acknowledge, the existence of relatively little regional dialect in America. Recalling her travels in America in 1834, the otherwise critical Harriet Martineau, who apparently was hard of hearing and needed an ear horn, rejoices over how clearly (without an accent) the Americans spoke: “I shall have no bad tales to tell in England about the peculiarities of American speech; for the truth is, it is quite a holiday treat to an unready ear like mine to meet with intelligible English all over this great country, after being perplexed with the provincialisms with which one is assailed as often as one takes a journey in England.”²²

7

What were the unbridled Americanisms and other offenses that set so many British and several American commentators’ teeth on edge? One of the most prolific examples was the epidemic and unlicensed use of nouns as verbs, such as *beat*, *dump*, *interview*, *notice*, *process*, *progress*, *scalp*, and so on. Contractions and sloppy pronunciation became widespread, as did other “vulgarities” of language such as *gents*, *pants*, and *thanks* and informal and essentially private terms of endearment between spouses that (it was felt) should be kept private

and not be heard across a room in public. Racy language and low expressions were other lamented features. Such usage for many was insulting, careless, undisciplined, idiomatically imprecise and illogical, and disrespectful.

There was no want of other examples of what British observers classified as “degradation” and “debasement.” To begin with, accounts invariably mentioned the unbearable volubility of Americans, who prided themselves on being “born orators,” but their speech was blemished with uncouth vulgarity in vocabulary, profanity, runaway “innovation,” flaccid inaccuracy and imprecision, grandiloquence, high-flown rhetoric, and lazy or shortcut pronunciation. In New England, some took note of a “whining cadence” and twang that Nicholas Cresswell, a visitor from Derbyshire earlier in the 1770s, found was quite beyond his powers of description, although elsewhere in the country he did not notice any dialect. Cresswell, who nevertheless wished to move to America from Derbyshire, participated so completely in American ways of speaking that he began to talk and throw his weight around like an American, one morning almost getting into a gunfight with a man who “threatened to scalp and tomahawk me.”²³

Thousands of popular words and expressions, what could be called American provincialisms as well as Americanisms, infiltrated the speech of even the most educated Americans who did not normally use them in their writing—individuals who, in the words of a Yale graduate in 1855, “in half a dozen [spoken] sentences, use at least as many words that cannot fail to strike the inexperienced Englishman who hears them for the first time.” “Fail to strike” only feebly describes the English loathing of the mushrooming of Americanisms. With deepening resentment, the English deplored them as vulgar and incomprehensible. On the other hand, Daniel Boorstin (historian and Librarian of Congress) follows Mencken’s line of defense by applauding the “brash vitality” of the burgeoning “tall talk” and flamboyant American speech. He illustrates the “flood of racy and unprecedented words and phrases” with his own sample list: *to affiliate, to Americanize, down-and-out, down-town, to engineer, to enthuse, flat-footed, to funeralize, highfalutin, to hornswoggle, hunkydory, to itemize, to lynch, non-committal, on-the-fence, plumb crazy, rambunctious, to resurrect, scalawag, scrumptious, shebang, to skedaddle, slambang, splendiferous, true-blue, under-the-weather*. “The new riches of an American language,” Boorstin writes, “were not found in the pages of an American Shakespeare or Milton but on the tongues of Western

boatmen, town boosters, fur traders, explorers, Indian-fighters, and sod-busters. While the greatness of British English could be viewed in a library, the greatness of American English had to be heard to be appreciated. America had no powerful literary aristocracy, no single cultural capital, no London. And the new nation gave the language back to the people. No American achievement was more distinctive or less predictable.”²⁴

8

Apart from conservative “traditionalists” among them, many literate Americans were not willing to endure silently this British disrespect. Across the country, Americans believed that, no thanks to the British, clarity and unity in both written and spoken English, not to mention elegance, were what they wanted and were certain they had already achieved. One of the most insightful and commanding American voices to protest the British criticism of the way Americans used the language was the eminent Edward Everett. A distinguished Harvard professor of Greek literature by the age of twenty-one, a universally admired orator, editor of the influential *North American Review*, US secretary of state, ambassador to Britain, and president of Harvard from 1846 to 1849 (he disliked the job), Everett had a brilliant pedigree. He was a highly respected authority and leader in American cultural thought, and he plays a significant, though minor, role in the dictionary history told in these pages. “I know nobody else in the country,” wrote one critic, “who holds such a pen. He is the American Junius.” At Harvard and for many years afterward, he was accorded heroic status by Emerson, who heard him preach as Unitarian minister at Brattle Street Church in Cambridge and concluded that his voice “of such rich tones, such precise and perfect utterance, that although slightly nasal . . . was the most mellow, and beautiful, and correct of all instruments of the time.” He had the honor of speaking for nearly two hours at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery before Abraham Lincoln got around to delivering his brief, eloquent, and legendary address on November 19, 1863, the day after which he graciously wrote to Lincoln, “I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes.”²⁵

After several visits to England, Everett felt he could speak out with “reasoned patriotism” and authority about the comparative state of the language in England and America: “[W]e submit it fearlessly to any person, who has

had the means of making the comparison, and is at all qualified to do it, whether one might not rather suppose that America were the native country of the language, and England a remote colony, exposed to all the chances of corruption, so villainously is the language spoken in all the provinces of the latter country, so wholly distorted in a score of rustic jargons, that do not deserve the name of dialects.” The British critics were hardly justified in “stigmatizing as a corruption” all American neologisms. By whatever authority, whether dictionaries, “good company,” or “good writers,” “more provincialisms, more good words in false acceptations, and more newly coined words” are to be found in respectable English writers than in equally respectable American writers and society, he claimed.²⁶

Finding himself in a coach en route to Cambridge, England, in 1818, Everett was shocked to discover that the five others in the coach “spoke worse English, than any five well dressed people that one would be apt to meet in any part of America, with which I am acquainted.” Indeed, throughout his travels in England, Everett was appalled by the level of English ignorance and dogmatism regarding American English: “[W]e ought neither to be *reviewed* out of the right of coining any words which the peculiarity of our situation requires, nor browbeaten into the belief, that in respect to new words we speak and write the language more corruptly than we do.” The English had best concentrate on saving their own language from corruption instead of “ringing insipid changes on the ‘American language,’ wrestling with the puritanical Christian names of our writers, and waging a quixotic warfare against barbarism never approved, and denounced already here.”²⁷

Belonging to the wealthy, educated, patrician class in Boston society, George Ticknor was a close friend of Everett’s, a brilliant Spanish and French scholar at Harvard, and author of the monumental three-volume *History of Spanish Literature* (1849). It would never have occurred to him that he spoke anything but the best English. It amazed him, therefore, when a visiting Englishman in 1815 “expressed to me his surprise that I spoke so good English, and spoke it, too, without an accent, so that he should not have known me from an Englishman.” “This is the first instance I have yet met of this kind of ignorance,” Ticknor noted in his journal. “He is himself a cockney.” Another priceless American riposte later in the century shocked a sprightly, young, upper-class New England woman who was not exactly swept off her feet when a young officer in the English army told her that

her English was excellent and asked if she was unusual in that respect for an American woman. “Oh, yes,” she replied, “but then I had unusual advantages. There was an English missionary stationed near my tribe.” One other impatient American woman more testily replied in 1839 to an Englishman who had asked her, “Why do you drawl out your words in that way?” that she would “drawl all the way from Maine to Georgia, rather than *clip* my words as you English people do.” The London *Literary Gazette* in 1839 regaled its readers with a host of other examples of what must have seemed to them like chatter from some sort of underworld American conspiracy against England’s noble language. A couple of specimens here will suffice to convey the tenor of the dialect and “twisting” of the meaning of words that English people felt was afflicting America: “The old phrase of ‘straining at a gnat, and swallowing a camel,’ is, in the Eastern States, rendered ‘straining at a gate, and swallow a saw-mill’”; another concerned the words *nasty* and *nice*: “one of the strangest perversions of the meaning of a word which I ever heard of is in Kentucky, where sometimes the word *nasty* is used for *nice*. For instance: at a rustic dance in that State a Kentuckian said to an acquaintance of mine, in reply to his asking the name of a very fine girl, ‘That’s my sister, stranger; and I flatter myself that she shews the nastiest ankle in all Kentuck.’”²⁸

James Fenimore Cooper tried bravely to have it both ways. While he thought that Americans had gone overboard with their reforms, he nonetheless declared they had “an equal right” to the language. He predicted that soon America would blossom with a literature “felt with a force, a directness, and a common sense in its application, that has never yet been known.” “Twenty millions of people not only can make a word, but they can make a language, if it be needed,” he wrote at the end of a footnote defending Americanisms in his novel *Satanstoe* (1845). Waxing prophetic and audacious at the same time, he predicted in *The American Democrat* a bright future for American English but doubted English attitudes would soften anytime soon:

In *fine*, we speak our language, as a nation, better than any other people speak their language. When one reflects on the immense surface of country that we occupy, the general accuracy, in pronunciation and in the use of words, is quite astonishing. . . . We do amend, and each year introduces a better and purer English into our country. . . . [I]n another generation or two, far more reasonable English will be used in

this country than exists here now. How far this melioration or purification of our language will affect the mother country, is another question. It is, perhaps, twenty years too soon to expect that England will very complacently submit to receive opinions or fashions very directly from America.²⁹

9

The Scottish critic and folklorist Andrew Lang, looking back in 1895 on a century of Anglo-American wrangling over language, adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude. He asserted the rights of Americans to use the language the way they wanted to, but he could not bear to contemplate, as did Cooper, American influences on British English: “I, for one, have never been able to see why Americans should not use Americanisms. It is a free country, and has a right to develop its own language in its own way. . . . As long as they bud and blossom in America only, they are of mere philological interest to us; but when they begin to invade our language, like the American weed in our waters, surely we may, inoffensively, try to check their profusion? Or is this rude and offensive?” He added, “Only time and usage can sanction new words and phrases: the fittest survive.”³⁰

Nevertheless, the fight was still on, as the prominent English essayist John Ruskin demonstrated in 1873 with this surprisingly impertinent remark: “[T]his dying England taught the Americans all they have of speech, or thought, hitherto. What thoughts they have not learned from England are foolish thoughts; what words they have not learned from England, unseemly words; the vile among them not being able even to be humorous parrots, but only obscene mocking-birds.” One could hardly be more insulting than that. The intellectual and social derailment the language wars generated infected even brilliant philosophers and critics like Ruskin. By the third decade of the nineteenth century, informed and fair-minded people—and even the uninformed and biased—on both sides of the Atlantic were beginning to fear that if this transatlantic linguistic boxing match went on much longer, “the last drops of goodwill toward England that exist in the United States” would be turned into irreversible bitterness.³¹

Americans had repaid the British handsomely for their sneers, but they were nevertheless confronted by the embarrassing and increasingly inconvenient fact that they were, as we shall see, still relying on English-language

authorities like Samuel Johnson and his irrepressible dictionary. An English journalist ill-naturedly had warned as early as 1787 that the American language was already so different from the English that English dictionaries in the future might as well ignore Americanisms: “If this is true, let us leave the inventors of this motley gibberish to make a Dictionary for themselves.” That is exactly what Americans would do. The American language was rushing into the future, following its own course and needs, and the majority of Americans were little disposed to let English attitudes and prejudices, and dictionaries, keep it back. Only a truly comprehensive American dictionary, recording what the American language had become, could keep pace with the rapid changes in American society and the new words, meanings, and pronunciations pouring into it. When it came, it surely would, once and for all, set the seal on their declaration of linguistic independence from the mother country.³²