



**Postmodern Identity (Crisis):
Confessions of a Linguistic Historiographer and Romance Writer
1999**

My name is Julie, and I write romances.

Over the years, I have sometimes felt like I am at an unofficial AA meeting where I must confess to my romance writing behavior. Other times, I have made it a political gesture to come out of the closet and admit it. As a member of the English Department at Duke University where I teach linguistics, I publish scholarly books and articles with titles like “The Behaviorist Turn in Recent Theories of Language” and “Signs and Systems in Condillac and Saussure.” I also write historical romances with titles like *And Heaven Too*, *Simon’s Lady*, and *Tangled Dreams*. I love linguistics, but I feel passionate about romance.

In 1994, I was invited by the Psychology Department at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, to give a series of lectures on the current state of evolutionary scripts for the development of human language in the species. When several psychologists at Western Michigan learned that I wrote (and actually published!) popular romances, I was asked to give yet another lecture, jointly sponsored by the creative writing program, where I would explain this unusual combination of writing interests: obscure linguistic theories and mass-market romance.

The psychologists at Western Michigan are known for their adherence to the work of the premier American behaviorist, B. F. Skinner (1904-90). For decades, Skinner has been known to the linguistics community primarily as an outcast, in large part because Noam Chomsky (b. 1928), the premier American linguist of his day, published an excoriating review of Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior* (1957) in the major linguistics journal, *Language*, in 1959. After that review, Skinner’s account of verbal behavior was pretty much dead in the linguistics community. In the late 1980s, I, as a linguistic historiographer (that is, someone who studies the historical record of linguistics), decided to take a look at Skinner’s book, since it formed such an important part of recent American linguistic history. Upon reading it, I discovered that I liked quite a bit of it, and I saw the need to rehabilitate some of Skinner’s views on verbal behavior in several articles that I published. To my surprise, I found myself instantly embraced by the behaviorist community and was invited to speak all over the country.

The psychologists at Western Michigan were the first and only group (before the “Rereading the Romance” conference in 1997) to be interested in the intersection of my academic writing and my romance writing. Behaviorists are, after all, curious about all kinds of behavior, particularly the odd combinations. As I began to formulate an explanation of my own odd combination of writing behaviors for these psychologists, I was struck both by the difficulty and by the delight of the experience. I was also struck by how just plain strange it was, because I experienced the attempt to explain my own behavior to myself as an intriguingly not-so-novel novelty. It is the not-so-novel novelty of that experience which I hope to explain in the course of the present exposition.

The story of my dual and divergent writing behaviors begins like this:

In the past fifteen years, I have had increasing occasion to speak about my life and work as a



romance writer. I have given newspaper and radio interviews, and I have spoken before reading groups and library associations. Until very recently, I have had no opportunity to address questions concerning my particular writing craft. Until very recently, all of my explanatory efforts have been devoted entirely to perfecting the gentle art of my verbal self-defense of the entire genre of romance fiction. That is, the majority of my public efforts to articulate my thoughts on the subject of my romances have been directed at finding effective answers to the standard and inevitable questions that interviewers and “just plain folk” alike find themselves unable *not* to ask a romance writer: 1) How much money do you make? 2) When are you going to write a real book? 3) How come you write under a pen name? Are you ashamed of what you’re writing? 4) Do you let your children read your books? 5) What about all those rape scenes in historical novels? 6) How do you do your research (wink, wink, snicker, snicker)? 7) What is a linguist at a respected university like you doing writing romances? And my personal favorite: 8) Is it true that romances are written by sexually frustrated housewives?

Similarly, in the past fifteen years, I have had occasion to speak about my research field of linguistic historiography. These occasions have taken the form of discussions with my colleagues in both the English Department and the Department of Cultural Anthropology (where I have a joint appointment), as well as with students, fellow linguists, behavior analysts, other psychologists, and regular old, random people. Most recently, I have had to present myself in relationship to my research field in the form of that wretched but challenging genre known as “Statement of Purpose for Tenure.”

My point is that over the years, I have had to account for bits and pieces of myself in bits and pieces, but until the psychologists at Western Michigan invited *both* of me to speak, I had not been asked to account for *all* of myself at once. At first, I experienced this attempt to account for the whole of myself as something new, even puzzling. I was frankly stymied for several weeks, wondering if there was anything intelligible I could possibly say to explain why one person could be engaged in such apparently disparate activities as writing esoteric, neck-up, high-minded linguistic historiography for an extremely small audience of scholars (most of whom could be counted on my ten fingers and ten toes), and, at the same time, writing accessible, determinedly neck-down narratives of heterosexual love relationships for a potentially huge audience of millions. I was tempted to say that having these two writing interests was odd, even cognitively dissonant at times – and leave it at that. But that would be explaining nothing, because it was this very supposed oddness of one person engaged in the two activities that prompted the psychologists to invite me to account for myself.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I had never experienced the two writing activities, one or the other of which I engage in on a day-to-day basis, as odd or even at odds with one another. My self-description of the two activities has always been that they are, in fact, mutually energizing. And how new, after all, could the explanatory experience be in light of the accountings I routinely give of myself, albeit in bits and pieces? The newness was only that of finding myself in the position of having to articulate what I had felt all along at some unarticulated level, namely that the perception of oddity or disparity between my two writing activities is not a function of some chopped up set of sensibilities inside of me but is rather produced by evaluative categories and institutionalized practices that exist outside of me.

Because I was born into a world in which the romance genre and the discipline of linguistics

were already well-constituted discourses, I understand that I have been formed by the evaluative categories and institutionalized practices that maintain them as much as I have resisted the logic that separates them. I understand as well that my pragmatic challenge to the logic that separates them, in my day-to-day exercise of one or the other, necessarily reforms those categories and practices, however minimally, whether I want or intend to reform those categories and practices or not. (I am not sure that I do.) I would go so far as to say that it is precisely when someone like me – that is, someone with my socioeconomic background and education – comes along and discovers that she does not like the kind of literature that she is either supposed to like or that most people of a similar demographic profile *do* like that the evaluative categories and institutionalized practices become exposed and available for examination and then, possibly, reorganization. If I were engaged in writing high-level syntactic analyses of exotic languages along with writing, say, recognizably consciousness-raising post-feminist fiction or even cerebral murder mysteries, certain categories and practices would be confirmed rather than contested, and the perception of dissonance between my two activities would not be as wide. If I were that person, I might not have been asked to give an explanation of why I write what I write, because it would have been obvious.

I have identified four personal characteristics, constitutive of the organization of my inner sensibilities, that make coherent and continuous my inclinations and interests as a romance writer and as a linguistic historiographer. In other words, here are the reasons why the two different writing activities don't seem so different to me:

#1) I am not a minimalist. I am tempted to avoid the negative self-description and call myself a maximalist. However, that would still be self-definition by opposition to someone else's primary term, so I think I will call myself an extravagantist.

Take, for instance, the novels of Ann Tyler. I admire her work greatly, but her writing is not to my taste. I do not bring up Ann Tyler to put her down. I do not valorize my work by devalorizing hers. I bring her up because her work strikes me as being at an aesthetic polar opposite from mine. Her characters and their relationships are, in a word, bony. Now her craft is great, and in the German sense of *Kraft*, she has power to bring a very particular world into existence. To my eye, her stories are like finely etched engravings. I have read many of her stories and appreciated them and even enjoyed them, but *they are not central to my reading taste*.

My taste is for flesh, lots of it. I do not like painfully skinny Giacometti statues. I do like the corpulent men and women (especially the women) in the paintings of Fragonard, Watteau, and Titian. I like things round, lush, and colorful. In other words, I respond well to the aesthetic dimensions of the romance, in particular, the historical romance. Fifteen years ago, I experienced something of a relief when, while working on my dissertation, a friend lent me Georgette Heyer's *Cotillion* as a diversion, and I ate it up, finding that historical romances, specifically romanticomedies, seemed to satisfy my reading taste for physical, emotional, and verbal extravagance. Soon thereafter, I began to write my first romance. I set it in the thirteenth century, and I recall taking intemperate pleasure in describing a medieval feast and in spreading the tables with food. No authorial anorexia for me.

My aesthetic and authorial tastes are intimately bound with my conception of myself, which can be understood, in part, in terms of the consequences of being born a baby girl in the 1950s and becoming a woman in the culture in which I have lived for the past 45 years. My sense of my



bodily self is – curiously, given the culture in which I live – the opposite of the wisdom articulated by the diet guru, Richard Simmons, who has said that inside every fat woman is a thin woman trying to get out. Inside of me, by way of contrast, I am aware of a fat woman trying to get out, and I let her out as often as I can. If I could sing (which I cannot), I would not be a romance writer. I would be a torch singer of operatic proportions.

So, then, what could have been my response as a graduate student in the 1970s upon encountering Chomskyan linguistics, that most svelte of language theories? I think I experienced, quite simply, cognitive distaste for this emaciated theory of language. Chomskyan linguistics is based on the linguistic analysis of single, monologic sentences occurring in isolation. I do not say that these sentences are *uttered* in isolation, because they never issue forth from any particular speaker's mouth; and I call them monologic (versus dialogic) because they are never a response to another utterance, nor do they, in turn, ever provoke responses. Chomskyan linguistics was first built around an elegant set of rules to explain its monologic sentences and is now built around an exquisitely abstracted set of principles and parameters. Either way, it is thin to the vanishing point, for in its very conceptualization, language is theorized to be a thoroughly disembodied entity. So, fifteen years ago, I was a graduate student in search of a theory of language that I could respond to positively, and in order to increase the possibilities of finding such a theory, I turned to the historical record of the discipline and began to hunt around. I am happy to report that I have found many theories to my taste, Skinner's account of verbal behavior being one notable, full-bodied example. In *Verbal Behavior* bodies speak, bodies move, they interact with one another, they affect one another, they laugh, argue, and have fun. No wonder I took so readily to Skinner and preferred him to Chomsky's world of hushed, bodiless, streamlined analyses.

#2) Although I have set up an aesthetic pole where Ann Tyler is at one end and I am at the other, I do not believe in any similar emotion / intellect continuum, such that the farther one is toward the emotional end, the farther away one is from the intellectual end, and vice versa. I suppose I should tell you that I was a girl who did pretty well in school, and I suppose that I should also tell you that I was the girl who consistently got a "check minus" on her report card in the category: "ability to control emotions." I must have been crying, laughing, or generally emoting in school, but it was primarily crying. In any case, I was not behaving within the emotional norms preferred by the public schools - and my inner child still rages at the thought of not only having been graded on my emotions but also *having been graded down* for them, as if they were some wild part of me that I needed either to tame or kill. Come to think of it, my adult self rages, too, at the thought of either taming or killing my emotions. I *like* living life at a high emotional pitch, or perhaps I can live only at this pitch. I don't think I can even tell it is a high pitch, for it seems normal to me. Yet the clues are all around me that I do emote more strongly than the norm, and sure enough, I still get an occasional "check minus" from my husband and two sons in the category: "ability to control emotions."

I probably do not need to belabor the point that the romance genre is a likely candidate for satisfying my desire and need for emotional charge, both in my reading and writing experiences. (Writing romance is, in fact, emotionally regulatory for me.) Certainly all literature is expressive, but it seems to me that romance foregrounds emotionality and makes it its subject matter. In the romance, the central problem is the working through of the emotional relationship between the hero

and heroine. The central problem is not, say, the solving of a murder as it is in a mystery novel or the creation of a parallel universe as it is in a science fiction novel. I do not insist on differentiating romance from other genres on the basis of its foregrounding of emotionality. I will, however, insist that it is not built into the genre that an emotionally charged love story will insult your intelligence or, alternatively, will have no appeal to the intellect. Let's face it: some romances are dumb, but some are not, and I like to read and write emotionally compelling stories that satisfy the (intellectual? technical? literary?) demands of plot, character development, historical specificity, thematic elements, style, and imagery.

Turning back to linguistics, the logical premise of the Chomskyan theory of language is that syntactic structures and "knowledge of language" can be successfully analyzed as autonomous objects, that is, objects studied apart from particular contexts and apart from the particular beliefs, needs, desires, emotions, idiosyncrasies, historical circumstances, etc., of particular speakers. I have either always refused or am constitutionally unable to undertake such an autonomously conceived analytic task. It is a fundamentally alien notion to me to think that I – or anyone else – could utter a sentence apart from any beliefs, needs, desires, emotions, etc. So, when I was a graduate student, it was difficult for me to wring any emotional transport out of (or even see the sense of analyzing) such classic sentences as "Flying planes can be dangerous" or "Seymour cut the salami with a knife" which were left to float in white space on a textbook page, without a context, without a speaker, without a listener, and without a purpose, emotional or otherwise.

So there I was, a graduate student, faced with the Chomskyan model of language that assumed that communication does occur and proceeded to explain *how* it occurs but saying nothing of *why* it occurs. The "why" seemed the more interesting question to me, along with the "why" of why Chomsky was making the kinds of assumptions he was making about language. So I backed up through the historical record of linguistics and came to a stop at the 18th century. There I discovered that both the *grammairiens philosophes* and Chomskyan linguists were working from an inherited Cartesian epistemology / psychology. I was able to see Chomsky as a most recent and prominent purveyor of the dichotomization of intellect (*raison*) and emotion (*passion*) formalized by Descartes and inherited by Condillac, perhaps the most influential *grammairien philosophe*, who continued to separate understanding (*entendement*) from will or willful desire (*volonté*). Rousseau, Diderot, and even Condillac had problematized the intellect / emotion dichotomy under the influence of an imported Lockean sensualism. Still, the traditional master narrative of intellectual history established the commonplace that the cool rationalism of the Enlightenment was followed, in serial fashion, by the heated passion of Romanticism, as if intellect and emotion could not coherently co-occur at any given time, in any given philosophy.

But, of course, intellect and emotion do interpenetrate in the work of, say, William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894) and William James (1842-1910), and it pleases me to think that American pragmatism, in a certain sense, did not buy into the intellect / emotion dichotomy. Or, perhaps, it is that Whitney and James understand understanding to be so thoroughly embodied that they cannot help but discuss it in terms of the ever-situatedness of individually, historically circumstanced bodies interacting in specific contexts. On discussing the faculty of memory, for instance, James writes in *Principles of Psychology*: "Evidently, then, the faculty does not exist absolutely, but works under conditions, and the quest of the conditions becomes the psychologist's most interesting task" (1918 [1890]:3). This "quest of conditions" defines my various projects: from understanding the



historical and otherwise contingent conditions that shape a given theory of language at a given period of time; to understanding the historical and otherwise contingent conditions that shape the characters in my romances as they, in turn, shape a certain historical and otherwise contingent plot played out in the “theater of my mind”; to understanding the historical and otherwise contingent conditions that shape any given instance of verbal behavior.

#3) I have already told you that I cannot sing. I also cannot paint or sculpt. That’s okay, because I love language. I love new words. I love old words. I love to talk, and I love people to talk to me. My preferred genre in film is the Hollywood romanticomedy. My preferred genre in television is the situation comedy. I loved *I Love Lucy* as a kid. I think *Home Improvement* is funny now. The romanticomedy and the situation comedy are genres that are dialogue-intense, and the best, from my point of view, are hallmarked by witty repartee.

My point is this: the center of the center of my romances is animated by the dialogue between the hero and heroine. If you do not have good dialogue, you do not have good romance. Dialogue is “where the action is” as far as the romantic chemistry between the two characters is concerned. Dialogue is the verbal sculpture of the characters, and their dialogic interactions sculpt their chemistry. If what the characters are saying is not interesting and if their dialogic interactions are not interesting, then I do not care how beautiful and sexy they are, their love relationship will not interest me.

Let me re-invoke Ann Tyler. I have said that her characters and their relationships are bony. I would like to add that her dialogues are consistently about miscommunication. Her dialogues go like this. (Fingers on both hands spread and turned away from one another, fingers not meshing.) I, on the other hand, like my hero-heroine dialogues to go like this. (Fingers on both hands spread, facing one another, and now interlocking.) There can be serious misunderstandings between the hero and heroine – and there often are – but it is the possibility of entangling, then clearing them up that is tantalizing to me. Hero and heroine have to be talking to each other, verbally engaged with each other, even if they are talking at cross-purposes. No matter how serious in tone or theme, romances are comedies. Romances are premised on the possibility of communication and happy resolution and a satisfying love relationship. In a romance, the hero’s answer to the heroine’s question: “What’s bothering you?” is *never*: “I don’t want to talk about it.”

As a graduate student, I could make absolutely nothing out of those poor, lonely, emotionless, theoretically unprovoked, and defiantly unresponsive utterances of the type “Seymour cut the salami with a knife.” I think I was even resentful that these lone, fully finished, seemingly transparently interpretable sentences could be the centerpiece of linguistic inquiry. So, when, about five years ago, I encountered the work of V. N. Vološinov, a Soviet linguist of the 1920s, I immediately recognized a kindred spirit. Let me quote a passage from Vološinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*:

The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic form, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psycho-physiological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances. Thus, verbal interaction is the basic reality of language. Dialogue, in the narrow sense of the word, is, of course, only one of the forms – a very



important form, to be sure – of verbal interaction. But dialogue can also be understood in a broader sense, meaning not only direct, face-to-face, vocalized communication between persons, but also verbal communication of any type whatsoever. A book, i.e., a *verbal performance in print*, is also an element of verbal communication. (1973 [1929]:94-95)

To this, all I can say is: “Sounds right to me.”

#4) This is where I will try to explain why I experienced this attempt to account for the whole of myself as a not-so-novel novelty. This is also where I pretty much sum up my view of my work, and it is this: romance writing and linguistic historiography share, to my way of thinking, two characteristics: they are both and at once adventuresomely iconoclastic and irrevocably traditional. It is as if they both “hedge my bets” in similar ways.

When I struck out to do linguistic historiography in the late 1970s, it was not a recognized or even recognizable sub-discipline of linguistics in the United States. It is hardly more recognized today (that is a different story), but it is fully recognizable, at least to me and other international scholars, if to no one else. When I began to imagine linguistic historiography, I was engaging in relativist heresy: I was not accepting Chomskyan linguistics as a set of true statements about language. I was not believing that Chomskyan linguistics was describing an immediately available object “language.” Rather, I suspected that the shape of that object “language” was forcefully determined by often unstated and unquestioned presuppositions concerning, among other things, the nature of the mind and of society. I also suspected that the shape of that object “language” at any given time might well be the result of unquestioned presuppositions about that object uncritically inherited from a preceding theory of language, no matter how much, at times, one theorist might disclaim his connection with a preceding theory. I was interested to read the historical record of linguistics in order to gain a broad understanding of the theoretical range and presuppositional structures of the variously configured objects called “language,” and I wanted that broad understanding to serve as a method – although not the cheapest and easiest method, surely – for producing a new understanding of that object.

I admit that the relativist heresy gave me a thrill. It also gave me some long-term unemployment, but that period of unemployment was productive for the exercise of my romance writing craft. At the same time that I was enjoying my heresy (in splendid poverty, I might add), I was also enjoying a certain ironic awareness that my activity of rummaging around in the dusty old texts in the university library, assimilating a vast historical learning, could hardly be more traditionally, recognizably academic. For a long time, it was my private joke that I was alone among American linguists in my ability to quote linguists who were dead but that my field was too innovative for me to find employment.

The same blend of the innovative and the traditional in the romance genre apparently appeals to my creative writing imagination. The romance genre is either 800 years old or 200 years old, depending on how you count it, but either way you count it, it is a venerable literary form. The central problematic – that of establishing a long-term heterosexual love relationship that usually involves marriage and reproduction – could hardly be any more traditionally grounded. At the same time, the conventions of the romance novel fall so far outside the pale of traditional definitions of “real”



literature that the adjective “trashy” flies, magnet-like, to the term “romance” as easily as “dumb” precedes “blonde.” It has always struck me as deliciously ironic that this most traditional genre could be so reviled and by some of the most traditional sectors in our culture.

Now I admit to getting a heretical thrill from skirmishing on the borders of the magic circle surrounding “real” literature as well. My challenges to those borders, my insistence on the respectability of the romance genre have been variously perceived as outrageous, pretentious, deluded, untenable, a slap in the face at “real” literature written by “real” writers with “real” talent, a quirky, campy start, or “just a phase.” (This last is my mother’s position. It’s like: “Julie can’t be serious. She’s too smart to be serious about this.”)

So either way I have been turning in the past fifteen years, I have been the Barbarian at the Gate. Go figure. Well, actually, I *can* figure. The ways I have been turning have been directed by my ways of knowing that seem similar to the ways of knowing of American behaviorism. I admit to liking, once again the heretical thrill that I as an American linguist could feel in taking up the cause of defending Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior*. Or at least I could say that the prospect of further heresy held no terrors for me. However, I could not have taken up that heretical cause if I had not also responded to the account of verbal behavior that Skinner was offering and that was so consonant with my backward-looking ways of knowing and the lessons I had learned from reading the historical record of linguistics, namely: a) that any given theory of language and any given instance of verbal behavior is the product of the history of the reinforcements of the situated, historically circumstanced variables at hand; b) that some of those situated, historically circumstanced variables will prove useful or powerful enough to recur, thus making for a high degree of repetition and formularization in every “new” thing we say or say about language; and c) that in particular historical circumstances, it might be perceived as “new” to point out the repetitive, formulaic nature of our verbal behaviors.

As for my romance writing, I believe that the romance is neither more nor less formulaic than any other kind of fiction, and having said that, I hasten to add that I am completely comfortable with its repetitions and formulas. I have repeatedly encountered the objection to romance fiction that it has “a predictable happy end.” To my way of thinking, the happy end is not a conclusion but a premise of the genre, and the question for a reader opening the first page of a romance novel is not *whether* the romance will end happily but *how* it will achieve its happy end, just as the person who turns on *Home Improvement* at 8:00 is not wondering *whether* Tim will solve his problem with Jill and his kids by 8:29 but *how* he will resolve it, usually with the aid of Good Neighbor Wilson. Criticizing a romance novel for its “predictable happy end” is, to me, the equivalent of criticizing a high-culture Renaissance painting of the Madonna and Child for depicting a Madonna and Child. A love relationship is a fine and venerable topos. It is an “institutionalized something” to write about, just as the Madonna and Child is an “institutionalized something” to paint about.

My view of language, my view of linguistic historiography, and my view of the romance genre have been mutually reinforcing, enough so that my various writing behaviors have maintained themselves under long-term aversive conditions. The most sustained and publicly aversive conditions have pertained to my romance writing behavior, and I rehearsed at the outset the questions routinely encountered by romance writers, each of which carries a densely-packed load of negative prejudice. The current conditions for my various writing behaviors are no longer so aversive, and I am amazed (and yet not so amazed) that recent, more positive reactions to my various

writing behaviors are not immediately welcome to me. The simple reason is that they create for me the problem of establishing new responses, ones that are not defensive and argumentative but instead explanatory. In writing these pages, I have been trying to move through explanatory territory in order to stimulate new behavioral responses, but I have to admit that it is easier for me to walk through the old, familiar territory of simply defending myself against attack.

The compressed lessons of linguistic historiography, romance writing, and Skinnerean behaviorism all exemplify for me the notion of “intentionless invention of regulated improvisation” as elaborated by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. In his terms, the human *habitus* that is, embodied or forgotten history, is the active presence of the individual’s whole past which continues to produce history on the basis of history, thereby ensuring the permanence in change. The individual constantly carrying and carried by, constantly possessing and possessed by institutional practices, finds in discourse the triggers for further discourse, finds in instituted means of expression further instituted means of expression, finds in behavior further behavior, which goes along, as Bourdieu says, like a train laying its own rails. The clever person – and we are all clever people, in our own ways – constantly improvises within the regulatory range of possibilities that institutionalized practices necessarily imply.

The way our verbal interactions work, the way a good story works, the way the entire world works is, I believe, like a train laying its own rails. What can be said, imagined, or produced in the future is an inevitably contingent product of what was said, imagined, and produced in the past, and how what was said, imagined, and produced was reinforced. And yet what is said, imagined, or produced is always unexpected because the resources of our institutionalized practices are never exhausted and because new and different clever people come along every day. I came along and recognized in the full (even fat) bodied, emotionally saturated, dialogue-intense genre marketed as romance fiction an institutionalized practice whose resources are extremely rich for me, given my tastes, inclinations, and personal history. I do not now envision an end to my ability to improvise within the regulatory range of the genre. I came along and, with my love of language at various levels, felt the desire to recover the *habitus* of thought about language, that full and rich body of forgotten history that is an active presence in the discipline of linguistics. I felt the desire to “write the cross-generational dialogue” created by linguists over the centuries. I have always been aware that this dialogue was open-ended, yet also aware that the historian always “cheats,” always get to look ahead to see “what happens next.”

I hope that my work, whether it is linguistic historiography or romance fiction, always strikes as much by its unpredictability as by its retrospective necessity, like a good joke or a pun. I cannot resist quoting William James again, this time with a passage that should be engraved on my key chain:

Our minds thus grow in spots; and like grease-spots, the spots spread. But we let them spread as little as possible: we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs, as we can. We patch and tinker more than we renew. The novelty soaks in; it stains the ancient mass; but it is also tinged by what absorbs it. Our past apperceives and co-operates; and in the new equilibrium in which each step forward in the process of learning terminates, it happens rela-



tively seldom that the new fact is added *raw*. More usually it is embedded cooked, as one might say, or stewed down in the sauce of the old. (1969 [1907]:13)

This passage summarizes what I find so delightful and compelling in the work of this first great naturalist psychologist to write in the wake of Darwin, and I used it in my talk at Western Michigan to set up my subsequent lectures on the evolutionary scripts for language. James understood that evolution does not produce novelties from scratch and that even in the development of our mental processes – whether phylogenetic or ontogenetic – the action of natural selection / experience works on what already exists. I can telescope James’s passage to read like an aphorism: “Fresh experience grafted onto old knowledge makes new knowledge.” Or, reverse angle: “Old habits die hard.” You see, my taste for formularization runs deep.

The James quote also serves my purposes by explaining rather beautifully – and this image of grease-spots spreading is deeply satisfying to me aesthetically – the sense of the unexpected and the inevitable that I experienced in this accounting for the whole of myself. The exercise has felt new to me, which it is, because my grease-spot of selfunderstanding has spread. It has also felt as if I have thought all this before, which I have, because my grease-spot of self-understanding was already there. I have been standing at the intersection of these two writing activities all these years, looking either down one lane or down the other, but I had never bothered – had never been asked – to describe what the intersection itself looked like.

By inviting both of me to speak, the psychologists at Western Michigan, generally in tune with what I am “up to” concerning verbal behavior, must have guessed that there would be some reason why I do what I do and that it would have everything to do with my personal history and the places I fit and do not fit within the evaluative categories and institutionalized practices of the culture that shapes me and that I, like it or not, shape in return. I am not saying that the psychologists could have guessed what they would hear, for I, at least, had never said it before, but I hope they heard this unexpected and inevitable account of myself and thought, just as you might be thinking: “Sounds right to me.”

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