‘The Northern Farmer’: Language and Homeland

There is no longer any homeland.

T. W. Adorno

Tennyson’s dialect poems, though composed in the later part of his career, represent an instinctive and symptomatic return to his Lincolnshire roots. As Sir Charles Tennyson remarks, the poet ‘used dialect in dramatic monologue to recreate the life and character of the countryside in which he spent his youth’. Edward Campion has suggested that there is ‘plenty of evidence to suggest that all through his long life [Tennyson] continued to speak with a Lincolnshire accent’, and he further notes that ‘Alfred had a sympathetic and retentive ear for the dialect of his neighbours and his memory was remarkable’. The Laureate himself considered what he termed his ‘Lincolnshire sketches’ some of his ‘best things’, but, he warned, ‘it needs humour to understand them’. Tennyson’s series of dialect poems, published from the early 1860s onwards, testifies to, and is marked by, the beginnings of systematic dialect study in England. Indeed, he was alert to the new models of classification, accuracy and mapping, remarking for instance of ‘The Northern Farmer’,

When I first wrote ‘The Northern Farmer’ I sent it to a solicitor of ours in Lincolnshire. I was afraid I had forgotten the tongue and he altered all my mid-Lincolnshire into North Lincolnshire and I had to put it all back.

Tennyson’s work may thus be situated within a larger project, a cultural moment signalled, for example, by the formation of Walter Skeat’s English Dialect Society in 1873, and the subsequent production of

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a prodigious series of glossaries; by A. J. Ellis's *Early English Pronunciation* (1889), and by Joseph Wright's dialect dictionary (1898–1905). The emphasis in all these enterprises was predominantly upon traditional dialects located, as Peter Trudgill notes, ‘in the more remote and peripheral areas of the country’, and there was a general diagnosis of loss or disappearance in connection with non-standard linguistic practice. A work like Wright's dictionary was testimony to the widespread belief that, as Thomas Hardy phrased it, regional dialects were destined to be ‘worsted in the struggle for existence, when a uniform tongue became a necessity among the advanced classes of the population’. There is a sense, in this structure of feeling, of a vanishing relationship between diction, community and spirit, and it was a combination of these factors which, prior to the publication of Tennyson's poems, had earlier generated the project of William Barnes. Believing that foreign words and roots had corrupted the simplicity and homogeneity of a lost Anglo-Saxon tongue, Barnes composed his dialect poems in a ‘purified’ English which took the form of an amalgam of Dorset dialect terms, obsolete English words of Anglo-Saxon origin, and neologisms based on these Anglo-Saxon roots. In practice the combination of these factors generated an eccentric polyglot English which took the form of a type of linguistic ‘invented tradition’. The Dorset dialect was, in Barnes's account,

...purer and more regular than that which has been adopted as the national speech. It was, moreover, a broad, bold, rustic shape of English as the Doric was of the Greek; rich in humour, strong in raillery, powerful in hyperbole, and altogether a fit vehicle of rustic feeling and thought as the Doric is found in the Idylls of Theocritus.

Barnes's life-work, then, was to propagate the view ‘that the local speech was not, as many thought, a debased form of standard English, but a variant of the West Saxon tongue...and therefore the purest form of the language’. Sue Edney has pertinently remarked that Barnes's ‘sense of what was familiar and stable in the life of a small farmhouse is always underpinned by anxiety over change’. She goes on to suggest of Barnes, in terms which also resonate in Tennyson's Lincolnshire verse, that the ‘juxtaposition of labouring-class language and “high tone” produces radical effects'. Tennyson possessed copies of both Barnes's dialect *Poems of Rural Life* (1848) and his *Notes on Ancient Britain and the Britons* (1858), and he similarly aimed at linguistic fidelity, his