

# The Lexicographers

Michael Manis



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## Johnson Upon the Priapism of Lexicography

“A preternatural tension”—ah yes between our throats creating sounds endless and the pen’s wet running upon the page. Such early morning thoughts arise to wag my confidence at my bedside as if to tantalize, to offer and then stiff me of my resolve to suffer English fixed like a tent pitched to serve whim and wish of Pope and Dryden. Then, outside my home, the chatter rises from the street, the drone, the hum, which should comfort my stultified, wooden mind and limpen the stature of my worries. But the muffled sounds that shove their way into my room causes worry once again to bloom. I close my ears and try to train my mind on Pope’s poems, but against the street, not all Pope’s verses could stay defeat. There my dictionary stands on a shelf and outside the language busies itself. Who am I but an old man with an ear through which to soften the stubborn fear that men do not need monuments erect to all Shakespeare, Dryden, and Pope’s affect.

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## Murray On His Pigeon Holes

Today I look up from my work, and I am astounded by the pigeon-holes lining the scriptorium wall like wooden pores, from which the language exhales its secrets. I have spent near half my life listening to the lungs of English, measuring its intervals. I wonder if those pores will swallow me one day and inside there sits my doppelganger, waiting for his chance to make sense of the last of my breaths.

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## Picture of a Lexicographer

Words  
alone  
make  
for  
lonely  
men.

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## Memo One: From Philip Gove to America

Ain’t is a word like any other, though substandard, but all words are substandard in their own way.

For example, I came home late one evening and found my house empty except for strangers reading stacks of memos like this one—all trying to figure out who it was that lived here.

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## Memo Two: From Phillip Gove to the Copy of Webster’s Third on His Desk

Congratulations for being finished, though I don’t mean “finished” in the completed sense. I mean through or dead or irrelevant. We both know you’ll never be finished in the first way but you’ll be forever finished in the second.

Last night, I dreamt I opened you. Inside: all the bones of anyone who ever tried to say anything and mean it.

### Lexicographical poems: an introduction

Indiana University has an outstanding graduate creative writing program. Some students in that program were members of a seminar I taught last spring, titled “Reading Dictionaries.” While doctoral students wrote traditional research papers at the end of the term, the creative writers were encouraged to find a way to make sense of the course material in fiction or poetry. Michael Manis, primarily a writer of fiction, submitted the poems published here. In them, he conveys memorably the burdens and joys of lexicography. I am aware of only a few poems devoted to dictionaries and their makers; it seems fitting that *Kernerman Dictionary News*, devoted as it is to the art and craft of lexicography, would once in a while publish art about lexicography, too. Through lyric, we see our familiar world with unexpected clarity; we are reminded of the humanity that underlies all lexicographical enterprise.

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