

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.

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.

Picture of a Lexicographer

Words
alone
make
for
lonely
men.

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.

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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Dictionary as Lexicographer

If Webster's Third were a lexicographer, she would be a tall woman with glasses—popular glasses like something Sarah Palin would wear. She would speak eloquently, though in long-winded sentences that lose people's attention at parties, but those people would invariably believe she was very smart, despite the fact that she was known for repeating herself.

If the OED were a lexicographer, he would be a skinny man in his late forties prone to wearing tweed suits and bow-ties. At parties, the OED would entertain with trivia that, while precise, would annoy the guests by the sheer weight of it. Once the OED gets talking, he will never stop.

If the American Heritage Dictionary were a lexicographer, he would be a portly man in his thirties, though he would dress as if he were in his twenties: casually, with no tie, open collar and camel hair blazer. He would be jealous of the attention Webster's gets and would constantly look out for the politically incorrect, if only to butt his way into a conversation, which was hard enough to do with the OED around.

Gove's Wife, Cataloguing Johnson's Cards

The words on the cards, like fossils buried in bedrock—they are easy to disregard.

Many words come from the bard and some vulgarities are a shock to find on the cards.

Most people I show are dullards and care for no words and balk, but they are easy to disregard.

The quotations are like barnyards, here a cow and there a cock domesticated on the cards.

The tedium makes it hard, and Philip does not take stock—my work, he disregards.

I see my husband in Johnson's awkward script—small letters like pocks fall into line on the cards, which I find difficult to disregard.

Johnson Upon Craigie

"It was a railway porter"—what have I with my methods brought about? Is it dry witticism, for surely no man thinks that the object here is by its link to existence (ah "it was!") distinguished from the atoms composing a bonefish or those of the ink running black over the presses of Grub Street or of Dover? Perhaps I mistake the nature of this porter and it is truly formal bliss the likes of which might leave Plato pleased to see exist. Or better Democrates, attempting to divide the object in twain, might find the process trying and refrain from attempting to define—excuse me—divide it any further. Bad to lose a pure proof of ancient-logic to those poets who'd sentence divinity's word to context low! Perhaps to protect and gird it best, the lexicographer chose to leave this sacred porter alone in lieu of finding it a wordly epitome, which the language in brief could not condone, or if it could, why can't the writer shirk his readers to do philosophy's work?

Burchfield on Nonce words

The ground beneath the tree of words grows softer with common rinds, and I do the work of a botanist, picking up here a rough and yellowed peel and sketching the seeds still stuck to the husk on my steno-pad with an old fountain pen.

Have not I earned, in all these long years among the rinds, the swarming flies, the sweet and sticky juices, the exposed, oxidized flesh in browns—I know I've earned the right to climb the tree and pick the fruit that never falls but is so light, it evaporates into the rarefied air.

Memo Three: Philip Gove to His Employees

Murray died before he got to see the complete OED, and I began to wonder—if I hired one of you to write these memos for me, could I embark on a voyage to somewhere warm and distant?

None of you harmless drudges would ever know.