

ADAM'S TASK

A Dictionary Story

“Language most shews a man: Speak, that I may see thee.”

Ben Jonson, *Timber, or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter* (1640)

We are condemned to loss. From the moment we come into this world, we lose everything we believe is ours, from the comfort of the womb to the memory of a lifetime. Circumstances change, desires wane, our memory loses its hold. We walk towards the grave shedding stuff: toys, playmates, parents, teachers, homeland, enthusiasms, dates, tastes, beliefs, knick-knacks accumulated on the shore throughout the years. All these and many more are drift away, forgotten (but I can't now remember what they are) as if to lighten our descent into the realm of shadows. Death is not, as we like to suppose, a thief in the night, but rather resembles one of those dishonest guests who come for a weekend and gradually outstay their welcome, taking up more and more room over longer and longer periods, until we feel that neither our house nor our life belong to us any longer. “Where did we put that book?” we ask. “Where is that photograph I knew I had?” “What was that name, that address, that unforgettable look, that memorable line?” *Alms for oblivion*, someone wrote, but rest of the lines I knew have also vanished, gone into the thief's pocket, never to be seen again.

And yet, a cluster of these things clings on, doggedly resisting abduction, so that in the dim light of old age we might recognize a few of familiar faces, a few dear bits and pieces -- a few but not many, and not always. Most of them are neither notorious nor prestigious: our memory is not picky. A smile floats down, disembodied, like the grin on the Cheshire Cat; a snippet of a song, a paragraph in a story, the dappled

image of a forest, a conversation of no importance – these persist, scattered on the ground after the garbage truck has passed. In this heap of leftovers are also a few solid objects: maybe a cup, a pen, a stone, a volume of poetry and, why not, a dictionary.

For my generation (I was born in the first half of the previous century) dictionaries mattered. Our elders treasured their Bible, or the *Complete Works* of Shakespeare, or Betty Crocker's cookbook, or the six volumes of the Lagarde-Michard. For the generations of this third millennium, it will perhaps not be a book at all but a nostalgic Gameboy or an iPhone. But for many readers of my age, le Petit Robert, Collins, Sopena, Webster's were the names of our libraries' guardian angels. Mine, when I was in high school, was the Spanish edition of the *Petit Larousse Illustré*, with its pink stratum of foreign phrases separating common words from proper names.

In the days of my youth, for those of us who liked to read, the dictionary was a magical object of mysterious powers. In first place, because we were told that here, in this small fat volume, was almost the entirety of our common language; that between the drab covers were all the words that named everything in the world that we knew and also everything in the world that we did not know; that the dictionary held the past (all those words spoken by our grandparents and great-grandparents, mumbled in the dark and which we no longer used) and the future (words to name what we might one day want to say, when a new experience would call for them.) In second place, because the dictionary, like a benevolent Sibyl, answered all our questions when we stumbled over difficult words in a story (even though, as Helen Keller's teacher

complains in *The Miracle Worker*, “what use is a dictionary if you have to know how a word is spelled before you can find out how to spell it?”)

We were taught to be curious. Whenever we asked a teacher what something meant, we were told to “look it up in the dictionary!” We never thought of this as a punishment. On the contrary: with this command we were given the keys to a magic cavern in which one word would lead without rhyme or reason (except an arbitrary alphabetical reason) to the next. We would look up “*poudroie*,” for example, after reading in *La Barbe Bleue*: “*Je ne vois rien que le Soleil qui poudroie, et l’herbe qui verdoie*” and discover not only the sense in which Charles Perrault used the word, but that, in Canada, (a name that for me was still nothing but a vast pink shape on the map) “*poudroyer*” meant “*être chassée par le vent (souvent en rafales), en parlant de la neige.*” And further on the same page, this exquisite term, “*Poudrin: pluie fine et glacée, à Terre-Neuve.*” Several decades later, when caught in an icy downpour in St-Johns, Newfoundland, I found that I had the word to name the experience. Aby Warburg, the great reader, defined for us all what he called a library’s “law of the good neighbour.” According to Warburg, the book with which one was familiar was not, in most cases, the book one needed. It was the unknown neighbour on the same shelf that contained the vital information. The same can be said of the words in a dictionary, though in the electronic age a virtual dictionary offers less of a chance for serendipity, or for the kind of happy distraction which filled Emile Littré with such pride: “*Plus d’une fois,*” Littré reported happily, “*il m’est revenu que, cherchant un mot, le chercheur s’attrada et suivit la lecture comme il eût fait d’un livre ordinaire et courant.*”

These magical properties were probably unsuspected that singular hot afternoon, almost three thousand years ago when, somewhere in Mesopotamia, an inspired and anonymous ancestor of ours scratched in a piece of clay a slim list of Akkadian words and their meanings, thus creating what must have been, to all effects and purposes, a dictionary. For a dictionary designed much along the lines of ours today, we have to wait until the first century, when Pamphilus of Alexandria put together the earliest Greek lexicon with the words in alphabetical order. Did Pamphilus intuit that among his descendants would be swarms of illustrious lexicographers toiling in languages not yet born?

Sebastián de Covarrubias in Spain, Émile Littré in France, Noah Webster in the States: their names became synonymous with their scholarly creations. Today we speak of fetching a Langenscheidt or a Sopena, or of consulting a “*calepin*”, after the Italian Ambrogio Calepino put together, in 1502, a gigantic multilingual dictionary worthy of the Epiphany. I remember once, at the house of a friend in the Gaspé, discussing whether the word “*névé*” (which appears in a novel by Erckmann-Chatrion, meaning “*un amas de neige durci*”) came from Quebec. My friend called out to his wife: “*Chérie, emmène mon Béslisle à table!*” as if inviting the learned Louis-Alexandre himself, author of the *Dictionnaire général de la langue française au Canada*, to share our dinner. I believe this familiarity says something important about the nature of a reader’s relationship with dictionaries.

Dictionary-makers are astonishing creatures who rejoice, above everything else, in words. In spite of Dr Samuel Johnson’s definition of a lexicographer as “a harmless drudge,” dictionary-makers are notoriously passionate and don’t believe in social niceties wherever their great task is

concerned. Think of James Murray, mastermind behind the great Oxford English Dictionary, who for many years received thousands of earliest instances of English words from an American surgeon living in England whom he never met, until at last he discovered, with splendid indifference, that his contributor, in addition to being a talented researcher, was also a clinically insane murderer whose home was the lunatic asylum of Broadmoor. Think of Noah Webster, who was caught by his wife in the arms of the maid. “Doctor Webster,” she exclaimed, “I am surprised!” “No Madam,” he corrected her. “*I* am surprised. You are *astonished*.” Think of Thomas Cooper, the sixteenth-century scholar, who compiled for many years an important Latin-English dictionary. When he was halfway through his work, his wife, angry at him for always sitting up so late at night, crept into his study, seized all his notes and threw them in the fire. “For all that,” reported the gossipy antiquarian John Aubrey, “the good man had so great a zeal for the advancement of learning, that he began it again, and went with it to that Perfection that he has left us, a most useful Work.” Aubrey concludes admiringly: “He was made Bishop of Winton.”

Readers of dictionaries are equally passionate. Gustave Flaubert, himself a great dictionary reader, mockingly noted in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*: “*Dictionnaire -- En dire: ‘N’est fait que pour les ignorants’.*” Michel Leiris, not the most ignorant of men, often travelled with a dictionary in his pocket in view of compiling one of his own, since he believed that every person’s task was to “*élucider le sens véritable de ses mots... selon le bon plaisir de son esprit.*” Gabriel García Márquez, while writing *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, would start every day reading the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* -- “*dont chaque édition,*” judged the French-Argentinian critic Paul Groussac,

“fait regretter la précédente.” Ralph Waldo Emerson read the dictionary for literary pleasure. “There is no cant in it,” he said, “no excess of explanation, and it is full of suggestion, the raw material of possible poems and histories.” Vladimir Nabokov found in Cambridge a secondhand edition of Vladimir Dahl’s *Interpretative Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language* in four volumes, and resolved to read ten pages a day since, away from his motherland, “my fear of losing or corrupting, through alien influence, the only thing I had salvaged from Russia –her language—became positively morbid.”

As Nabokov understood, the language we use is not just an instrument –however feeble, inexact, treacherous-- for communicating as best we can with others. Unlike other instruments, the language that we speak defines us. Our thoughts, our ethics, our aesthetics are all, up to a point, defined by our language. Each particular language provokes or allows a certain way of thinking, elicits even certain specific thoughts that come to our mind not only through but because of the language we call ours. Every translator knows that passing from one language to another is less an act of reconstruction than of reconversion, in the profoundest sense of changing one’s system of belief. No French author would ever come up with “*être ou ne pas être*” any more than an English author would write “For a long time I went to bed early”: their language, not their experience, disallows it, because though human experience is universally the same, after Babel the words we have to name that common experience are different. After all, the identity of things depends on what we call them.

It is an old, old story. After creating Adam "out of the dust of the ground" and placing him in a garden east of Eden (as the second chapter

of Genesis tells us), God went on to create every beast of the field and every fowl of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever Adam called each living creature, "that was the name thereof." For centuries, scholars have puzzled over the curious task that God gave Adam. Was Adam supposed to invent names for the nameless creatures he saw? Or did the beasts and the fowl that God created indeed have God-given names, names which Adam was meant to know, and which he was to pronounce like a child seeing a dog or a dove for the very first time?

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, words are the beginning of everything. According to Talmudic commentators, two thousand years before the creation of heaven and earth, God brought into being seven essential things: his divine throne, Paradise set to his right, Hell to his left, the celestial sanctuary in front, a jewel with the name of the Messiah engraved upon it, a voice calling out from the darkness "*Return, ye children of men!*" and the Torah, written in black fire on white fire. The Torah was the first of these seven and it was the Torah that God consulted before creating the world. With some reluctance, because it feared the sinfulness of the world's creatures, the Torah consented to the world's creation. Learning of the divine purpose, the letters of the alphabet descended from his august crown, where they had been written with a pen of flames, and one by one the letters said to God: "Create the world through me! Create the world through me!" From the twenty-six letters, God chose Bet, the first letter in the word "Blessed" and thus it was that through Bet the world came into being. The commentators note that the only letter that did not put forward its claims was the modest Aleph; to reward its humility, God later gave Aleph the first place in the Decalogue. Many years later, Saint John the Evangelist, somewhat

impatiently summed up the lengthy procedure and simply declared that “In the beginning was the Word.” From this ancient conviction stems the metaphor of God as author and the world as book: a book we try to read and in which we are also written.

The magical letters, capable of making up words that hold in their utterance everything that is known, became Adam’s privileged inheritance, and even after the expulsion from Eden, this gift, as our libraries prove, was not taken away from him. Adam and his children continued the task of naming, either as makers or as unriddlers, as authors or as readers, in the deep-rooted belief that everything in the world is the name we give it. If that is so (and the Author himself seems to have vouched for this) then next to the book of the world there should be another volume, a book listing the names that Adam and his progeny gave to the things in the world. And while the world in all its mystery can forgo a clear method for lending meaning to its madness, a book of the world’s words, a dictionary, requires just such an order. The alphabet, invented (it seems) by the Egyptians in about 2000 B.C., suits this purpose perfectly.

A quarter of the world’s population uses non-alphabetic writing. China and Japan, for instance, have other methods for ordering their dictionaries. The Chinese developed three lexicographic systems: by semantic categories, by graphic components and by pronunciation. The first Chinese dictionary we know of was assembled in the third century under the title *Approaching Correctness* and contained lists of synonyms arranged in nineteen semantic categories such as “Explaining Trees” and “Explaining Insects.” The obvious inconvenience was that the user needed to know the meaning of the word before being able to find it in

its proper semantic group. The second system allowed words to be grouped according to recurrent graphic components known as “radicals,” of which there exist over five hundred. Since many are hard to recognize, a *Chart of Characters Difficult to Look Up*, arranged by the number of strokes of a character, was provided as an appendix. Finally, Chinese dictionaries can be ordered according to the rhyme of the logogram’s last syllable; the earliest of these “rhyming dictionaries” dates from the seventh century. These surprising lexicographical methods should not surprise us. An order based on hierarchies of meaning, on similarities of trait or on similarities of sound, is doubtlessly as good as any other for tidying up the unruly universe.

In the alphabetic world, the conventional sequence of letters serves as the dictionary’s practical underpinning. An alphabetical order is one of exquisite simplicity that avoids the tinge of hierarchy implicit in most other methods. Things listed under A are not more or less important than books listed under Z, except that, in a library, the geographical disposition sometimes has it that the A books on the top shelf and the Z ones on the bottom are less courted than their brethren in the middle sections. Paying homage to the ubiquity of the alphabet, Jorge Luis Borges imagined a universal library containing all books written and unwritten, past, present and future, made up of all possible combinations of the alphabet’s letters. Jean Cocteau, with becoming modesty, judged that a simple dictionary was enough for such a purpose, because “*un chef-d’oeuvre de la littérature*,” he noted in *Le Potomak*, “*n’est jamais qu’un dictionnaire en désordre*.” Indeed, every book, whether or not a *chef-d’oeuvre* (and including of course dictionaries themselves) is “*un dictionnaire en désordre*”, since, in a dizzying *mise-en-abîme*, all of the words used to define a given word in a dictionary must themselves in

turn be found defined in that same dictionary. If, as we said, we are the language we speak, then dictionaries are our biographies. Everything we know, everything we dream of, everything we fear or desire, every achievement and every pettiness, is in a dictionary.

The term “dictionary” has blended with that of “encyclopedia” and now denotes not only inventories of words but thematic repertoires of everything under the sun, including the sun. In my library alone, there are dictionaries of cuisine, of film, of psychoanalysis, of German literature, of astrophysics, of heresies, of forms of address, of surrealism, of Jewish religion, of opera, of phrase and fable, of the Koran, of birds of Northern Europe, of spices, of the *Quixote*, of bookbinding terms, of Baudelaire, of clouds, of Greek and Roman mythology, of Quebecois expressions, of African art, of difficulties in French, of saints and of devils. There is even, I believe, a *Dictionary of Imaginary Places*. But in its truest, primordial, archetypal form, a dictionary is a dictionary of words.

Because of this simple fact, because a dictionary is first and foremost a collection of the building-blocks of a given language, its core identity does not depend on how it is presented. Its earliest incarnations (Pamphilus’s lexicon, for instance) are not essentially different from its appearances today on screen. Whether in the guise of a scroll (in the case of Pamphilus) or as an imposing set of codexes (in the case of the complete Oxford) or conjured up in electronic windows (in the case of an on-line dictionary), it is the chosen container that grants the dictionary all the characteristics, privileges and limitations of its own particular form. In itself, a dictionary is like a Moëbius strip, a self-defining object of one surface only, collecting and explaining without claiming a narrative third dimension. Only in association with a specific container does a

dictionary become an ongoing sequence of definitions, or a listing of conventional signs, or the jumbled story of our language, or an almost limitless storehouse of disconnected word fragments. It is the readers who, preferring one form over another according to their own requirements and inclinations, choosing either a printed codex or a virtual text, recognize in a dictionary one or several of many books: an anthology, a hierarchical catalogue, a philological thesaurus, a parallel memory, a writing and reading tool. A dictionary is all these things, though not all perhaps at the same time.

One more question: dictionaries are catalogues of definitions, but can we trust those definitions? Novalis, in 1798, wondered how it was possible to trust words to carry the meaning of things. “Nobody knows,” he wrote, “the essential characteristic of language, namely that it is only concerned with itself. If only one could make people understand that language is like a mathematical formula – it constitutes a world of its own, it simply plays with itself. And that is the very reason why the strange play of relations among things mirrors itself in language.” For Novalis, the power of language is not that words define things, but that the relationship between words is like the relationship between things. A dictionary is then a collection of touchstones, marking points in an incommensurable web whose individual nature remains unknown to us but whose constellations allow us a glimpse, however brief, however slight, of the machinery of the universe where everything we lose is gathered and everything we forget is remembered.

I began by speaking of loss. I want to end by speaking of recovery. If books are our records of experience and libraries our depositories of memory, a dictionary is our talisman against oblivion. Not a memorial to

language, which smacks of the grave, nor a treasury, which implies something closed and inaccessible. A dictionary, intent on recording and defining, is in itself a paradox: on the one hand, accumulating that which a society creates for its own consumption, hoping for a shared comprehension of the world; on the other, circulating what it amasses so that the old words won't die on the page, and new words are not left out in the cold. The Latin adage, *Verba volant, scripta manent*, has two complementary meanings. One is that the words we speak have the power to soar, while the ones that are written remain rooted to the page; the other is that words spoken can fly away and vanish in the air, while the written words are kept tethered until called for. In practical terms, dictionaries collect our words both to preserve them and to give them back to us, to allow us to see what names we have given to our experience throughout time, and also to discard some of those names and renew them in an ongoing ritual of baptism. In this sense, dictionaries are life-preservers: they confirm and invigorate the life-blood of a language. There are, of course, historical dictionaries of terms no longer in use and dictionaries of so-called dead tongues, but even these grant their subjects a brief resurrection every time someone consults them. Borges, studying the ancient Northern sagas, often looked up words in Bosworth and Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, and liked to recite the "Our Father" in the language of the ancient inhabitants of Britain "to give God," he said, "a little surprise."

To lose, to shed, to forget is our lot: this is what we need to remember. We begin to be dust long before we return to the dust. I only hope that as I go, I might be allowed to still name at least some of the landmarks and sights along the way.

Long ago, during the sixties, in Argentina, just before the bloody military dictatorship that was to hideously parody this quiet erosion by making people “disappear” and forcing new identities on stolen children, a courageous poet and singer, María Elena Walsh, wrote a song about the things that are taken away and the things that remain.

So many things have departed
To the kingdom of what we forget,
But you have have never cut loose
My Small Illustrated Larousse.