

Charlotte Brewer: “‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. Poets and dictionaries, dictionaries and poets”

Author’s version

## INTRODUCTION

‘The dictionary is the most important, the most inexhaustible book to a writer,’ T. S. Eliot said in a BBC radio broadcast in 1940. ‘Incidentally’, he added, ‘I find it the best reading in the world when I am recovering from influenza, or any other temporary illness, except that one needs a bookrest for it across the bed. You want a big dictionary, because definitions are not enough by themselves: you want the quotations showing how a word has been used ever since it was first used.’<sup>1</sup> In declaring this preference Eliot was following in the footsteps of many poets and creative writers, and has himself been followed by many more. In his mention of quotations, moreover, Eliot points to the reciprocal relationship between literary writers and dictionaries: while poets have found dictionaries inexhaustibly fertile sources for their writing, dictionaries themselves have long turned to poets and other ‘best authors’ as evidence for ‘how a word has been used ever since it was first used’.

It is not surprising that poets should be fascinated by dictionaries: ‘Whatever else it may or may not be, I want every poem I write to be a hymn in praise of the English language’, W. H. Auden wrote in 1964, and the importance, for a writer, of choosing words appropriately, is self-evident and has been repeatedly discussed from at least as early as Horace’s *Ars Poetica*.<sup>2</sup> Near the start of this work, composed in the early first century BCE and influential on post-classical poets and literary critics alike from the medieval period onwards, Horace gives writers some specific advice. Firstly, they should render the language of the day aptly and expertly: ‘Weaving words together, you’ll speak most happily, / When

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skilled juxtaposition renews a common word'. Secondly, they may also, where appropriate and with restraint, coin new words, especially if their coinages have etymological resonance: 'new-minted words will gain acceptance/That spring from the Greek fount, and are sparingly used'—and indeed, Horace asks, why should poets be begrudged adding new words to the language, when previous great writers such as Cato and Ennius (the father of Roman poetry) had 'thus enriched our mother tongue'? He goes on to say,

It's been our right, ever  
 Will be our right, to issue words that are fresh-stamped.  
 As the forests shed their leaves, as the year declines,  
 And the oldest fall, so perish those former generations  
 Of words, while the latest, like infants, are born and thrive.<sup>3</sup>

Horace's reference to distinguished predecessors and his recommendation of etymology —'the Greek fount'—as a desirable element in word coinage point to a perennial feature of poetry and literature more generally, and a third desideratum in vocabulary choice: however innovative poets may be, they should (and must) at the same time, in some recognizable way, participate in an established literary and linguistic tradition. The idea is treated more specifically in Epistle 2.2:

[The good poet] will do well to unearth words that have been long hidden  
 from the people's view, bringing to light some splendid terms  
 employed in earlier days by Cato, Cethegus and others  
 which now lie buried by grimy dust and the years' neglect.<sup>4</sup>

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Where should such archaic words be found, however? One answer, as became clear in the lexicographical practices of many centuries later, was in dictionaries. In 1755, Samuel Johnson published the first English monolingual dictionary to be supplied with quotations illustrating usage, and selected this very quotation from Horace's *Epistles* as the epigraph, printing it on his title page—and in fact many of the European dictionaries and encyclopedias in whose path he was consciously treading had also illustrated their entries with carefully chosen excerpts from great writers of the past.<sup>5</sup> Johnson's dictionary, a tribute to a literary canon (principally Shakespeare, Dryden, Milton, Bacon, the Bible, Addison, and Pope) as well as a record of the language, swiftly became a cultural and national icon, appearing in four separate editions in his life time, and abridged, re-edited and re-issued in many different forms well into the next century.<sup>6</sup>

The use made by dictionaries of great writers and poets is thus longstanding. Since Johnson and his European forebears it has been repeated and renewed in British dictionaries, notably in Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808), Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (originally published 1884-1928), the last of which has been particularly cherished as a repository of literary usage (though Jamieson's dictionary, described by one poet, Douglas Young, as a 'kist of ferlies', has also had an important function in this respect).<sup>7</sup> While the OED has drawn on the literary canon from Chaucer onwards to illustrate the history of the English language, poets and literary writers such as Hardy, Joyce, Auden, Heaney, Hill and Muldoon, have themselves pillaged both this dictionary and others as sources for their works, and sometimes even had the fruits of such 'adventuring in dictionaries' (to use MacDiarmid's term) re-recorded in the OED, quoted from a new though incestuously derived lodging place.

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This chapter looks at the reciprocal relationship between writers and dictionaries and begins with an account of the origin of the OED, to explain how its reliance on quotations as the basis for its history of the language was both a continuation of earlier lexicographical practice and a departure from it. In fact, the OED's quotations from a chronologically organized range of historical sources—along with its scholarly and meticulous representation of the etymology of every word—were the key element in its embodiment of the new nineteenth-century discipline of historical lexicography. Both these features of the dictionary were motivated by primarily scholarly purposes, but both have proved immensely suggestive to creative writers, not least owing to the OED's perceptible literary bias. The chapter then turns to discuss the problematic issues raised by the OED's heavy citation of literary sources, given the definitional purposes of dictionaries, on the one hand, and the polyvalent and allusive characteristics of poetic writing, on the other.

The fascination of dictionaries for poets depends nonetheless on just those features of linguistic representation that might be most criticised by linguists—their arrangement of words by alphabetical order, which has little or no relation to what or how words mean, and, in the case of the OED, its abundance of quotations from a long dominant (if highly selective) literary tradition. Such abundance does not, to a modern linguist, look like evidence of usage based on a representative sample of texts, given that poets often express themselves in highly distinctive and unusual ways. Yet as Eliot, Horace, and many others testify, poets do not write in a critical or historical vacuum, but look to past writers when pondering which words to use. The OED's quotations from great writers from the earliest period of written English onwards are therefore as invaluable to poets and other creative writers as they are delightful to all dictionary readers.

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## HISTORICAL LEXICOGRAPHY AND THE OED

From the renaissance onwards, dictionaries had illustrated their entries with quotations from established cultural authorities, regarding them as a source of aesthetic pleasure and moral instruction—or as Johnson put it, an ‘accumulation of elegance and wisdom’. The nineteenth century saw a sea change in European lexicography, however, prompted by a much more scholarly interest in historical texts and in the way their contents could be mined to reveal the development of language over time.<sup>8</sup> John Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* was the first dictionary to seek to explain the history and meaning of a word through supplying fully referenced quotations of its use from the first identifiable example onwards, and the German classicist Franz Passow independently hit on the same plan for his revision of J. G. Schneider’s *Handwörterbuch der griechischen Sprache* (1798-1799). Historical dictionaries of other languages, based on quotations from actual usage, were soon embarked on elsewhere (if less soon completed), notably in Germany (the Grimm brothers’ *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 1852-1960), France (Littré’s *Dictionnaire de Langue Française*, 1863-73), and the Netherlands (*Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, 1864-1998).<sup>9</sup> This was the intellectual context in which the OED was conceived, and its founders sought to improve decisively on past lexicographical practice in English by gathering quotations much more widely and thoroughly than before and using them systematically, not for pleasure or instruction but as the evidential basis for a comprehensive history of vocabulary from 1100 to the present day (i.e. the late nineteenth century).

The OED’s improvement on its predecessors, and its use of historical evidence and ‘linguistic science’ in doing so, were repeatedly emphasized by the lexicographers themselves. Mid-way through the publication of the first edition, which slowly emerged from the presses between 1884 and 1928, the chief editor J. A. H. Murray delivered a lecture in Brewer, Charlotte. ‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author’s version.

Oxford entitled ‘The evolution of lexicography’. Here he identified the significance of Johnson’s introduction of quotations to the English lexicographical tradition, in that it had enabled ‘the more delicate appreciation and discrimination of senses’, but also described how his own new work ‘superadd[ed]’ complete historical coverage ‘to all the features that have been successively evolved by the long chain of workers [i.e. the editors of preceding dictionaries] ... It seeks not merely to record every word that has been used in the language for the last 800 years, with its written form and signification, and the pronunciation of current words, but to furnish a biography of each word’.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Murray explained, the new dictionary was ‘permeated... through and through with the scientific method of the century’, which relied on carefully gathered evidence rather than on partial selection or philosophical speculation; or as he also put it, ‘the scientific and historical spirit of the nineteenth century has at once called for and rendered possible the Oxford English Dictionary’.<sup>11</sup>

Such remarks underline the significance of the quotations in the OED as constituting the raw data, marshalled with objective and consistent thoroughness, on which the dictionary’s chief claim to scientific method and authority was (and is) founded.<sup>12</sup> They also make it clear that this project, with its assumption that words were the sum of their diachronic, evolutionary progress, was based on a paradigm drawn from contemporary developments in the natural sciences. Both of these ‘scientific’ features—the meticulous assemblage of chronologically organized quotations, and the OED’s commitment to analysing meaning through the history of each and every word, including its etymology—turned out to be of great interest to writers and poets as well as to linguists and the general public.

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## II QUOTATIONS

The attraction of OED's quotations to dictionary-reading poets was due not least to something we would now regard as rather unscientific, namely the literary preferences underlying the OED's collection and choice of quotations. Here we need to remind ourselves of the cultural environment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when material for the first edition was gathered and edited. At that stage it still seemed perfectly natural to look to great works of literature as playing an originary as well as exemplary role in the history, development and usage of the language. In his *Idea of a University* (first published 1852), J. H. Newman described how the 'sayings' of 'a great author directly influence the language of a nation since they 'pass into proverbs among his people, and his phrases become household words and idioms of their daily speech, which is tessellated with the rich fragments of his language'.<sup>13</sup> Some years later, the American linguist W. D. Whitney, editor of the massive *Century Dictionary* (an early rival to the OED published in 1889-91), explained the connection between language and literature in a much reprinted series of public lectures as follows: 'A great body of literary works of acknowledged merit and authority, in the midst of a people proud and fond of it, is an agent in the preservation and transmission of any tongue, the importance of which cannot be easily over-estimated'.<sup>14</sup> In this cultural context, it is unsurprising that from its first appearance onwards the OED was often regarded and praised as a repository of the nation's great writers of the past, with this element seen as its keystone. Accordingly, the publishers' press release of 1928, announcing the completion of the first edition, described the work as 'a Dictionary not of our English, but of all English: the English of Chaucer, of the Bible, and of Shakespeare is unfolded in it with the same wealth of illustration as is devoted to the most modern authors'.<sup>15</sup>

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This now-anachronistic privileging of literary sources, in constructing a history of the language, is additionally explained by their ready availability to the non-specialist readers on whose quotation-gathering labour the first edition was crucially reliant. Armies of volunteers contributed to the OED project, drawn from a ‘leisured or semi-leisured class’ with sufficient income and education to perform such a task.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, the volunteers had readiest access to the books already on their shelves or in their libraries, and these collections in turn reflected the literary and cultural biases both of the day and of the recent past. They were much less likely to contain the sorts of ‘social documents’ to which today’s historical linguists routinely turn, not least because these past records were often still unpublished—judicial records, inventories, wills, diaries and journals, letters, and so on. All this explains why Shakespeare, the Bible, Walter Scott, Milton, Chaucer, Dryden, and Dickens are far and away the most quoted single-author sources of the first edition of OED, along with the many other male authors (often poets, not prose writers) regarded by most educated Victorians as constituting the literary canon.

Re-issued with a short Supplement in 1933, the OED then lay dormant until the late 1950s when the publishers appointed R. W. Burchfield to edit a Supplement of twentieth-century vocabulary, aiming to bring the largely nineteenth-century collection of words and quotations up to date.<sup>17</sup> His four volumes, published 1972-86, included many more colloquialisms, slang, technical and scientific vocabulary than previously and he drew extensively on journals and periodical literature too. But Burchfield was (and to date, is) also unique among OED editors in identifying this dictionary as ‘a literary instrument’, and he insisted on the inclusion of many quotations from a selective list of twentieth-century literary writers, notably Joyce (around 1,700 quotations), D. H. Lawrence (c.1,500), and Auden (c.750), but also from some earlier sources overlooked by the first edition, including 50-odd Brewer, Charlotte. ‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author’s version.



quotations from Emily Dickinson and rather more from Gerard Manley Hopkins.<sup>18</sup> As this list indicates, Burchfield was keen to cite poets, often for eccentric or even unique usage; as he later reported, ‘my staff ... have a genuine horror of poets. I love poetry and poetical use has been poured into the Supplement, because it is my own preference compared with that of my colleagues’.<sup>19</sup>

Burchfield describes his poetic contributions to the OED as ‘golden specks’, ornamenting the corpus of quotations in the OED rather than influencing it in any fundamental way.<sup>20</sup> Whether this is true or not, the literary bias of the first edition (OED1) is pervasive in the dictionary and still endures today, notwithstanding the major re-formulations of the literary canon that have since taken place, such as the ascendance of writers virtually ignored by OED1 (e.g. William Blake) and of female authors. The current OED (OED3), which is nearly half way through its first major revision, continues to list the same Victorian canon of male ‘great writers’ at the top of its online list of 1,000 quotation sources—though they are now interspersed with newspaper, periodical and reference titles such as *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Nature*, and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—and has done little to re-balance the cultural choices of its parent dictionary where this list is concerned.<sup>21</sup> This is despite OED3’s addition of over one million new quotations in its attempt to broaden the range of sources, in particular seeking out material from ‘women’s writing and non-literary texts which have been published in recent times, such as wills, probate inventories, account books, diaries, and letters’.<sup>22</sup>

There are various possible explanations for the continued predominance of such literary sources in today’s OED, most important, perhaps, being the reluctance of the editors to jettison the huge stocks of quotations (derived from OED1) from individual authors at the head of the ‘top 1,000’ list: over 33,000 from Shakespeare (an over-supply early identified by Brewer, Charlotte. ‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author’s version.

critics), over 17,000 from Walter Scott, c.12,400 from Milton, c. 9,300 from Dryden, c. 9,300 from Dickens, c. 6,650 from Tennyson and so on. (This compares with 153 from William Blake—and although the most quoted female writer, 88th on the ‘top 1,000’ list, is George Eliot at 3,502, numbers for the comparatively few remaining female authors drop swiftly to the low hundreds and below). Problematic as this may be linguistically as well as culturally, the OED continues to be invaluable for those interested in the conventional literary canon. Its munificent collection of quotations is especially illuminating to poets seeking to understand their ‘individual talent’ (to use T. S. Eliot’s term), in relation to a long-dominant poetic ‘tradition’, at the level of the individual word. Eliot thought that ‘the greatest poets [...] by exercising a direct influence on other poets centuries later...continue to affect the living language’.<sup>23</sup> Where dictionaries are concerned, therefore, as he pointed out in the BBC radio broadcast quoted at the start of this chapter, ‘you want the quotations showing how a word has been used ever since it was first used’. Not least for Eliot himself, who ‘perhaps more than any other canonical poet of the English language [...] was conscious of the previous uses by other writers of the words he deployed in his poems’, you also want to see *by whom* a word has been used, and in particular, by *which great writers* during the course of the English literary tradition.<sup>24</sup>

### III ETYMOLOGY

The second ‘scientific’ feature of OED identified by its first-edition editors and supporters, and particularly attractive to literary-minded users, was its focus on the history and etymology of individual words. In the words of its first editor, Herbert Coleridge (grand-son of the poet), “‘Every word should be made to tell its own story’—the story of its birth and life, and in many cases of its death, and even occasionally of its resuscitation’.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly,

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every entry in the OED begins with a section detailing a word's origin, whether in Greek or Latin or other ancient languages (e.g. Sanskrit), or medieval European or more distant or more recent languages (Jamieson's dictionary too, though not as scholarly in its investigations and findings, had included extensive information, often speculative, on etymology). The carefully distinguished listing of successive or associated senses and meanings in the body of the entry, sometimes branching into many separate sections, additionally conjures up a powerful sense of the various branches of a family tree, or of sedimental layers, all interconnected in a chain of mutually related significance. The correspondence between this feature and nineteenth-century developments in the natural sciences—notably biology and geology—was beginning to be explored well before the new English dictionary was embarked on. One of its eventual co-founders, Dean (later Archbishop) R. C. Trench, first found fame as a philologist in 1851 with *The Study of Words*, a small book (originating in lectures to trainee priests) many times reprinted over the next few decades, in which he described 'how the geologist is able from the different strata and deposits, primary, secondary, or tertiary [...] to conclude the successive physical changes through which a region has passed', and pointed out that 'with such a composite language as the English before us, we may carry on moral and historical researches precisely analogous to his. Here too are strata and deposits, not of gravel and chalk, sandstone and limestone, but of Celtic, Latin, Saxon, Danish, Norman...'<sup>26</sup>

As Dennis Taylor observes in a study of these remarks and their relationship to the poetry and thought of Thomas Hardy (a writer captivated by dictionaries and by the OED in particular), such ideas were widely echoed—for example, by W. D. Whitney, who thought that 'The remains of ancient speech are like strata deposited in bygone ages, telling of the forms of life then existing... words are as rolled pebbles, relics of yet more ancient

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formations, or as fossils, whose grade indicates the progress of organic life.<sup>27</sup> Many such remarks relate to the study of individual words, and to the narratives that unfold when their etymology is investigated, to reveal, as Trench put it, ‘boundless stores of moral and historic truth, and no less of passion and imagination’. Such a goal—whether moral, historic, passionate or imaginative—evokes a territory well beyond the most obvious primary function of a dictionary, namely supplying a definition. Pursuing this idea, Trench pondered R. W. Emerson’s notion that ‘Language is fossil poetry’: ‘just as in some fossil, curious and beautiful shapes of vegetable or animal life [...] are permanently bound up with the stone, and rescued from that perishing which would otherwise have been theirs,—so in words are beautiful thoughts and images, the imagination and the feeling of past ages, of men long since in their graves’.<sup>28</sup> Emerson’s dictum was later (1897) reproduced by OED as an illustrative quotation for *fossil*, and in the interim the idea had been echoed by Max Müller, Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford: ‘every word, if carefully examined, will turn out to be itself a petrified poem’.<sup>29</sup> Further reverberations can easily be found, for example in the writing of W. H. Auden, whose own poetry bears witness to his lifelong fascination with geology, etymology, language and dictionaries, and who thought ‘the most poetical of all scholastic disciplines is, surely, Philology, the study of language in abstraction from its uses, so that words become, as it were, little lyrics about themselves’.<sup>30</sup>

#### IV USE OF DICTIONARIES BY POETS

The use to which such insights are put vary according to the reader. Trench used etymologies—whether true or imagined—to trace moral histories and elicit local and universal truths: ‘Language may be, and indeed is, this “fossil poetry”, but it may be affirmed of it with exactly the same truth that it is fossil ethics, or fossil history. Words quite as often and

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effectually embody facts of history, or convictions of the moral common sense, as of the imagination or passion of men'.<sup>31</sup> He crammed his lectures with illustrative examples of the morally revelatory possibilities of words, and saw the dictionaries in which they were listed as morally instructive for this very reason ('It needs no more than to open a dictionary, and to cast our mind thoughtfully down a few columns, and we shall find abundant confirmation of this sadder and sterner estimate of man's moral and spiritual condition. How else shall we explain this long catalogue of words, having all to do with sin, or with sorrow, or with both?')<sup>32</sup> Creative writers, by contrast, though equally fascinated by dictionaries and glossaries, tend to be less prescriptive in exploiting their suggestive possibilities, seeing these works as opening up interpretation rather than closing it down. Seamus Heaney was initially nonplussed, he describes, on encountering the verb *holian* ('to suffer, endure, hold out') in *Beowulf*. Looking the word up in C. L. Wrenn's glossary, and realising the initial thorn symbol was pronounced 'th', was revelatory in a different way:

I gradually realised that it was not strange at all, for it was the word that older and less educated people would have used in the country where I grew up [...] And now suddenly here was 'thole' in the official textual world, mediated through the apparatus of a scholarly edition, a little bleeper to remind me that my aunt's language was not just a self-enclosed family possession but an historical heritage, one that involved the journey *holian* had made north into Scotland and then across Ulster with the planters, and then across from the planters to the locals who had originally spoken Irish, and then farther across again when the Scots Irish emigrated to the American South in the eighteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

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To make his point Heaney quotes the Tennessee poet John Crowe Ransom: ‘Sweet ladies, long may ye bloom, and /toughly I hope ye may thole’.<sup>34</sup>

This stream of reactions to Wrenn’s glossary explores the connotations of *thole* both through its etymology—its Old English origin—and through its usage in specific historical and cultural contexts, just as in a quotation dictionary. And the cultural and historical resonance of such quotation ‘paragraphs’—i.e. the string of quotations provided by a dictionary (notably the OED) to illustrate a word’s usage—has long been recognized as richly suggestive, not least because of its implication, as we have seen, that the selected cited authors share a common intellectual and literary tradition (in Johnson’s words, ‘a genealogy of sentiments...affording a kind of intellectual history’).<sup>35</sup> Many poets have put on record their fascination with this material, notably Geoffrey Hill, who thought the OED ‘the third most essential work in English after the English Bible and the collected works of Shakespeare’, and whose quasi-religious immersion in its pages is witnessed by the pervasive etymological wordplay in his poems along with his use of archaic and/or abstruse vocabulary.<sup>36</sup> Connections have also been traced between Dickinson (who read her dictionary ‘as a priest his breviary’) and the structure of entries and definitions in Webster, if only to show that Dickinson repudiated the constraints of dictionary definitions.<sup>37</sup>

As Heaney’s discussion of *thole* also indicates, the variety of vocabulary registers recorded in dictionaries—and the progress that words can make from mainstream to dialect and vice versa, which the OED, as an historical dictionary, is particularly well placed to show—is another important feature that makes a dictionary, in Tom Paulin’s words, ‘both quarry and cairn, a living resource which connects us with the spoken language and the written language’.<sup>38</sup> Hardy, William Barnes, Hopkins, Auden, Heaney, Paulin himself, and Muldoon—to mention a specimen handful of names—have all been interested in (and in Brewer, Charlotte. ‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author’s version.

some instances contributed to) dialect dictionaries, notably the dialect dictionary that was being edited in Oxford at the same time as the OED, the six-volume work by Joseph Wright.<sup>39</sup> Reciprocally, at least one recent quotation dictionary, T. P. Dolan's *Dictionary of Hiberno-English*, has in return drawn on contemporary and recent Irish poets writing in English (principally Heaney, but also Paulin and Kavanagh) to instance twentieth-century dialectal or regional usage.

Auden is a particularly interesting example of the reciprocal relationship between dictionaries and poets, not least since his engagement with the OED included real-life interaction with the Supplement editor Burchfield. An inveterate OED reader, he used this dictionary to discover and breathe new life into long-dead words precisely as Horace had recommended. One of his biographers describes how as an Oxford undergraduate, Auden impressed his contemporaries with his unusual lexical choices:

In his conversation as in his poetry, he used a vocabulary drawn from scientific, psychological and philosophical terminology, and from his discoveries among the pages of the OED. Words like 'glabrous', 'sordes', 'callipygous', 'peptonised' (which all appeared in his poetry during this period) delighted him but disquieted his listeners. "I did not understand much of what Wystan said," recorded one undergraduate contemporary...<sup>40</sup>

At this stage Auden had probably come across the *OED* in his college library, which subscribed to the first edition as it came out in instalments. In 1933 it was reissued in a multi-volume set and Auden eventually acquired not one but two such sets, for his New York apartment and for his summer retreat at Kirchstetten in Austria; in both places, it is recorded, Brewer, Charlotte. 'When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary'. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author's version.

he used a volume to sit on at dinner, ‘as if he were a child too short for table’.<sup>41</sup> ‘Dictionary’ words were a consistent feature of Auden’s poetry throughout his career, and lists of such words—sometimes marked up metrically, often in alphabetical order—crop up regularly in his notebooks—e.g. *obfirm*, *oblectations*, *obtemper*, *ochlocratic*, *osse*, *outnoise* and many more.<sup>42</sup> His readers did not always approve, Denis Donoghue observing (of *Epistle to a Godson*, published in 1972) that ‘Mr Auden...has been making merry with the dictionary in recent years. I suppose he thinks of them as pure poetry, containing thousands of words virtually untouched by human hands; marvelous words now archaic, obsolete, and for that very reason waiting to be resuscitated by a poet addicted to that pleasure’.<sup>43</sup>

But Auden’s relationship with the dictionary was more complicated and more interesting than this. In 1956 he was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford, where he met the new editor of the *OED* Supplement, Robert Burchfield, a lecturer at the same college (Christ Church). As Burchfield later described, he was sitting working quietly in his college room one afternoon when the door burst open and in rushed an excited Auden, waving a sheet of paper freshly torn out of his typewriter, to insist Burchfield should put back into the *OED* an obscure word in a poem he had just that minute written—and indeed there are many detectable instances of such a ‘lexicographical loop’ in the Supplement (later incorporated into the second edition, *OED2*), where Auden is cited as the only recent quotation for a word he may well have come across in the *OED* in the first place. Frequent—and arguably, on occasion, tiresome—as Auden’s use of dictionary words may be, he is decisively trumped in both respects by Hugh MacDiarmid, whose poetry was transformed by his encounters with Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (a dictionary rich in literary quotations which also inspired the *OED* lexicographer W. A. Craigie).<sup>86</sup> On demobilisation in 1920, MacDiarmid tells us, wishing to understand the Scottish literary tradition, ‘not having Brewer, Charlotte. ‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author’s version.



an adequate knowledge of the language and knowing that a great portion of the vocabulary had lapsed out of use[,] I had recourse to the place where the language was kept, that is to say to the dictionary, and I wrote my early Scots lyrics straight out of the dictionary'.<sup>44</sup>

Jamieson's pervasive influence on MacDiarmid's poems is often detectable through the repeated juxtapositions or near juxtapositions of specialist Scots vocabulary beginning with the same letter—as one critic notes, he must have been raiding the 'd' section of Jamieson in writing part of 'Gairmscoile'—'Wee drochlin' craturs drutling' etc—which stretches for 14 lines.<sup>45</sup> Famously, MacDiarmid was 'enormously struck by the resemblance—the moral resemblance—between Jamieson's Dictionary of the Scottish Language and James Joyce's *Ulysses*', and his 1955 memorial to Joyce advocated 'adventuring in dictionaries ... Among the débris of all past literature/And raw material of all the literature to be' (another echo of Horatian, as well as Eliotian, instructions to writers). By reading both dictionaries and literature, as MacDiarmid himself described, he was able to enact his continuous concern 'with what Mr. T. S. Eliot has called "the living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written"', a quotation he repeated in his Joyce tribute, a 'hapax legomenon of a poem', crammed with dictionary words.<sup>87</sup>

The potential of dictionaries to suggest poetic combinations, and inspire writers, is not confined to poets. 'When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary', the poet and essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. recorded in 1831, and the fruits of Hardy's and Joyce's dictionary-reading can equally be seen in their prose writings.<sup>46</sup> Under its entry for *dictionary*, the first edition OED included an illustrative quotation from Emerson testifying 'neither is a dictionary a bad book to read. There is no cant in it, no excess of explanation, and it is full of suggestion. The raw material of possible poems and histories'.<sup>47</sup> The observation was echoed many years later by the novelist and short-story writer Annie Proulx, Brewer, Charlotte. 'When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary'. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author's version.

also a dialect dictionary enthusiast, who said of the 1989 publication of *OED*, ‘Here is the greatest treasure of words waiting to be assembled...All the raw material a writer needs for a lifetime of work’.<sup>48</sup>

## V USE OF POETS BY DICTIONARIES

Painstakingly seeking out the first and last occurrences of each and every word in the language (along with etymology and quotations to illustrate its chronological passage through the language) certainly enabled the *OED* to show how every word has its own story to tell. But what are the implications of quoting poetry as key examples of usage in the unfolding of such narratives, when the main aim of a dictionary is to pin down—precisely, sufficiently, and succinctly—what a word or sense actually means? An important consideration here is that poets will always have much more in mind, when choosing words, than their basic semantic signification. Dylan Thomas describes how, when he started writing poetry,

What the words stood for, symbolised, or meant, was of very secondary importance. . . . I fell in love—that is the only expression I can think of—at once, and am still at the mercy of words, though sometimes now, knowing a little of their behaviour very well, I think I can influence them slightly and have even learnt to beat them now and then, which they appear to enjoy. . . . Out of them came the gusts and grunts and hiccups and heehaws of the common fun of the earth; and though what the words meant was, in its own way, often deliciously funny enough, so much funnier seemed to me, at that almost forgotten time, the shape and shade and size and noise of the words as they hummed, strummed, juggled and galloped along.<sup>49</sup>

Brewer, Charlotte. ‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author’s version.

Thomas identifies sound as an important determining element in the way words work in poetry, but also, quasi-synaesthetically, a range of other qualities of words—‘shape’, ‘shade’ and ‘size’—apparently beyond the reach and remit of dictionaries. Heaney comes up with a more sophisticated formulation of a comparable idea in a discussion of the poetry of Hughes, Heaney and Larkin in which he meditates on Eliot’s term ‘auditory imagination’:

I presume Eliot was thinking here about the cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms, that binding secret between words in poetry that delights not just the ear but the whole backward and abysm of mind and body; thinking of the energies beating in and between words that the poet brings into half-deliberate play; thinking of the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments.<sup>50</sup>

This evokes the many different cultural associations of words above and beyond their dictionary definition, ‘the intimate level of rhythm and diction and echo and allusion’ as Heaney later put it in his inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1989.<sup>51</sup> Naturally, these matters are of great interest to poets, not least because they gesture towards the ways in which the use of language in the present has the capacity to echo, and play variations on, the use of language in the past, just as Horace recommended. In fact, this capacity is exemplified both by Heaney’s own adapted allusion to *The Tempest* (his ‘backward and abysm of mind and body’ pointing to Prospero’s reference to memory as ‘the dark backward and abysm of time’) and by the echoes and links often gestured at in OED’s selectively assembled quotation paragraphs. In other words, it is a virtually inescapable characteristic of poetry that it plays on and exploits the connotative as well as the denotative properties of words.

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But the potential connotations of a word, as realised in an individual poem, cannot be captured in its definition. Writing in the Preface to the 1927 edition of the journal *Oxford Poetry*, the undergraduates W. H. Auden and C. Day-Lewis described

the alogical conflict, between the denotatory and the connotatory sense of words ...

between, that is to say, an asceticism tending to kill language by stripping words of all association and a hedonism tending to kill language by dissipating their sense under a multiplicity of associations (Preface, pp. vi–vii).

Dictionaries are clearly on the denotatory side of this conflict, confirming and circumscribing meaning in an attempt to pin it down definitively. The promiscuous potential for meaning beyond the denotatory, however, is the feature of words that poetry most characteristically exploits. Typically, words are used by poets and other creative writers in ways that nudge them loose of their customary semantic (and sometimes syntactic) moorings, free to signify in relatively unfettered ways both with other words in the same poem and with other words in other texts. This is true of many of the ‘golden specks’ included by Burchfield as illustrative quotations in the OED Supplement—for example, *Finnegans Wake*’s ‘What a pairfact crease!’, quoted without comment as an apparently unremarkable instance of the noun *crease*, or Auden’s ‘Nowise withdrawn by doubting flinch Nor joined to any by belief’s firm flange’, cited likewise both for *flinch* and *flange*, or Hopkins’s ‘His thew That onewhere curded, onewhere sucked or sank’, cited—again without comment—as the only modern use of the intransitive verb *curd*.

This characteristic chimes perfectly with the interest in fragmentariness and allusiveness characteristic of the modernist canon favoured by Burchfield; in fact, Eliot’s

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friend and mentor Pound invented a taxonomy of diction intended to capture just this quality. As Pound explained, ‘there are three “kinds of poetry”, melopoeia, wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning’—i.e. relating to sound (or perhaps rhythm); ‘phanopoeia, which is a casting of images upon the visual imagination’—i.e. the imagism often primarily associated with Pound; and logopoeia, which is “the dance of the intellect among words”, that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, of its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play’.<sup>52</sup> Choosing words for the sake of their ‘musical property’, for their impact on the ‘visual imagination’, or for ‘the dance of the intellect’ that they may conjure up, are things that all users may sometimes do, to varying extents. In poetry, however, it is an expectation of the genre that the writer will exploit these connotative properties of words in unusual and potentially unique ways—so that the results will be at the eccentric end of the spectrum of possible meaning, unlikely therefore to typify usage in the way we might expect a dictionary to capture.

In such a view of poetry, the word is primary (as indicated by the etymology of the term *logopoeia*[: *λόγος* ‘word’ + *ποιεῖν* ‘to make’; *logos* being understood, in one sense or another, as poetic discourse]). The Jamieson-reading MacDiarmid identified the same attribute when he described, in his autobiography, how (like Mallarmé) he had ‘always believed in the possibility of “une poésie qui fut comme deduite de l’ensemble des propriétés et des caractères du langage”’. The ‘act of poetry’, he went on to explain, was according to this view ‘the reverse of what it is usually thought to be; not an idea gradually shaping itself in words, but deriving entirely from words—and it was in fact ...in this way that I wrote all my best Scots poems’.<sup>53</sup> But constructing poetry from words in this way can lead (and

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manifestly, in MacDiarmid's case, did lead) to problems of interpretation and understanding virtually impossible for dictionaries to tackle. This is true whether the words are derived from dictionary reading and therefore rare, or abstruse, or archaic, or whether they are less intrinsically remarkable, as for example in Auden's first volume of poetry, published by Faber in 1930. Auden's friend Louis MacNeice complained that 'Mr Auden's attempt is to put the soul across in telegrams. But whereas in the everyday telegram the words tend to be, like Morse, mere counters, in the poem-telegram the words stand rather on their own than *for* a meaning behind them'.<sup>54</sup>

## VI PROBLEMS FOR DICTIONARIES?

All this suggests that dictionaries need to think hard about the implications of citing allusive 'poem-telegrams' as unexceptional evidence of a word's use. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* explains that 'Logopoeia relies on the reader to recognize language (whether from Dante, popular song, or cliché) and to interpret the poet's (often ironical) stance toward it. T S Eliot's subversion of pastoral invitation in the opening lines of 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock' can be seen as an example'.<sup>55</sup> The OED (or any other dictionary) cannot possibly be expected do these complex things in explaining the use of words, and might be well advised, when choosing illustrative quotations, either to steer well clear of such allusive diction altogether or, if they do choose such an example, to alert the reader by some means to the different ways in which the words are likely to be working. As it happens, the opening lines of 'Prufrock', perhaps some of most famous in the modernist canon, are selected as illustrative quotations in the OED, in truncated form ('The evening is spread out against the sky Like a patient etherized upon a table'), in not just one but—most unusually—three entries (*etherize*, *spread*, and *table* respectively), without editorial comment Brewer, Charlotte. 'When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary'. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author's version.

or marking of any sort. Examples can be readily replicated by anyone browsing OED's pages, while on screen they can be sought out by searching for quotations from specific works or poets.<sup>56</sup>

Certainly, both Murray and Burchfield are on record as expressing caution in quoting poets, but not because of any recognition of the problems posed by polyvalence and allusion when extracts from poems, quoted out of context, are used by dictionaries side-by-side with 'regular' examples of usage as the evidential basis for the history and development of the language. Instead, both lexicographers felt that poets were simply apt to misunderstand or misuse words. 'One must not take the language of poets too seriously', Murray said of D. G. Rossetti, while Robert Browning 'constantly used words without regard to their proper meaning' and had therefore 'added greatly to the difficulties of the Dictionary' (Browning had earlier told Murray 'that he found the Dictionary "most delightful" and intended to read every word of it').<sup>57</sup> Burchfield thought that Auden 'was not a scholar and often didn't know what words meant,' and said of T. S. Eliot's use of the word *opherion* in a draft of *The Waste Land*, 'It is a classic example of the kind of linguistic flaw found in the work of most major writers'.<sup>58</sup>

Yet, as we have seen, Burchfield 'poured' poetry into the Supplement, and argued that 'the language of great writers, including poets, should be registered, even once-only uses, virtually in concordance form'.<sup>59</sup> At no point to date, however, have OED lexicographers addressed the theoretical or practical issues raised in quoting literary sources—in fact it must be acknowledged that lexicographers working on monolingual (non-learners') English dictionaries over the twentieth century and beyond have been reluctant, on the whole, to grapple with concepts of denotation, connotation, and associated matters of how words mean, or to acknowledge discussions, by their contemporaries in linguistics, of lexis and lexicon in Brewer, Charlotte. 'When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary'. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author's version.

relation to linguistic theory—the work of John Sinclair and his associates being a notable exception.<sup>60</sup>

One of the most stimulating, if provocative, discussions of the resistance of English language lexicography to theory to date, along with a proposed new theoretical basis for definition-writing, is that of Patrick Hanks (a former colleague of Sinclair) and his theory of norms and exploitations. In essence, Hanks argues—contrary to what one might infer from most dictionaries—that words do not have fixed or self-standing meanings. As he explains, ‘meanings are associated with words in a pattern, not words in isolation’, so that it is analysis of a word in context that reveals meaning.<sup>61</sup> This understanding, albeit not thus articulated, was precisely what underlay (and underlies) OED methodology, which deduces the meaning of words from large numbers of examples of real usage—in effect, from a linguistic corpus, with the difference that it was impossible, in the late nineteenth century, to draw on a representative sample of source texts. It is a method that the OED1 lexicographers correctly recognized as revolutionising English language lexicography.<sup>62</sup> But as we have seen, the problem with dictionaries drawing on poetry (or shall we say, creative writing) as evidence is that the meaning of any individual word in such texts is characteristically (though to varying extents) influenced, far more than in non-creative writing, by the entirety of its verbal environment. To repeat the point, the meaning of a word in a poem is determined not just by its immediate semantic and syntactic relationships but by a much looser set of associations—including sound, etymology, poetic form and so on—with other words both in the immediate context and beyond (sometimes well beyond): just as Horace, Eliot, Heaney, and the *Princeton Encyclopedia* in their different ways identify. The OED method of printing short quotations as evidence of a word’s meaning and usage dislocates poetic usage from these wider contexts, on which its meaning depends, and this is especially the case if the poetry is

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difficult in the first place.

## VII OED'S TREATMENT—SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

So how does the OED deal with highly literary writing, not least when it looks as if the reason for the presence of a particular word in a poem is that the writer found it in a dictionary in the first place? Such lexicographical loops are rarely identified by the OED when it inserts a freshly used example of an obsolete word, though they almost certainly exist in reasonable numbers. When adding James Joyce's two examples of *peccaminous* ('full of sins, sinful') into the third volume of the Supplement in 1982, as the sole modern usage of a word instanced only in 1665 and 1668, Burchfield noted, 'It is the kind of word that Joyce may have picked up from the *O.E.D.*' This comment was removed when the entry was updated in 2005—probably because it is not clear that the OED was in fact among the dictionaries habitually consulted by Joyce—and substituted with the more cautious suggestion that Joyce's usage was 'apparently revived from dictionary record'.<sup>63</sup> The revised version of OED (as of October 2016) suggests this origin for just 17 other modern instances of archaic vocabulary quoted in its entries, eight from non-literary sources and nine from literary ones: two from Joyce (*muskin* and *nan* as well as *peccaminous*), two from Auden (*maltaient* and *menalty*), one from MacDiarmid (*resplaid*), and one each from T. C. Boyle, E. R. Eddison, Ernest Hemmingway, and Alexander Theroux. Yet any browser through the dictionary's quotations for both these and many other writers will readily identify hundreds of other candidates, including some that have been added in the OED3 revision.

Turning from one Horatian feature of desirable poetic diction (unearthing words 'long hidden') to another ('fresh-stamping', or coining): so far as I have observed (and been informally told), the revision has shied away from recording new examples of *hapax* Brewer, Charlotte. 'When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary'. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author's version.

*legomena* or (Murray's own coinage) 'nonce-words'—the one-off usages liberally inserted in previous editions, such as Shakespeare's *adoptious*, Milton's *azurne*, Tennyson's *injellied*, and so on—but this exclusion rule does not seem to have been applied consistently. (The rule itself, if it is one, appears perfectly reasonable: if a word has only ever been used once, by however famous a writer, it has not contributed in any definable way to the history and development of the language. To re-word Horace, 'new-minted words', even those 'That spring from the Greek fount, and are sparingly used', need to 'gain acceptance').<sup>64</sup> However, OED's treatment of these and other words cited from literary sources is sometimes so inconsistent that it is not clear that any policy has been applied.

A quick way to illustrate the nature of the problem, both for the OED and for their users, is to look briefly at its treatment of any individual literary writer, for example MacDiarmid. Burchfield had included 44 quotations from MacDiarmid's poetry in his Supplement, many for unusual words such as *madarosis*, defined as 'Loss of hair; esp. of that of the eyebrows'. MacDiarmid's example of this word, 'Nor [...] can we [...] Shut our eyes despite their madarosis of the sun' is the only recorded use not from a pre-nineteenth-century dictionary or a medical work, but is not easy to understand in relation to the definition: eyes are not normally thought of as having hair or suffering from hair loss, and 'madarosis of the sun' appears to be an archaic formulation (we would expect 'by the sun'). The entry was updated in 2000 and a further specialist (ophthalmological) quotation added, but no help given on MacDiarmid's usage, which comes from a poem in his 1934 volume *Stony Limits*. According to a recent electronic search (October 2016) the OED3 revision has now added a further 120 quotations from MacDiarmid, making a total of 164 in all, including a number either from the same 1934 volume of *Stony Limits* or from two later editions of the same work (published in 1936 and 1938 respectively): *artation*, *colour-de-roy*, *lithogenesis*,

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*misesteem, mordacity, norn, pamphract, pasilaly, penelopize, perigraph, prison-grey, right, routinier, rupestrine, Sant, spargosis, tegula, twisel-tongued, xenolith, Yiddishkeit.*

Some of these words are highly unusual and one can well believe MacDiarmid found them, if not in OED, then in Jamieson or in one of the Chambers dictionaries which he regularly consulted. In their original context—i.e. in MacDiarmid’s poems themselves—they often appear even more unusual than in the snippets quoted in OED. The OED treatment moreover is bewilderingly varied. On *pamphract* (‘No more than a rattle of broken bones On the invisible pamphract of God’), which seems to have broken the new OED rule on unique usages since no other example of the word used as noun is given, the dictionary helpfully says ‘The poem from which the quot. 1934 is taken contains numerous rare, stylized, archly literary words, chiefly of Greek origin’. This note accompanies none of the other 21 words cited from this same source, however, many of which appear equally ‘stylized and highly literary’. *Perigraph* and *parablepsy*, for example, are also sole citations for their respective senses, and are also (like *pamphract*) labelled ‘poet. rare’; these two words are side-by-side in the source quotation—only partially reproduced under *perigraph*, but given its full glory under *parablepsy*: ‘Glistening with exoskeletal stars we turn in vain This way and that and but changing perigraphs gain, Parablepsies, calentures, every cursèd paranthelion Of this theandric force Pepper’s-ghosting God.’ It is hard to feel that this illustrates the meaning of either word in any way that elucidates its meaning, especially in the absence of the contextualising note provided for *pamphract*. MacDiarmid is not cited under *exoskeletal*, *calenture*, *paranthelion* or *theandric*, and none of these words are identified by the OED as ‘poetic’. *Pepper’s-ghosting* is nowhere explained.

Labels vary for the other *Stony Limits* words. *Twissel-tongued*, for example (‘twissel-tongued we penelopise’), is said to be ‘obs. exc. poetic’; it was last recorded in the Wycliffite Brewer, Charlotte. ‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author’s version.

Bible (a1382). *Penelopise* is by contrast labelled ‘literary’ but not ‘poet’. *Spargosis*, otherwise cited only in 1867, is said to be a ‘fig’ not ‘poet’ use (‘In open country [...] watching an aching spargosis of stars’). *tegula* is identified as an architectural term, but again not allowed to be poetic; the quotation reads ‘The gold edging of a bough at sunset, its pantile way Forming a double curve, tegula and imbrex in one’. *Imbrex* has no twentieth-century citations, while the adjectival use of *pantile* is not recorded at all by OED, although the entry was updated in 2005 when many of the other MacDiarmid quotations were inserted. Any reader can try to infer and construct some underlying principles here (e.g., are ‘classical’ words deemed ‘literary’ but use of vernacular ones like *twissel* more ‘poetic’? Does infrequency of use, or of recent use, correlate with the label ‘poetic’?) but one can find so many exceptions that it would appear to be the case that OED labelling and indeed inclusion policies vary unpredictably from time to time and maybe from individual sub-editor to sub-editor.

Other questions arise too. Has MacDiarmid proved attractive to lexicographers just because his usage is so bizarre (and unrepresentative, presumably)? Why have some words been selected for inclusion but so many others left out in the cold, despite occurring in the very same poems quoted elsewhere in the dictionary (e.g. *ceramic*, in the line preceding ‘twissel-tongued we penelopise’, or the other unregistered words in the same collection)? If the attraction of Macdiarmid is his unbridled (some might say indiscriminating) love of abstruse and archaic vocabulary, why has the much more scholarly and precise Geoffrey Hill been so overlooked (fifteen quotations to date, from an oeuvre rich in unrecorded vocabulary)? Why is it—to select an arbitrary handful of contemporary or near-contemporary poets—that Sylvia Plath’s poetry is quoted 108 times, Seamus Heaney’s around 60 times, Adrienne Rich’s twelve, Derek Walcott’s 14? Does this variation reflect intrinsic differences

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in these writers' use of language, the accident of the lexicographers' personal preferences (or those of their volunteer contributors), or an editorially assembled reading list, prepared according to specific criteria, with an eye to the accessibility of certain texts in electronic (therefore easily searchable) media?<sup>65</sup>

Whenever I ask lexicographers such questions I am told that quotations are chosen on their intrinsic merits without regard to their source. Given that the OED's representation of the history and development of the language is based on its quotation sources, and that gender and cultural biases are already deeply ingrained in the dictionary, this is not an acceptable answer. As we have seen, the biases of the first edition are continuing into the revision, and the 1,000 most cited sources which OED draws attention to via the front page of its website reproduce the Victorian cultural canon of male poets and writers; strikingly few sources, for example, are female; even fewer are female poets. It is certainly an attractive proposition that Shakespeare, the second most cited quotation source, has been so influential on the development of the language.<sup>66</sup> But can that really be true of poets such as Milton and Dryden (seventh and 15<sup>th</sup> respectively) and of prose writers such as Walter Scott and Carlyle (third and 16<sup>th</sup>)?

To resolve these issues, the OED will need to grapple with some of the matters it has long left undiscussed. Where dictionaries' use of poetry is concerned, the essential question is whether and to what extent poets and other creative writers actually form and influence the language, as Newman believed they did and as Eliot considered it their duty to do—and in addition, how one might try that question without appealing to the very court (i.e. the OED) which is itself under scrutiny.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, it is a delightful paradox, linguistically speaking, that poets love dictionaries not just for their abundance of scholarly information but also for the features that

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forthc. Author's version.

make them so (apparently) linguistically unsatisfactory: the listing of headwords in a logocentric succession of alphabetic entries, and the profusion of literary quotations, however selectively sourced, to be found in the OED. Reviewing the third volume of Burchfield's OED Supplement in 1982, the linguist Roy Harris criticized the naïve and unexamined semantic assumptions of lexicography in general and the OED in particular, observing moreover,

the very convention of alphabetization [in a dictionary] simultaneously decontextualizes and recontextualizes words in a way which has no small element of surrealism in it. It makes the lexicographer 'automatically'—in the various senses of that word—a Masson or a Magritte. He becomes the agent of a poeticization of the banal which is all the more stimulating for being the unsought consequence of a strait-laced professional practice.<sup>68</sup>

On the contrary, 'banal' is the opposite of how this 'poeticization' has seemed to many dictionary-reading writers. If marooned on a desert island, Auden said, he would choose to have with him 'a good dictionary' in preference to 'the greatest literary masterpiece imaginable, for, in relation to its readers, a dictionary is absolutely passive and may legitimately be read in an infinite number of ways'.<sup>69</sup> That must be why, both for Auden and his fellow poets, Emerson was right: 'Neither is a dictionary a bad book to read.... The raw material of possible poems and histories'.

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Writer as Artist', *The Listener* (1940), pp. 773–4. This chapter develops ideas and material (including references to Eliot's 1940 BBC broadcast) in Charlotte Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED* (New Haven and London: Yale

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University Press, 2007), and ‘The Use of Literary Quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’, *Review of English Studies*, 61 (2010), pp. 93-125.

<sup>2</sup> W. H. Auden, ‘A Change of Air’, in Anthony Ostroff (ed.), *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic; Eight Symposia* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), pp. 183-7 (p. 186).

<sup>3</sup> *Ars Poetica* ll. 46-52, trans. A. S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, [http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceArsPoetica.htm#anchor\\_Toc98156241](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceArsPoetica.htm#anchor_Toc98156241) (accessed 29 October 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Horace, *Epistles*, 2.2. ll. 115-18; transl. N. Rudd (ed.), *Horace Satires and Epistles* (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See John Considine, *Academy dictionaries 1600-1800* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Nearly half the quotations in Johnson’s dictionary were furnished by the seven sources listed here: see Rüdiger Schreyer, ‘Illustrations of Authority: Quotations in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*’, *Lexicographica*, 16 (2000), pp. 58-103.

<sup>7</sup> See Susan Rennie, *Jamieson’s dictionary of Scots: the story of the first historical dictionary of the Scots language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 235-6; *kist of ferlies* (‘chest of wonders’) is quoted from Douglas Young’s poem on Jamieson’s dictionary, ‘Thesaurus Paleo-Scoticus’, in *Auntran Blads* (Glasgow: W. Maclellan, 1943), p. 11. Charles Richardson’s *A New Dictionary of the English Language* (1836-7) was a fourth important dictionary that used quotations extensively, often relying on them to furnish definitions. Originated by S. T. Coleridge, its influence on subsequent poets is not easy to ascertain; see James C. McCusick, “‘Living Words’: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the genesis of the *OED*”, *Modern Philology*, 90 (1990), pp. 1-45.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Johnson, ‘Preface’ to *A Dictionary of the English Language*, in Gwin J. Kolb and Robert Demaria (ed.), *Johnson on the English Language* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005), p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> See John Considine, ‘John Jamieson, Frank Passow, and the Double Invention of Lexicography on Historical Principles’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 75 (2014), pp. 261-81; John Considine, ‘Historical Dictionaries: History and Development; Current Issues’, in Philip Durkin (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Lexicography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 163-75; Noel Osselton, ‘Murray and His European Counterparts’, in Lynda Brewer, Charlotte. ‘When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary’. In Andrew Blades & Piers Pennington (eds.), *Poetry and the dictionary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019 forthc. Author’s version.

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Mugglestone (ed.), *Lexicography and the OED*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 59-76.

<sup>10</sup> J. A. H. Murray, *The Evolution of English Lexicography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), pp. 38-9, 46-7.

<sup>11</sup> Murray, *Evolution*, pp. 49, 51)

<sup>12</sup> See Brewer, *Treasure-House*, pp. 127-9.

<sup>13</sup> J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London, 1873), pp. 292–3.

<sup>14</sup> W. D. Whitney, *Language and the Study of Language* (London, 1867), p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> *The Periodical*, 15 Feb 1928, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> The quoted phrase is R. W. Burchfield's ('Data Collecting and Research', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 211 (1973), pp. 99-103 (99)).

<sup>17</sup> R. W. Burchfield, *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972-86), 4 vols.

<sup>18</sup> The figures cited are from electronic searches of the second edition of the OED (OED2), which prior to April 2011 was available at [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com). Most regrettably, OUP removed this version from public access at that date, making it now impossible to identify quotations added to the OED by the Supplement except by comparing physical against online versions of OED, an impossible task. OED1 had already included a handful of Hopkins quotations (Brewer, *Treasure-House*, p. 165). On Burchfield's principles and practice in assembling and editing the Supplement, and his particular interest in literary sources, see *Treasure-House*, pp. 152-212.

<sup>19</sup> Brewer, *Treasure-House*, pp. 210-11.

<sup>20</sup> Burchfield, *Unlocking the English Language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> See

<http://www.oed.com/sources;jsessionid=0748CAE007B87B19E07D4DDACC4BCABF>, accessed 24 October 2016.

<sup>22</sup> <http://public.oed.com/history-of-the-oed/reading-programme/> (accessed 24 October 2016).

For OED's neglect of female-authored sources see Brewer, 'Happy Copiousness'? OED's Recording of Female Authors of the Eighteenth Century', *Review of English Studies*, 63 (2012), pp. 86-117, and the charts on the *Examining the OED* website (<http://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk>) at

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<http://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk/main/content/view/56/140/index.html> (accessed 25 October 2016).

<sup>23</sup> See T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in Frank Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 37-44.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Ford, 'I gotta use words', *London Review of Books* vol. 38 No. 16, 11 August 2016, pp. 9-12, reviewing Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (ed.), *The poems of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015). Ford notes that 'Eliot's mind was a vast, labyrinthine echo chamber', a phrase recalling Dennis Taylor's characterization of the OED as 'the greatest of all literary echo-chambers in our language'; Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Literary Language and Victorian Philology* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 6. See also David-Antoine Williams, 'The OED in T. S. Eliot', *Notes and Queries*, 63 (2016), pp. 293-96, and 'T.S. Eliot in the OED', *Notes and Queries*, 63 (2016), pp. 296-301.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Coleridge, 'A Letter to the Very Revd the Dean of Westminster', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, pp. 71-8 (72).

<sup>26</sup> R. C. Trench, *On the Study of Words: 5 Lectures* (London: Parker, 1858), pp. 68-9 (quoted here from 5th edition).

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Thomas Hardy*, p. 282, quoting from Whitney, *Language and the Study of Language*, pp. 47-8.

<sup>28</sup> Trench, *Study of Words*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>29</sup> Max Müller, *Biographies of Words* (London: Longmans, 1888), p. x.

<sup>30</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand: And Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Trench, *Study of Words*, pp. 5, 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> Trench, *Study of Words*, p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. xxv.

<sup>34</sup> It goes without saying that writers were fascinated by etymology long before it was routinely available in dictionaries, with Milton perhaps the most notable example; see further K. K. Ruthven, 'The Poet as Etymologist', *Critical Quarterly*, 11 (1969), pp. 9-37, who notes 'the frequency with which poets depend on etymological information in order to make hidden connections between apparently unrelated ideas and to establish metaphoric consequence in cases where a superficial reader might think the metaphoric thread has been broken' (p. 10).

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<sup>35</sup> Johnson, 'Preface', p. 198; see also John Considine, 'Literary Classics in OED Quotation Evidence', *The Review of English Studies*, 60 (2009), pp. 620-38, Brewer, 'The OED as "literary instrument": its treatment past and present of the vocabulary of Virginia Woolf', *Notes & Queries*, 56 (2009), pp. 430-44, and 'Literary Quotations', pp. 100-10.

<sup>36</sup> See David-Antoine Williams, 'All Corruptible Things: Geoffrey Hill's Etymological Crucifixion', *Modern Philology*, 112 (2015), pp. 522-53, which suggests that Hill's work is written 'on an etymological loom': 'Certainly there is plenty in his draft poetry notebooks to corroborate the claim, including definitions, illustrative quotations, and etymologies copied from the *OED*, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, and other reference works, as well as notes to look up this or that word, and frequently its etymology, in those works' (p. 539). Hill's devotion to OED (comparatively scantily reciprocated; see below) is fully explored in Matthew Sperling, *Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> See further Jed Deppman, *Trying to think with Emily Dickinson* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), notably chapter 4.

<sup>38</sup> Foreword to T. P. Dolan, *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English: The Irish use of English* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998), p. xi.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary* (London: Henry Frowde, 1898), 8 vols. See e.g. Norman White, 'G. M. Hopkins's contributions to the *English Dialect Dictionary*', *English Studies*, 4 (1987), 325-35.

<sup>40</sup> Carpenter, *Auden*, p. 66. The following material on Auden is condensed from Brewer, *Treasure-House*, pp. 188-197 and elsewhere; for OED3's subsequent treatment of Auden see 'Literary Quotations', pp. 116-120.

<sup>41</sup> Spender, Stephen (ed.), *W. H. Auden: a Tribute* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 176; Carpenter, *Auden*, p. 391.

<sup>42</sup> These words form part of one of the lists (p. 90) to be found in the holograph notebook, dated September 1965-[73], p. 90, in the Berg Collection in New York Public Library.

<sup>43</sup> Originally published in *The New York Review of Books* in July 1973; reprinted in John Haffenden, *W. H. Auden: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 480-84.

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<sup>86</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, W. R. Aitken, and Michael Grieve (ed.), *Complete Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993-4), vol. 2, p. 823; Hugh MacDiarmid and A. N. Bold (ed.), *The Thistle Rises: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), pp. 224; 247–8; *Oxford English Dictionary, 1884-1928: Speeches Delivered in the Goldsmiths' Hall, 6 June 1928* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> MacDiarmid and Bold, *The Thistle Rises*, p. 224.

<sup>45</sup> Ann Boutelle, *Thistle and rose: a study of Hugh MacDiarmid's poetry* (Loanhead, Midlothian: Macdonald), p. 77.

<sup>87</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (London: Methuen, 1943), p. 225; *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, pp. 738, 755, also instanced in Brewer, 'Literary Quotations', p. 123. Ruth McQuillan, 'Macdiarmid's Other Dictionary', *Lines Review*, lxvi (September 1978), pp. 5-14, shows that MacDiarmid chose words from a range of dictionaries, often for their non-semantic connotations; see also Michael Whitworth, 'Hugh MacDiarmid and Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary', *Notes and Queries* 55 (2008), pp. 78-80.

<sup>46</sup> Wendell Holmes continues, adumbrating Emerson's notion of fossil poetry, 'The poetry of words is quite as beautiful as that of sentences. The author may arrange the gems effectively, but their shape and lustre have been given by the attrition of ages' (quoted in David Micklethwait, *Noah Webster and the American Dictionary* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2000), pp. 103-4).

<sup>47</sup> Sadly, this quotation has been excised in OED3 in its updated entry of 2010, along with the quotation following it: '1878 R. W. Dale *Lect. Preach.* vi. 181 A dictionary is not merely a home for living words; it is a hospital for the sick; it is a cemetery for the dead'.

<sup>48</sup> Brewer, *Treasure-House*, pp. 190-1; Proulx records that she collects 'dictionaries of works and trades, of dialects and phrases', and slept with a copy of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* when writing *The Shipping News*; see Aliko Varvogli, *Annie Proulx's the Shipping News: A Reader's Guide* (New York; London: Continuum, 2002), p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Constantine FitzGibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: J. M. Dent, 1965), pp. 367-8.

<sup>50</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 150; T.S. Eliot, 'Matthew Arnold', *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 118-9.

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<sup>51</sup> Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, 24 Oct 1989, Clarendon Press (1990), p. 8. Okay for us to change this reference to the essay's later publication in the Faber book? Just because more readers are likely to have ready access to that... Yes, of course!

<sup>52</sup> Quoted from Ezra Pound, 'How to Read' (Harmsworth: London, 1931) pp. 25-26 (first published in the *New York Herald-Tribune* of 20 Jan 1929). The term was included by Burchfield in the 1976 volume of the Supplement, citing Pound as first and second user and Northrop Frye as a third example, in an excerpt from *Anatomy of Criticism* referring to Pound. The entry is as yet unrevised and the term is not independently defined by OED; the dictionary reader is referred to Pound's own (quoted) definition.

<sup>53</sup> MacDiarmid, *Lucky poet*, xiii.

<sup>54</sup> Untitled review (1931), reprinted in Haffenden, *Critical Heritage*, p. 86. MacDiarmid refers to the 'great brouhaha in Scotland' which greeted his 'early Scots lyrics [written] straight out of the dictionary' (*The Thistle Rises*, p. 224).

<sup>55</sup> Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, and Paul Rouzer (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, fourth edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 862.

<sup>56</sup> The quotation was added to the entry for *table* by Burchfield in the Supplement (1986), and to those for *etherize* and *spread* by OED3 in March 2014 and June 2016 respectively. See further Brewer, 'Literary Quotations', pp. 105-13.

<sup>57</sup> See Rowena Fowler, 'Robert Browning in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: A New Approach', *Studies in Philology*, 95 (1998), pp. 333-50.

<sup>58</sup> See Brewer, *Treasure-House*, pp. 195, 204-5; Burchfield, *Unlocking the English Language*, p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> R. W. Burchfield, 'The Supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: The End of the Alphabet', R. W. Bailey (ed.), *Dictionaries of English*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 11-21; see further Brewer, *Treasure-House*, p. 187.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Patrick Hanks, *Lexical Analysis: Norms and Exploitations* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013), chapter 12, 'The Role of the Lexicon in Linguistic Theory', pp. 347-408, and B. T. S. Atkins and Michael Rundell, *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially Introduction 1.2.2 (p. 4) and 1.4 (pp. 8-11).

<sup>61</sup> Hanks, *Lexical Analysis*, p. 426.

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<sup>62</sup> As the two surviving OED1 editors, W. A. Craigie and C. T. Onions, described in their Preface to the first edition's 'Re-issue' of 1933, *OED*'s 'basis is a collection of some five million excerpts from English literature of every period', forming 'the only possible foundation for the historical treatment of every word and idiom which is the *raison d'être* of the work. It is a fact everywhere recognized that the consistent pursuit of this evidence has worked a revolution in the art of lexicography'.

<sup>63</sup> Burchfield printed two quotations in his updated entry, the first from *Ulysses* (1920): 'A volume of peccaminous pornographical tendency entitled *Sweets of Sin*', and the second an unintelligible utterance from *Finnegans Wake* (1939); 'To put off the barcelonas from their peccaminous corpulums'; *corpulum* was not then and is not now defined elsewhere in the *OED*. The revised entry (September 2005) now supplies additional quotations of 1707 and (from a dictionary) 1806, along with a third of 2003, an apparent echo of Joyce. See further Brewer, 'Literary Quotations', pp. 12-124; John Simpson, "'And words. They are not in my dictionary": James Joyce and the *OED*', in Ronan Crowley and Dirk Van Hulle (eds.), *New Quotatoes: Joycean Exogenesis in the Digital Age* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), pp. 45-65.

<sup>64</sup> An indeterminable number of *hapax legomena* in the first and second editions (i.e. inserted by Murray and his fellow editors or by Burchfield) have now, in the revised edition, been found either not to have been *hapax legomena* or to have been used by other writers subsequently, sometimes in direct reference to the earlier usage. An example of the first category is Joyce's *plotch*, in Molly's 'prose poem' soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses*, which has now been shown (in the new OED3 entry) to be a variant of the dialect word *platch* (Brewer, 'Literary Quotations', p. 123); Auden's coinage *metalogue* is an example of the second. The number of these instances is indeterminable because—most regrettably—the OED website does not permit searches of OED3 entries as against those in OED2 or OED1; see further Brewer, 'OED Online Re-launched: Distinguishing old scholarship from new', *Dictionaries*, 34 (2013), pp. 101-26.

<sup>65</sup> Another important consideration here is the number of instances for which an author is cited as the first example of usage for a word or sense, which might seem to indicate relative lexical productivity. This metric is tricky to interpret, however: the OED seeks out the earliest example it can find of textual usage, but the word may have existed prior to this either in unrecorded oral sources or in earlier texts as yet unread by the dictionary.

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<sup>66</sup> See Brewer, 'Shakespeare, word-coining, and the OED', *Shakespeare Survey*, 65 (2013), pp. 345-57.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Eliot, 'The Writer as Artist', p. 774: 'The writer must help to select those words and meanings which deserve to survive, and which we should continue to need, and to help reject those which we can well do without.... the writer as artist is the single most important factor in preserving, refreshing and developing the language'.

<sup>68</sup> Roy Harris, 'The History Men', *Times Literary Supplement* (1982), pp. 935-6.

<sup>69</sup> Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 4.