This is a pre-print version of an article that has been accepted for publication in *Notes & Queries*, published by Oxford University Press. Version 1.0 - 28 June 2015. Version 1.1 (addition of this acknowledgement) 26 September 2015.

David-Antoine Williams
St Jerome's University
290 Westmount Rd North
Waterloo ON N2L 3G3
david.williams@uwaterloo.ca

THE 'OXFORD DICTIONARY' IN T. S. ELIOT

T. S. Eliot famously denies the possibility of arriving at a satisfactory definition of *poetry*;[1] and, less famously perhaps, of *concept*, *knowledge*, *experience, immediate experience, religious behaviour*, and *rhetoric*.[2] Frequently in his essays he quibbles with others' definitions—among them Matthew Arnold's (he who had 'little gift for consistency or for definition')[3] of *poetry* and *criticism*; W. B. Yeats's of *art*, Richard Aldington's of *prose poem,* A. G. Barnes's of *satire*, Josiah Royce's and William James's of *idea*, and Bertrand Russell's of *definition*.[4] In 'Can "Education" be defined?' (1950), Eliot contemplates over several pages a number of kinds of definition—'lexical', 'stipulative', 'nominal', 'primary', 'secondary'—for his title word, commenting that 'people have been very far from agreeing upon a definition of the word 'definition.'"[5]

Two years earlier he had published *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*

---

[1] T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London, 1933) 16, 155.

[2] Respectively: T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Prose*, ed. R. Schuchard et. al. (London, 2014), I, 264; *ibid.*, 353; *ibid.*, 32; *ibid.*, 171; *ibid.*, 115; *ibid.*, II, 89.

[3] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London, 1932), 393.

[4] Respectively: *Use of Poetry*, 111; *Prose*, II, 288; *ibid.*, 74; *ibid.*, 324; *ibid.*, 791; *ibid.*, 838; *ibid.*, I, 183.

[5] T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and other writings* (New York, 1965), 120-22.

(1948), in which he sought the advice of the lexicographer on this preallable matter, quoting a definition of *definition* on the title page:

> DEFINITION: 1. The setting of bounds; limitation (rare)—1483
> —*Oxford English Dictionary* [6]

This is an error. The definition is not taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), but rather from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (SOED)—a misattribution which caught the attention of Robert Burchfield, editor of the OED's second Supplement (1972-86). Burchfield thought this 'a trivial example of the way in which poets are often inattentive to, or unconcerned with, the exactness of pure scholarship as they excavate their own kind of truth'.[7] But arguably the error is not so trivial. Among other effects of the misattribution (the pretention of lexicographical completeness, for instance) is the implication that this sense of the word was first attested in 1483, when in fact the formatting conventions of the *Shorter* mean that it was most recently attested in that year.[8] To take an obsolete definition for an epigraph might be thought to set the scene for a different kind of attitude toward one's subject matter than to take an ancient and enduring (if 'rare') one.

In 1940, speaking on the BBC, Eliot described some additional uses and qualities of a good dictionary:

> 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.[9]

---

[6] T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London, 1948), title page.

[7] R. W. Burchfield, *Unlocking the English Language* (London, 1989), 61, 79 n.1.

[8] I am indebted to John Cowan for this observation.

[9] T. S. Eliot, 'The Writer as Artist', *The Listener* (1940), 773-4. Quoted in Charlotte

The biggest English dictionary available in 1940 was the thirteen-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* and Supplement (1933), which also contained the fullest accounts of each headword's usage history and sense development. As Charlotte Brewer comments, one might naturally assume therefore that Eliot was thinking of the OED in this comment, but Brewer takes the story surrounding the misidentified definition in *Notes* as evidence to the contrary, adding: 'Valerie Eliot confirmed to Burchfield in 1988 that "her husband possessed a copy of the *Shorter Oxford* but not of the *OED* itself".'[10]

Whatever the contents of Eliot's personal library (he spent his working days within a few steps of the old British Library reading room in Russell Square), it seems impossible that some notion of the OED, even if a muddled one, did not supply a part of his radio description of the 'most important, the most inexhaustible book to a writer'.[11] Certainly Eliot did consult the OED in the course of his work, even if he also consulted other dictionaries. He makes reference to something that could be the OED fourteen times in the letters and prose that have been published as of mid-2015. In order of increasing vagueness, he mentions 'a big dictionary', 'the large English dictionary', 'the Oxford dictionary', 'the Oxford Dictionary', '*The Oxford Dictionary*', 'the *N.E.D.*', 'the *New English Dictionary*', 'the O.E.D.', and '*Oxford English Dictionary*'. We have seen how the final and most precise of these designations certainly is *not* quoting the OED. Of the remaining, five times they definitely refer to the OED, and five times most probably they do not, leaving three undeterminable cases.

Brewer, *Treasure House of the Language: The Living OED* (New Haven, 2007), 191.

[10] Brewer, *ibid.*

[11] Eliot, quoted in *ibid.*

In 'Arnold and Pater' (1930), Eliot set out to define and yet again define (as Pound said poets ought), writing, 'If, as the *Oxford Dictionary* tells us, an aesthete is a "professed appreciator of the beautiful", then there are at least two varieties…',[12] before going on to describe these. In 1930, as now, there was no *Oxford Dictionary*. The publication that would, three years later, receive the title *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which had been coming out in fascicles and volumes since 1884, was called *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (NED). Even so, the NED had been commonly referred to as 'the Oxford dictionary' (sometimes even quasi-officially as 'The Oxford Dictionary') as early as the mid-1880s, and this was a common shorthand inside Oxford University Press and out.[13]

But Eliot is not citing the NED in 'Arnold and Pater', though the pages covering 'A-Ant' had been available since 1884. Neither is he citing the SOED (this was not published until 1933). Rather, by 'the *Oxford Dictionary*' Eliot here means the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (COD), a 1911 work partially based on the uncompleted OED. The phrasing of the definition, which is equivalent but different in the other two works, makes the attribution beyond doubt. In other cases, definitions quoted by Eliot correspond to (or resemble more closely) those in the SOED rather than the OED.

---

[12] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 400.

[13] As early as 1885, about the time the second fascicle ('Ant-Batten') was published, we find a reference in *The Dietic Reformer and Vegetarian Messenger*, clxvii (1 Nov. 1885), 334, which hoped that 'The great Oxford dictionary of Dr. Murray…will do us justice'. They would have to wait till 1916 for the publication of 'V-Verificative'.

Eliot quotes these dictionaries for different purposes. On two occasions he merely glosses a term under discussion.[14] In one essay he invokes the authority of 'the Oxford Dictionary' (probably SOED) against Poe's use of *immemorial:*

> None of these meanings seems applicable to this use of the word by Poe … sound and sense must cooperate; in even the most purely incantatory poem, the dictionary meaning of words cannot be disregarded with impunity.[15]

More typically it is the dictionary definition itself that Eliot challenges as inadequate or incomplete, as with *aesthete*, as well as *invention* ("'Invention" in the sense used here by Dryden does not seem to me to be properly covered by the *New English Dictionary*'[16]), and, perhaps most famously, *lyric*: 'The very definition of "lyric", in the Oxford Dictionary, indicates that the word cannot be satisfactorily defined',[17] Eliot says in 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (1953), before quoting the SOED definition. Two paragraphs of critique follow. Of *provincial*, he writes in 'What is a Classic?' (1944),

> I mean here something more than I find in the dictionary definitions. I mean more, for instance, than 'wanting the culture or polish of the capital' … and I mean more than 'narrow in thought, in culture, in creed' — a slippery definition this…[18]

If the second quotation appears slippery, it may be because it is not in fact a

---

[14] The first is referring either to OED or COD, in T. S. Eliot, *Letters*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London, 2011), III, 859; the second is one of two quotations of the NED in 'The Age of Dryden', in *Use of Poetry*, 57. For the other, see note 16, below.

[15] Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic*, 32

[16] Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 48.

[17] T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), 96.

[18] *Ibid.*, 69.

definition, but rather part of an illustrative quotation, clearly marked as such under definition 5 of the OED entry. Due to the abridgement and formatting conventions of the SOED, however, a less than careful user of that dictionary might take it for a definition, as Eliot apparently did. Had he looked for the word in the parent dictionary instead, Eliot would have found that 'narrow in thought…' was the not the wording of the lexicographer, but that of (his distant cousin) James Russell Lowell, in *New England Two Centuries Ago* (1865). Needless to say, to critique an abridged work for incompleteness, when the unabridged version is available—and to misread that work—might fairly be seen as lacking the 'exactness of pure scholarship' which Burchfield pointed out.

The other main use of 'the Oxford D/dictionary' in the essays is to set out the history of a word's usage and development in order to exemplify or even frame an argument, and here Eliot does turn, most often, to the OED. He does this for the word *evince*, carefully comparing its modern meaning with senses it had in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries—OED quotation evidence supplying his examples—as well as its modern French cognate and Latin etymon. The history of *education* is discussed in two separate essays: 'Notes on Education and Culture' (Chapter VI of *Notes*), where SOED supplies the evidence, and 'Can "Education" be Defined?', where the OED entry is narrated in some detail, starting with obsolete sense †1, and including later semantic detours into the training of animals, especially the rearing of silkworms. Of the abridged history he got from the SOED entry, Eliot had commented 'In short, the dictionary tells you what you know already',[19] but if Eliot knew about 'an "education" of silkworms' in 1948 he did not think it worth adducing (it does not appear in the

[19] Eliot, *Notes*, 99.

SOED entry he cites). The paragraph summarizing the more detailed OED entry in the later essay leads Eliot to reflect that 'As time goes on, and a language ages, it becomes more difficult to find out what words mean, and whether they are meaning the same thing to different people',[20] as if the very fullness of the OED's lexicographical record could put the communicative utility of a word into peril.

Perhaps Eliot's idea of the relations among the OED, SOED, and COD was muddy, and he understood these simply as three formats—full, shorter, shortest—of the same Oxford Dictionary. This would allow him to avoid the (apparently confounding) exhaustiveness of the OED, while still laying claim to its authority. And it would not be an uncommon misapprehension. Today the situation is much worse, with 'Oxford Dictionary' and even *Oxford English Dictionary* used commonly to refer to any of the dozen or more English dictionaries published by Oxford University Press in the last century, in print and online.[21] This phenomenon in itself speaks to a peculiar kind of authority within the public imagination of a title which—more like the Bible than other reference works—has come to stand for authority itself, so much that it transcends the specificity of its own authoritative statements.

Eliot did not write an essay called 'Johnson as Lexicographer', but in

---

[20] Eliot, *To Criticize*, 68.

[21] These include, in addition to the titles already discussed, *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary*, *The Oxford American Dictionary*, *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, and *The Oxford English Dictionary Online.*

'Johnson as Critic and Poet' (1944) he explains the 'responsibility of our poets and critics, for the preservation of the language', in terms rooted in the philological:

> amongst the varieties of chaos in which we find ourselves immersed to-day, one is a chaos of language … and an increasing indifference to etymology and the history of the use of words.[22]

Though this might suggest a kind of fusty linguistic conservatism (would not some other 'varieties of chaos' prevalent in that year perhaps be more pressing?), really it is a pedagogical conservatism, combined with a perfectly modern view of linguistic development. To return to 'Can "Education" be Defined?', the essay in which he pays most attention to dictionaries, words, and definitions, Eliot there approves of the 'wobbliness of words', saying that 'it is their changes in meaning that … indicate that a language *is* alive'.[23] It is a view clearly informed by the same philological principles that guided the OED project. Discussing the attractive Americanisms *grifter* and *shill*, Eliot writes that, should they succeed in American writing, 'They will find their way into the English vocabulary as well, and eventually into a supplement to the great Oxford dictionary… and so their dictionary status in Britain will be assured.'[24]

DAVID-ANTOINE WILLIAMS

St Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo

---

[22] Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, 192.

[23] Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic*, 65. Original emphasis.

[24] *Ibid.*, 47.