

Seeks he a wisdom well worth the faring?

Pages here may his purpose greet
with all men's cunning for all men's sharing
Knowledge of what to believe or eat,
of Pliny's villa or Pompey's fleet,
why barnacles stick or elephants lumber,
of centipedes' legs or poets' feet—
this is the hundred and fiftieth number.

Never of newer news despairing
to shape the paragraphs closed and neat,
provocative both in giving and sparing,
wisest is he who fills the sheet,
he, the miller of finest wheat;
never yielding, nor luring, to slumber,
but holding us fixed, as he in his seat—
this is the hundred and fiftieth number.

ENVOY.

Prince, what seekers, in palace and street,
rajas and ryots, from Hoogli to Humber,
taste the confection and find it sweet—
this is the hundred and fiftieth number.

29
C.W.

Some allusions in this poem are not mere ornament but memorialize OUP, authors, editors, and *The Periodical*. In line 5, for example, 'Skeat' refers to Walter William Skeat (1835–1912), professor of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge who produced a number of editions of Chaucer and Langland for OUP during *The Periodical's* run. And in the envoy, the lines 'Prince, what seekers, in palace and street, / rajas and ryots, from Hoogli to Humber' (ll. 26–7) allude to *The Periodical's* circulation. According to the journal's hundredth issue, subscribers included 'all classes', from 'Princes' to 'studious artisans and squatters' (vi.100 [April 1919]: 286). It circulated globally from the United Kingdom ('Humber' is its synecdochic estuary in these lines) to India (with its 'rajas and ryots'; 'Hoogli' is an Anglicization of a river variously known as the Hooghly, Bhāgirathi-Hooghly, or Ganga) and beyond to Australia, North America, Africa, and continental Europe, thus giving this Williams poem significant international exposure.

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doi:10.1093/notesj/gjw015

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Advance Access publication 27 April, 2016

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*, John Watson's of *personality*, 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* (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 it 'a trivial example of the way in which poets are often inattentive to, or unconcerned with, the exactness of pure scholarship as they excavate

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), 120–2.

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

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

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 says, 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-2015.¹² Starting with the vaguest references, 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 indeterminate cases.

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 . . .',¹³ before going on to describe these. Strictly speaking, in 1930, as now, there was no *Oxford Dictionary*. The publication that would, three years later, officially receive the title *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which had been coming out in fascicles and volumes since 1884, was titled *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (NED)*. Even so, the *NED* bore '*The Oxford English Dictionary*' quasi-officially on the covers and wrappers of parts published after 1895 (though not on their title pages),¹⁴ and had been commonly referred to as 'the Oxford dictionary', inside Oxford University Press and out, as early as the mid-1880s.¹⁵

¹² I.e., letters to 1931. In an edition published too late to be incorporated into the main text here, I note nine additional mentions in letters from 1934 to 1942, and unpublished prose from 1942 to 1954, all or most of which refer to the *OED*. See *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London, 2015), I, 931, 969, 1009, 1011, 1215, 1250–2, for these and other relevancies, and the note on 'Gerontion', lines 52–53, which quotes a letter from 1960: 'It is only in recent years that I have formed the habit of looking up in the dictionary every important word that appears in my verse!' (480).

¹³ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 400.

¹⁴ See Brewer, *Treasure House*, 261.

¹⁵ 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, in defiance of those who would traduce the name of *vegetarian*, that 'The great Oxford dictionary of Dr. Murray . . . will do us justice'. They would have to wait thirty-one years for the publication of 'V-Verificative' (1916).

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

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Eliot, quoted in *ibid.*

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*.

Eliot quotes these dictionaries for different purposes. On two occasions he merely glosses a term under discussion.¹⁶ 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... in even the most purely incantatory poem, the dictionary meaning of words cannot be disregarded with impunity.¹⁷

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*’¹⁸), and, perhaps most famously, *lyric*: ‘The very definition of “lyric”, in the *Oxford Dictionary*, indicates that the word cannot be satisfactorily defined’,¹⁹ 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...²⁰

If the second definition appears slippery, it may be because it is not in fact a definition, but rather part of an illustrative quotation, clearly marked as such under sense 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 Eliot’s essays is to set out the history of a word’s usage and development in order to illustrate 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’,²¹ but if Eliot knew about ‘an “education” of silkworms’ in 1948 he did not think it worth adducing (it does not appear in the *SOED* entry he cites). The paragraph summarizing the more detailed *OED* entry in the later essay leads Eliot to reflect that ‘As time

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic*, 32.

¹⁸ Eliot, *Use of Poetry*, 56.

¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), 96.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹ Eliot, *Notes*, 99.

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',²² as if the very fullness of the *OED*'s lexicographical record could put the communicative utility of a word into doubt.

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.²³ 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 'Johnson as Critic and Poet' (1944) he set out 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.²⁴

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'.²⁵ It is a view clearly informed by the same philological principles that guided the *OED* project. Discussing the attractive Americanisms *grifter* and *skill*, 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'.²⁶

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doi:10.1093/notesj/gjw022

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Advance Access publication 11 April, 2016

²⁵ Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic*, 65. Original emphasis.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47. The two words would appear in volumes of R. W. Burchfield's Second Supplement to the *OED*, in 1972 and 1986, respectively.

T. S. ELIOT IN THE *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*

THE second Supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by Robert Burchfield between 1957 and 1986, more than doubled the number of literary eponyms in the dictionary, to 167.¹ The first edition of 1933 (*OEDI*), including the first Supplement, had *Aristophanic* (first attested 1827) and *Sophoclean* (1649) but not *Æschylean* (1844) or *Euripidean* (1821); *Ossianesque* (1874) but not *Omaresque* (1892); *Coleridgean* (1834) but not *Southeyan* (1817); and so on. In addition

¹ Quantitative evidence is based on analysis of the pseudo-SGML text of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (1989), encoded in the late 1980s at the University of Waterloo as part of the digitization process, and the TriStar CD-ROM edition (1987) of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1st edn (1928). Information from the first Supplement (1933) has been gleaned manually. Compiled results are available from the author. All *OED* data is published by Oxford University Press.

²² Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic*, 68.

²³ 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*.

²⁴ Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, 192.