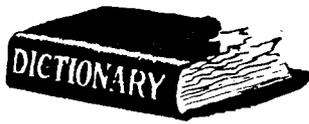

AUTHORS & CRITICS

“To plagiarise, or to purloin, or to borrow. . . .”?

A Reply to R. W. Burchfield—By LAURENCE URDANG



THE LEXICOGRAPHERS and publishers of dictionaries not bearing the imprint of Oxford University Press should feel flattered that the august Robert W. Burchfield has deigned to take cognisance of their efforts, though the casual observer might venture to regard his piece, “Dictionaries, New & Old”, in the September/October ENCOUNTER, somewhat *infra dig*. It is also riddled with errors, misconceptions, and misinterpretations concerning (at the very least) the dictionaries with which I have had more than a passing acquaintance. As I am unqualified to comment on *Webster’s Third International* and *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate vis-à-vis* the *OED*, I shall confine my remarks to the other dictionaries that have come under scrutiny in that article.

First, I shall try, as briefly as possible, to set the record straight:

1. The rights for the unfettered use of material from the *American College Dictionary (ACD)* were made available to Paul Hamlyn in the mid-1960s for a Britishised version; ably edited by Patrick W. Hanks, it appeared in 1971 as the *Encyclopedic World Dictionary (EWD)*. In the late 1970s, permission was granted for an Australian edition of that work, which appeared as *The Macquarie Dictionary*, in 1981. These three dictionaries, sold in entirely different and mutually exclusive markets, are obviously and unashamedly similar, for they are simply different versions of the same work. Acknowledgment of the “derivativeness” (as Mr Burchfield so quaintly puts it) of the second to the first and of the third to the first two is set forth in their front matter and copyright pages in accordance with whatever agreement was drawn between the respective publishers. Rights to every kind of work—book, film, gramophone record, and all other copyrightable items—are constantly interchanged among companies that cater to different markets round the world, and there is nothing odd, suspicious, reprehensible, underhanded, or illegal in that activity. The manner in which the acknowledgments are set forth, both in wording and in prominence—and, in fact, whether they are required at all—is a matter between the owners and the purchasers of the rights; it is not, conceivably, any of Mr Burchfield’s business.

Thus, it would appear that the mystery surrounding the “revelation” of similarities among the three dictionaries is cleared up—if, indeed, it ever was a mystery in the mind of anyone but Mr Burchfield, considering the ineluctable fact that

the “indebtedness”, as he so archly puts it, was there for all to see.

2. The case of the *Random House Dictionary* (college edition) (*RHD*) and the *Collins English Dictionary (CED)* is entirely different. Going back a bit, Mr Burchfield seems to be totally unaware that the *ACD*, edited by Clarence L. Barnhart and published by Random House in 1947, was based in large part on an abridged edition of the *Century Dictionary & Cyclopedia*. That work, a massive, ten-volume dictionary published in 1889 (revised editions appeared till 1911), was prepared in America under the direction of William Dwight Whitney, a scholar of international repute and professor of linguistics at Yale University. In the late 1920s, Appleton-Century-Crofts, successors to the Century Company (the original publisher), prepared a two-volume abridgment of the large dictionary. Despite its quality, the abridgment enjoyed only a modest success, probably because it was not easy to use: in their efforts to demonstrate the semantic development of each word, the editors had stripped out most of the definition numbers, substituting what amounted to a telegraphically succinct collection of semantic elements. Scholarly though that method might have been, it held little appeal for the general public.

Random House acquired the rights to use material from this *Century* abridgment for the *ACD*. In 1959, when the planning of what was to become *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language—Unabridged Edition* was begun, negotiations were concluded with Appleton-Century-Crofts to extend the rights granted for the *ACD* to the new dictionary. Hence, many of the definitions of the (basic) words common to the *ACD* and the *RHD* (all editions) are similar if not identical to one another, and to those in the *Century* abridgment as well.

When the preparation of the *CED* was begun, under my direction, in the early 1970s, I acquired the rights to use any material I wished from the (old, ten-volume) *Century*, and we drew on it freely, chiefly, of course, for definitions of general vocabulary. In most well-balanced modern dictionaries, the coverages of general vocabulary and of scientific, technical, and specialised vocabulary are about equal in volume. As it is useless to try to pick up fully half of the material from a dictionary prepared a century earlier, all of such matter must be researched and written afresh. But there seems little advantage in creating new definitions for the other half of the dictionary provided that the definitions in a source work are acceptable.

The similarities between the *RHD* and the *CED* can be thus accounted for: to some extent, both were ultimately derived from the same source, though independently. There was nothing illegal, plagiaristic, or even mildly shady about it. As the agreements with Appleton-Century-Crofts (and, in the 1970s, with Prentice-Hall Publishers, who had since acquired that company) did not require any acknowledgment, none was given. Besides, the users of dictionaries are more interested in being presented with serviceable information about the lexicon of the language than in engaging in comparative lexicographical research.

So much for Mr Burchfield's insinuations of hanky-panky.

AS FOR his more serious accusations of plagiarism, it may be useful to cite here (again) the definition in the *OED* which was quoted in the earlier article in ENCOUNTER:

"the wrongful appropriation or purloining and publication as one's own, of the ideas, or the expression of the

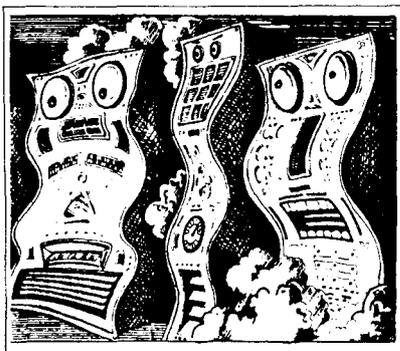
ideas (literary, artistic, musical, mechanical, etc.) of another. . . ."

In this context, it seems hardly necessary to repeat the point that the key word is "wrongful": when one has the permission of the owner of the idea, there is nothing wrongful to be drawn into question.

More to the point, perhaps, is the question of whether it is plagiarism to appropriate or purloin and publish as one's own the ideas of others *even if the source is acknowledged*. In a legal sense—at least in the modern interpretations familiar to me—the publication of another's work without permission is plagiarism *prima facie*, whether acknowledgment is made or not. In other words, if someone publishes, without permission, a work or part of a work copyrighted by another (excepting brief excerpts), notwithstanding an acknowledgment of indebtedness, he is contravening and violating the other's right and thereby lays himself open to a lawsuit if he hasn't obtained the copyright owner's express permission, for which he may often be asked to pay a fee.

Mr Burchfield's contention that similarities—even identities—of treatment and text in the *EWD* and *Macquarie vis-à-*

Logos Takes Over the Word



Hanover

"**L**OGOS", first exhibited here at the Hanover international fair, represents a triumph for the mathematical formulae, "algorithms", first worked out by American specialists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1946. It is a translating machine run by a handy little computer; and it will doubtless put more speed, efficiency, and know-how into a whole host of European enterprise.

The vocabulary of the Wang machine, which translates from German into English, consists of 20,000 words. The director of Logos Computer Systems (of New Bedford, Massachusetts) has reassured one and all here that the accuracy of the translation is so high that only some 10% of the final text needs to be edited by "human hand." What has finally been achieved, after many rough starts, is the capacity of the programme to "tune in" on certain mental complexities in the use of language and thus capture the essence of meanings which might be

otherwise misunderstood and mistranslated. To "translate" is not necessarily to "traduce."

Logos's vocabulary can be augmented by some 50 words for a specialised area of technical concern; and it operates according to the standard spelling and usages of Germany's "Duden" dictionary. It knows its prepositions and will make the proper corrections when the Hanover firm is dispatching a shipment of goods "onto" (read: "to") the United States. But it is not a stylist. Out of bad German it will not be able to make good English.

STILL, THE CODES in the Logos programme are remarkable in getting the literal meaning right, and behind it there is the verbal insurance of some 256 special semantic categories. Take the German word *verlegen*. It has many meanings and different usages, but the machine evidently gets them all correctly rendered. Thus the key to the library can be misplaced (*verlegen*), which would make the librarian look very embarrassed (*verlegen*); he blames it on the confusion caused by the cables which were being laid (*verlegen*); but still, how should one get at all the books which have been published (*verlegen*)?

Each of these, individually, can be coped with; but take them all together, as in the above, and Logos will inevitably need homo sapiens to help it puzzle out when "ein Verleger verlegen wird" because "alle seine beste verlegte Bücher verlegt waren. . . ." Thus, Logos will be of small use when it comes to translating subtleties in literature or intellectual texts. It is intended to deal

efficiently and speedily with instruction handbooks, collections of technical documents, or a firm's average daily correspondence. It knows how to deal with things, with terminology, with declarative sentences; but not with ideas, or with feelings, ironies, jokes, impressions, or reflections.

SO THE HUMAN TRANSLATOR is not yet obsolete. One is doubtful even here, in this technical Utopia, that a machine will yet be devised to handle the ultimate jobs. The next models of the Logos machine will clearly have much larger vocabularies, will be able to adjust more quickly to more specialised fields, will learn faster and permanently. It already works tirelessly through the night, and in the morning the hundred pages or so are translated in quite satisfactory renderings. The English is clear, concise, accurate. With Logos plugged in, a vital job will be well done; productivity should go up; and one or two more poor chaps join the unemployed. But they, or their cousins in America, may get newly-created places with expanding Logos Computers in New Bedford, Mass. Or they can shift gear and go into translating best sellers, or to doing the tricky dubbing of texts for language-synchronised TV hits like *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and *Kojak*.

The machine, good as it is, has its limitations—and human intelligence still rules.

A.S.
in the FRANKFURTER
ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG

vis the *ACD*, and in the *RHD* and *CED*, are suggestive of the results of having been “furtively copied or covertly concealed” borders on libel, especially in light of what I have revealed about permission agreements and common sources.

By implication, he tries to convey the impression that his research and scholarship are impeccable, which I should not dare to question; yet I suggest that his repeated references to medieval texts are entirely irrelevant to the issues raised in his article. Moreover, had he taken the trouble to pursue his research a simple, logical step further by asking me about the “coincidences” he found among the dictionaries with which I have been involved, I should have been happy to have provided him with the foregoing information, sparing him the embarrassment of seeing publication of his false and misleading innuendos.

MR BURCHFIELD SEEMS to be quite content in his belief that it is perfectly all right to appropriate and purloin the ideas and materials of others as long as the source is credited. I submit that in questions of plagiarism the attribution of source is irrelevant, and I believe that my view is supported by law.

The *OED* was prepared and published to document the history of the English lexicon. Much of it is not copyright (under the laws of any country), and lexicographers have traditionally had recourse to it as an excellent and generally accurate resource for certain parts of the English word stock. Good lexicographers have resorted to the *OED* to supplement their own citation files and other sources and, usually, have seen fit to interpret or use the information so gleaned to suit themselves and the style of their works.

The dictionaries published in the 20th century, to which Mr Burchfield refers, were prepared as practical works of reference for the lay public, not for linguists, scholars in the history of the English language, or specialists in English lexicography. The average user cares little, I think, for detailed documentation of the sources used in compiling his dictionary as long as he is satisfied that the scholarship used in its preparation was properly authoritative. Moreover, if a citation for a particular sense of a word is required, and the *OED*, employed as a secondary source, shows it to have occurred in the writings of Dryden, Milton, Pope, or anyone else, why must the compiler of a new dictionary be compelled to go to the original Dryden, Milton, or Pope materials (unless it is to verify that the quotation in the *OED* was accurately transcribed)? Is it not the very function of the *OED* to provide such information? And, as for pinching material from other dictionaries, did not the editors of the *OED* themselves use the definitions of other

dictionaries—some of them in copyright, like the *Century Dictionary* after 1889—as fodder for its own citations? As I suggested above, acknowledgment of a source does nothing to remove the stigma of plagiarism.

Mr Burchfield, I fear, has done himself and the *OED* a disservice by attacking those who are the most consistent users and supporters of the *OED*, who derive the greatest benefits from it, and who labour mightily to pass on to the general public, in assimilable form, some of the vast wealth of information contained in the *OED*. In so doing, he has revealed himself only as a harmful drudge.

P.S. In the event that Mr Burchfield (or anyone else) wishes to pursue his line of investigation into other books prepared under my direction, virtually all of which are in computer-readable form, he may turn his attention to the 110 or so dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference works published since 1972.

Robert Burchfield Replies

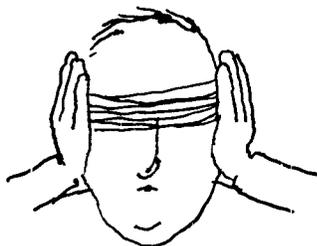
I MUST SAY AT ONCE that there was no question of plagiarism—neither stated nor implied—in the relationships of the various dictionaries mentioned by Laurence Urdang. My own title for the article (as for the lecture in Toronto before it) was “The Genealogy of Dictionaries.” I just want to encourage a little more openness about the sources and relationships of new dictionaries, and am pleased to see Mr Urdang, a distinguished lexicographer of great experience, now setting out the genealogy of several dictionaries in an unmistakable manner. This more open approach can do nothing but good.

I cannot leave the matter, however, without making an unqualified apology to the Editor and publishers of *Webster's Ninth Collegiate*. I expected to find an acknowledgment of some kind to the *OED* for their plain use of our dictionary on a huge scale in the system of dates entered in *Webster's Ninth*. No such acknowledgment appeared in the “obvious” places, the Preface itself (p. 6) and the section on p. 17 about Dates. But towards the end (p. 27) of a long essay called “The English Language in the Dictionary”, which unfortunately I did not read, there is a handsome reference to numerous source-dictionaries including “the majestic thirteen-volume Oxford English Dictionary and its supplements.” Had I read this essay to the bitter end that part of my article would never have been written, and I am sorry for the anguish that my words must have given to those concerned.

IN THE MARGIN

Suspicion by Omission

By Melvin J. Lasky



New York City
ON THE DAY I left London for Boston the Northwest Airlines stewardess kindly supplied me with the morning's newspapers. According to the headlines on both sides of the Atlantic, mayhem was in progress. *The Guardian*

reported that, on the one side, the Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire police chiefs were worried that the miners' strike pickets were getting out of hand; on the other, Mr Tony Benn, MP, was charging that it was only "a police riot", instigated by Mrs Thatcher's provocateurs.

What was happening in Lawrence, Massachusetts, was rather less clear, if possible; and in some confusion I leafed through all the papers I could find in Logan Airport. The banner headlines of the next day indicated that the local police were still desperately trying to control the rioting. Troopers were trying to stop angry crowds and gangs on the rampage; firemen were busy putting out fires and disposing of garbage-cans burning in the middle of Lawrence streets. Who was fighting whom? and why? For a moment I had a little nostalgia for the hard ideological lines of the Old World, where a class struggle is a class struggle.

Only a limited amount of light was shed on the subject by the *Boston Globe*, the famous New England newspaper. Its accounts showed the politicians blustering and filibustering in their usual way, and the Lawrence alderman in charge of public safety was quoted as saying:

"It was an isolated incident over nothing important. It was not racial. It was simply a warm night, tempers were high. . . . Things just got away with themselves."

Accordingly one's immediate suspicion was that it was, once again, "Whites" v. "Blacks." But the press also reported that Puerto Rican women had been complaining that they had been subjected to racial taunts from "Americans." But who were they? White Americans, brown ones, black ones, yellow ones? (On another page, covering another story, the paper used the odd phrase "Native Americans" . . . referring to some Indian tribes on an Arizona reservation.) That evening in Providence, and perhaps Rhode Island was far enough away to have more perspective, the local evening newspaper revealed that when the police moved in to declare an absolute curfew in Lawrence

they had made megaphone announcements in English, Spanish, and *French!* Well, the first is obvious; Spanish, understandably, because this is an area of so-called "Portuguese" settlements and Puerto Ricans emigrated there because of its attractive Hispanic ethnicity. But the *French?* It turned out, after much finger-flicking research at the hotel's newspaper-stand, that there was a substantial French-Canadian community in Lawrence. Were these the "Americans" who were doing the taunting? At any rate somebody, in the phrase of the *Journal-Bulletin*, was "raising a ruckus"; and if I couldn't quite figure out *who* was "ruckusing", and *why* (it wasn't the hate, it was the humidity), I was pleased to note that after 48 hours or so, in which your friendly neighbourhood police were described as moving in with "snarling attack dogs on leashes", Lawrence was brought back to law-and-order, and Mayor John J. Buckley could remind one and all that their town had "a long and proud history of being a city of immigrants." The *Boston Globe* reported:

"In an effort to defuse the tense situation last night, area clergymen organized an ecumenical service in front of an abandoned fire house at the corner of Oxford and Lowell Streets. With an electric piano and bongo drums playing in front of a wooden cross, a group from St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church sang 'the Lord's Prayer'. . . ."

Our press was running true to form, telling us more about everything we didn't have to know, and sedulously omitting essentials.

I HAVE GOOD REASON to suspect that this is not a mere accident of careless reporting under the pressure of a fast-breaking story, but rather a reflection of our new cultural predicament where the precarious balance of disruptive forces dictates that no potentially explosive truths be told. The motives are doubtless well-meaning. Yet how an informed public opinion can ever develop under such self-censored circumstances—much less come to wise and prudent conclusions about properly ordering a multiracial and ethnically plural society—is quite beyond me.

In more optimistic and hopeful years, some twenty years ago, I once tried to argue the problem with the editors of *The New York Times*. I confessed to the distinguished managing editor, Mr A. M. Rosenthal, that I was more bewildered every day by the full-page coverage which his paper had been energetically devoting to a situation of racial tension in Brooklyn that had alarmed the entire nation. Thousands of agitated citizens were milling about the streets; the atmosphere was explosive; police were alerted for riot and violence; the fire brigades were in readiness for arson; shopkeepers were boarding up their shops in fear of looting. What had happened?

Well, apparently, the academic officials of Brooklyn College had asked the FBI to help with the proliferating hard-drugs problem on the campus. The city had approved, for the hospitals were overcrowded with appalling cases; and this was when the pushing had to stop. One suspect was trapped on a street-corner: a young student, of hitherto good record and repute. The FBI moved to the arrest; the young man broke