

The "World" of the Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary (OEDS)

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I

The table of contents of the A SUPPLEMENT TO THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY (OEDS, 4 vols., 1972—1986, ed. by R.W. Burchfield) refers to the Bibliography and indicates (somewhat cryptically) that it is "at end." That, of course, is where bibliographies belong — "at end." But that this one is not accorded the customary page number is curious. But no matter. The important thing is that the bibliography exists. For it is the "only begetter," the source of a "large body of the most recent accessions to the English language" (I:v). More: it constitutes the world as envisaged by the lexicographer. That world exists spatially: it spans the globe from Australia to India to Africa to Europe to Britain to the Caribbean to North America and around again to New Zealand. It reflects what was formerly the British Empire and is still the province of English. The barriers have been lowered, in fact; for "equality of attention" has been accorded to words from abroad which were treated by James Murray and the OED "almost like illegal immigrants" (IV:xi). The bibliography has a temporal dimension as well, extending from 1703 to 1983. If the overall aim is to "give shape and historical outline, graced necessarily with 'modern decorations'" (I:v) to the most recent accessions, the more specific ones are to record additions and antedatings to the vocabulary after 1928 (the cutoff date for the 1933 Supplement); to incorporate much of the material of the 1933 Supplement; to document from 1820 antedatings for words still current; and to add words or senses omitted in the OED which are older than 1820 but still current.

But for all its geographical and chronological vastness, the bibliography is merely a list, offering only hints of the true dimensions: titles and dates only; the true substance is elsewhere, in the entries themselves which supply the quantitative and qualitative contours of the world of the OEDS. Still, the list offers interesting information and suggests avenues for further research. It is not unlikely that when all the information becomes available—the exact number of uses of each work, the manner in which each lemma is documented and illustrated—the preliminary observations derived from the list may well be substantiated and intensified.

II

A preliminary classification of the bibliography according to the somewhat modified categories of a representative work like the *ARBA Guide to Subject Encyclopedias and Dictionaries* (1986) reveals that the 8596 titles cover all fields and, more important perhaps, make apparent certain preferences and emphases. As might be expected, the heaviest concentration is in literature, which includes fiction (2807 titles), drama (171), poetry (246), and secondary sources (157). This is followed by

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Figure 1: Chronological Distribution of Titles (excluding titles extending over a period of years or continuing)

1703—	1940: 75	1955: 102	1970: 127
1883: 415	1941: 61	1956: 109	1971: 133
1884—	1942: 59	1957: 133	1972: 152
1928: 1603	1943: 49	1958: 117	1973: 148
1929: 73	1944: 57	1959: 142	1974: 123
1930: 94	1945: 57	1960: 145	1975: 84
1931: 83	1946: 74	1961: 118	1976: 112
1932: 80	1947: 66	1962: 147	1977: 87
1933: 80	1948: 67	1963: 105	1978: 43
1934: 92	1949: 90	1964: 122	1979: 19
1935: 83	1950: 92	1965: 131	1980: 17
1936: 102	1951: 108	1966: 157	1981: 10
1937: 82	1952: 93	1967: 165	1982: 2
1938: 72	1953: 94	1968: 143	1983: 1
1939: 94	1954: 90	1969: 148	

Figure 2: Chronological Distribution of Fiction Titles 1929—81

1929: 37	1943: 15	1956: 32	1969: 68
1930: 38	1944: 22	1957: 43	1970: 51
1931: 24	1945: 23	1958: 49	1971: 64
1932: 31	1946: 22	1959: 60	1972: 88
1933: 31	1947: 20	1960: 51	1973: 107
1934: 32	1948: 21	1961: 35	1974: 76
1935: 32	1949: 22	1962: 44	1975: 51
1936: 42	1950: 24	1963: 31	1976: 69
1937: 28	1951: 41	1964: 28	1977: 49
1938: 34	1952: 34	1965: 35	1978: 30
1939: 37	1953: 38	1966: 60	1979: 10
1940: 26	1954: 21	1967: 65	1980: 9
1941: 22	1955: 35	1968: 58	1981: 9
1942: 21			

linguistics (391), personal accounts (374), medical science (270), and newspapers (212). At the other end of the spectrum are statistics and demography (6), homes and gardens (11), and mythology and folklore (12)—whereby it must be acknowledged that most of these, even homes and gardens, might be integrated into other categories. Of interest too is the chronological distribution of the works listed. Whether by accident or design, all years between 1820 and 1983 are represented: the period from 1929 to the present—the actual focus of OEDS—dominates. And it is surely a happy chance that the distribution is so fairly even up to 1977, by which time, it must be pointed out, Volumes I and II had already been published. See Fig. 1. Further evidence of the expansiveness of the selection may be seen in the geographical distribution of the considerable body of newspapers and periodicals. Of

the 1019 titles, 21 originate in Africa, 23 in Asia, 25 in Australia, 31 in Canada, 5 in the Caribbean, 11 in Europe, 16 in New Zealand, 1 in South America, 432 in the United Kingdom, and 454 in the United States.

A more precise focus confirms the general outlines but presents a sharper and somewhat different picture. Since it is impossible to deal here with all the categories, it is best to concentrate on the largest, fiction (with some reference as well to drama, poetry, and the related critical literature), the corpus which most readily furnishes the core of "common words," the "well-defined centre," in Murray's description (OED, I:xxvii), with "no discernible circumference" of the "circle of the English language." The 2795 fiction titles (excluding 12 collections) cover the period from 1749 to 1981. The chronological weighting, again whether by accident or design, is apparent: 750 titles from 1791 to 1928, 2045 from 1929 to 1981. Broken down according to the individual years of the main focus of the OEDS, the distribution is strikingly consistent. (See Fig. 2) The proportional weighting is also evident in the geographical dimension. Authors from Africa account for 29 titles, from Asia 3, from Australia 72, from the Caribbean 6, from Canada 37, from Europe 6, from New Zealand 65, from the United Kingdom (and Ireland) 1828, and from the United States 761.

Since these lexicographical strategies of representative selection are indivisible from sociocultural ones, the titles themselves must be evaluated not merely for the vocabulary they provide but for the world they reflect. The important shift in editorial policy—supplying illustrative quotations at an average of almost 10 per lemma, whereas the OED tried to restrict them to one per century—shapes and populates that world to an unprecedented degree. A full-scale depiction would involve a minute study of all the categories, which is obviously impossible here. But a manageable and characteristic example is provided by the group of American authors of the 468 post-1928 fiction titles. The comprehensiveness of approach is apparent in the mixture of established literary figures and occasional writers. Of the 254 authors, 89 are to be found in the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* (OCAL, 5th ed., 1983). The authors most heavily represented—with 5 or more works—show the catholicity of selection. Figures of almost classic stature are William Faulkner and John Steinbeck (each with 10 titles) and Ernest Hemingway (with 8). A rung lower are Saul Bellow (with 5) and Bernard Malamud (with 6). Mary McCarthy (with 5) is perhaps an example of the personal taste of the contributory readers. Novelty—in whatever form, be it dialect or milieu or word-coining—will most likely account for the appearance of Henry Miller (with 6 titles), Damon Runyon (with 5), and Vladimir Nabokov (with 10). And the particular penchant of the OEDS for popular literature, its inordinate consideration of mystery novels (perhaps because the works are short and easily scanned?), is evident in Raymond Chandler and Rex Stout (both with 6) and John D. MacDonald (with 5).

The chronological distribution conveys a sense of particular period through books whose popularity is to be measured not merely by the number of copies sold but also by the fact they were made into very successful films. Among the works of the 1930s by authors in the OCAL were such box-office favorites as Louis Bromfield's *The Rains Came* (1937), James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* (1933), Lloyd Douglas' *White Banners* (1936), Christopher Morley's *Kitty Foyle* (1939), Marjory Rawlings' *The Yearling*

(1938), and of course Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). The following decades are likewise sketched by the inclusion of works strongly identified with a period which earned the writers a place in the OCAL. The spirit of the 1940s—perhaps only distantly evident in the citation of works by, say, an F. Scott Fitzgerald or a Faulkner—is immediate in such novels as Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), J. P. Marquand's *H. M. Pulham, Esq.* (1941), Carson McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), John O'Hara's *Pal Joey* (1940), S. J. Perelman's *Crazy Like a Fox* (1944), and Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941). The variety of the 1950s is recaptured in Isaac Asimov's *The Naked Sun* (1957), William S. Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* (1959), Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* (1951), Peter De Vries's *The Mackerel Plaza* (1958), Herbert Gold's *The Man Who Was Not With It* (1956), Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Mickey Spillane's *The Big Kill* (1951). The 1960s and 1970s are similarly displayed. There are only 5 titles of the 1980s, but the three by OCAL authors—Erica Jong, Joyce Carol Oates, and Paul Theroux—indicate that the general pattern will continue.

The pattern, however, is not regular. To a certain degree this is inevitable: when works are published cannot be predicted; neither can verbal richness. And agreeing on a fixed canon of authors and works is problematic. (In this connection it would be extremely useful to know which works were consulted by the OEDS and not used.) Nevertheless it is difficult not to be unaware, even at a casual glance, of the absence of certain works of fiction by authors in the OCAL. Howard Fast, whose impact and production was greatest in the 1940s and 1950s, is represented by a single work of 1977; none of the short stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald appears; Norman Mailer's fiction stops at 1959; Katherine Anne Porter's influential stories of the 1930s and 1940s and J. D. Salinger's illustrious collection *Nine Stories* are missing; lesser works by William Styron and Robert Penn Warren take the place of *Lie Down in Darkness* and *All The King's Men*.

There is of course no point in extending the list: *de gustibus disputandum est—semper!* Besides, the works of fiction from 1929—1982 singled out by the OCAL (in the Chronological Index, pp. 888—896) as “noteworthy [for being] representative of their time” are well represented in the OEDS bibliography. As a matter of fact, the strategy of selection to be deduced from the bibliography makes it clear that a base broader than a list of set books is desired. Against the 89 authors of fiction listed in the OCAL for the period 1929 to the present are set 165 who are not. Their novels are popular, easily read and forgotten, with few exceptions of relatively little literary, historical, or cultural interest. The great majority consist of crime fiction: Emma Lathen (and their other pseudonym, R. B. Dominic) is represented by no fewer than 10 novels; Ed McBain by 11; authors like Dell Shannon and Hillary Baldwin Waugh by 6 and 5. Numerous others are light—one could say almost subliterary—works by those whose main occupation is not that of professional author, like the columnist Hy Gardner's *So What Else Is New?* (1959) or the TV news commentator Edwin Newman's *Sunday Punch* (1979). And there is the ample presence of such journeyman authors as Rona Jaffe, David Karp, Chaim Potok, as well as such single hits as William Burroughs, Jr.'s *Speed* (1970) or Elaine Dundy's *The Dud Avocado* (1958).

If it is obvious that the pattern of mixture is deliberate, it is equally obvious that certain areas have been so neglected as to seem consciously so. In American fiction, there is as good as no representation of Black, Chicano, Native American, or Gay literature. Of the 36 modern authors listed under "Black" in the OCAL, only James Baldwin and Chester Himes (for crime fiction) are in the OEDS bibliography. There are other works by blacks—like Z. N. Hurston's *Mules and Men* and Malcolm X's *Autobiography*—but both fiction and the illustration of contemporary standard English do not seem well served when ethnic and minority groups, which are sources of lexical fertility, are untapped. It is not a question of dialect or regionalism or politics. Surely any novel by Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or even Alex Haley's *Roots* deserves as much attention as Earle Stanley Gardner's *Case of the Stuttering Bishop*.

The pattern becomes even more irregular when other literary sources are considered. In American drama and poetry, for example, only household figures are represented. From 1929 onwards American drama is represented by Establishment playwrights: one play of 1962 by Edward Albee, one of 1939 by Lillian Hellman, seven from 1947 to 1961 by Arthur Miller, nine from 1929 to (posthumously) 1964 by Eugene O'Neill, one of 1947 by S. J. Perelman, one of 1936 by Robert E. Sherwood, one of 1938 by Thornton Wilder, and four from 1945 to 1958 by Tennessee Williams. The only other playwright is Ed Bullins, whose *The Theme Is Blackness: "The Corner" and Other Plays* appeared in 1973, a single and obvious attempt to add a black off-Broadway figure. The American poets cited are similarly few, standard, and not too recent: Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Ogden Nash, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Robert Penn Warren, and William Carlos Williams. Only Warren, born 1905, is still alive. The monotone selection of both groups (authors in collections aside, because not evident) contrasts sharply with the dappled fiction. In fact, this conservative, academic penchant is likewise apparent in the choice of supporting periodicals. Those of American origin—which constitute the largest group—still being published consist mainly of scholarly journals—*Modern Language Notes* (MLN), *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (PMLA), *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (JEGP), *Modern Philology* (MP), *Medium Aevum* (MAE), *American Notes & Queries* (ANQ)—and review periodicals—*New York Times Book Review* and *New York Review of Books*. Newer theoretical, scholarly, or even trendy American literary periodicals are lacking.

III

The OEDS's attempt to circumscribe and record contemporary English is evident in the wide range of printed works it cites. They in turn render a world which is expansive and diverse. How well or accurately proportioned the various fields are is not really clear: only a computer analysis of all the citations could—and in all likelihood would—confirm the shape of the world according to Oxford. But Murray's metaphor of the "well-defined centre" with "no discernible circumference," which has been accepted by the OEDS ("The perimeter remains as undefinable as ever," I:xiv), is troubling. For it gives little information about how the core, the body of "common words," a "central mass of many thousand words whose 'Anglicity' is

unquestioned" (OED, xxvii), is determined. And it says even less about the spokes which, in Murray's diagram, seem to emanate from it.

Consequently it is difficult to discern what the world which emerges is made of and what it looks like. In its overall proportions, with its emphasis on "common words"—with, of course, the caveat that the vocabulary is not that of Everyman or Anyman—it seems to suggest a fairly prosperous, bustling English city with a major university, inhabited by enlightened and literate citizens and visited by tourists from all over the world. Its High Street has many shops, large and small, offering a wide variety of wares. Its bookshops range from the plain and hack of W. H. Smith to the fancy and odd of Blackwell's. Yet this construct is not predictable in its proportions. For the lexicographer's "fatal Cleopatra," the fascination of neologisms and, more, hapax legomena, as well as his duty-bound desire to record the "central and enduring vocabulary of all major academic subjects" (I:xv), introduces eccentricities and distortions. The effort to "keep up with the language as it developed even while the first volume . . . was being prepared" (IV:vii) may contribute to the disjointedness of the world which emerges from the resulting vocabulary. The attempt to date first occurrences—not to mention the tedious public interest in this futile feature—is likewise distorting.

A tension is present on a more fundamental level. It is impossible to capture a language which is constantly changing. Dictionaries—as printed books or as CDs—are by definition retrospective. The world at large is similarly ungraspable in its diversity. It may be that the universal dictionary is as much a chimera as the unabridged dictionary. Dictionaries—in whatever form—may only be viable if encapsulated. The solution may well be that only an array of specialized, controlled dictionaries in which canons are agreed on and frequency a determinant of acceptance can begin to cope with the density, and faithfully reflect the fragmentation, of the everchanging world.